

Haftarah

'You must set free your fellow Hebrews'



'But then you turned around and profaned my name when each of you too back your male and female slaves, whom you had set free according to their desire, and you brought them again into subjection to be your slaves.'

Jeremiah 34:16

Links

- In the Jewish calendar, this Haftarah reading (Jeremiah 34:8-22; 33:25-26) accompanies the Torah portion *Mishpatim*: Exodus 21:1—24:18.
- The Torah portion opens with a ruling about the release of Hebrew slaves after six years of service. The Haftarah deals with expectations about the application of that ruling and the release of Jewish slaves in the time of Jeremiah.

Background

Amidst politically dangerous times, the prophet Jeremiah was convinced that only a life lived according to the Torah would guarantee the security of the Jewish community. In the prophet's worldview, God and Israel were partners in the patterns of human history.

'...that all should set free their Hebrew slaves, male and female, so that no one should hold another Judean in slavery' (34:9).

In 589 BCE, when the Babylonians laid siege to Jerusalem, the Jews—in an effort to live better religious lives so as to seek God's protection—implemented a Torah law that required Hebrew slaves to be released after six years of service. (These were Jewish men and women who had become indentured because of personal or family debts.)

'But afterward they turned around and took back the male and female slaves they had set free, and brought them again into subjection as slaves' (34:11). However in 588 BCE, when it seemed that the Babylonian threat had abated, the slave owners renigged on their previous commitment.

Jeremiah condemns this reversal and predicts dire consequences as a result. *'Thus says the Lord: You have not obeyed me by granting a release to your neighbors and friends... I will make you a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth' (34:17).*

'And as for King Zedekiah of Judah and his officials, I will hand them over to their enemies...to the army of the king of Babylon, which has withdrawn from you' (34:21).

Linking Israel's moral choices to its political future, the prophet predicts the decisive defeat of Jerusalem by Babylon. The Babylonian exile occurred a short time later in 586/7 BCE.

'For I will restore their fortunes, and will have mercy upon them' (33:26). The final two verses of the Haftarah are added from another part of Jeremiah so as to leave its listeners on a positive, encouraging note.

Reflect

Share your own thoughts on the impact of ethical choices on historical events.

Bibliography: Plaut, *The Haftarah Commentary* (NY, 1996). Scripture: NRSV.