

Haftarah Themes and Analysis by Gidon Rothstein: Bo

- Gidon Rothstein

Haftarah No. 3: Parshat Bo, Jeremiah 46:13-28

Two Prophets Reacting to the Same Event

The prophet Jeremiah gives a date for this week's *haftarah* that puts it at just about the same time as in last week's, although that one was by Ezekiel. Apparently, Nebuchadnezzar's conquest of Egypt inspired both prophets, living hundreds of miles apart, Ezekiel in Bavel and Jeremiah still in Israel.

That fact alone raises the question of how naturalistically we view prophecy. Some Jewish thinkers saw prophecy as mostly a function of the prophet's personal perfection. For such views—Maimonides seems close to this one—if a person achieves the requisite personal perfections and God does not choose to intervene to interrupt the flow of prophecy, prophecy comes. In this view, prophecy is a metaphysical event that is nonetheless part of the makeup of the world.

For people who understand the workings of prophecy this way, our two haftarot suggest that both Ezekiel and Jeremiah were so moved by Bavel's conquest of Egypt as to have a prophetic vision. Since prophecy depends on the prophet's readiness for it, we would have to say that the event impressed them enough to spur their words.

On the other hand, for those who see prophecy as mostly God-driven—that God decides who gets prophecy and when, although there may be minimum standards for who God would speak to in this way—we would need to understand these two prophecies as reflecting God's interest in “getting the word out” about His perspective of the events.

Either way, the conquest of Egypt was clearly repercussive, a world-shaking happening that reflected a change in the very fabric of God's relationship with the world. We saw some of what that was about last week, but Jeremiah will help us flesh it out further.

Note also that while these prophecies seem relevant to us because of their parallel to our Torah readings (the Exodus, the Egyptian failure to understand the need to listen to God), they are less obviously explainable in their original context. The Jewish people were about to themselves go into exile, the Temple was about to be destroyed, and God was taking time to hearken back to the mistakes Egypt had made and continues to make. At a basic level, it reminds us of Egypt's permanent role as bearer of the message of God's supremacy in the world.

One Voice, Two Messages

For all that their prophecies reflect the words of the One True God—whose Unity means that the messages must somehow come together into one whole—Ezekiel and Jeremiah appear to have absorbed God's message slightly differently. In last week's *haftarah*, Ezekiel focused on Egypt, her overweening view of herself, and the comeuppance headed her way. That it would be Nebuchadnezzar who served as the vehicle of that destruction was only mentioned briefly at the

end, and is linked to the reward he deserves for destroying Tyre.

Ezekiel thus concentrates on God striking down those who deny or ignore God, such as Egypt and Tyre.

For Jeremiah, on the other hand, the conquest is central, providing a date for the prophecy; Jeremiah also relates his words to the Egyptians back to the Jews, encouraging them by saying that God will not abandon them, that they need not fear the kind of outcome Egypt is getting.

I think the difference between the prophecies stems from where the two prophets were living—where you stand depends on where you sit. Ezekiel, already in Bavel, was necessarily removed from events in Egypt; they might be interesting on the scale of world events, but not urgently or directly important to him.

For Jeremiah, though, the fall of Egypt was a significant step towards the Destruction itself, taking away one of the political and military allies some Jews had relied on. He elsewhere also mentions that the Jews repeatedly turned to Egypt for assistance with attackers, that instead of seeing Egypt as an ancient enemy, Jews of the eighth through fifth centuries saw them as a source of salvation. For Jeremiah, their defeat drives home a very practical point about allies and who the Jews should turn to for protection, more than some philosophical ideas about world control.

The Whole Message May Take More than One Sitting

Why would God give both prophecies (or, for the naturalists among us, why would there be value in seeing both perspectives of the event)? One aspect of the answer depends on remembering that Egypt was both a world power whose attitudes challenged the Jewish monotheistic picture and also an ally who more directly tempted the Jews to see their salvation coming elsewhere than from God. These two qualities show us where each prophet's message would have value, in particular for the audience who might first hear it.

In Bavel, the question of allies had long ago fallen off the top of their agenda, since they had no political autonomy anyway. For them, the fate of Egypt was of more theoretical interest, as a question of where and how God's rule would be revealed.

In Judah, where the defeat of Egypt dashed many actual hopes and brought the destruction of the Jewish commonwealth and its Temple one step closer, the event would impact Jeremiah's listeners more personally and more distressingly. Seeing Egypt lose to Nebuchadnezzar might inspire complete despair (hence Jeremiah's care in reminding the Jews not to fear, because God is with them), but might also have us miss the forest; seeing it from afar, as Ezekiel did, allowed him to point out its cosmic and historic significance.

Hence the two *haftarot* give us both immediate and general perspective of Egypt, thus also enriching our understanding of the Exodus, redemption, and its multiple meanings for Jewish history.

Shabbat Shalom