

Haftarah Themes and Analysis by Gidon Rothstein: Emor

- Gidon Rothstein

Haftarah No. 8: Parshat Emor, Ezekiel 44:15-31

Ezekiel, the Future Temple and How It Explains Modern Orthodoxy

This week's *haftarah* focuses on how priests of the future will conduct themselves. While the match to the Torah reading's opening discussion of the rules for priests is clear, these chapters challenge us in their portrayal, since it differs in important ways from what we see portrayed in the Torah and the Book of Kings, where King Solomon's Temple is described.

Commentators approach this divergence in two main ways. Rashi, echoing the Talmud, tries to reconcile Ezekiel's words with Jewish law, as recorded in the rabbinic literature. This is most obviously necessary for those verses where Ezekiel seems to prophesy that the 3rd Temple will violate well-accepted laws.

Since tradition held the fundamental belief that the Torah given to Moses on Sinai would not change, it also could not imagine Ezekiel predicting an abrogation of those laws. We might limit that rule, however, by noting occasions when later events reveal that an apparently unequivocal law had room for adaptation. One famous example is Nachmanides's explanation of our commonly using Babylonian names for the months of the calendar, despite the Torah's requiring us to make the month of the Exodus the first of the months. He says events showed that the Torah actually meant we should have the calendar reflect our various redemptions, not just the first one from Egypt.

It might be possible, then, that when the 3rd Temple is built, the Sanhedrin will discover that Ezekiel's words don't actually contradict earlier statements of Jewish law as much as show a new range of permissibility that was always latent in that law. Within the Rashi/Talmud view, then, we might see Ezekiel as fully within tradition, or demonstrating new room for what tradition meant.

Radak: The Rules of the Game Will Change

I find Radak's approach more textually compelling while also more theologically challenging. Radak assumes Ezekiel is regularly noting deep differences of practice between the 3rd Temple and the first two.

Some of those are fairly banal, such as the dimensions of the Temple, which he sees as larger than the others. Since King Solomon's Temple was much larger than the Tabernacle in the desert, we already know that the dimensions were not fixed numbers, but proportions. I have long wondered whether even Ezekiel's dimensions would suffice for what will one day be the third Temple, given how many more people there are in the world.

Numerous sources suggest the first Temple simply didn't service all that many people. The Mishnah in Pesachim speaks of offering the Passover sacrifice in three groups of at least thirty animals in a group, and the Talmud speaks of years when they could not get that many. Granting

that as many as fifty people might have shared a lamb, that number represents only 4500 people. Assuming in a good year you had three groups of 100 animals, that's only 15,000 people. While I would never want to underestimate the possible apathy of world Jewry, I still imagine a future Temple would have more than 15,000 people coming to Jerusalem for Passover. So, it seems to me, it'd have to be a lot bigger than it was.

Our haftarah might also be referring to voluntary change. If, as Radak reads it, the priests of the future voluntarily decided to only marry women who have never been married before or the widows of other priests, that would also pose no problem of Jewish law (as long as they did not confuse it with Torah law). We would only wonder why they would make this choice, the value they would see in this.

Roles Can Change Over Time, Within Traditional Models

Since I find Radak so much closer to what the text seems to mean, if I can find a theologically sound reading of the text within his framework I would prefer it. Here, Ezekiel refers to the priests both as Levites and as *B'nei Tzadok*, sons of Zadok, the first priest to actually serve in a Temple.

Other aspects of the *haftarah* suggest the future Temple, for all its importance, would be largely separate from the ordinary life of most people. If so, while priests will still perform the Temple service, they might identify other aspects of their job as more central, such as teaching the nation (a Levitical duty as well). Zadok, who started life only as the teacher kind of Kohen, but then became part of a Temple, serves as a model of bridging the two worlds.

The Separateness of the Kohanim

While this would place the priests more frequently among the people, their strong connection to the Temple—both professionally and as an identity issue—might instill in them the need to maintain a distance from the regular populace. Some such ways might be by marrying only women who have never been married, or who are firmly within and accustomed to the Kohen lifestyle. In both cases, the priest can expect the woman to be flexible enough to adapt and adopt the very different lives of a priest.

Ezekiel's stress on Kohanim having no share in Israel of their own, their reliance on God's gifts for their sustenance, shows us the other half of this problem. In a future Temple, if the service itself is not to be the high point of religiosity, the priests will be forced to be more involved with people while also maintaining their separate identity. Money issues challenge them in that way as well, since they will be relying on others for sustenance even while working on their separateness.

The closing verse of the *haftarah* offers a similar puzzle, stating that priests cannot eat unslaughtered animals or birds, which is true of all Jews. Rashi argues that it needed to be stressed to them because in the Temple, they were allowed to eat some sacrifices that were not killed that way. Here, too, we see the question of balance that will face the future priests, knowing when they are separate from other Jews by virtue of their Temple service, and when to mix in and join the rest of the community. A challenge we can all hope to struggle with, and to help them reach conclusions on, soon, speedily, in our days.

Shabbat Shalom