

Haftarah

'The boy shall be a nazirite from birth'



Although you are barren, having borne no children, you shall conceive and bear a son. Now be careful not to drink wine or strong drink, or to eat anything unclean. No razor is to come on his head, for the boy shall be a nazirite to God from birth. It is he who shall begin to deliver Israel from the hand of the Philistines.

Judges 13:3-5

Links

- In the Jewish calendar, this Haftarah reading (Judges 13:2-25) accompanies the Torah portion *Naso*: Numbers 4:21—7:89.
- Both readings refer to those Israelites known as nazirites who take special vows. Samson (in the Haftarah) is destined to be a nazirite.

Background

The **Book of Judges** represents the period (12-11th centuries BCE) following the Israelites entry into the land of Canaan under the leadership of Joshua. This period is depicted as a time of constant warfare with the local Canaanite population, the twelve tribes of Israelites united in a loose federation but often acting separately and including an attack on the tribe of Benjamin at the end of the book. The book's name reflects the system of leadership before the establishment of a monarchy when the Israelites were ruled by a group of judiciary officers (*'shofetim'*) whose duties included not just administering justice but civil administration and military roles as well.

The **nazirites** described in Numbers 6 are Israelite men and women who undertake an unusual lifestyle involving three vows which resemble certain priestly obligations: they abstain from alcohol, from cutting their hair, and from coming near to the dead (which would create a state of ritual impurity). The nazirite vows are normally understood as temporary (but lifelong for Samson). While the Torah affirms the holiness of Israel as a people, the nazirites are an intense expression of drawing close to God. However it is an expression which attracts some criticism in the discussions of the sages.

Ponder

The scene of an angel announcing the birth of a special child to a barren woman is a familiar one in the bible. In the case of our Haftarah the story resembles the angelic visitation to Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 18. In this case the child to be born is the famous biblical character Samson [*See the whole story of Samson in Judges 13-16*], and he is destined to live as a nazirite from birth. The name Samson (Hebrew: *Shimshon*) is derived from *shemesh*, 'sun', recalling the heavenly messenger who announces his birth. Similarly, the insistence of Manoah [Samson's father, his name means 'rest'] to know the angel's name and the angel's reluctance to reply is reminiscent of the story of Jacob wrestling with the angel in Genesis 32.

This Haftarah is a wonderful reading to practice your skills of pondering the details of the sacred text: e.g., the use of repetition, surprising words/phrases, association with other texts, questions posed in the text (sometimes answered, sometimes not), the reference to names (inclusion or absence of names, meaning of names), etc. Read Judges 13 slowly, aloud, with a friend, sharing your observations, insights and wrestlings with God's Word. Enjoy!

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