

Haftarah

'They saw that he possessed divine wisdom to execute justice'



“When all Israel heard the decision that the king had rendered, they stood in awe of the king; for they saw that he possessed divine wisdom to execute justice.”

1 Kings 3:28

Links

- In the Jewish calendar, this Haftarah reading (1 Kings 3:15 - 4:1) accompanies the Torah portion *Mikeitz*: Genesis 41:1 - 44:17.
- Both readings open with reference to the dreams of a national leader: Pharaoh and Solomon. The Torah attributes Joseph’s power as dream interpreter to God. Likewise, Solomon’s wisdom has a divine source.

Background

- At this point in the biblical story, the ancient nation of Israel is now ruled by a monarchy and King Solomon has followed King David to the throne. He governs the Israelites effectively in terms of national prosperity and international relations, though ruthlessly in terms of social cost. A system of forced labour and high taxes produces great architectural feats, including the beautiful Jerusalem Temple.
- Solomon’s talents include the gift of wise judgement. The Haftarah passage about two mothers in conflict over one child gives an example of his wisdom at work. The story of Solomon’s dream, in which he asks God for ‘an understanding mind’ (other translations: ‘a listening heart’) is recorded in 1 Kings 3, and its fame is extolled in 1 Kings 5:9-14.

Things to ponder

- “*When all Israel heard the decision that the king had rendered, they stood in awe*’ (3:28). The Hebrew text refers to ‘all-Israel’ rather than ‘Israelites’ or ‘the people’. The king wins the nation’s respect, but does he win the people’s hearts? Jewish commentators note the ambivalence toward Solomon found in the tradition. Gleaned from the bible as well as midrashic commentary they observe how his dedicated leadership and divine gifts sit alongside his pagan practices, ostentatious affluence and a huge harem of wives and concubines (1 Kings 11). We mentioned above his ruthlessness. Is there an element of brutality (‘cut the living child in two’) even in this Haftarah that is meant to exemplify his wisdom?
- Is there another kind of wisdom present in this story? The true mother, ‘*overcome with compassion for her son*’ (3:26), is prepared to lose him to save his life. The Hebrew word for ‘compassion’ (*rachamim*) is related to the word for ‘womb’ (*rechem*). How is compassion ‘womb-like’?

Reflect

- How are we to understand and respond to the mix of gifts and limitations, integrity and failings, that we find in our leaders/shepherds—and in ourselves as leaders/shepherds/parents/etc?
- Think of one of the wisest people you know. Tell this person of his/her gift. Pray for the gift of wisdom.

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

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Text: Teresa Pirola. Illustration: Sarann Ryan. © The Story Source, 2011. *Haftarah* (from the Hebrew root word; ‘to conclude’) is the name given to the reading which, in accordance with the Jewish lectionary, is read after the Torah portion of the day, at Shabbat and festival services.