

Dr. Lawrence H. Schiffman

The Haftarah: A Historical Introduction

One of the last verses of the book of *Malakhi*, the last of the *Nevi'im Acharonim*, the Latter Prophets, reminds us of the unbreakable link between the Torah and Prophets. The book concludes (3:22) with the admonition, “*zikhru Torat Moshe avdi*” – “Remember the words of Moshe, My servant.” Here the message, contained in the very last words of the *Nevi'im*, is that the words of the Prophets complement those of the Torah but do not replace them.

While it is difficult to define the exact authority of the *Nevi'im*,¹ the primacy of the Torah and the role of the prophets in explaining its tenets are basic to our beliefs. Careful study of the books of the *Nevi'im* will reveal that they often relate closely to the Torah, and often they explain it. This is true despite the fact that the Rabbis did not see the prophets as having halakhic authority as prophets, but rather, only as the sages of their generation. In this way, *Chazal* emphasized another basic principle of the Jewish understanding of the Bible: The religious phenomenon of prophecy may not lead to changes in the obligatory nature of the Torah, since the Torah represents the immutable will of God.

However, the importance of the message of the Biblical prophets for the Jewish people was understood from the very first days of the ancient prophets. Their teachings, received through Divine inspiration, albeit that which was of a lesser intensity than God’s revelation through Moshe, were an essential supplement to and perspective on the Torah – both its laws and its religious message. In the same way, the even less directly revealed words of the *Ketuvim*, the Writings, were a further step in the revelation of God’s will to His people and the world.

It is natural, then, that the regular reading of the Torah should be supplemented with a prophetic reading, the *haftarah* (Hebrew הפטרה, termed in Aramaic אפטרתא or אשלמתא).² The Hebrew is derived from להפטיר, “to conclude.” The *Yerushalmi* (*Sanhedrin* 1:2, 19a) uses the word אשלים to refer to the reading of the *maftir*.³ This clearly refers to concluding the reading of the Torah with a reading from the *Nevi'im*. Further, while we know of various occasions for the reading of the *Ketuvim* (in the form of the *Chameish Megillot*), it is possible that in ancient times in the Land of Israel, a chapter of *Tehillim* (Psalms) was read each *Shabbat* afternoon after the Torah reading.

Apparently, the decision to accompany the Torah portion with a reading from the *Nevi'im* was made very early, since early Christian sources make clear that it was already going on in the synagogues of the first century ce.⁴ The *Mishnah* gives the impression that this was a long-standing practice (*Megillah* 4:4–5). Traditional sources provide several approaches to the origins of the reading of the *haftarah*.⁵ R. Hai Gaon saw the *haftarah* as instituted in the time of the prophets,⁶ but offers no evidence for this position. Modern scholars have suggested that the *haftarah* developed as a means of comforting the people, or that it grew out of *derashot* on the *parashah* that quoted the words

¹ Cf. Z.H. Chajes, *Torat Nevi'im* (Jerusalem: Divrei Chakhamim, 1958), 3–206 (in *Kol Sifre Maharatz Chajes*, vol. 1).

² On the early history of Torah reading see I. Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy: A Comprehensive History* (trans. R.P. Scheindlin; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society and New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1993), 117–42; L.H. Schiffman, “The Early History of the Public Reading of the Torah,” in *Jews, Christians, and Polytheists in the Ancient Synagogue* (ed. S. Fine; Baltimore Studies in the History of Judaism; London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 44–56, and C. Perrot, “The Reading of the Bible in the Ancient Synagogue,” *Mikra. Text, Translation, Reading and Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity* (ed. M.J. Mulder; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 137–59.

³ ואשלים, cf. also *Yerushalmi Nedarim* 6:8, 40a ואשלים.

⁴ Perrot, 151, 158.

⁵ These are summarized in K. Brander, “וישב: We Have Met the Enemy...and He is Us,” *Mitokh Ha-Ohel: Essays on the Weekly Parashah from the Rabbis and Professors of Yeshiva University* (Jerusalem: Koren, 2010), 101–4. Cf. also the longer discussion in S. Weingarten, “Reshitam Shel Ha-Haftarot,” *Sinai* 83 (5738), 105–36.

⁶ *Teshuvot Ha-Geonim Sha'arei Teshuvah* 84, *Otzar Ha-Geonim, Megillah*, 30, 90.

of the *Nevi'im*. This suggested link with the *derashah* is based on *Soferim* 13:15,⁷ which calls for a twenty-two verse *haftarah* when there is no sermon but allows three, five, or seven verses when there is a *derashah*. R. David Abudraham, the fourteenth century commentator on the *Siddur* and its *halakhot*, suggested that the *haftarah* originated at a time of persecution when it was forbidden to read the Torah.⁸ Most commentators who have followed this view identify it with the persecution leading up to the Maccabean revolt.⁹ Numerous traditional and modern commentaries have objected to this theory, however, on the grounds that foreign persecutors can hardly have been able to tell the difference between the Torah and the Prophets. A final suggestion is that the Rabbis instituted the *haftarah* in response to the Samaritans who did not accept the Prophets as part of the Biblical canon. There is simply no evidence for this point of view. All of these theories have in common the fact that there simply is no historical evidence by which to date the origins of the *haftarah* beyond our being able to state that it predates the turn of the era.

Rabbinic sources indicate that the texts of the *haftarah* were not fixed in the tannaitic (Mishnaic) period, except for certain *haftarot* for special *Shabbatot*.¹⁰ In the amoraic era (when the *gemarot* were coming into being in Byzantine Palestine and Sassanian Babylonia), the weekly *haftarot* began to be fixed.¹¹ This process, however, took place along very different lines in *Eretz Yisrael* and *Bavel*. In *Bavel*, many of the exact *haftarot* that we use today were fixed as we see in the Talmud. However, in *Eretz Yisrael*, *haftarot* were developed to accompany the triennial (three-year) cycle. In the Middle Ages, a variety of local customs existed for the reading of the *haftarot* so that until today some variety still exists among *Ashkenazim*, *Sephardim*, *Yemenites*, and *Chasidim*.¹²

Mishnah Megillah 4:3 discusses the reading of *haftarot* on *Shabbat* and festival mornings. The *mishnah* there indicates that certain prophetic texts were not to be used for this purpose. Another one of our earliest references to *haftarot* comes from the tannaitic discussion of the *Arba'ah Parashiyot*, the four special readings between *Purim* and *Pesach* – *Shekalim*, *Zachor*, *Parah*, and *Ha-Chodesh* (see *Tosefta Megillah* 3[4]:1–4). Originally, these portions broke the sequence of the weekly readings. Remember that in *Eretz Yisrael* the Torah was being read sequentially over a period of more than three years. These four special *Shabbatot*, therefore, interrupted that order and brought with them required and specified *haftarot*. Additionally, the *Bavli* in *Megillah* 31a-b, in a *baraita*, mentions *haftarot* for festivals, *Shabbat Chol Ha-Mo'ed*, *Chanukah*, *Rosh Chodesh*, and *Tishah Be-Av*. Later, the *haftarah* for *minchah* on fast days was added.¹³

How were the *haftarah* texts chosen? The *Bavli* in *Megillah* 29b indicates that there must be some correspondence in content to the Torah reading. (Remember that when the *haftarot* were first developing, the Torah readings were not yet fixed as they are today, neither on an annual nor triennial cycle.¹⁴) This is the case for the most part for the festivals, where the relationship is generally apparent or can be understood from midrashic interpretations of the Biblical text. However, in the case of some *Shabbatot*, the correspondence might be limited to the use of a specific common word. Some have theorized that our *haftarot*, according to the annual Torah reading cycle, were chosen from among the three selections followed in the triennial cycle.¹⁵ This is highly unlikely, however, since the

⁷. Ed. M. Higger (New York: Deve Rabbanan, 5697), 250–51.

⁸. *Sefer Avudraham Ha-Shaleim* (Jerusalem: Usha, 5727), 172. This view is also held by Elijah Levita, the Levush, and others.

⁹. Cf. 1 Macc. 1:56–57.

¹⁰. B.Z. Wacholder, “Prolegomenon,” in J. Mann, *The Bible As Read and Preached in the Old Synagogue*, vol. 1 (reprint; New York: KTAV, 1971), XX.

¹¹. Elbogen, 143–44; Wacholder, XXIII–XXV.

¹². See the lists prepared by N. Fried in *Encyclopedia Talmudit* 10.702–27. A detailed halakhic discussion appears in “הפטרה,” *Encyclopedia Talmudit* 10.1–32. Cf. also N. Fried, “Haftarot Alternativiyot Be-Fiyute Yannai U-She'ar Paytanim Kedumim,” *Sinai* 62 (5728), 50–66, 127–41.

¹³. Elbogen, 144.

¹⁴. The triennial cycle for Torah reading was the norm in the Land of Israel in the amoraic (Byzantine) period. This reading cycle was not uniform, and there was no fixed date of beginning, meaning there was no holiday of *Simchat Torah*. Many followed a system of 154 *sedarim*, although some had as many as twenty more. The triennial cycle is in evidence in Bible manuscripts, *Megillah* 29b, the *Pesikta midrashim*, the early Palestinian *piyyut* texts, Geonic sources, and in lists of *haftarot* discovered in the Cairo *genizah*. That cycle could take as much as 3 ½ years to complete. In addition, certain *midrashim* seem to be based on a triennial system. See Perrot, 139–43; Wacholder, XX–XXIII, XXV–XXIX. S. Naeh, “Sidre Qeri'at Ha-Torah Be-Eretz Yisrael: Iyun Me-Chadash,” *Tarbiz* 67 (5758), 167–87 argues that the triennial cycle was exactly fixed and corresponded with the calendar.

¹⁵. Elbogen, 144.

triennial cycle was used in the Land of Israel and the annual cycle, similar to our pattern of Torah reading, was used in Babylonia. Our own cycle of *haftarot* is based on that fixed by the Babylonian sages, generally in its present form by the Geonic era. Thus, the annual cycle was fixed by the fifth century ce at the latest. For the Palestinian rite, lists of *haftarot* have been discovered in the Cairo *genizah* that indicate that there was an almost stable sequence of prophetic readings by the end of the Talmudic period and the Islamic conquest.¹⁶

Some evidence for this approach can be gleaned from the special *haftarot* read during the three weeks between *Shivah Asar Be-Tammuz* and *Tishah Be-Av*, the תלתא דפורענותא (“Three of Misfortune”), and those read on the seven *Shabbatot* following *Tishah Be-Av*, the דנחמתא שבעה (“Seven of Comfort”). These *haftarot* were most probably fixed in *Eretz Yisrael* and then spread to Babylonia, and served as the basis of the organization of much of the *Pesikta midrashim* that were edited sometime after the fifth century ce.¹⁷ If these *midrashim* did indeed originate in the Land of Israel, then it would show that these, and perhaps other *haftarot*, were customary in *Eretz Yisrael* and then adopted in Babylonia.¹⁸

From amoraic times, it seems that the *haftarah*, at least according to the *Bavli* (*Megillah* 23a), was read by a person called up after the required number of readers had read their portions. His reading was what we call *maftir*; however, this was not always the case. It is clear from the talmudic evidence that the original reader of the *haftarah* was the one called to read the last required portion of the daily reading – the fifth on *Yom Tov*, the sixth on *Yom Kippur*, and the seventh on *Shabbat*. Of course, in those days there was no *Ba'al Keri'ah*, but each man called to the Torah read his own portion. Until today, this last *aliyah* is highly valued by Jews from Middle Eastern countries, who term it “משלים” – “the one who completes” the reading. Eventually, it was decided that the *haftarah* should be read by an additional person. Since the *kaddish* after the regular reading indicated that the required number of readers had been called and that the required Torah reading was completed, it was recited before the calling of this additional reader, who was now called the *maftir*, the reader of the additional portion.¹⁹

The various lists of *haftarot* found in the Cairo *genizah* indicate that *haftarot* were originally much shorter than they are now. Following a tannaitic tradition, the Babylonian *Amoraim* (*Megillah* 23a) fixed the minimum length for a *haftarah* at twenty-one verses. This number is based on the minimum number of verses to be read for the seven *aliyot* that took place on *Shabbat*. However, the lists of *haftarot* from the Cairo *genizah* indicate that Jews following the ritual of *Eretz Yisrael* continued to allow shorter *haftarot*. While the Babylonian sages had permitted shorter readings in cases in which the prophet moved to a new theme (*Megillah* 23b), it is clear that this was not the issue in the Land of Israel. In *Eretz Yisrael*, they simply allowed shorter *haftarot*.

Although in earliest times, *haftarot* must have been read out of scrolls containing the entire book of the prophet, such as those found among the Dead Sea Scrolls,²⁰ it is clear that in Babylonia, scrolls came into use that contained only the particular readings of the *haftarot*. Such scrolls were considered to be permitted (*Gittin* 60a), and they continued to be used as late as the Geonic period. In Christian countries, the transition to the use of books for the *haftarah* (codices rather than scrolls) took place early in the Middle Ages, although apparently in Islamic countries, the use of scrolls continued for somewhat longer.²¹ Under the influence of the Gaon of Vilna, the custom of reading from scrolls has been revived in some Ashkenazic communities.²²

Some take the view that when the *haftarah* is read from a printed copy, one cannot fulfill the obligation except by reading along with the reader.²³ This practice is opposite to that of listening to the Torah reading, where we are to listen and not read along, since the Torah is read from a scroll in a *minyán* and, therefore, constitutes *keriah be-tzibbur* (public reading).²⁴ This is the basis for the practice of some Chasidic groups, where, after reciting the *berakhot* before

¹⁶. A full list appears in Perrot, 141–3.

¹⁷. Elbogen, 144–5.

¹⁸. Cf. Wacholder, XXIX–XLI.

¹⁹. *Shulchan Arukh, Orach Chaim* 282:4; *Taz, Orach Chaim* 282:2.

²⁰. E. Tov, *An Introduction to the Discoveries in the Judaean Desert Series* (DJD 39; Oxford: Clarendon, 2002), 165–183. Only a few MSS. can be shown to contain more than one Biblical book. Cf. also *Soferim* 3:5 (ed. Higger, 124) on the rarity of scrolls containing all the Prophets.

²¹. Elbogen, 145 and 426 nn. 17–18.

²². *Mishnah Berurah, Orach Chaim* 244:1 and *Sha'ar Ha-Tziyun* 4; Elbogen, 145–6.

²³. R. Isaac Luria (Ari), cited in *Arukh Ha-Shulchan, Orach Chaim* 244:14.

²⁴. *Shulchan Arukh, Orach Chaim* 146:2 and *Biur Halakhah*.

the *haftarah* out loud, the *maftir* simply reads the *haftarah* for himself while others read it as well, in the style of *Pesukei De-Zimrah*.²⁵

Different practices exist regarding who actually reads the *haftarah*. As we mentioned, it was originally the reader of *shevii*, who was the seventh reader, who read the *haftarah*. That was because it was considered obligatory that one who reads the *haftarah* first read the Torah, in order to indicate the higher status of the Torah (*Megillah* 23a). Because the *haftarah* was regarded as of lower status than the Torah reading, it was permitted in some communities for boys under the age of *bar mitzvah* to read the *haftarah*,²⁶ except on certain special occasions.²⁷ This custom generally went out of use when it became customary for boys to read the *haftarah* on the *Shabbat* of their *bar mitzvah* celebration.

In addition, it is customary for Ashkenazic grooms the week before the wedding, and Sephardic grooms during the week after the wedding, to be called to read the *maftir* and *haftarah*. Originally, bridegrooms had a special *haftarah* that displaced the weekly prophetic reading.²⁸ However, this practice has fallen into disuse. Furthermore, it is customary for *Ashkenazim* observing *yahrtzeit* to be called to read the *haftarah* on the *Shabbat* before the *yahrtzeit* (or on *Shabbat* if the *yahrtzeit* falls on a *Shabbat*),²⁹ since this is the *yahrtzeit* of the *neshamah yeteirah*, the “additional soul” of the departed.³⁰ Sephardic Jews, for the most part, prefer the individual who reads the last of the obligatory *aliyot*, termed by them “משלים” – “the one who completes” the reading (as mentioned above).

Originally, the *haftarah*, like the Torah reading, was accompanied by translation into Aramaic, known as the *Targum*.³¹ In some communities the original practice consisted of this translation being read orally by the translator, on the spot (*Yerushalmi Megillah* 4:1, 74d). Later, specific texts were read, as is done today by the Yemenite Jews who recite the *Targum Onkelos* to the Torah in between the verses. The *Mishnah* required that each verse of the Torah was to be translated separately, but for the reading of the Prophets, three verses would be translated at a time, except where the subject matter changed, in which case the reader would stop earlier and allow the translator to proceed (*Mishnah Megillah* 4:4). Although the custom of Aramaic translation was dropped by all communities other than the Yemenites, in the Middle Ages some Ashkenazic communities continued to translate the readings on festivals.³² The Aramaic translations were often preceded by introductory poems in Aramaic, and two of these remain in the Ashkenazic liturgy. *Akdmut* is an introduction to the Torah reading on the first day of *Shavuot*. What interests us here, however, in the context of discussing the *haftarot*, is the poem *Yatziv Pitgam*, still recited by most Ashkenazic congregations, which originated as a poetic introduction to the translation of the *haftarah* on the second day of *Shavuot*. It is customarily read after the reading of the first two verses of that day’s *haftarah*.³³

There is evidence that in ancient times there may have been a *haftarah* recited on *Shabbat* afternoon. In that case, it seems that the *haftarah* we read on the afternoon of fast days is a remnant of what would have been a wider practice in ancient times.³⁴ However, evidence from the *genizah* lists of Karaite *haftarot*³⁵ and from scattered literary references suggests that the *Shabbat* afternoon readings may have been from *Tehillim* (Psalms). This would make sense, since the number of psalms in the book of *Tehillim* is approximately equivalent to the number of triennial Torah portions, according to some of the reading schedules that we know from *genizah* sources.

²⁵. *Shulchan Arukh, Orach Chaim* 146:3 forbids talking during the reading of the *haftarah*.

²⁶. *Shulchan Arukh, Orach Chaim* 284:4, following *Mishnah Megillah* 4:5.

²⁷. *Teshuvot Ha-Geonim* #94, *Sha’arei Torah* 60.

²⁸. Rema to *Orach Chaim* 285:7 and *Arukh Ha-Shulchan, Orach Chaim* 285:13.

²⁹. *Biur Halakhah* to *Orach Chaim* 136, marginal gloss to *Levush, Orach Chaim* 282:7, adapted in *Magen Avraham*, end of *Orach Chaim* 282.

³⁰. Cf. the related reasons given in Y.M. Tuczinsky, *Gesher Ha-Chaim* (Jerusalem: Solomon, 5720), 1.242.

³¹. See Elbogen, 154–5 and L.H. Schiffman, “Translation as Commentary: Targum, Midrash and Talmud,” in *La Bibbia nelle Culture dei Popoli: Ermeneutica e Comunicazione*, Atti del Convegno Internazionale, Pontificia Università Urbanica, 10–11 maggio 2007; a cura di A. Gieniusz, A. Spreafico (Città del Vaticano, Roma: Urbiana University Press, 2008), 32–45.

³². Elbogen, 153–4.

³³. L.H. Schiffman, “*Yatziv Pitgam*, One of our Last Aramaic Piyyutim,” *Shavuot To-Go* (New York: Yeshiva University Center for the Jewish Future, 2011), 43–46.

³⁴. Elbogen, 148–9.

³⁵. Wacholder, LXIX–LXXXVI.

The reading of the *haftarah* was intended to maintain the ongoing connection between the Torah and the *Nevi'im* and between the Jewish people and the religious, ethical, and national teachings of our ancient prophets. The *haftarot* serve to remind us that even after the revelation of the Torah, the word of God continued to be heard by the Jewish people. Let us hope that the essays that follow, which teach us the significance of the words of the Prophets and their connection to the weekly Torah readings, will help us to hear that word in our own hearts and in our own day.

ספר בראשית