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Haftarat Bo: *The Legacy of Ignored Prophecies*

Yirmiyahu 46:13–28, the prophetic portion we read as the *haftarah* for *Parashat Bo*, warns Egypt of an impending attack by the Babylonian ruler Nevuchadnezzar.¹ According to the words of Yirmiyahu, the once-secure Egypt will be rendered desolate, vulnerable, and at the mercy of the “people of the north.”² The prophecy enumerates cities that were of strategic and symbolic significance to Egypt,³ as well as specific gods and temple-cities,⁴ stressing the imminence and totality of the destruction. In a final word to Egypt, Yirmiyahu notes that despite its conquest by Babylon, the land of Egypt will one day be inhabited again, as in its former days. Then, turning to Israel (vv. 27–28), Yirmiyahu ends his prophecy with an assurance of God’s commitment to Israel’s continued survival.

The obvious connections between the *parashah* and *haftarah*, including an account of the defeat of Egypt and a reference to locusts (v. 23), are difficult to miss, and in all probability these similarities served as the impetus for the pairing of the two portions.⁵ Be that as it may, I would like to address an additional, perhaps more fundamental, correspondence between the two, which is illuminated by their pairing.

The portion of *Yirmiyahu* that constitutes this particular *haftarah* belongs to a type of prophecy often referred to as “The Oracles Against Foreign Nations.”⁶ This genre of prophecy, appearing in nearly every book of *Nevi'im Acharonim*,⁷ either takes foreign nations as its subject or addresses them directly.⁸ This, of course, raises an interesting question for readers of *Tanakh*. After all, it is unlikely that these nations, often the enemies of Israel, actually constituted the prophet’s intended audience. Even more inconceivable is the notion that the leaders of these nations, were they to have heard or

¹ A number of possible dates have been suggested as the historical context for the prophecy. For the sake of this article, we will assume that it is referring to Nevuchadnezzar’s attempted invasion in 601–600 bce.

² *Yirmiyahu* 46: 20, 24.

³ Verse 14: Noph, the ancient capital of Egypt known today as Memphis, and Tachpanches, a northeastern Nile Delta city fortified by Pharaoh Psammetichus I (664–610), for example.

⁴ See for example, verse 25, which mentions Amon, the Egyptian sun-god whose temple was located in *No Amon*, the Hebrew name for Thebes.

⁵ The topic of *parashah* and *haftarah* pairing, more generally, is one which has generated much discussion. See M. Fishbane’s introduction to *The JPS Bible Commentary: Haftarat* (Philadelphia, 2002).

⁶ For a comprehensive discussion of these prophecies, and important perspectives not addressed in this article, see J. Hayes, “The Usage of Oracles against Foreign Nations in Israel,” *JBL* 87 (1968), 81–92.

⁷ *Hoshea* is the lone exception.

⁸ See for example, *Amos*, chapters 1–3; *Yeshayahu*, chapters 13–23; *Yirmiyahu*, chapters 46–51; *Yechezkel*, chapters 25–31.

read the prophecies, would have reacted in any meaningful way to their content.⁹ That being the case, we can't help but wonder why these prophecies were delivered at all? And why document prophecies that, more likely than not, were never heard by their addressees?

Of course, as is often the case, the search for an answer demands that we identify the assumptions underlying the question. In this instance, the assumption that bears scrutiny is that prophecies were only delivered to receptive audiences. If that were indeed the case, then our *Tanakh* would likely be missing major sections, if not the entire *Nevi'im Acharonim*.¹⁰ Even a cursory reading of the text reveals that, in their own times, the prophets were often not only largely ignored, but were often scorned for their unpopular messages.¹¹ That notwithstanding, those very same prophecies were preserved and later canonized, and so we must conclude that their value extends beyond the degree of their contemporaneous reception.

Returning, then, to our portion from *Yirmiyahu*, let us modify our original query. Rather than asking why this prophecy was communicated despite the improbability of its reception by the foreign nation about which it spoke, let us ask: what function did this prophecy serve within Israel? For what reasons was it valued, deemed sacred, and ultimately canonized?¹²

One oft-suggested line of reasoning is that the prophecies in *Nevi'im Acharonim* were preserved as evidence of the accuracy of God's prophets and of their ability, as Divinely inspired mortals, to predict the future. This contention, while appealing on its surface for its sense of vindication, is in fact based on a crucial misunderstanding of the role of prophecy in Ancient Israel.

Perhaps due to the common, contemporary understanding of the word "prophecy," we tend to think of prophets solely as individuals with the ability to predict the future. And while the *nevi'im* of whom we are speaking certainly did predict the future, and while their predictions often lent them credibility,¹³ their ability to foresee events was by no means the essence of their national role. Their pronouncements about the future were not delivered for their own sake, but rather appear in *Tanakh* in the context of cautioning, rebuking, or consoling the people. The Later Prophets were concerned with the social corrosion of the nation and the religious complacency of its people, and in rebuking the people – and their leaders – for their misdeeds, the prophets predicted the bleak future that, absent reform, was sure to ensue. Needless to say, the fulfillment of such prophecy was something to be mourned, not commemorated or celebrated for "I-told-you-so" triumphalism. At other times, the prophets tempered their rebuke and the harshness of their predictions with assurances that the horrors to come would be short-lived and would, in time, give way to reconstruction. Again, their concern was not fortune-telling for its own sake, or establishing the *bona fides* of their own prophetic roles, but steering the people in the direction set down by God. Put simply, the implication that the entire section of *Nevi'im Acharonim* primarily serves as retroactive evidence of the authenticity of God's prophets sorely misses the point.

In a similar vein, the concept that the prophecies appearing in *Nevi'im Acharonim* are there simply to complete the historical record is likewise untenable. The *nevuot* that are included in *Nevi'im*

⁹. The arguable exceptions to this statement are the people of Nineveh in the book of *Yonah*. The implications of that *sefer* however, remain beyond the scope of this discussion.

¹⁰. The "classical" prophets, beginning in the middle of the eighth century bce, differed in a number of ways from the prophets that preceded them. For a full discussion of the various stages of prophecy in Israel, see J. Bright, *Jeremiah: A New Translation With Introduction and Commentary* (New York, 1965), xv–xxvi.

¹¹. Yirmiyahu, by way of example, tells of a time when his transcribed prophecies were destroyed by the king (ch. 36). We are also told, that on account of his sermons, his life was threatened by men of his home town (ch. 11), he was flogged by a Temple priest (ch. 20), and he was thrown into a pit to die (ch. 38).

¹². While any discussion of the process of canonization is far from unanimous, it is clear that the assumed authority, sacredness, and level of inspiration of the texts, were qualifying factors.

¹³. The template for such a litmus test is outlined in *Devarim* 18:15–22.

Acharonim undeniably shed light on the historical periods from which they emerged. They give a vivid sense of the social, religious, and political landscape, as well as the points of contention that inevitably arose between the prophets and the people they were sent to guide. In reality, however, any close reading of *Nevi'im Acharonim* leads to the unmistakable conclusion that the authors had no interest in writing works of history. There are large gaps in the chronologies of events, historical details that do appear are often obscure or mentioned only in passing,¹⁴ and there are inconsistencies among varying accounts of the same historical events.¹⁵

Inescapably, then, the prophetic portions that have survived the test of time do not owe their power and longevity to their historical accuracy; rather, they have survived and continue to inspire because they articulate a world-view, a broad religio-nationalistic context to explain the earth-shattering events unfolding around them.

From the perspective of the prophets, events in history are determined by Israel's adherence to, or violation of, its covenantal relationship with God. God is not only present in history, but is continuously focused on Israel, rewarding them for their obedience and punishing them for their derelictions. And because His will is supreme, Israel's behavior determines the outcome of history. From this perspective, there is no distinction between acts of God and acts of man. World-destroying floods and invasions by foreign powers are, according to the prophets, equally manifestations of God's Divine administration.

In our *haftarah*, Yirmiyahu did not delineate the details of the war he was referring to, because in his mind those details were immaterial. The immediate political causes of the invasion, the names and dates associated with it, and the military strategies and counter strategies, were not of interest to Yirmiyahu. His interest was theological and didactic: what caused God to bring this event about, and what lesson are we, as party to the Covenant, to draw from it?

To better understand the influence of what we might call prophetic ideology, an examination of the prophetic outlook concerning the destruction of the Temple in 586 bce and its aftermath is instructive. The cataclysmic nature of this destruction can be difficult for contemporary readers to understand. For decades, the people believed that God's continuing physical presence in the Temple was an unconditional guarantee, as was the promise of an everlasting Davidic dynasty centered in Jerusalem.¹⁶ The defeat of Sancheirev's army a century earlier had only served to reinforce that contention, and to reduce to incontrovertible fact the inviolability of Jerusalem and the Temple.¹⁷

As a result, when disaster did eventually strike, it carried with it the potential for a devastating religious crisis. If, despite all assurances to the contrary, God's supposedly invulnerable Sanctuary and His physical resting place among His people had been destroyed, then there was every reason to believe that God has abrogated the Covenant with His people. Even those who saw the destruction as God's covenantal response to Israel's iniquities would have seen the utter destruction of the Temple and the cessation of the Davidic line as a terrifyingly permanent abandonment by God.¹⁸ Even more

¹⁴. Chapter 14 of *Yirmiyahu* for example, begins with the words "הַבְּצֻרוֹת עַל-דִּבְרֵי אֱלֹהֵי-יְרֵמְיָהוּ, דְּבַר-יְהוָה הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר" – "The word of the Lord came to Yirmiyahu concerning the droughts." Clearly Judah suffered a period of drought during the days of Yirmiyahu that left an enduring mark on his contemporaries, and served as the backdrop for the message of this particular prophecy. We as readers however, are left in the dark as to the precise dating of the events.

¹⁵. Compare, for example, the accounts of the conquest of *Kena'an* in *Yehoshua* and *Shoftim*, or for that matter, many of the details of *Divrei Ha-Yamim* with their "parallels" in other *sifrei Tanakh*.

¹⁶. The promises of *Shmuel Bet* 7:11–16 and 23:1–7 serve as the primary basis for this conviction and, it should be mentioned, was addressed in different modes by post-exilic prophets.

¹⁷. In 701 bce, Sancheirev's army swept through Judah, wreaking havoc and, according to his own accounts, conquering forty-six strong cities and forts, including 200,000 people, before making Chizkiyahu "a prisoner in Jerusalem, like a bird in a cage" (Pritchard, ANET, 287). The focus in both *Melakhim Bet* 18:13–19:37 and *Yeshayahu* chapter 36, however, is the fact that Jerusalem evaded capture.

¹⁸. See, for example, *Yechezkel* 33:10 and 37:11, for responses to the despondency wrought by the *Churban*.

fatal to the faith of Israel might have been the belief, based on the norms of Ancient Near Eastern thought, that God had in fact been defeated – a belief with which we find Yeshayahu vehemently taking issue.¹⁹ In short, the destruction of the Temple, while not spelling out the physical annihilation of Israel, would in all likelihood have resulted in its spiritual annihilation, leaving its people to wallow in inescapable, existential despair.

It is against this dire backdrop that Yirmiyahu, in his prophetic utterances, offers an alternative lens through which Israel could view history in the making, a way to make sense of the incomprehensible and to find a measure of solace in the inconsolable. He creates a framework within which the people could make sense of their new, tragic reality. By speaking of God's role in history and His calculations, Yirmiyahu enables the people to conceive of the destruction and exile as reinforcing, rather than undermining, God's sovereignty, and justifying His actions within a continuing covenantal relationship. His emphasis on this continuing relationship helped Israel understand that its fate was not reflective of God's abandoning them, rather, it was an expression of God's faithfulness to His promises, and expectations of reciprocity on the part of His people. Crucially, his words pointed to a future beyond the tragedy, giving the people not only hope, but a plan for survival, rebirth and rebuilding. "Jeremiah as it were drew the national disaster within the framework of faith, and thus prevented it from destroying faith."²⁰

The Oracles Against the Foreign Nations were merely one facet of the prophetic worldview that placed Israel at the center of God's concern for history. Events in other nations were of concern to the prophets only insofar as they were of concern to Israel. As noted above, in prophetic thought, the fate of all mankind is intricately connected to that of Israel. By nominally addressing Egypt, Yirmiyahu was asserting that they too were under the purview of God's powers, and that God's justice extended into their borders as well. The Egyptians, in all likelihood, remained ignorant of the prophecy in *Yirmiyahu* chapter 46; nonetheless, its impact continues to resound.

Bearing the above in mind, we can now revisit the correspondence between *parashah* and *haftarah* mentioned at the outset of this discussion. Like the *haftarah*, the *parashah* tells of the overthrow of Egypt, which to eyewitnesses seemed unfathomable. In each case, the role of God in the toppling of this world power is articulated by God's prophet, as is the shame wrought by the defeat. Most relevant for this discussion though, is the dearth of historical features in the *parashah*, analogous to that which we noted about the *haftarah*. *Parashat Bo* contains both the lead-in to, and the Exodus from, Egypt, and yet there is little in the narrative that allows us to pinpoint with any accuracy the date of the event, or even the identity of the pharaoh whose defeat is at the center of the narrative.

Paradoxically, this very same *parashah* is preoccupied with establishing Israel's institutional memory of this formative historical event. God's stated purpose for the drawn-out clash between Himself and Pharaoh is so "that you may recount in the hearing of your sons and of your son's sons how I made a mockery of the Egyptians and how I displayed My signs among them – in order that you may know that I am the Lord."²¹ The observance of *Pesach* is to be "an institution for all time, for you and your descendants,"²² and the various *mitzvot*, including *pidyon ha-ben* (the redeeming of the firstborn),²³ the prohibition of *chametz* (unleavened bread),²⁴ and *tefillin*,²⁵ are explained as a

¹⁹. Chapters 40–48.

²⁰. Bright, cxiv.

²¹. *Shemot* 10:2 ה"י. כִּי־אֲנִי וְיִדְעֻתֶם, בָּם; אֲשֶׁר־שָׁמַתִּי וְאֶת־אֲתֹנֹתַי, בְּמִצְרַיִם, הִתְעַלְלֹתִי אֲשֶׁר אֶת וְכֵן־בְּנֶה, בְּנֶה בְּאֲזְנֵי תִסְפֹּר וְלִמְעַן *Shemot* 10:2.

²². *Ibid.*, 12:24 "וּשְׁמַרְתֶּם, אֶת־הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה, לְחֹק־לֶךְ וּלְבְנֵיךָ, עַד־עוֹלָם."

²³. *Ibid.*, 13:13.

²⁴. *Ibid.*, verse 7.

²⁵. *Ibid.*, verse 9.

commemoration of “what the Lord did for me when I went free from Egypt.”²⁶ And so, we must conclude, that what appears at first blush as a disconcerting lack of detail, is in fact concern not with recalling the particulars of the Exodus, but with shaping the memory of the Exodus for their children. The Torah is not asking us to verify the historicity of the Exodus, it is enjoining us to sear its national significance on to our collective consciousness, and ensure that its impact endures beyond its historical reality. As was the case in Yirmiyahu, the implications of the historical developments for Israelite thought, not the factual minutia of them, are of primary importance.

As we listen in *shul* to the *parashah* and *haftarah* read consecutively, we can begin to appreciate that the power of our written history lies in its very lack of historical precision. God’s words, in *Parashat Bo*, set down the fundamentals of this uniquely Israelite approach to history;²⁷ and Yirmiyahu, six and a half centuries later, continued to communicate it to the people through his prophecies. Philosophies and worldviews are not forged overnight; they are cultivated, reiterated, and ultimately internalized. Writing history is, thus, “a consistent and continuous cultural phenomenon in Israel, an immanent expression of its spiritual constitution, disposition, and presuppositions.”²⁸ Taken together, the *parashah* and *haftarah* constitute a preeminent example of this ongoing process that pertained throughout the entire period in which the books of *Tanakh* were being produced.²⁹

Today, long after prophecy has ceased, and the empires our ancestors feared have vanished with the vicissitudes of history, we still pray to God. We pray that as a people we will live up to the expectations outlined in our covenantal relationship with Him, we pray for the welfare of the countries in which we live, and after two thousand years, we once again relish our ability to pray for the safety and prosperity of *Medinat Yisrael*. Our inclination to turn towards God, our deeply-rooted belief in His ability and willingness to intervene in history, reveals a millennia-long engagement with the texts of *Tanakh*, and the ultimate achievement of Biblical prophecies.

²⁶. Ibid., verse 8.

²⁷. As Yosef Yerushalmi writes in his seminal work, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle, 1982), 8, “If Herodotus was the father of history, the fathers of meaning in history were the Jews.”

²⁸. S. Japhet, *From the Rivers of Babylon to the Highlands of Judah* (Indiana, 2006), 307.

²⁹. This approach to writing history is seen through the post-exilic period, as well. According to the author of *Ezra-Nehemiah*, King Cyrus of Persia issued a proclamation allowing the Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple because, “the Lord roused the spirit of King Cyrus” (*Ezra* 1:1). While there were undoubtedly geopolitical factors germane to his decision, the *Tanakh’s* perspective remains theologically oriented. See, for example, J. Trotter, “Was the Second Temple a Primarily Persian Project?” *SJOT* (2010) 15, 276–293.