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Prophets and Prophecy

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Some historical context for the haftarah

The word haftarah comes from the Hebrew root meaning to close or depart. The haftarah is read following the Torah reading on Shabbat mornings. In addition, a haftarah is read on the Festivals of Passover, Shavuot, Sukkot and on the High Holidays--Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

A haftarah is also read on the afternoons of all public fast days including Yom Kippur.

The origins of the custom of reading the haftarah are unknown though several theories have been offered. One suggests that haftarot were read in response to the theological disputes between the Jewish community and the Samaritans who do not accept the canonicity of any books of the Tanakh beyond the book of Joshua. A second theory, widely taught but without historical support is that the practice was instituted in 168 B.C.E. just before the Maccabean revolt when reading the Torah was forbidden. A third theory suggests that haftaroth were read after a synagogue or community's Torah scrolls were destroyed.

Though the precise origin has been lost to history, the practice is noted in the Christian New Testament as well.

Unlike the annual or triennial Torah reading cycles which are fixed, haftaroth vary between and within communities. Typically, there is a link between the haftarah for a given Shabbat and the Torah portion. That link can often be small, abstract or tenuous.

At other times, the haftarah is thematically linked to a period of time on the Jewish calendar.

Source 1: Megillah 31A (Sefaria).

גַּם, תְּנֵן: בְּפֹסֵחַ קֹרֵין בְּפָרַשַּׁת מוֹעֵדֹת וּמִפְטִירִין בְּפֹסֵחַ גִּלְגָּל, וְקָיְדָנָא דָאִיכָּא תְּרֵי יוֹמִי, יוֹמָא קְמָא — בְּפֹסֵחַ גִּלְגָּל, וְלֹמְדָר — בְּפֹסֵחַ יְאַשְׁיָהוּ

GEMARA: The Sages taught in a *baraita*: On the first day of **Passover**, the congregation **reads from the portion of the Festivals** (Leviticus 22:26–23:44), and they read as the **haftara** the account of the **Passover** celebrated at **Gilgal** (Joshua 5:2–14). The Gemara comments: And nowadays, in the Diaspora, when there are two Festival days of Passover, on the first day they read as the **haftara** the account of the **Passover** celebrated at **Gilgal**, and on the next day they read from the account of the **Passover** observed by **Josiah** (II Kings 23).

...יּוֹם טוֹב הַאַחֲרֹן שֶׁל פֹּסֵחַ קֹרֵין "זֶה בְּשַׁלֵּחַ", וּמִפְטִירִין "זֶה יְדִבֵּר זֶה". וְלֹמְדָר "כֵּל הַבְּכוֹר", וּמִפְטִירִין "עַד הַיּוֹם".

The *baraita* continues: **On the last Festival day of Passover, they read the portion of “And it came to pass, when Pharaoh let the people go”** (Exodus 13:17–15:26), because it includes the account of the splitting of the Red Sea, **and they read as the *haftara* the portion “And David spoke”** (II Samuel 22), which is the song of David. **And in the Diaspora, on the next day, the eighth day of Passover, they read the portion “All the firstborns”** (Deuteronomy 15:19–16:17), **and they read as the *haftara* the portion of “This very day”** (Isaiah 10:32–12:6), because it discusses the downfall of Sennacherib, which occurred on the night of Passover.

בעצרת “שבעה שבועות”, ומפטירין בתקוות. אחרים אומרים: “בחג'ש השלייש”, ומפטירין במרכבה. והאידנא... דאייכא תרי יומי, עבדין כתרי יהו ואיפכא.

The *baraita* continues: **On Shavuot** they read the portion of **“Seven weeks,” and they read as the *haftara* from Habakkuk**, chapter 2, since it mentions the giving of the Torah at Sinai. **Others say:** They read the portion of **“In the third month”** (Exodus 19:1–20:23), which describes the giving of the Torah, **and they read as the *haftara* from the account of the Divine Chariot** (Ezekiel 1). The Gemara comments: **And nowadays, in the Diaspora, when there are two days of Shavuot, we act in accordance with both opinions, but in the reverse order.** On the first day they read the portion of **“In the third month,”** and on the second day they read the portion of **“Seven weeks.”**

בראש החנוכה: “בחג'ש השבעי”, ומפטירין: “ובן יקיר ל' אפרים”. ויש אומרים: “זה פקד את שרה”, ומפטירין בחתנה.

The *baraita* continues: **On Rosh HaShana** they read the portion of **“On the seventh month on the first of the month”** (Numbers 29:1–6) **and they read as the *haftara* “Is Ephraim My dear son?”** (Jeremiah 31:1–20), as it contains the verse: “I earnestly remember him still,” which recalls God’s love for His people. **And some say** that they read **“And the Lord visited Sarah”** (Genesis 21), which describes how God blessed her that she should have a child, and, according to tradition, God blessed her on Rosh HaShana. **And they read as the *haftara* from the account of Hannah** (I Samuel 1:1–2:10), who, according to tradition, was also blessed on Rosh HaShana that she should have a child. ...

Source 2: Gittin 60A (Sefaria)

ורביה ורב יוסף דאמר תרני יהו: פאי ספר אפтарתא – אסור למקרי ביה בשבת. מאי טעםא? דלא ניתן ליכתב.

And Rabba and Rav Yosef both say: **It is prohibited to publicly read the *haftara*, the portion from the Prophets that is read after the weekly Torah portion, on Shabbat, from a scroll containing only the *haftarot*. What is the reason for this? It is because this type of scroll may not be written, as the words of the Prophets must also be written as complete books.**