



Haftarah Portions: Background Information, Definition, Explanation and History



Many people, even those fairly familiar with Jewish practices, are confused about the history, purpose and meaning of what we call Haftarah portions. This misunderstanding can cut across Jewish denominational lines.

First of all, the word *Haftarah* does not mean “half Torah.” Nor, actually, is it connected with the word Torah at all (although, as we will see, it is thematically connected!)

The Hebrew word “**Haftarah**” means “**conclusion.**” It is the second, or concluding reading from the Hebrew Bible that is chanted (or read) after the Torah portion at Shabbat or holiday morning services.

Torah portions come, of course, from the Torah, the first part of the TaNaKh, the Hebrew Bible. (The word TaNaKh is an acronym; the “T” stands for Torah.) **Haftarah portions** come from the **second section of the TaNaKh**, the “N,” **the *Nevi'im*, or Prophets.**



There is always a reason why a particular Haftarah portion is chosen. Most frequently a **Haftarah reading reflects upon the weekly Torah portion.** It may link the stories together, deal with a similar subject or situation, or mention the same characters or countries. Often the Haftarah reading echoes and reinforces the theme of the Torah portion; occasionally, however, Haftarah readings can be seen as putting a new interpretation or even slightly recasting the apparent message in the Torah.

There are **special Haftarah readings for holidays, as well as for the Sabbaths that fall during holidays, as well as on Rosh Chodesh** (the beginning of the new month). There are also **special readings for certain times of the year**, such as over the summer, surrounding the sad holiday of Tisha B'Av (which marks the destruction of the First and Second Temples), **and on particular Sabbaths during the year** (the one in between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and the ones before Purim and Passover).

No one is certain why this additional reading was added. There are three main theories, all of which ultimately emphasize the importance of the entire Hebrew Bible, beyond just the Torah. These theories place the origin of the Haftarah reading in different periods of history.

Perhaps this custom comes from the second century BCE, the time of the Maccabees, the heroes of the story of Chanukah.

Perhaps it originates in the split between different factions at the end of the Second Temple period (200 BCE-100 CE), in a debate with the Samaritans, or between groups such as the Pharisees and Sadducees.



Perhaps it comes from a similar time period as above, but as a reaction to persecution by Rome, rather than an internal split.

These theories give different explanations as well as coming from different periods of time: If it was from a time of persecution, when the reading of the Torah was banned (either by the Syrian-Greeks before the Maccabee victory, or by the Romans later on), then reading a **passage with a similar theme would have reminded the Jews of that time period what they should have been reading if they were free to do so.**

If it was an internal debate, it **might have emphasized the idea that the other books of the Bible were sacred, too** – not at the same level as the Torah, but also holy. (The Samaritans believed that only the Torah was sacred.)

The writings of the prophets also show that the Torah can be interpreted in different ways in different generations. While Sadducees took the Torah fairly literally, the Pharisees – who became the first rabbis and founded what would evolve into the Judaism that is more familiar to us – believed that the Torah, and the entire TaNaKh, should be approached with an ever-changing understanding of the grand themes of life and the great events of history. This is how we understand the Jewish Bible today.

