

שבת הגדול

Malachi, chapter 3, verses 4 to 24

Introduction

About the choice of this haftarah:

Opinions differ about the reasons for the choice of this haftarah. Most say that it is read on the Shabbat before Pesach, the festival of liberation from Egyptian servitude, because it deals with the ultimate liberation of Israel from oppression, which would come about when the “great day” arrives, with Elijah as its messenger—and Elijah is by long tradition connected with the Seder observance.¹

Another opinion holds that Pesach is the great family festival of the Jewish people, and the concluding words of the haftarah speak of family unity.

The Shabbat itself is named the “Great Shabbat” because Malachi speaks of the arrival of the “great day.”²

The setting:

The anonymous prophet called Malachi (“My Messenger”) lived about the middle of the 5th century B.C.E. Judea was still a Persian province ruled by a governor. The Prophet addressed himself to the social and religious conditions of his time, which were not unlike what many societies at the end of the 20th century have come to know. People doubted God and divine justice; their temple service was perfunctory; divorce and intermarriage rates were rising; and a general sense of instability prevailed. Malachi’s critique helped to bring about the reforms by Ezra and Nehemiah.

For more on Malachi and his time, see our *General Introduction*.

The message:

1. The opening verses of the haftarah are part of Malachi’s vision of the distant future that precedes them in verses 1-3. On that day, God will see to it that justice reigns throughout the land. (3:4-5)
2. In order to turn your land into a place of delight, you must start by cleansing the Temple of its corruption. (6-12)
3. God takes note of the doubt that people have about divine justice. (14-16) See the essay below.
4. Taking up the theme of the opening lines, the Prophet now depicts the “great and terrible day” that the Eternal will bring about when the time is right. (17-24)