

Isaiah 18: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Isaiah chapter 18. Ah, land of whirring wings that is beyond the rivers of Cush, which sends ambassadors by the sea in vessels of papyrus on the waters. Go, you swift messengers, to a nation tall and smooth, to a people feared near and far, a nation mighty and conquering, whose land the rivers divide. All you inhabitants of the world, you who dwell on the earth, when a signal is raised on the mountains, look, when a trumpet is blown, hear. For thus the Lord said to me, I will quietly look from my dwelling like clear heat in sunshine, like a cloud of dew in the heat of harvest. For before the harvest, when the blossom is over and the flower becomes a ripening grape, he cuts off the shoots with pruning hooks, and the spreading branches he lops off and clears away. They shall all of them be left to the birds of prey of the mountains, and to the beasts of the earth, and the birds of prey will summer on them, and all the beasts of the earth will winter on them. At that time tribute will be brought to the Lord of hosts from a people tall and smooth, from a people feared near and far, a nation mighty and conquering, whose land the rivers divide, to Mount Zion, the place of the name of the Lord of hosts. In Isaiah chapters 18 to 20, the prophecies concerning the nations move on to consider the nations to the further south, Egypt and

Cush, which would include modern-day Ethiopia or Sudan. As Christopher Seitz notes, this section is unusual in treating Egypt and the land to its south separately, in chapters 18 and 19, and then together in chapter 20. Cush was one of the people groups mentioned in the list of the nations in Genesis chapter 10. The kingdom of Cush was to the south of Egypt. We don't have many references to it in scripture. During the reign of King Asa, a Cushite named Zerah had invaded Judah with an immense army, an event recorded in 2nd Chronicles chapter 14 verses 9 to 15. On that occasion the Lord had delivered his people. The Cushite kingdom, centered upon the city of Napata, attacked upper Egypt under Kashta in the middle of the 8th century. His successors, Pianki and Shabaka, eventually brought the entirety of Egypt under Cushite rule, establishing the 25th dynasty. In contrast to the messages to the nations that precede it, chapter 18 is not introduced as an oracle, but as a woe, much as we see in verses 12 to 14 of the preceding chapter. The land is described as a land of whirring wings that is beyond the rivers of Cush. Some have understood the word translated whirring wings in the ESV as a reference to the sort of vessels that the Cushites used upon the river. Elsewhere we see this word used in reference to the locust or some other insect in Deuteronomy chapter 28 verse 42.

This, it seems to me, is the more likely meaning of the term here. However, the Septuagint and the Targon both understand the term to be in reference to ships, so that reading does have a long pedigree.

The Cushites are described as sending ambassadors by the sea in vessels of papyrus. These vessels would have been used to navigate the Nile. If they stuck close to the shore, they could also have been used for a sea journey towards Judah. The business of these ambassadors is debated. Was this part of a plan for an anti-Assyrian rebellion? Later on in chapter 31, for instance, the Lord will declare the futility of those who go down to Egypt for help. Brother Charles, for instance, proposes that we understand this chapter in the context of Hezekiah's attempts to build such an alliance against the Assyrians. Alec Martia relates it to earlier events, as the newly established 25th dynasty under Pianki itself engaged in diplomatic efforts to form an anti-Assyrian conglomeration of nations.

This might make more sense for the fact that at the beginning of verse 2, it seems to be Cush that initiates the diplomatic exchange. The question of the identity of the swift messengers in the second part of verse 2 and their design destination is one that divides the commentators. Are these the same messengers as have been mentioned in the first part of verse 2?

[3 : 58] However, if the messengers that have been sent from Cush are being sent back to Cush, it is odd that they are not simply told to return. The description of the people to whom they are sent, a nation that is tall and smooth, is repeated in verse 7. Some commentators see a parallel with this and chapter 45 verse 14.

Thus says the Lord, Yet the description of the men of stature there is not so clearly related to Cush as it is within these verses. Furthermore, as there is no reference to them being smooth or hairless, the parallel may not be as strong as many people think.

A people feared near and far, a nation mighty and conquering, does not seem to fit Cush that well. Some have seen this then as a reference to Assyria. Alternatively, as Joseph Blenkinsop suggests, this might be a more sarcastic way of speaking about the people of Cush.

He sees the envoys here, not as Cushite being sent back, but as Judeans being sent to Cush. The message that is delivered does not seem to relate to Cush more directly. Rather, it is a message delivered to the whole world, speaking about what the Lord will do.

The raise signal might draw our minds back to Isaiah chapter 13 verse 2, at the very beginning of the section concerning the nations. On a bare hill, raise a signal, cry aloud to them, wave the hand for them to enter the gates of the nobles. The object of the Lord's judgment is also a matter of debate. If we read it alongside verses 12 to 14 of the preceding chapter, as Gary Smith notes, it would make most sense to relate it to the Assyrians.

[5 : 43] God is enthroned above all the events of the earth. His throne is in no way unsettled. He looks down calmly upon the things that are taking place. At the appropriate time, he will act decisively against his enemies. If verses 5 to 6 are in reference to the Assyrians, the word would have been fulfilled with the cutting back of Sennacherib's army, as the Lord prevented Sennacherib from taking over Jerusalem in 701 BC. This would be a message of hope to both Judah and Cush. Much as the Lord described cutting back the vine of Moab, the spreading vine of Assyria would also be cut back, and as the Lord cut off from this vine, the pieces would be left for the birds of prey of the mountains and the beasts of the earth. The end of verse 6 might be a reference to birds of prey and beasts of the earth making their home in the ruins of a former city. Alternatively, we might think of the birds of prey feeding upon the 185,000 that were dead of the Assyrians when the Lord slew them at their unsuccessful siege of Jerusalem. The short chapter is bracketed by another reference to the people tall and smooth, feared near and far, the nation mighty and conquering, whose land the rivers divide. In

Isaiah chapter 2 verses 2 to 4, we read the following prophecy, It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be lifted up above the hills, and all the nations shall flow to it.

And many people shall come and say, Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways, and that we may walk in his paths. For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall decide disputes for many peoples, and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks. Nations shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. The chapter ends with a prophecy that this time will come for Cush too. They will bring tribute to the Lord of hosts, to Mount Zion. Nations that were worried about paying tribute to the cruel Assyria would one day pay tribute to the Lord, the righteous and good ruler of all of the earth. A question to consider, in the context of the reign of King Hezekiah, and the insecurities of Judah during that period, what lesson might they have taken from this prophecy?