

Book of Isaiah



Chapter 18

Theme: The Burden Of The Land Beyond The Rivers Of Ethiopia.

**Michael Fronczak
564 Schaeffer Dr.
Coldwater, Michigan 49036**

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Chapter 18

Ethiopia? Or the United States?

“To us, this brief chapter is the most difficult one of all the sixty-six chapters of Isaiah.” (Bultema) “Although the prophecy is a short one, it probably ranks as the most obscure chapter in this entire section.” (Wolf) “This is one of the most obscure prophecies in the whole Book of Isaiah.” (Clarke)

Six Predictions -- Unfulfilled:

1. Woe to the land shadowing with wings, beyond the rivers of Ethiopia (Isa. 18:1).
2. God will lift up a banner among the nations and they are commanded to see it (Isa. 18:3).
3. He will blow a trumpet among the nations and they are commanded to hear it.
4. The Lord will take His rest and consider in His dwelling place, and the crops will not be harvested (Isa. 18:4-5).
5. The crops will be left to the fowl and wild animals to feed on during the summer and winter (Isa. 18:6).
6. In that time -- the time of the fulfillment of this woe -- a present shall be brought from this land to Mount Zion to the Lord of hosts (Isa. 18:7).¹

Future Defeat of Ethiopia

God has made clear His purpose to punish the Ethiopians described in Isa. 18:1-2,7. These people will be making plans against God and Israel, and will be mobilized with other nations under Antichrist to fight in the battle of Armageddon. The Ethiopians will be at his steps (Dan. 11:40-45). It is revealed here that they will all be defeated, and the manner in which it will be done is shown. God will sit calmly while these preparations are being made -- as the sun shines on the earth while the crops are growing, and the dew gently falls in the heat of harvest (Isa. 18:4) -- but before their plans are completed, He will suddenly interfere and destroy them like one appearing before the harvest is ripe and cutting it down (Isa. 18:5). God comforts Judah here by showing that when the nations are gathered to destroy them He will undertake for them and destroy their enemies (Isa. 18:4-5). The bones of these enemies will remain unburied for months, and the fowls of the air and beasts of the field will feed upon them (Isa. 18:6). All this proves a latter-day fulfillment, for at no time in history has this literally been fulfilled. Such is not only definitely predicted here for the future, but in many other prophecies it states that at Armageddon the Jews will be delivered from the Gentiles, including the Ethiopians, and that the many slain on the battlefield will make meat for the fowl and wild animals for seven months and longer (Isa. 18:4-6; Ezek. 39:1-24; Dan. 11:40-45; Mt. 24:28-31; Lk. 17:31-37; Rev. 19:11-21).²

¹ Dake's Annotated Reference Bible

² Dake's Annotated Reference Bible

Chapter 18 deals with the fifth burden, that of the land "beyond the rivers of Ethiopia." The exact nation that Isaiah had in mind has not been clearly established, so there have been many interpretations. Some have thought that he is talking about Egypt, but the description does not fit that country. Also, Egypt is the subject of the next chapter, where we see that God is not through with that kingdom. Prophecy literally has been fulfilled concerning her. Those who say that chapter 18 is referring to England and the United States weary me with that interpretation. I feel like yawning, as that is certainly not sound interpretation of the Word of God! I believe that Ethiopia best suits the text and tenor of Scripture. But which Ethiopia is intended? There are two mentioned in Scripture. The word for Ethiopia is Cush. There is one in Asia (see Gen. 2:13), and there is one in Africa. I believe we are talking about the Ethiopia that is in Africa. It is the land "beyond the rivers," and the rivers of Ethiopia are the Nile River. Now God calls the world's attention to Ethiopia:³

This prophecy was probably given in the days of Hezekiah (2 Kings 19-20). The king of Ethiopia had heard that Assyria's great army was marching south toward them. He sent messengers up the Nile asking the surrounding nations to form an alliance. Judah was also asked to join, but Isaiah told the messengers to return home because Judah needed only God's help to repel the Assyrians. Isaiah prophesied that Assyria would be destroyed at the proper time (37:21-38).⁴

¹Woe to the land shadowing with wings, which is beyond the rivers of Ethiopia:

There are several difficulties in the following few verses of chapter 18. One is the word "Woe" in Hebrew is "hoy" and may not be a warning at all but simply an expression like "listen." In other words the first verse of chapter 18 is saying "Oh Land of Ethiopia, listen to this loud reverberating announcement!" There is something that is to happen to the people of God in His "dwelling place" (Heb. makon) This word refers to the location of the habitation of the Shekinah in verse 4 below. See the notes in Isa 4:5 on this word. Therefore the event that the Ethiopians are to hear about is to take place in Jerusalem and will, according to verse 7. result in the Ethiopians expressing worship to YHWH. This much is clear.

"...beyond" the rivers of Ethiopia. Classic expositors have Ethiopia in view; however, some suggest that this may refer to the United States. (Many regard this as rather specious; yet, even if one grants this view, it reveals nothing relevant, other than it is ripe for judgment. Indeed.)⁵

"Woe" is an unfortunate translation. Actually, it is the same word that is translated as "ah" in Isaiah 1:4, where it is a sigh, or as "ho" in Isaiah 55, where it is a form of address that demands attention. Here God is saying, "Ho, to the land -- Hear Me, listen to this!"

"Shadowing with wings" might better be translated "rustling with wings." This is quite interesting. A missionary to the land for quite some years told me that Ethiopia is noted for its birds. It is called "the land of wings." This helps to confirm that the land in question here is Ethiopia.⁶

³ Thru The Bible with J. Vernon McGee.

⁴ Life Application Study Bible.

⁵ Chuck Missler, Notes on Isaiah, khouse.org

⁶ Thru The Bible with J. Vernon McGee.

Ethiopia, called Cush in the Bible, was at the southern end of Isaiah's world. A Cushite dynasty took over Egypt in 715 b.c. and probably sent ambassadors to Jerusalem. Cush may have been a Hebrew term for black African peoples (Num. 12:1; Ps. 87:4).

The land that lies beyond the rivers of Cush was Cush (Nubia), notable for its ships, whose sails looked like the whirring wings of insects over water from a distance. Another view of the whirling wings is that they represent swarming hordes of people, including soldiers.²¹⁴ Cush was at the end of the earth in Isaiah's day and therefore symbolized the ends of the earth; it was a great distance from Judah. Some scholars believe Cush lay within what is now Ethiopia, but others think Cush included modern southern Egypt, Sudan, Eritrea, and northern Ethiopia.²¹⁵ Envoys from Cush may have traveled to Moab, Philistia, and Judah seeking an alliance against Assyria.⁷

Which is beyond the rivers of Ethiopia: In the days of Isaiah, Ethiopia was a major world power, ruling Egypt and a chief rival to Assyria. Since Judah was caught in the middle between this conflict, it might make sense for Judah to align herself with Ethiopia against Assyria.

"In 715 B.C. an Ethiopian named Shabako gained control of Egypt as founder of the twenty-fifth dynasty. Ethiopian domination continued until 633 B.C. when a native Egyptian regained the throne." (Wolf)

"The term designates a much larger area than present-day Eithiopia - an area including the Sudan and Somalia." (Grogan)

Shadowed with buzzing wings: The Nile Valley is famous for its many whirring insects.⁸

²That sendeth ambassadors by the sea, even in vessels of bulrushes upon the waters, saying, Go, ye swift messengers, to a nation scattered and peeled, to a people terrible from their beginning hitherto; a nation meted out and trodden down, whose land the rivers have spoiled!

Traditional view: An embassy from Egypt, resulting in the alliance denounced in Chapters 30-31 and Jer 37:7-11. Ambassadors by sea? Acts 8:27 implies that ambassadors from Ethiopia travelled by land.

"Rivers have spoiled" = *baw-za*: divided, cleaved, cut through; traversed.

"Scattered": *maw-shak*: 36X: draw 15, draw out 3, prolonged 3, scattered 2, draw along 1, draw away 1, continue 1, deferred 1, misc 9.

Means = to draw, drag, seize; to draw (and lift out), drag along, lead along, drag or lead off, draw down; to proceed, march; to draw out or give (a sound); to draw out, prolong, continue; to trail (seed in sowing); to cheer, draw, attract, gratify; to be drawn out; to be drawn out, be postponed, be deferred; to be tall.

"Peeled" *mo-rawt*: polished; scoured; smooth; also, obstinate, independent.

"Bulrushes" *go-meh*: swallow, drink, absorbent, porous: bulrush; papyrus.⁹

⁷ <http://soniclight.com/constable/notes/pdf/isaiah.pdf>

⁸ <http://www.studyight.org/commentaries/guz/isaiah-18.html>

⁹ Chuck Missler, Notes on Isaiah, khouse.org

[Go, ye swift messengers] Here God commanded these ambassadors to return home to their own people instead of going to another nation.

None of these details could possibly describe the United States, as some would interpret Isa. 18. In fact, not one passage in Scripture mentions the United States in particular. This passage describes Ethiopia (see Six Proofs that This Land Is Ethiopia in The 20th Prophecy in Isaiah) and to force another meaning into it is unscriptural.¹⁰

Some have held this sea power to be England or the United States, but "vessels of bulrushes" would not characterize the boats of any modern nation! Dr. F. C. Jennings, in his profound work on Isaiah, makes a good case for the steamboat, but since modern ships use oil, this seems to have no place in our day.

"A nation scattered and peeled" is Israel. This is patently evident, and most of the sound students of the Word of God concur in this.¹¹

Which sends ambassadors by sea: The scene pictures Ethiopian ambassadors who come to make an alliance with Judah and the other nations of the region against Assyria.

Go, swift messengers, to a nation tall and smooth of skin: As the Ethiopian ambassadors invite Judah to rebel against the Assyrians, they ask Judah to send swift messengers back to Ethiopia (to a nation tall and smooth of skin . . . a nation powerful), and the Ethiopians would hope to hear that Judah has rebelled against Assyria and aligned itself with Ethiopia and Egypt.¹²

Isaiah called on these messengers from Ethiopia to go to a nation tall and smooth (shaven). This was a common description of the Nubians (or Cushites). They were to go to a people feared far and wide, perhaps the Egyptians or the Assyrians. They were to go to a powerful and oppressive nation whose land was divided by rivers, again perhaps the Egyptians, the Assyrians, or even the Medes. Taken together these descriptions represent all great, aggressive nations.

All the recipients of this message, the "inhabitants of the world and wellers on earth" (v. 3), were to hear that a sovereign (the Lord) would issue a call to battle. No one could miss that call when it came.¹³

This prophecy is spoken of the land beyond the rivers of Cush, which is Ethiopia. Ethiopia during Isaiah's time was much larger than today, and was known for their political power, not for starving citizens.

Isaiah compares their many diplomatic messengers going here and there to the sound of many insects buzzing about. These diplomats were trying to form alliances to protect Ethiopia from the impending Assyrian invasion. Remember that alliances were formed by idolatrous nations not only to secure the partnership of the country's military, but also of their gods.

But the true God is not buzzing about. He will look from His dwelling place quietly. He is able to cut away spreading branches with ease, without assistance. The same people that the Ethiopians were approaching for help (18:2) will be those that approach the Lord with gifts and

¹⁰ Dake's Annotated Reference Bible

¹¹ Thru The Bible with J. Vernon McGee.

¹² <http://www.study-light.org/commentaries/guz/isaiah-18.html>

¹³ <http://soniclight.com/constable/notes/pdf/isaiah.pdf>

adoration (18:7). They are described as being "tall and smooth," which could be speaking of the Nubians of Cush.¹⁴

³All ye inhabitants of the world, and dwellers on the earth, see ye, when he lifteth up an ensign on the mountains; and when he bloweth a trumpet, hear ye.

Two things all men are commanded to do:

1. See when God lifts up the banner on the mountains (note c, Isa. 11:10).
2. Hear when He blows a trumpet.

[he lifteth up an ensign] He -- God will lift up a banner. The only one He predicts to lift up is the Messiah Himself as the rallying point of all nations, which identifies this passage as yet unfulfilled (note c, Isa. 11:10). Many will not rally to Christ but will first oppose Him, being led by Antichrist (Zech. 14; Rev. 16:13-16; 19:11-21).

[he bloweth a trumpet] He -- God will blow a trumpet at the second coming of Christ (Joel 2:1; Zech. 9:14).¹⁵

Many students of the Word consider the "ensign" mentioned here to be the ark of the tabernacle, which was later transferred to the temple. It disappeared at the time of the Babylonian captivity, and there is a tradition which says it was carried to Ethiopia. I have been told that there is a church in that land that claims to have the ark. I don't know if that is true or not, but an ensign will come out of that land.¹⁶

banner: For the use of this word to refer to salvation instead of judgment.

⁴For so the LORD said unto me, I will take my rest, and I will consider in my dwelling place like a clear heat upon herbs, and like a cloud of dew in the heat of harvest.

The LORD said to me, "I will take My rest": The LORD God rejects the alliance with Ethiopia, because He is more than able to deal with the Assyrians Himself. He can take His rest without the help of the Ethiopians. If God wanted to muster an army against Assyria, He would have raised a banner or sounded a trumpet. He is fully able to do it, and would do it when the time is right.

Significantly, there is no rebuke or judgment against Ethiopia announced in this chapter. It wasn't as if God was going to judge Ethiopia for their offer of an alliance. Perhaps the idea is that it is a well intentioned but unnecessary offer. Instead, Judah was to trust in the LORD!¹⁷

¹⁴ <http://rondaniel.com/library/23-Isaiah/Isaiah1428.php>

¹⁵ Dake's Annotated Reference Bible

¹⁶ Thru The Bible with J. Vernon McGee.

¹⁷ <http://www.studyight.org/commentaries/guz/isaiah-18.html>

⁵For afore the harvest, when the bud is perfect, and the sour grape is ripening in the flower, he shall both cut off the sprigs with pruning hooks, and take away *and* cut down the branches.

Pruning before harvest? Dew: clear hint = bad.

[**afore**] An old English word for "before."

[shall both cut off the sprigs with pruning hooks, and take away and cut down the branches] God will destroy the Ethiopians and other nations under Antichrist, as one would cut off sprigs with the pruning hook and take away the branches before they bear a crop.¹⁸

God can "prune" Assyria all by Himself. He will destroy the Assyrian army so completely that they will be left together for the mountain birds of prey.¹⁹

⁶They shall be left together unto the fowls of the mountains, and to the beasts of the earth: and the fowls shall summer upon them, and all the beasts of the earth shall winter upon them.

The nations destroyed at Armageddon will make meat for the fowls and beasts of the field to eat for many months (Ezek. 39:1-24; Lk. 17:31-37; Rev. 19:17,21).²⁰

God's judgment will be so extensive that the carcasses of His victims will be devoured in the summer and winter.

⁷In that time shall the present be brought unto the LORD of hosts of a people scattered and peeled, and from a people terrible from their beginning hitherto; a nation meted out and trodden under foot, whose land the rivers have spoiled, to the place of the name of the LORD of hosts, the mount Zion.

In that time -- when Antichrist's armies are destroyed and the Millennium begins following Armageddon, the Ethiopians will submit to God and bring a present to the Lord of hosts who will then be in Mount Zion and Jerusalem establishing the kingdom of David over Israel and all other nations (Isa. 9:6-7; Zech. 14; Lk. 1:32-33; Rev. 11-15; 20:1-10).²¹

This is evidently a reference to the time when the Kingdom of Christ will be established on this earth and the Ethiopians will come again to Jerusalem to worship. There is no judgment spoken

¹⁸ Dake's Annotated Reference Bible

¹⁹ <http://www.study-light.org/commentaries/guz/isaiah-18.html>

²⁰ Dake's Annotated Reference Bible

²¹ Dake's Annotated Reference Bible

against them. In Psalm 87:4, evidently in reply to what he is doing in Jerusalem, the Ethiopian answers that he was born there. God has wonderful things to say about Ethiopia!²²

the place of the name: Note how closely the Lord identifies with Mount Zion. This was the one place for the true worship of God.

Instead of Israelite messengers bringing news to Ethiopia of an alliance against the Assyria, the day will come when Ethiopians will come and worship at Mount Zion.

This may have been fulfilled in some way close to Isaiah's time. But we know it was fulfilled in Acts 8:26-40, when an Ethiopian came to worship the LORD at Jerusalem, and then trusted in Jesus at the preaching of Philip. It was also fulfilled in the strong Ethiopian church the first few centuries, and the enduring Ethiopian church today.²³

This message by the Cushite envoys harmonized with what Yahweh had told Isaiah. Yahweh would look from His heavenly dwelling place quietly, like the shimmering heat in summer or the encroaching mist in autumn. These are figures that connote coming judgment.

He would prune the nations as a farmer pruned his grapevines and trees, but He would do it before they reached harvest time. In other words, His judging the nations would be perceived as premature. The nations would be so depopulated by this judgment that birds and beasts would feed on the remains of those judged (cf. Rev. 19:17-18).

Then the remaining representatives of all these once-powerful and aggressive nations (cf. v. 2) would worship the Lord Almighty (cf. Ps. 68:31; Zech. 14:16; Acts 8:26-36). They would bring their gifts to Him at Mt. Zion. This will be a time of global worship of Messiah.²⁴

Alliances Today

<i>Government</i>	We rely on government legislation to protect the moral decisions we want made, but legislation cannot change people's hearts.
<i>Science</i>	We enjoy the benefits of science and technology. We look to scientific predictions and analysis before we look to the Bible.
<i>Education</i>	We act as though education and degrees can guarantee our future and success without considering what God plans for our future.
<i>Medical care</i>	We regard medicine as the way to prolong life and preserve its quality—quite apart from faith and moral living.
<i>Financial systems</i>	We place our faith in financial "security"—making as much money as we can for ourselves—forgetting that, while being wise with our money, we must trust God for our needs.

Isaiah warned Judah not to ally with Egypt ([20:5](#); [30:1, 2](#); [31:1](#)). He knew that trust in any nation or any military might was futile. Judah's only hope was to trust in God. Although we don't consciously put our hope for deliverance in political alliances in quite the same way, we often put our hope in other places.²⁵

²² Thru The Bible with J. Vernon McGee.

²³ <http://www.study-light.org/commentaries/guz/isaiah-18.html>

²⁴ <http://soniclight.com/constable/notes/pdf/isaiah.pdf>

²⁵ Life Application Study Bible.