

Isaiah Chapter 17, Hebrew Text with Translation and Footnotes

A Prophetic Word for Syria

and Ephraim / Northern Israel–

YHWH Alone is the Rock of Salvation!¹

¹There are six end-notes at the end of **chapter 17**: (1) “The Modern City of Damascus”; (2) “The Asherim in the Hebrew Bible”; (3) “Astarte and Ashtaroth in the Hebrew Bible”; (4) Sun-Pillars as Objects of Worship in the Ancient Near East”; (5) “The Worship of Tammuz in the Ancient Near East”; and (6) Adonis and Adonis Gardens.

Motyer entitles the two chapters, **17:1-18:7** “Damascus and Ephraim: destruction and preservation, the work of humankind and the work of God.”

He comments that “The oracle concerning Damascus (**17:1**) is a mosaic of five pieces. First, in **17:1-3** Aram and Ephraim are involved in a common fate, stripped of the worldly security of cities, fortifications and royal power. Secondly, **17:4-9** is divided into three parts by ‘In that day’ (**verses 4, 7, 9**). Jacob will be reduced to gleanings (**verses 4-6**) but the remnant (**verses 7-8**) will turn truly to the Lord. Yet the day of their preservation will also be the day (**verse 9**) of the destruction of all their worldly strength. Thirdly, **17:10-11** is distinct in form, the verbs being 2nd person singular feminine, but (whatever its origin) since **verse 10** opens with ‘for,’ it now acts as an explanation why this disaster has befallen Ephraim...

“Fourthly, **17:12-14** has a world setting among ‘nations’ and ‘peoples’ (**verses 12-13**). The theme is the sudden dispersal of an international threat. Fifthly, **18:1-7** has the same international flavor: envoys travel between nations (**verses 1-2**) and the whole earth is addressed (**verse 3**). The Lord is an unobserved watcher (**verse 4**). Just when the harvest is ready, He will intervene (**verses 5-6**), and what would have been harvested will be food for the birds and beasts. Then the people to whom the envoys went (**verse 7**; compare **verse 2**) will bring tribute to the Lord in Zion...

Such a wide spread of literature, extending perhaps over twenty or thirty years of Isaiah’s ministry, must have been brought together deliberately, but to what purpose? We note that after **17:1-3** specific historical references disappear. Thus, while we may discern Sennacherib and Assyria behind **17:12-14** neither he nor his empire is named, and in the same way **18:1-7** is now detached from the history which gave it birth. In other words, as throughout these oracle chapters, Isaiah’s concern is with the issues to which history gave expression rather than with the course of events as such.” (P. 155)

We are amazed that in this outline of **chapters 17-18**, Motyer makes no mention of Cush / Ethiopia, to whom **chapter 18** is addressed, with its prediction of the coming of this farthest-off black people of Africa coming to YHWH in Zion.

Slotki entitles **chapter 17** “Doom of Damascus and the Northern Kingdom.”

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He comments on **verses 1-11**, that they contain the “Announcement of the approaching ruin of Damascus and the fall of the kingdom of Israel. The date of the prophecy is held to be about 735 B.C.E.

He states concerning **verses 1-3** that they depict “the destruction of the kingdom of Damascus on whose protection Israel had relied.” (P. 81)

Gray entitles **17:1-11** “The coming Destruction of Syria and Ephraim.”

He comments that “The first strophe [**verses 1-3**] is devoted mainly to the fate of Syria, but incidentally also to that of Ephraim. Syria is to lose its independence: Damascus, the capital, and other cities are to be reduced to perpetual desolation. The last two strophes [**verses 4-11**] are devoted exclusively to Ephraim, i.e. the Northern kingdom of Israel. In strophe 2 the almost total depopulation of Ephraim is depicted under three figures: strophe 3 dwells on the inutility in the day of disaster of those cults to which Ephraim had devoted itself. In **verses 7-8** the point of the last strophe is universalized: all mankind will be convinced in the coming day of the inutility of works of men’s hands, and will turn instead to the Holy One of Israel, Who is also Maker of mankind. [Do you agree with Gray, that **verses 7-8** predict ‘universal’ turning of humanity to YHWH? Can these verses be predicting anything less?]

“The poem was composed before the fall of Damascus (732 B.C.E.), and, as we may infer from the coupling of Ephraim and Damascus, after the formation of the Syro-Ephraimitish alliance (**chapter 7**), which took place about 736 B.C.E.

“The predictions were in large part fulfilled. Retson (**Isaiah 7:1**) was the last native sovereign of Damascus; he was slain by Tiglath-pileser (**2 Kings 17:9**), who was not in the west after 732 B.C.E., and with him ‘the sovereignty was taken away from Damascus’ (**verse 3**), which became an Assyrian province...Though less complete and lasting than Isaiah expected (for Damascus never actually became an uninhabited spot), the devastation of Damascus and the neighboring country in 732 B.C.E. was great. Tiglath-pileser speaks of cutting down numberless gardens and plantations, carrying off many captives with their property, and wasting 591 cities of 16 districts of the land of Damascus. See his Annals, II. 203-209 [Pritchard, **Ancient Near Eastern Texts**, pp. 287-88, 301-02].” (P. 297)

Gray is being too easy, we think, on Isaiah and the fulfillment of his prophecy. As we read the first paragraph of the text, it predicts the total extermination of Damascus—its ceasing to be a city. Gray’s translation is “Lo! Damascus is about to be removed from being a city, And it shall become a ruin ‘forsaken for ever’,” and his comment is that “Damascus, the capital and other cities are to be reduced to perpetual desolation.” (P. 297)

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But this didn't happen; the city of Damascus survived the Assyrian onslaught of Tiglath-pileser, and is still today a huge metropolis in spite of the modern Syrian civil war—one of the world's oldest, continuously occupied cities. We say, Isaiah's prediction did not come to pass. The city suffered an overwhelming defeat at the hands of the Assyrians, but she was not 'reduced to perpetual desolation.' Compare our footnote 20.

Alexander comments concerning **chapter 17** that "This chapter is chiefly occupied with a prophecy of desolation to the kingdoms of Syria and Ephraim (**verses 1-11**). It closes with a more general threatening against the enemies of Judah (**verses 12-14**). Most of the modern [mid-19th century C.E.] writers regard **verse 12** as the beginning of a new and distinct prophecy, extending through **chapter 18**, and relating to the destruction of Sennacherib's host. Some of the older writers explain **verses 12-14** as a direct continuation of the prophecy concerning Syria and Israel. Others treat it as a fragment, or an independent prophecy, connected neither with the **17th** nor **18th** chapter. In favor of connecting it with **chapter 17** is the absence of any distinctive title or intimation of a change of subject. In favor of connecting it with **chapter 18**, is the similarity of form in the beginning of **17:12** and **18:1**. The still stronger resemblance between **17:11** and **18:15**, seems to show that the whole is a continuous composition. This is, at least, a safer conclusion, and one more favorable to correct interpretation, than the extreme of mutilation and division, to which the modern [mid-nineteenth century] criticism uniformly tends...

"The most satisfactory view of the whole passage is that it was meant to be a prophetic picture of the doom which awaited the enemies of Judah, and that while many of its expressions admit of a general application, some traits in the description are derived from particular invasions and attacks. Thus Syria and Ephraim are expressly mentioned in the first part, while the terms of the last three verses are more appropriate to the slaughter of the Assyrian host; but as this is not explicitly referred to, there is no need of regarding it as the exclusive subject even of that passage.

"The **18th chapter** may then be treated as a part of the same context. In the first part of **chapter 17**, the prophet represents the kingdoms of Syria and Ephraim as sharing the same fate, both being brought to desolation (**verses 1-3**). He then describes the desolation of Ephraim especially, by the figures of a harvest and a gathering of olives, in which little is left to be afterwards gleaned (**verses 4-6**). As the effect of these judgments, he describes the people as renouncing their idols and returning to Jehovah (**verses 7-8**). But as the desolation of Syria and Israel was actually effected by successive strokes or stages, as Shalmaneser accomplished what Tiglath-pileser had begun, and as history records a partial conversion of the Israelites from their apostasy between these two attacks, it is altogether natural to understand the prophecy as exhibiting this sequence of events. In the close of the chapter, the prophet first describes a gathering of nations, and then their dispersion by Divine rebuke, which

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he declares to be the doom of all who attack or oppress God's people (**verses 12-14**)." (Pp. 331-32)

Oswalt entitles **17:1-11** "Syria and Ephraim," and comments that "After dealing with Judah's two southern neighbors, Philistia and Moab, Isaiah now turns to address the two on the north. Although the oracle is addressed to Damascus, the main focus after **verse 3** is upon Northern Israel [Ephraim]. This combined treatment suggests that the prophecy is one of the earlier ones, having originated during the Syro-Ephraimite alliance in 735-732 B.C.E..."

"The stress upon the failure to trust God and the results of that failure (**verses 7-11**) remind one strongly of the emphasis of **chapters 7-12**, as does the following treatment (**17:12-18:7**) on the certainty of God's triumph. Thus, whether or not it was intended to do so, the entire segment (**17:1-18:7**) serves as an excellent midpoint summary to hold before the reader again the central issues: refusal to depend upon God is foolishness which will result in destruction by the nations. Nevertheless, God is in control of the nations and He will not permit them to obliterate His people. Despite all the raging of the nations, He is their Master." (P. 349)

Kaiser entitles **17:1-3** "Against Damascus and Israel."

He comments that the threat against Damascus and Israel "is attributed by modern commentators to the prophet Isaiah. They date it at the opening of the war with Syria and Ephraim, when king Pekah of Israel and king Razon of Damascus joined together to drive out their Judaeen colleague Ahaz, in order to replace him by a prince who would lead Judah into battle alongside them against the Assyrian emperor Tiglath-pileser III. In 732 B.C.E. Damascus was conquered and thus became the capital of an Assyrian province, while the kingdom of Israel, whose territory was considerably reduced in 734 and 732 B.C.E., suffered the same fate, together with its capital, in 722-21 B.C.E..."

"We must ask whether there are really any grounds for dating these stanzas in the eighth century...Unfortunately, the history of Damascus from the time of its last mention by Assurbanipal [687-627 B.C.E.; called Asenappar in **Ezra 4:10**] who traveled through it, until the entry of Parmenion [a Macedonian general in the service of Philip II of Macedon and Alexander the Great] in 333 B.C.E. lies in total obscurity, for the city clearly passed from one overlord to another without any further occurrence. Its last attempt to regain its independence was as early as 720 B.C.E., when Samaria too once again revolted against Sargon..."

"In the period of the successors of Alexander [the Great], Antiochus I forced Ptolemy II to withdraw from Damascus, and Seleucus II did the same to an army sent by Ptolemy III. In the Seleucid period [312-63 B.C.E.] Damascus had become, after Antioch, the second administrative headquarters of the western half of the kingdom."

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The expectation that, in spite of having continued to flourish against all the storms of the centuries, the former Aramaean metropolis (compare **Ezekiel 27:18**) would suffer its final fall before the beginning of the age of salvation fits perfectly well into the total picture built up in the oracles against the nations...

“The flourishing city of Damascus is to become a place of ruins (compare **Isaiah 23:13; 25:2**, and also **Ezekiel 27:15, 18; 27:27; 33:13, 16; 32:10**) and is never again to be rebuilt. The same fate is to befall not only the cities belonging to Damascus, in the ruins of which the shepherds will pasture their sheep (compare **Isaiah 13:19ff.; 27:10; 32:14** and **Zephaniah 2:14**), but also Ephraim, the Samaritan heartland of the ancient northern kingdom...

“In prophesying the end of the kingdom of Damascus, either the poet was taking upon himself the mantle of Isaiah, from whom ultimately the whole poem is derived by way of the tradition in **Isaiah 7:1-16** (compare also **5:17**), or else he had in mind the later favors shown to the city by foreign overlords. What is left after the devastation of the Aramaeans possesses no more importance and honor than what the storms of history have left behind of the former flourishing kingdom of Israel, which from the political point of view was virtually nothing.” (Pp. 76-78)

²Motyer entitles **verses 1-3** “An alliance that failed.”

He comments that “For the background to this passage see **Isaiah 7:3-9; 2 Kings 16:1-9**. In these verses the people of God, here the northern kingdom, Ephraim, make their first appearance in the oracle sequence (**chapters 13:1-20:6**). Note that they are not mentioned independently but as linked with Damascus / Aram and are destroyed with them in a joint destruction...

“The Lord’s concern for His people is a holy concern. Consequently, Divine judgment touches them also. The particular sin which brings them under judgment is that, against the looming power of Assyria, they have sought security through armed alliance with Aram (see **7:7-9**). The explanation (**verse 10**) is that this constitutes abandonment of the Lord and the security He affords. Consequently, both they and the strength in which they trust will perish.” (P. 156)

Watts comments on **verses 1-3** that “The burden laments the devastation of Syria and its capital. Its continued ruin has removed the threat to Ephraim and the need for fortification on either side of that border. One way to stop an armaments race is to have both territories reduced to rubble. Thus the rivalry on the border between Syria and Israel which had raged for more than a century was ended in 732 B.C.E. by the Assyrian invasions. Now peace reigns because there is nothing more to destroy. Royal rule with its pride and ambition has ceased to be. That situation continues in

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הַנָּה דְּמִשְׁקֹ מוֹסֵר מֵעִיר
וְהִיתָה מֵעַי מִפְּלָה:

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Hezekiah's reign, to which this passage refers. Both Aram and Israel are *remnants* of their former *glory*. God Himself notes and describes the situation." (P. 238)

Oswalt comments on **verses 1-2** that "Damascus was one of the most strategic cities of the ancient world, for it stood at the mouth of a natural funnel through which ran the only convenient land route between Mesopotamia and Egypt. North of the city stands Mount Hermon [No–Mount Hermon lies some 54 miles to the southwest of Damascus; the mountains to the north of Damascus are the Anti-Lebanons, and specifically, Mount Qasioun] and south of it are a series of basalt plateaus. Both of these constitute barriers to caravan travel. As a result, Damascus exercised an influence far beyond other cities of comparable size. Yet Isaiah says that Damascus will be turned from a city into a ruin. By the time of the prophecies against Philistia and Moab, this prophecy had already come true in large part, as Shalmaneser had conquered it after a ruinous siege in 732 B.C.E. For every influential power, there is always a greater one which can reduce it to desolation." (P. 350)

Alexander translates / comments on **verse 1**: "*The burden of Damascus. Behold, Damascus is removed from (being) a city, and is a heap, a ruin...*

"Damascus is still the most flourishing city in Western Asia. It is also one of the most ancient. It is here mentioned as the capital of a kingdom, called Syria of Damascus to distinguish it from other Syrian principalities...

"Damascus appears to have experienced more vicissitudes than any other ancient city except Jerusalem. After the desolation here predicted it was again rebuilt, and again destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar, notwithstanding which it reappears in the **Old Testament** as a flourishing city and a seat of government. In the verse before us, the reference may be chiefly to its downfall as a royal residence." (Pp. 332-33)

Motyer comments on **verses 1-2** that "The alternative object of trust, Damascus, will be proved insufficient." (P. 156)

But the text says nothing concerning "alternative object of trust," which is being imported into the text by Motyer on the basis of his overall view of the purpose for **chapters 13-20**.

An oracle / utterance³ for Damascus:⁴

Look–Damascus⁵, ¹ is being turned aside / changed⁶ from (being) a city,⁷

³Translations of the Hebrew word **בְּשֵׁא**, defined by **Brown-Driver-Briggs** as “utterance, oracle,” vary, from “burden,” to “Pronouncement,” to “oracle,” to “prophecy,” to “Proclamation,” to τὸ ῥῆμα, “the word.”

⁴Slotki comments that the title “Damascus” “can obviously apply to no more than the first three verses of the chapter, the remainder of which is concerned mainly with the fate of the kingdom of Israel.” (P. 81)

⁵See our end-note 1 for a modern article concerning the City of Damascus, Syria.

⁶Oswalt notes that the phrase **הִנֵּה דָמָשֶׁק׃ מוֹסָר׃** [“Look–Damascus is being turned aside / changed”] is “a participial construction indicating imminent action, ‘Behold, Damascus is on the point of being removed.’” (P. 348) The student of Hebrew quickly learns that present participles oftentimes indicate the immediate future.

Watts notes that **מוֹסָר׃** is a “hophal passive participle from **סָוַר**, ‘turn,’ therefore ‘changed.’ The masculine form is a problem since Damascus and the following verb are feminine.” (P. 126)

⁷Slotki comments that “Such will be the completeness of devastation, that Damascus will not be acknowledged any longer as a city.” (P. 81) But the text doesn’t say anything about “being acknowledged as a city.” It says Damascus will no longer be a city. And we think Slotki’s comment is an attempt to get around the fact that Isaiah’s prediction was not fulfilled. What do you think?

Gray explains that the phrase **מֵעִיר׃**, literally “from a city,” is “a poetical breviloquence [a pertinent and brief way of speaking] for **מֵהוֹת עִיר׃**, “from being a city.” (P. 298) Compare: **Isaiah 7:8**, where the phrase **מֵעַם׃** means “from being a people”; and **Isaiah 52:14**, where the phrase **מֵאִישׁ׃** means “from being a man.”

Watts comments that “The key phrase is *changed from being a city*. Her external structure is changed. She is a ruin, a pasture for peaceful flocks. But also the concept and dynamic are changed: fortification and kingly ambition have ceased.” (P. 238) Yes...but does **מִמְלָכָה׃** mean “kingly ambition”?

We think the text means Damascus is no longer the capital of a kingdom. What do you think?

and it will become⁸ a (heap) of a ruin,⁹ a (fallen) ruin.

17:2¹⁰ עֲזָבוֹת עָרֵי עָרְעָר
לְעִרְרִים תִּהְיֶינָה
וְרִבְצוּ
וְאֵין מַחְרִיד:

⁸Watts notes that the phrase here, וְהִיְתָה, is qal “perfect with waw of the verb ‘to be.’ The form is unquestioned. The problem lies in the time viewpoint. [All of our English versions have it as future, as does **Rahlfs**, καὶ ἔσται, ‘and it will be’]...with most commentaries making the passage a prediction which must be dated prior to the fall of Damascus in 732 B.C.E. The time viewpoint of a perfect with waw is dependent on its antecedent...which in this case is a participle with no hint of time...

“The contextual setting in a scene of Hezekiah’s reign calls for a past time, which the grammar does not forbid.” (P. 236)

⁹Oswalt notes that there is a wordplay in the Hebrew, with the two closely similar words, מְעִיר and me’iyr, “from a city” and מְעִי, me’iy, “ruin-heap.” Watts notes that מְעִי, me’iy, which occurs only here in the **Hebrew Bible**, “means ‘internal organs,’ ‘guts.’” (P. 236) **Brown-Driver-Briggs** defines it as “ruin.” Again we note that when a word occurs only once in the **Hebrew Bible**, it is very difficult to determine its meaning!

¹⁰Alexander translates / comments on **verse 2**: “*Forsaken (are) the cities of Aroer; for flocks shall they be, and they shall lie down and there shall be no one making (them) afraid...*”

“There are three Aroers distinctly mentioned in the **Bible**: one in the territory of Judah (**1 Samuel 30:28**), one at the southern extremity of the land of Israel east of Jordan (**Joshua 12:2; 13:6**), a third farther north and near to Rabbah (**Joshua 13:25; Numbers 32:24**). Some suppose a fourth in Syria, in order to explain the text before us...It is now commonly agreed that the place meant [is] the northern Aroer east of Jordan, and that its cities are the towns around it and perhaps dependent on it...

“*Forsaken* probably means emptied of their people and left desolate. There is then a specific reference to deportation and exile.” (P. 333)

Motyer simply states that “There is no known Aroer in Aram, and, if the Masoretic Text is to be preserved, the alternatives are either to assume an Aramean area not elsewhere mentioned (and chosen by Isaiah to achieve the sort of assonance he loved...or to see a reference to Aroer in Gad (**Numbers 32:34**).” (P. 156)

Deserted—cities of Aroer;¹¹
for the flocks / herds they will be;
and they will lie down,
and there is no one causing fear.¹²

¹¹The first line in Hebrew, עֲרֵי עֲרֵר, literally “deserted ones—cities of Aroer,” is translated by **Rahlfs** as καταλελειμμένη εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα, “having been left behind into the ages.”

Oswalt notes that “the cities of Aroer’ constitutes a problem in that the [Aramaic] Targum lacks the name and the **Septuagint [Rahlfs]** adds ‘forever,’ suggesting that ‘Aroer’...is a mistake for עַד עֲרֵי, [‘until perpetuity,’ or ‘forever’]. The ר and ד, *resh* and *daleth*, are easily mistaken in Hebrew script. This suggestion is strengthened by the fact that the only Aroers known in the **Bible** are from considerably south of Damascus in Moab and Judah (**Joshua 12:2; 13:9; 1 Samuel 30:28**)...

“At the same time, ‘the cities of Aroer’ constitutes a very typical wordplay, עֲרֵי עֲרֵר, ‘arey ‘aro’er, and there well may have been a city of that name in Syria of whose existence the **Bible** does not otherwise tell us.” (P. 348)

Slotki comments on the phrase “cities of Aroer” that “There may have been an Aroer in the Syrian kingdom; but if the reference is to the well-known Aroer on the Arnon in the south (**Numbers 32:34; Deuteronomy 2:36**), the verse must be applied to the kingdom of Israel to which the city once belonged. Others render עֲרֵר as “ruined cities,’ and in that case the text refers to Syria.” (P. 81)

Gray states that the phrase, “the cities of Aroer” is strange, and “has been explained, unsatisfactorily, in various ways:

(1) the two cities of the name of Aroer, one on the northern edge of the defile of the Arnon [see **Isaiah 16:2**], the other near Rabbath-Ammon (**Joshua 13:25**);

(2) the cities dependent on the more northern (which is, however, the less important) of the two Aroers; both [of these explanations] are hazardously understood to mean the country east of the Jordan [River]. Both Aroers are remote from Damascus;

(3) Dillmann [makes the phrase, cities of Aroer] mean ‘the ruined cities.’” (P. 298)

¹²Slotki states that this means “the site will be without any human inhabitants to frighten the animals.” (P. 82)

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וְנִשְׁבְּתָ מִבְּצָר מֵאֲפֻרַיִם 17:3¹³

וּמִמְלָכָה מִדְּמֶשֶׁק

וְשָׂאֵר אֲרָם כְּכַבֹּד בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל יִהְיוּ

¹²(...continued)

Motyer likewise states that “The scene of flocks, which will lie down, with no-one to make them afraid is not one of pastoral bliss but of a landscape emptied of humankind (compare **5:17**).” (P. 156)

Watts comments that “The phrase **אֵין מִחַרִּיד**, ‘no one terrorizing’ is a common phrase in Scripture to picture a peaceful promised land.” See **Leviticus 26:6; Jeremiah 30:10 = 46:27; Ezekiel 34:28; 39:26; Micah 4:4; Zephaniah 3:13** and **Job 11:19**. “The irony is that ignominious defeat and destruction brought the peace (compare **11:6-9**) that royal might promised, but could never deliver. Syria and Israel shared a common demotion, from *glory* to the role of a *remnant*.” (P. 238)

¹³Alexander translates **verse 3**: “*Then shall cease defense from Ephraim and royalty from Damascus and the rest of Syria. Like the glory of the children of Israel shall they be, saith Jehovah of hosts.*” (P. 334)

Motyer comments on **verse 3** that “The first two lines of the verse continue the theme of the coming destruction. Since *Ephraim* cannot be saved by seeking security in *Damascus*, neither can *Damascus* be helped by unbelieving *Ephraim*. The people of God cannot be made secure by worldly power nor, when they depart from sole reliance on the Lord (**verse 10**), can they bring a blessing to the world.” (P. 156)

Again we note, nothing is said in the text concerning *Ephraim*’s seeking security in *Damascus*, nor about “unbelieving *Ephraim*,” or about *Ephraim*’s role in bringing a blessing to the world. These are Motyer’s theological conclusions which he is bringing to the text, and while they may be taught in other places, they are not mentioned here.

Oswalt comments on **verse 3**: “Here the prophet begins to treat *Ephraim* and *Syria* together. As they have linked themselves in an alliance, so too their fates are linked. Neither will constitute a source of power or stability; as *Israel* will lose the capacity to defend herself (*the fortress*), so *Damascus* will lose authority to rule over neighboring cities (*the dominion* [our ‘a kingdom’]). While *Syria* will not be totally destroyed, it will, like *Israel*, be left as just a shadow of itself. Its glory will be like *Israel*’s, a condition the prophet goes on to describe in the next three verses.” (P. 350)

To say “a kingdom will cease from *Damascus*” is quite different from what is said in **verse 1**, that “*Damascus* is being turned aside / taken away from (being) a city, and it will become a (heap) of a ruin, a (fallen) ruin.”

נָאִם יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת:

And a fortification¹⁴ will cease from Ephraim,¹⁵
and a kingdom from Damascus;¹⁶
and Aram's / Syria's remnant¹⁷ will be¹⁸ like (the) children of Israel's glory—
a saying of YHWH of Armies!¹⁹

¹⁴Slotki translates מְבִצָּר by “fortress,” and comments that it means “the kingdom of Syria, which was to serve as a bulwark [a defensive wall] against Assyria for the kingdom of Israel. According to some commentators, the *fortress* is Samaria.” (P. 82)

Gray holds that perhaps Samaria is meant by the “fortress,” or “giving מְבִצָּר a collective force, all the fortresses of the Northern kingdom [of Israel] are intended [Tanakh translates by “fortresses”]... More probably Damascus is meant; owing to the geographical situation, Damascus first invited the attack of the Assyrians coming [from the east], and so formed a bulwark or fortress of Ephraim.” (P. 298)

Again we note the ambiguous, puzzling nature of Isaiah's prophetic message.

¹⁵Watts notes that “A number of interpreters...translate “a fortress for Ephraim.” (P. 236)

¹⁶1QIs^a spells the name of Damascus דַּרְמִשְׁק, Darmascus, as the name is spelled five times in **1 and 2 Chronicles: 1 Chronicles 18:5, 6; 2 Chronicles 24:23; 28:5, 23.**

¹⁷This phrase, “and Aram's / Syria's remnant” can be read as part of the preceding line: “and a kingdom from Damascus and Aram's Syria's remnant,” but it can also be read as we have indicated, “and Aram's / Syria's remnant will be like (the) children of Israel's glory.”

¹⁸Rahlf's interpolates the future verb ἀπολείται, “will be destroyed,” at this point in its translation of the Hebrew text.

¹⁹1QIs^a reads the singular יהיה, “it will be,” instead of our Hebrew text's יהיו, “they will be.” But the subject of the verb is the plural בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל, and the Qumran copyist probably just made a mistake.

The Rahlf's translation of **verse 3** is different: καὶ οὐκέτι ἔσται ὄχυρά τοῦ καταφυγεῖν Ἐφραϊμ καὶ οὐκέτι ἔσται βασιλεία ἐν Δαμασκῶ καὶ τὸ λοιπὸν τῶν Σύρων ἀπολείται οὐ γὰρ σὺ βελτίων εἶ τῶν υἱῶν Ἰσραὴλ καὶ τῆς δόξης αὐτῶν

(continued...)

¹⁹(...continued)

τάδε λέγει κύριος σαβαωθ, “And no longer will it [Damascus, a feminine noun] be strong for Ephraim to flee to; and no longer will there be a kingdom in Damascus; and the remainder of the Syrians will perish. For you [Damascus] are not better than the children of Israel and than their glory. These things says Lord Sabaoth.” (This last phrase can be read as the conclusion of **verse 3**, or the beginning of **verse 4**, as the **NETS** translation shows.)

Watts states concerning **verses 1-3** that “So far as is known, Damascus did not rise again after 732 B.C.E. and Samaria’s fate was sealed by its destruction in 721 B.C.E. The scene pictured in **verses 1-3** fits their status during the last two decades of the [8th] century B.C.E.” (P. 238)

²⁰Slotki comments that **verses 4-6** contain “a description in figurative speech, of Israel’s calamities.” (P. 82)

Gray entitles **verses 4-6** “The fate of Ephraim.”

He comments on **verse 4** that “The nation is personified...as a man whose *glory*, i.e., reputation among his neighbors, will become slight (through lack of children...) and whose once well-nourished body will become lean...Jacob will exchange the outward marks in dress, etc., of a prosperous man for the garb of a pauper.” (P. 299)

Motyer entitles **verses 4-6** “Glory reduced to gleanings,” and comments that “This is the first of three ‘In that day’ sections (compare **verses 7, 9**). Three pictures of a final end (wasting sickness in **verse 4**; harvesting in **verse 5a**; gleaning in **verse 5b**) suddenly become the hope of a continuing, believing few (**verses 6-8**).” (Pp. 157)

Kaiser entitles **verses 4-6** “The Remnant of Israel—The Unpicked Fruit on an Olive Tree.” His comment is that “It is certain that **verses 4-6** in their present form were not the original continuation of **17:1-3**.” (P. 78)

We are amazed at how certain Kaiser can be and is of his analysis and reconstruction of biblical texts. Reading his commentary would lead one to believe that much of our present **Book of Isaiah** is little more than a collection of scraps of materials from numerous different authors, which today can be separated and analyzed and the original writing of Isaiah can be differentiated from all of the many interpolations and additions that have been made to his original writing with great certainty.

But numerous commentators, like Kaiser, have attempted the task—and there is little agreement or consensus among them—as Alexander shows in his monumental survey of German commentaries on **Isaiah** from the 19th century. Later commentators in the 20th and 21st centuries have attempted the same thing, but with no better results. We think it is much better to recognize and admit the enigmatic, puzzling nature of the

(continued...)

יָדַל כְּבוֹד יַעֲקֹב

וּמִשְׁמֵן בָּשָׂרוֹ יִרְזָה:

And it will happen on that day--²¹

Jacob's glory²² will be brought low;

²⁰(...continued)

prophetic vision, instead of such attempts to cut the biblical text apart and then attempt to put together a supposed original text.

Alexander translates / comments on **verse 4**: “*And it shall be (or come to pass) the glory of Jacob shall be brought low (or made weak), and the fatness of his flesh shall be made lean.* This is not a mere transition from Syria to Ephraim, nor a mere extension of the previous threatenings to the latter, but an explanation of the comparison in the verse preceding...*Glory*, as before, includes all that constitutes the strength of a people, and is here contrasted with a state of weakness...*Jacob* does not mean Judah (Eichhorn) but the ten tribes.” (P. 334) But we ask, Cannot “Jacob” mean both Judah and Israel (the ten tribes)?

Kaiser entitles **verse 4** “Jacob grows lean.” He comments that the prophet [meaning, an unknown author, who has taken upon himself the mantle of Isaiah] retains the personification in order to foretell that the northern kingdom, or its posterity, here referred to as Jacob, will lose its כְּבוֹד, **kabhodh**, everything which brings it power and respect, subjective and objective honor. It is likened to a man who had grown thin, and whose outward appearance proclaims his fate.” (P. 79) Compare:

Isaiah 10:16,

Therefore the Lord YHWH of Armies will send forth with His stout ones leanness;
and beneath His glory will be kindled a burning, like a burning of fire.

Isaiah 10:18,

And its forest's abundance / glory and its garden,
He will finish (both) from innermost-being and as far as flesh;
and it will be like a sick person's declining / melting away.

²¹Slotki states that “that day” is referring to the day on which Syria will fall. (P. 82)

²²Slotki holds that “glory” here refers to Jacob's power, prosperity, wealth. (P. 82)

Motyer states that “The glory is the false glory of worldly power and status.” (P. 157)

(continued...)

and his flesh's fatness will be made lean.²³

17:5²⁴ וְהָיָה פֶּאֶסֶף קִצִּיר קִמָּה

²²(...continued)

Oswalt states that “The concept of glory in Hebrew carries with it the connotations of permanence, abundance, significance, and reality. The *glory* of Jacob, as shared by Syria, will be none of these. God will expose to the world that the ‘glory’ of Israel, which she has achieved through her own strength, is nothing but a fraud. The arrogant haughtiness will be replaced by a creeping self-abnegation...So the hollow shell of this world’s glory is ripped open to expose the true nature of what dwells within.

“The prophet uses three figures of speech to describe what will remain to Israel (and Syria). The first is physical and the second two are agricultural. All three stress the pitiful nature of what will be left. Folds of gray skin hang from the man who once was fat and shining. The lush fields of the Valley of Rephaim southwest of Jerusalem are cut over, and all that remains of the rich crop are a few stray stalks fallen from the reapers’ arms and left for the poor to pick up (**Deuteronomy 24:20**). In each of these ways, then, the prophet says that only bits and pieces will be left to Damascus and Ephraim when God has done His work (**Isaiah 24:13; Amos 3:12**). Judah need not fear her neighbors; it is God with Whom she should come to terms.” (Pp. 350-51)

²³The verb פֶּאֶסֶף is niph'al imperfect, 3rd person masculine singular, which **Brown-Driver-Briggs** defines as “will be made lean.” **Hollaway** defines it as “will shrink away.” Slotki suggests “impoverished.”

Motyer states that “The picture is of internal forces of dissolution at work; unbelief as a cancer.” (P. 157) We say yes—but the text does not mention “unbelief.”

²⁴Gray comments on **verses 5-6** that “The point of these verses is clear: compared with what the population was before, the survivors in the Northern kingdom will be as few as the ears of corn left uncut, or dropped by the reapers, or as the olive berries still left on a tree after it has been beaten...with poles to bring down the crop.” (P. 299)

Watts states that “**Verses 5-6** are parabolic in nature, comparing Israel’s situation to a field that has been harvested, or an olive tree from which most of the fruit has already been taken. The implication is that some will survive and be sustained, if only the very poor.” (P. 237)

Alexander translates / comments on **verse 5**: “*And it shall be like the gathering (or as one gathers) the harvest, the standing corn, and his arm reaps the ears. And it shall be like one collecting ears in the valley of Rephaim...*”

“The valley of Rephaim or the Giants extends from Jerusalem to the southwest in the direction of Bethlehem. There is a difference of opinion as to the purpose for which it is here mentioned. Aben Ezra and Ewald suppose it to be named as a barren spot,

(continued...)

וְזָרְעוּ שְׂבִילִים יִקְצֹר

וְהָיָה כַּמִּלְקֹט שְׂבִילִים

בְּעֵמֶק רֵפְאִים:

And it will happen, like one gathering standing (grain),²⁵

and his arm harvests ears of grain;

and it will happen like one who gathers up / gleanes ears of grain²⁶

in Rephaim Valley;²⁷

²⁴(...continued)

producing scanty harvests, and gleanings in proportion...[But] there is no proof that it was remarkable either for fertility or barrenness...

“According to Cocceius, the point of the comparison is the care and skill with which the grain is gathered to be stored away; in like manner God would cause His people to be gathered for their preservation. All other writers understand the figures as denoting the completeness of the judgment threatened against Israel.” (Pp. 334-35)

Motyer states that here in **verse 5**, “under the figure of the *reaper*, an external force comes into play.” (P. 157)

Kaiser describes the content of **verse 5** as being “*Next to nothing is left to Israel*. The two similes in **verse 5** are taken from the corn harvest, which was familiar to everyone in the pre-industrial age. When the reaper gathers together the standing stalks of corn with his left arm...and with his sickle in his right hand...cuts off the ears...he naturally takes care that as few as possible remain standing. Anything he overlooks or loses when he is tying the sheaf together is gathered by the gleaners. The location of the field in the valley of Rephaim, the present day *al-baq’a*, immediately in front of the gates of Jerusalem, implies that because the city contained many landless poor, what was left would naturally be very small.” (P. 79)

²⁵Motyer notes that “*Standing corn* is the ripe crop ready for the sickle.” (P. 157)

²⁶Motyer comments that “A second picture is thus added: after the reaper, the gleaner. Now, surely nothing will remain. So Divine justice works its inexorable way.” (P. 157)

²⁷Motyer comments that “The *Valley of Rephaim* (**Joshua 15:8; 18:16**) is south of Jerusalem and its mention adds a vivid touch. Isaiah’s hearers would be familiar with the sight as Jerusalem’s poor would have gone gleaned there.” (P. 157)

(continued...)

17:6²⁸ וְנִשְׂאֲרֵבוּ עוֹלֵלֹת

כְּנִקְףָּ זֵית

שְׁנַיִם שְׁלֹשָׁה גִּרְגָּרִים בְּרֹאשׁ אֲמִיר

אַרְבַּעַת חֲמִשָּׁה בְּסַעֲפֵיהָ פְּרִיָּהּ

נֶאֱמַר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

²⁷(...continued)

Oswalt notes that Rephaim “can mean both ‘mighty men’ and ‘the dead.’ This double meaning along with the fertility of the valley probably accounts for its usage here.” (P. 349)

²⁸Alexander translates / comments on **verse 6**: “*And gleanings shall be left therein like the beating (or shaking) of an olive tree, two (or) three berries in the top of a high bough, four (or) five in the branches of the fruit-tree, saith Jehovah, God of Israel ...*”

“There is here an allusion to the custom of beating the unripe olives from the tree for the purpose of making oil. Those described as left may either be the few left to ripen for eating, or the few overlooked by the gatherer or beyond his reach...The transition from the figure of a harvest to that of an olive-gathering [is not olive-gathering a form of harvesting?] may be intended simply to vary and multiply the images...

“The verse is regarded by Cocceius as a promise to the people, by others as a promise to the pious Jews and especially to Hezekiah, but by most interpreters as describing the extent to which the threatened judgment would be carried. The gleanings, then, are not the pious remnant, but the ignoble refuse who survived the deportation of the ten tribes by the Assyrians.” (Pp. 335-36)

Kaiser states that the subject matter of **verse 5** is “*The fruit left on the olive tree.*” He comments that “The final addition develops the idea of the minute remnant. Whereas **verse 5** emphasizes how little chance of survival there is, **verse 6** stresses the very small number which remains.

“The fate of those left is not considered. During the olive harvest men climb into the trees in order to beat down with sticks or rods the fruit that cannot be reached by hand. Anything that remains out of reach on the highest branches is next to nothing by comparison with what a tree bears in a good year. What is to survive of Ephraim? The answer is, next to nothing.” (Pp. 79-80)

and gleanings shall be left in it,²⁹
like striking / beating an olive-tree,
two, three berries on top of (the) highest bough,
four, five on its branches bearing fruit—³⁰
a saying of YHWH, God of Israel!

17:7³¹ בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא

²⁹Slotki comments on **verse 5** plus the first line of **verse 6**, that “As the reaper leaves no more than isolated ears here and there, so will the conqueror leave but stragglers, the entire population being led away into captivity.” (P. 82)

³⁰Slotki’s translation has “beating of an olive-tree.” He comments that “By beating with a stick (compare **Deuteronomy 24:20**,

When you beat (the olives out of) your olive tree(s),
you shall not go over the boughs (again) after yourself;
to the temporary resident, to the orphan, and to the widow it will belong),

the olives of the upper branches were knocked down and only very few remained in the tree.” (P. 82)

See the numerous photos of harvesting olive trees on the Internet, in which many still reach up into the trees with long poles to knock the olives to the ground, on which large canvasses are spread, but which also show the growing trend to mechanization.

Motyer comments that the mention of “*some gleanings will remain* is a further vivid touch. It was common experience that after reaping and gleaning the tree would not be quite stripped. Thus, the picture of gleaning, the final blow in **verse 5**, leaves room for hope...Here the survival of Israel, against all probability, is guaranteed by Him Who is the God of Israel, the One Who has pledged Himself to them.” (P. 157)

³¹Oswalt entitles **verses 7-11** “They have forgotten God.”

He states that “This coming to terms with God is exactly what the prophet foresees as issuing from the coming destruction. No longer able to rely on their own strength, the people of Israel will finally turn back to the God they had forgotten. This repentance will not halt the destruction, but it will show them the fallacy of the course upon which they had been walking.

“Virtually all modern commentators have argued that **verses 7-8** are misplaced, not only because they seem to interrupt the flow of thought from **verse 6** to **verse 9**, but also because the theology is of a post-exilic variety in which the revulsion against idolatry has gained great impetus...

(continued...)

³¹(...continued)

“But that same argument might be turned around by making those references dependent upon this one, especially since ‘Maker’ appears in **Hosea 8:14**, which is hardly post-exilic in date...[And] there may not be as much of a breach in the chain of thought as first appears. The concept of coming to terms with God may be the most natural one in response to the vision of coming judgment...

“In [verses 7-8] the author contrasts the Gods who are made with the God Who has made. In a tone reminiscent of **2:6-22** and **44:9-18**, he points out the folly of investing one’s own handiwork with ultimate significance. What we have made cannot save us, it is not fundamentally different from us, that is, holy. Yet somehow when life is going well it is very easy to live as though that were so (**Hosea 4:7**)...

“It is ‘When Life Tumbles In’ [A.J. Gossip’s famous sermon written on the occasion of his wife’s sudden death] that we are forced to look for One Who is other than we, One Who is beyond us, Who holds us in His hands rather than vice versa (**Isaiah 10:20; Psalm 100:3; Hosea 3:5; 6:1; Micah 7:7**).” (Pp. 353-52)

Slotki comments on **verses 7-8** that “men will turn away from idol-worship to the God of Israel.” (P. 83)

Gray entitles **verses 7-8** “Mankind will reject their idols and turn to the God of Israel, the Maker of all men.”

He comments that “the point of the last strophe is universalized: all mankind will be convinced in the coming day of the inutility of works of men’s hands, and will turn instead to the Holy One of Israel, Who is also Maker of mankind...

“The insertion of this passage, with its universal outlook, between **verses 1-6** and **9-11**, which are strictly limited in their outlook to Damascus and Ephraim, may be due to an interpolater; as an alternative it might be held that the verses are a misplaced conclusion to the poem. They would stand less awkwardly after **verse 11**...

“The wide outlook has its parallel in **Isaiah 2:10, 11, 17**, and compare perhaps **2:20; 30:22; Hosea 8:14**.” (Pp. 297 and 300)

Note the difference between Slotki’s “men” and Gray’s “mankind.” Slotki’s translation may only mean “some men,” while Gray’s translation makes the prediction universal, as he states, “all mankind.”

If Gray’s translation is correct, we ask, Has that prediction come to pass? We say, obviously not—at least, not yet. But the phrase “in that day” dates the prediction to the time when Damascus and Northern Israel have fallen. And naive biblical students who claim every prophecy made in the **Bible** has been fulfilled, need to rethink that claim. Compare our footnote 1.

(continued...)

³¹(...continued)

Motyer entitles **verses 7-8** “People restored to the Lord,” and comments that “This is the second ‘In that day’ section and it turns to the question of trust. The eye of expectation and confidence will be fixed solely on the Lord, to the exclusion of every other possible object of religious devotion (compare **Isaiah 2:8; 31:7**.)” (P. 157)

Watts states that **verses 7-8** “take the form of an admonition to repentance...A proper attitude is contrasted with reactions to such a devastating catastrophe. He [אֱדָמָה, literally ‘the man / human’] should turn from false worship which has proved ineffective, from his self-made idols and false sanctuaries...He should look for the true God. He should respect the fact that Yahweh’s prophets had foretold and correctly interpreted the Assyrians’ coming and would therefore look to the Holy One of Israel.” (P. 238)

Kaiser entitles **verses 7-8** “The Eschatological Conversion.”

He comments that “A later redactor [an editor combining multiple source texts] felt the lack, in the context of a prophecy of judgment against the related people of Israel to the north, of an explicit affirmation that people would repent when faced with the Creator’s act of judgment...For him, ‘that day’ is of course the great day of Yahweh ...While people may still seek refuge in the idols they have manufactured themselves, in the utter distress of the coming event which is to shake the whole earth they will look for salvation to the one true God Who alone, as the Creator, can claim [humanity’s] worship, and Who as the Holy One of Israel has manifested Himself as the true Lord of the nations in His miraculous guiding of the people of God through the turmoils of history to the final glorification of Jerusalem.” (P. 84)

Alexander translates **verse 7**: “*In that day man shall turn to his Maker, and his eyes to the Holy One of Israel shall look.*”

He comments that “Some refer this verse partially or wholly to the times of the **New Testament**, others more correctly to the effect of the preceding judgments on the ten tribes of Israel. It is matter of history, that after the Assyrian conquest and the general deportation of the people, many accepted Hezekiah’s invitation and returned to the worship of Jehovah at Jerusalem (**2 Chronicles 30:11**); and this reformation is alluded to as still continued in the times of Josiah (**2 Chronicles 34:9**). At the same time the words may be intended to suggest, that a similar effect might be expected to result from similar causes in later times.” (P. 336)

Motyer states that “*Men* (אֱדָמָה, ‘[the] mankind’) suggests that Isaiah is thinking more widely than simply Israel, bringing into his view both the surviving few of Israel after the gleaning (**verse 6**) and the *remnant of Aram* (**verse 3**.)” (P. 157)

וְעֵינָיו אֶל-קְרוֹשׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל תִּרְאֶינָה:

In that day,

the human will gaze / look upon³² His Maker,
and his eyes will see Set-apart One of Israel!³³

17:8³⁴ וְלֹא יִשְׁעָה אֶל-הַמְזֻבְּחֹת מַעֲשֵׂה יָדָיו

³²Motyer states that “Look [יִשְׁעָה]; compare **Isaiah 31:1; Psalm 119:117**) is to look with steady regard, hence to keep one’s eye on the Lord as the sole object of confidence.” (Pp. 157-58)

³³Motyer comments that “The world remnant will acknowledge the one true God and be prepared to forego even national prestige by recognizing Him in *the Holy One of Israel*...They will know themselves to be acceptable to the *Holy One* and will give Him full approval and confident trust.” (P. 158)

³⁴Alexander translates / comments on **verse 8**: “*And he shall not turn (or look) to the altars, the work of his own hands, and that which his own fingers have made shall he not regard, and the groves (or images of Ashtoreth) and the pillars (or images) of the sun...*”

He states that “The positive declaration of the preceding verse is negatively expressed in this, with a particular mention of the objects which had usurped the place of God...

“Kimchi’s superficial observation, that even God’s altar was the work of men’s hands [is that observation ‘superficial’? If true, it is indeed profound, and would mean that Isaiah is rejecting not only hand-made idols, but even the altars built by the Israelites for worship in Jerusalem! Compare the powerful rejection of humanly constructed temples and sacrificial offerings made on altars in **Isaiah 66:1-3!**]...

The true explanation is that given by Calvin, and adopted by most later writers, viz., that idol-altars are described as the work of men’s hands, because erected by their sole authority, whereas the altar at Jerusalem was, in the highest sense, the work of God Himself.” (P. 336)

Gray’s comment fits in with Calvin’s view: “*The work of his hands...what his fingers have made*—these parallel and synonymous expressions mean idols. Compare **Isaiah 2:8; 32:7; 37:19; Hosea 14:4; Micah 5:12, Deuteronomy 4:28.**” (P. 301)

But even though Divinely ordered, the Jerusalem altar was also built by human hands! See **Exodus 31:1-11**, with its statements concerning the leading builders, Oholiab and Bezalel; and see the speech of Stephen in **Acts 7:48-50**, where he quotes

(continued...)

וְאִשֶׁר עָשׂוּ אֲצַבְעֹתָיו לֹא יִרְאֶה

וְהָאֲשֵׁרִים וְהַחֲמָנִים:

And he will not gaze / look at the altars, work of his (own) hands,
and that which his fingers made he will not see,
and the Asherim^{35, 2, 3} and the sun-pillars.^{36, 4}

³⁴(...continued)

Isaiah 66:1-2, and specifically identifies the temple in Jerusalem as “made by human hands”!

What do you think? Would you agree with Calvin and Alexander, or with Stephen in his speech opposing the Jerusalem temple (and its altar) as having been made by human hands? Also compare **John 4**, where Jesus is depicted as rejecting the temples built on mountains—whether in Samaria or in Jerusalem, and affirming that the real “holy place” or “temple of God” is the human heart!

Motyer comments on **verse 8** that “All false religion, all religion of works, is ultimately an exercise in self-reliance (*the work of their hands and their fingers have made*). This will be completely eradicated *in that day*, along with its support-system of *altars, Asherah poles and incense altars*....The three words speak of the eradication of all man-made ways of drawing near to God (*altars*), of sharing the Divine life ([*Asherah poles*) and of seeking Divine favor (*incense*).” (P. 158)

Motyer does not broach the subject, and leaves us wondering. Would he agree with Calvin and Alexander, or would he include the altar in the Jerusalem temple as part of a “religion of works”?

³⁵Slotki comments on the Asherim, that they were “sacred poles erected by the side of altars which, according to some authorities, were representations of the sacred trees under which altars once stood. In the opinion of others, they were symbols or images of a female deity of the name of Asherah.” (P. 83) See our end-note 2 for an article from **Wikipedia** concerning the Asherim.

Alexander comments that “The old writers take אֲשֵׁרִים [asherim] always in the sense of *groves*, i.e. such as were used for idol-worship. It has been shown, however, by Selden, Spencer, Gesenius, and others, that in some places this sense is inadmissible, as when the [singular] אֲשֵׁרָה is said to have stood upon an altar, or under a tree, or to have been brought out of a temple (**1 Kings 14:23; 2 Chronicles 34:4**). The modern writers, therefore, understand it as denoting the Goddess of fortune or happiness (from אָשַׁר, to be prosperous), otherwise called Ashtaroth, the

(continued...)

³⁵(...continued)

Phoenician Venus, extensively worshiped in conjunction with Baal. But according to Movers, the Hebrew word denotes a straight or upright pillar.” (Pp. 336-37)

See our end-note 3 for an article from **Wikipedia** concerning Ashtaroth.

Oswalt comments that “Asherah was the consort of El, the Canaanite high God. As such, she was the Mother-Goddess, the Canaanite version of the Mesopotamian Ishtar and Egyptian Isis. In some of the myths she appears alongside Astarte, Baal’s consort, but in others she *is* Baal’s consort. In the fertility cult she was represented by the grove of trees, perhaps poplars, surrounding the Baal altars on the high places. At other times the grove seems to have been replaced merely by poles. It is widely assumed that these trees or poles had phallic significance [representing an erect penis] (Compare **Isaiah 27:9**; **Exodus 34:13**; **Deuteronomy 16:21**; **Judges 6:25, 28**; **2 Chronicles 34:4-7**; **Micah 5:14**.) Instead of trying to manipulate forces of life considered to be sexually based, the people would be turning to the One Who *is* life, Who made sexuality, but is Himself asexual.” (Pp. 352-53)

We have seen this affirmation of God’s “asexuality” before in Oswalt’s commentary, and we wonder where he has gotten this idea. He has certainly not gotten it from the biblical writings such as **Ezekiel 16**, where YHWH is depicted as bearing children through His daughter / wife Jerusalem!

³⁶Slotki comments on the phrase **וְהָתְּמָנִים**, “the sun-pillars” (his translation has “sun-images”) that they were “pillars used in sun-worship, mentioned with Asherim again in **Isaiah 27:9**.” (P. 83)

See our end-note 4, for another article from **Wikipedia** concerning “sun-pillars.”

Brown-Driver-Briggs offers the following: “**תְּמָן** masculine noun, ‘sun-pillar,’ used in idolatrous worship...Phoenician, **לבעל חמן** often occurs as epithet of solar Baal);—only occurs in the plural in the **Hebrew Bible**, **תְּמָנִים**, **Isaiah 27:9** + 4 times; with suffix, **תְּמָנֵיכֶם**, ‘your (plural) sun-pillars,’ **Leviticus 26:30** + 2 times; used in parallel with **בְּמֹת**, ‘high places,’ **Leviticus 26:30**; **2 Chronicles 14:4**, compare **Ezekiel 6:4, 6**; used in parallel with **הַבְּעָלִים מִזְבְּחֹת**, ‘the Baals’ altars,’ **2 Chronicles 34:4**; used in parallel with **אֲשֵׁרִים**, Asherim, **Isaiah 17:8**; **27:9**; used in parallel with **אֲשֵׁרִים**, Asherim and **פְּסִלִים**, ‘idols,’ **2 Chronicles 34:7**.”

Gray disagrees, stating that “The rendering *sun-images*...which suggests that these objects were specially or exclusively used in the worship of the sun, rests on a

(continued...)

³⁶(...continued)

questionable derivation from the late Hebrew word שֶׁן, *sun*.” (P. 301)

Watts explains **verses 1-8** as follows: “Devastation and destruction, horrible as they are, do achieve certain desirable goals and present some useful possibilities. Damascus can no longer be either a nation or a city. But it is a place of peace and tranquility, which is more than could be said of it before. Now the feverish activity of ‘fortification’ and the pride of ‘royal rule’ are gone from both Damascus and Ephraim. Neither is necessary any longer.

“Israel is likened in a parable (**verses 5-6**) to a field of grain and to a tree of ripe olives. The field is harvested and the tree is beaten to make the olives fall down. These are pictures of the Assyrian invasions and the resultant destructions. The field and the tree look desolate, stripped of the grain or olives. But if one looks carefully, it is seen that some grain remains at the corners, or in stalks lying on the ground. On the tree some olives remain in the highest branches. The poor in Israel were accustomed to existing on such leftovers (**Deuteronomy 24:19-22**). Israel as a whole now shares their lot.

“Idolatry is often a temptation to the rich and ambitious. It bolsters pride and self-esteem. It feeds the dreams of wealth and power. But conditions of humiliation and bare survival should lead a people to search for the true God Who can save, for the Maker and Savior of Israel (compare **Isaiah 2:9, 11, 17-18**).” (P. 239)

Yes...but Isaiah does not say “should lead”—he predicts humanity turning to YHWH, their Maker, the Set-Apart One of Israel!

³⁷Watts entitles **verses 9-14** “Jerusalem Admonished.” [although Jerusalem is not mentioned in the text!]

He comments that “This section relates to Jerusalem, as the pronouns in 2nd feminine singular indicate. She is accused of blatant idolatry (**verses 10-11**). The section first notes in an ‘in such a day’ passage (**verse 9**) that Jerusalem has shared some of Israel’s and Damascus’ destruction. Her outer ring of fortress cities, apparently those along the upper border with Israel, have been abandoned. It goes on to accuse Jerusalem of having forgotten her God and of pagan practices in contrast to the kind of behavior one expects of humans in disaster (**verses 7-8**). Ironically, the motif of harvest is cited, in contrast with the pitiful little ‘Adonis gardens’ of the devotees.

“A chorus of Jerusalemites bewail their condition with a ‘woe’ passage (**verses 12-14**). They see themselves as the victims of their times, helpless to defend themselves from the looters...

“There is also a clear direction shown within the [**Book**] of **Isaiah**. The theme of

(continued...)

³⁷(...continued)

nations marching at Yahweh's signal begins in **5:26-30**. **8:9-10** echos the sentiments of super-patriots whose bravado challenges the nations to do their worst. **14:27** speaks of Yahweh's hand outstretched over the nations. **17:12-14** echo again the fears of the people. **29:5** repeats the motif with a word of hope. **34:2-3** depict Yahweh's destruction of the nations, but there is no hint that this relates to Jerusalem. Only in **34:8** is Zion's cause credited with the motif.

"The theme is complex. Some texts in **Isaiah** and in other prophets have the nations (or peoples) assembling against Jerusalem, but Yahweh saves them. Some have Yahweh fighting against the nations with little relation to Jerusalem, while in a few texts Yahweh fights against the city. The chorus here (**17:12-14**) seems to repeat a familiar theme which illustrates the anxieties and fears of the city in a time when they have little reason to be so anxious." (Pp. 241-42)

Of course, there is no mention of Jerusalem in the text, or of a "chorus," or of "the Jerusalemites." All of these are Watts' way of interpreting the **Book of Isaiah** as a great "play" or "drama" written in post-exilic times, in an attempt to explain the history of Israel and Judah to its post-exilic audience.

Slotki comments on **verses 9-11** that "Forgetfulness of God is the cause of disillusionment and desolation." (P. 83)

Gray entitles these verses "Ephraim in the hour of calamity will get no help from her heathen cults." (P. 301)

Motyer entitles them "Destruction and explanation," and comments that "These verses form the final 'In that day' section and return to the theme of coming desolation (**verse 9**; compare **verses 1-2**)." (P. 158)

Kaiser entitles **verses 9-11** "Punishment for Apostasy."

He comments that "**Verse 9** gives information to the reader, while **verses 10-11** are addressed directly, as can be seen from the Hebrew text, to a female person or to an entity conceived as such. In its context, **verse 9**, which from its introductory words can be clearly recognized as an interpolation, refers either to the men mentioned in **verses 7-8**, or looks back beyond **verses 7-8** to Jacob in **verses 4-6**, in other words to the northern kingdom of Israel or whatever had survived from it...

"The meaning of **verse 9** is clear. In that eschatological day of Yahweh the tempest of the nations or of God which roars over the land (compare **Isaiah 14:12ff.** and **2:6ff.**) will leave its cities lying as abandoned as those of the population which preceded Israel, the Hivites and the Amorites, who had either been driven out or killed when the Israelites entered Palestine. The idea that a Godless Israel must share the fate of its predecessors in the country is not a new one, but is derived from

(continued...)

יְהִיּוּ עָרֵי מְעֻזָּה כְּעֻזַּת הַחָרָשׁ

³⁷(...continued)

Deuteronomic writing (compare **Deuteronomy 8:19ff.**; **9:4f.**; **Joshua 23:15ff.**; compare **Isaiah 24:20**; **Leviticus 18:28** and also **Amos 9:7**). Of course in this case there is no further population to take Israel's place, and all that will be left is the uninhabited waste (compare **Isaiah 5:9**; **1:7** and **6:11**." (P. 81)

But, is the text that "clear"? And where in the text is the term "eschatological day" found? We say, the prophetic message is anything but "clear"! It is highly ambiguous, filled with enigma / puzzle, with lack of clarity!

Alexander translates / comments on **verse 9**: "*In that day shall his fortified cities be like what is left in the thicket and the lofty branch, (namely the cities) which they leave (as they retire) from before the children of Israel, and (the land) shall be a waste...*

"It is universally agreed that the desolation of the ten tribes [of Israel] is here described by a comparison...Some suppose the strongest towns to be here represented as no better defended than an open forest. Others on the contrary understand the strong towns alone to be left, the others being utterly destroyed...

"From the combination of...verbal explanations have arisen two principal interpretations of the whole verse...The first supposes the forsaken cities of Ephraim to be here compared with those which the Canaanites forsook when they fled before the Israelites under Joshua, or with the forests which the Israelites left unoccupied after the conquest of the country...

"The other interpretation supposes no historical allusion, but a comparison of the approaching desolation with the neglected branches of a tree or forest that is felled, or a resumption of the figure of the olive tree in **verse 6**. This last is strongly recommended by its great simplicity, by its superseding all gratuitous assumptions beyond what is expressed, and by its taking **אֲמִיר** [top, summit] in the same sense which it has [earlier in this text]."(P. 337)

Oswalt comments that **verse 9** "continues to be addressed to the reader in that it treats Israel in the 3rd person, whereas **verses 10-11** speak directly to her in the 2nd person...It brings the reader back to the fact that Israel's new awareness of God will come only in the destruction and thus will not prevent it. God had called to His people in so many ways, hoping to avert the disaster (**Hosea 11:1, 2**; **Matthew 23:37**), but they will not hear until the disaster rips all their false supports from them." (P. 353)

Watts states that in **verse 9**, "Jerusalem's fortified cities were probably those abandoned during the invasion of Israel and Aram and never re-occupied after the march of the Assyrians to Judah's borders in 734-732 B.C.E." (P. 242)

We say, "probably," yes. "Certainly," no.

וְהָאֲמִיר אֲשֶׁר עָזְבוּ מִפְּנֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל

וְהִיתָה שְׂמֹמָה:

On that day,

his strong cities³⁸ will be like the deserted wood-land;
and the height(s),³⁹ which they deserted from before Israel's children;⁴⁰

³⁸Where our Hebrew text has עָרֵי מִעֹז, literally “cities of his place or means of protection,” which we translate by “his strong cities,” **Rahlfs** has αἱ πόλεις σου, “the cities of yours (singular),” and this implies a Hebrew text reading מִעֹזְךָ, “your place or means of protection,” as is found in the next verse.

³⁹Oswalt comments that “*heights and summits* is one possible reading of the Masoretic Text [וְהָאֲמִירָשׁ] [Watts suggests ‘thickets and underbrush,’ p. 240]. If it is correct it perhaps refers to the Canaanite worship centers which were located on the hilltops and which were forsaken for a time at least before the victorious iconoclastic [characterized by attack on cherished beliefs or institutions] religion of Yahweh (**Judges 6:28**)...

“The irony of the present situation was that Israel had been sucked back into that paganism, forsaking the God Who had made her victorious with the result that she would be as desolate as her enemies once had been.” (P. 353)

Rahlfs translates the phrase by οἱ Ἀμορραῖοι καὶ οἱ Εὐαῖοι, “the Amorites and the Euaites / Hivites (?)”.

Watts comments that “The Hivites and the Amorites were some of those who populated Canaan before the entrance of the Israelites. Their *abandoned cities* were ruins that all Israel would know...

“The implication of this is that not only Aram and Israel had suffered in the years of Assyrian invasions (compare **Isaiah 8:7-8**). Judah also bore its scars.” (P. 242)

⁴⁰Translations of the first three lines of **verse 9** vary:

King James, “In that day shall his strong cities be as a forsaken bough, and an uppermost branch, which they left because of the children of Israel”;

Tanakh, “In that day, their fortress cities shall be like the deserted sites which the Horesh and the Amir abandoned because of the Israelites”;

New Revised Standard, “On that day their strong cities will be like the deserted places of the Hivites and the Amorites, which they deserted because of the children of Israel”;

(continued...)

and they will become a devastation.

17:10^{41, 5} כִּי שָׁכַחְתָּ אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל

⁴⁰(...continued)

New International, “In that day their strong cities, which they left because of the Israelites, will be like places abandoned to thickets and undergrowth.”

New Jerusalem, “That day, its cities of refuge will be abandoned as were the woods and heaths at the Israelites' advance”;

Rahfs, τῇ ἡμέρᾳ ἐκείνῃ ἔσονται αἱ πόλεις σου ἐγκαταλειμμέναι ὡς τρόπον ἐγκατέλιπον οἱ Ἀμορραῖοι καὶ οἱ Εὐαῖοι ἀπὸ προσώπου τῶν υἱῶν Ἰσραὴλ,
“On that day the cities of yours (singular) will be left behind / deserted just as the Amorraiōi and the Euaioi left behind / deserted from before the children of Israel.”

Slotki, “In that day shall his strong cities be as the forsaken places, which were forsaken from before the children of Israel, after the manner of woods and forests”;

(It is obvious that both **Tanakh** and **New Revised Standard** have followed the Greek translation.)

Gray, “In that day ‘Thy’ cities shall become forsaken (ruins), Like the forsaken (ruins) of ‘the Amorites and Hivites’...[but in his commentary, translates unpointed text by “the cities in which he finds refuge, or asylum.”

Slotki comments that the phrase “from before the children of Israel” is “an allusion to the time of the conquest of Canaan by Joshua, when the cities were forsaken by their inhabitants who fled before the children of Israel.” (P. 83)

⁴¹Oswalt comments on **verses 10-11**: “In words reminiscent of **Deuteronomy**, the prophet speaks directly to Israel, reminding her that it is because she has forgotten God that all her attempts to supply her needs have come to nothing...

“In the theology of **Deuteronomy**, remembering and forgetting form a fundamental concept (e.g., **Deuteronomy 8:11-20**)...God wants His people to recall His unique, never-to-be-repeated acts on their behalf with the result that their present actions will be in keeping with His character...But in fact, the significance of God’s acts on Israel’s behalf was lost on them, as their manipulative attempts to make themselves secure demonstrated.

“The description of the activity in **verses 10b-11** is reminiscent of that attributed to the Adonis cult, where potted plants were force-bloomed and then allowed to die as symbolic of the fertility cycle of the world. This cult was a Greek version of the Tammuz worship, which is mentioned in the **Bible (Ezekiel 8:14)** and which was widely practiced in the ancient Near East. The worshipers believed that by reenacting the myth of the dying and rising vegetation-God they would secure a good crop for themselves.

“Whether or not the particular activities of the Adonis cult are in view here...it is clear that the people are seeking to supply their own needs through their own activity.”

(continued...)

⁴¹(...continued)

(Pp. 353-54) See our end-note 5 for an article on Tammuz from **Wikipedia**.

Kaiser comments on **verses 10-11** that “The persons addressed, the origin and date of the warning and reason in **verses 10-11** are quite uncertain...In spite of the clear use of the language of the **Psalms**, it is not impossible that it is an isolated saying of the prophet Isaiah who for example in **Isaiah 30:2** and **31:1** uses language reminiscent of that familiar to us from the **Psalms**...

“Only a few years ago (Kaiser wrote this commentary in 1973) an obviously heathen sanctuary was discovered no more than 300 yards south of the precinct of the Jerusalem temple. It has not yet been finally dated, but can be cautiously placed in the period around 700 B.C.E. Literary evidence for pre-exilic foreign cults can be found for certain in **Isaiah 57:3-13a**...**Ezekiel 8:14** is sufficient evidence of the seductive power of heathen vegetation cults in post-exilic Jerusalem.” (P. 82)

Kaiser adds that “The city (or population of a country) personified as a virgin, or at least as a female figure, is acting as though she had forgotten that she possesses in Yahweh her salvation (compare **Psalms 18:47; 24:5; 25:5; 27:9; 62:8; 65:6** etc) and the Rock of her refuge (compare **Psalms 18:3; 19:15; 31:3; 62:3; 71:3; 89:27** etc.) which cannot be shaken in any distress. This she shows by her practice of Canaanite cults, in association with the lament for Adon, the Adonis of Greek and Latin sources, the Lord Who is present in the spring flowers and Who dies with them at the first heat of summer...

“In Greece a rapidly growing and equally rapidly withering seed was sown in small dishes made from broken jars at the appropriate season, in order to give a visual representation of the death of the God. The prophet avoids naming the foreign God, but may well be referring to His nickname ‘the Beloved’ in the name of the flowers, and goes on to apply the significance of the action to the people who are carrying them out: Just as no harvest is anticipated for these gardens, but only withering and dying away, so the people in the day of visitation will find no salvation, but only death.” (Pp. 82-83)

Alexander translates / comments on **verse 10**: “*Because thou hast forgotten the God of thy salvation, and the rock of thy strength hast nor remembered, therefore thou wilt plant plants of pleasantness (or pleasant plantations), and with a strange slip set it...*

“The sense...is not merely that because they forgot God they were desolate, but that because they forgot God they fell into idolatry, and on that account were given up to desolation. Some regard the second clause of this verse and the whole of the next as a description of their punishment. Because they forgot God, they should sow and plant but only for others; the fruits should be gathered not by themselves, but by their enemies...

(continued...)

וְצוֹר מִעוֹד לֹא זָכַרְתָּ
עַל-כֵּן תִּטְעִי נְטֵעֵי נְעִמִים
וְזָמַרְתְּ זֵר תִּזְרְעֶנּוּ:

Because you (feminine singular) forgot (the) God of your salvation,
and (the) Rock of your place of safety⁴² you did not remember!
For this reason you will plant pleasant plants,⁴³

⁴¹(...continued)

“Others suppose the description of the sin to be continued through this verse and the first clause of the next. Because they forgot God, they planted to please themselves, and introduced strange plants into their vineyard. On the latter hypothesis, the planting is a metaphor for the culture and propagation of corrupt opinions and practices, especially idolatry and illicit intercourse with heathen nations. According to the other view, the planting is to be literally understood, and the evil described is the literal fulfillment of the threatening in **Deuteronomy 28:39**...

“On the whole...it seems best to acquiesce in the opinion now very commonly adopted, that the planting here described is the sin of the people, not their punishment ...The foreign growth introduced is understood by some to be idolatry, by others foreign alliances; but these two things...were inseparably blended in the history and policy of Israel.” (Pp. 337-38)

Motyer comments on **verse 10** that “The feminine singular verbs of **verses 10-11** must originally have been addressed to a city (Jerusalem or Samaria) considered as the mother of its inhabitants.” (Pp. 158-59)

Watts comments on **verse 10**: “But Jerusalem did not have a healthy response of renewed concern with the worship of Yahweh Who had given her salvation in the past, Who was the foundation of her hope for defense. Instead she increased her devotion to pagan worship.” (P. 242) But the text makes no mention of Jerusalem.

⁴²Motyer comments that “The Lord as *Rock* is the Lord in His dependable, saving actions, here providing the fortress-like protection which His people need in a menacing world.” (P. 159)

⁴³Slotki comments that “Some authorities see in the phrase an allusion to the Adonis-gardens which were ‘pots of quickly withering flowers.’ These may well symbolize the futility of human designs...when they are contrary to the Divine purpose. Israel may have imported the cult from the neighboring Syrians. Adonis is the Greek name for the Syrian Deity known as *Naaman*, ‘Pleasantness’ [the phrase in Hebrew is נְטֵעֵי נְעִמִים, literally ‘plantings of pleasant things’] and it has been suggested that

(continued...)

and a vine-branch of a foreigner^{44, 6}—you will plant it.⁴⁵

⁴³(...continued)

‘anemone’ (from a root meaning ‘pleasant’), a name given to a flower sacred to Adonis, is derived from the same noun.” (Pp. 83-4)

Gray translates by “plantations of Adonis,” and “(vine-)cuttings of an alien (God).” and comments that “There is little doubt that the prophet is alluding to a custom similar to, if not in all respects identical with, the gardens of Adonis described by Greek writers. These gardens ‘were baskets or pots filled with earth, in which wheat, barley, lettuce, pease [old English for ‘peas’], and various kinds of flowers were sown and tended for eight days...Fostered by the sun’s heat, the plants shot up rapidly, but having no root, withered as rapidly away...These gardens are most naturally interpreted as representatives of Adonis or manifestations of his powers...The rapid growth of the wheat and barley in the garden of Adonis was intended to make the corn [planted in the farmers’ fields] shoot up’ (quoting Frazer, **Golden Bough**, ii, pp. 120-21)...

“The point of the prophet seems to be: you may resort to foreign Gods, [but] they will leave you helpless in the day of calamity; you may plant these symbols of fertility and bring them without difficult to leaf and blossom, but the harvest you wish to secure thereby will never come.” (P. 302)

Watts comments that “*The Beloved* is probably the name of a fertility God. The *gardens* described here fit the picture given by Plato (**Phaedrus, 277b**) and other Greek and Latin authors...Others have suggested a relation to the worship of Osiris in Egypt or to Tammuz in Mesopotamia...However this may be, the nearer and more likely relation of the Beloved was with the Canaanite Baal...The custom apparently was for grain to be planted in shallow pots or potsherds, watered, and placed in the sun. The plants grew very rapidly, but wilted equally rapidly. This represented the rise and the death of the God, Who was then mourned with great passion (compare **Ezekiel 8:14**) until the coming of the natural rains caused all the fields to turn green, a sign of His rebirth...

“The wordplay of heathen Gods in Jerusalem is denounced by Jeremiah and Ezekiel. This passage attests to its presence a century earlier.” (P. 242)

⁴⁴Slotki’s translation has “slips of a stranger,” and he comments that this means “slips [stems, roots, twigs, etc., cut or broken off a plant and used for planting or grafting] of a strange God. The Adonis-gardens were cultivated with vine-slips.” (P. 84) See our end-note 3 for a **Wikipedia** article on “Adonis.”

⁴⁵The last two lines of **verse 10** are given varying translations:

King James, “therefore shalt thou plant pleasant plants, and shalt set it with strange slips”;

Tanakh, “That is why, though you plant a delightful sapling, What you sow proves a disappointing slip.”

(continued...)

⁴⁵(...continued)

New Revised Standard, “therefore, though you plant pleasant plants and set out slips of an alien god”;

New International, “Therefore, though you set out the finest plants and plant imported vines”;

New Jerusalem, “you plant pleasure-gardens, you sow exotic seeds”;

Rahfs, διὰ τοῦτο φυτεύσεις φύτευμα ἄπιστον καὶ σπέρμα ἄπιστον, “because of this you (singular) will plant an untrustworthy plant and untrustworthy seed(s).”

Motyer comments on these last two lines of verse 10 that “What a pathetic thing, how fiddling and futile is false religion and the supposed political realism of armed alliances! They could have had the security of the saving God and the fortress Rock—and we find them pricking out seedlings, dabbling in alien cults and foreign alliances.” (P. 159)

⁴⁶Translations of **verse 11** vary greatly:

King James, “In the day shalt thou make thy plant to grow, and in the morning shalt thou make thy seed to flourish: *but* the harvest *shall be* a heap in the day of grief and of desperate sorrow.”

Tanakh, “On the day that you plant, you see it grow; On the morning you sow, you see it bud -- But the branches wither away On a day of sickness and mortal agony.”

New Revised Standard, “though you make them grow on the day that you plant them, and make them blossom in the morning that you sow; yet the harvest will flee away in a day of grief and incurable pain.” **New International** and **New Jerusalem**, similar.

Rahfs, “τῇ δὲ ἡμέρᾳ ἣ ἂν φυτεύσῃς πλανηθήσῃ τὸ δὲ πρωὶ ἐὰν σπείρῃς ἀνθήσει εἰς ἀμητὸν ἣ ἂν ἡμέρᾳ κληρώσῃ καὶ ὡς πατὴρ ἀνθρώπου κληρώσῃ τοῖς υἱοῖς σου, “but then on the day whenever you may plant (it), you may go astray; but then if you should sow early, it will bloom into a harvest, on whatever day you may obtain (it) by lot, and like a father of a man you may give by lot to the children of yours.”

Alexander, “In the day of thy planting thou wilt hedge it in, and in the morning thou wilt make thy seed to blossom, (but) away flies the crop in a day of grief and desperate sorrow.”

Slotki comments that “All this care and labor were spent in the expectation of a fruitful result; but what they will experience is only bitter disappointment.” (P. 84)

Watts states with regards to the translation of **verse 11**: “A basic question remains: does the second line of **verse 11** (a) continue the reference to the ‘gardens of the beloved’ or (b) return to application to Israel. If (a), it may be translated ‘harvest piles up in a day—a share (of the harvest), like fresh greenness, (becomes) wilted.’ If

(continued...)

וּבִבְקֶרֶךְ זְרַעְךָ תִּפְרִיחֵי
 נֹד קִצִּיר בַּיּוֹם נִחְלָה
 וְכָאֵב אֲנוּשׁ:

On a day of your planting, you will fence (it around);⁴⁷
 and in the morning of your planting, you will cause (it) to grow;
 a heap⁴⁸ of harvest on (the) day it was sick,
 and an incurable pain.

17:12⁴⁹ הוּי הַמּוֹן עַמִּים רַבִּים

⁴⁶(...continued)

(b), the translation will read: ‘harvest is past in a day of sickness like incurable pain.’
 Or is it possible that the double meaning is intentional?” (P. 241)

⁴⁷Slotki’s translation of the verb תִּשְׂגֵּחֵי, **tesaghseghiy**, is “thou didst make it to grow,” but he notes that “an alternative proposed rendering is ‘thou didst fence it carefully.’” (P. 84)

Watts notes that the verb “may derive from שָׁגַג, [‘go astray’], or שָׁגָא, ‘ or שָׁגָה [both evidently alternative ways of spelling ‘go astray,’ ‘err’], ‘grow,’ ‘grow large’...or from שׂוּג, שׂוּג, an Aramaic word meaning ‘fence in.’...Both the meaning of quick growth and fencing in would apply. This is the only use of either verb in a pilpel form. The second meaning appears to be the most likely.” (P. 240) This is a situation in which the meaning of the Hebrew verb is difficult to determine.

⁴⁸Watts observes that the Hebrew word here, נֹד, defined by **Brown-Driver-Briggs** as “heap” is found elsewhere only at **Exodus 15:8; Joshua 3:13, 16, Psalms 33:7 and 78:13**, all of these other passages describing the “piling up of waters in miraculous crossings of the Reed Sea or Jordan.” (P. 240) Yes, but what does it mean here?

⁴⁹Motyer entitles **17:12-18:7** “The world and its remnant.” He comments that “contextually these two oracles (**17:12-14** and **18:1-7**) validate the claim, registered especially in **verse 10**, that in time of world threat, security is found in the Fortress-Lord not in fortress-cities (**verse 9**)...

“Since, however, **Isaiah** does not mention Assyria by name—or indeed any other power—he is addressing himself not to the specific situations but to the principles involved in world history and in facing the threats of world empires. Respectively,

(continued...)

⁴⁹(...continued)

17:12-14 and **18:1-7** answer the question: Who actually rules the world and whose purposes will in the end be accomplished?" (Pp. 159-60) Yes...but we wonder why Motyer makes no specific mention of the African nation and people Cush.

Oswalt entitles **17:12-18:7** "Judgment On All Nations." Again we wonder, why no mention of the African nation / people Cush / Ethiopia and beyond?

Slotki entitles **verses 12-14** "An oracle on Assyria." But the text does not mention "Assyria."

Slotki comments that the text is "a graphic picture of the onrush of its [Assyria's] hosts against Jerusalem and their sudden destruction of her walls. The assonance and verbal force of the Hebrew original cannot be reproduced in translation." (P. 84) We can agree that the text may be meant in terms of the Assyrian armies coming against Jerusalem, and the armies of Sennacherib suddenly disappearing—but the text does not make any of this specific.

Gray entitles **verses 12-14** "The roar of the peoples stilled."

He comments that "The poem [in these three verses] describes a future that unfolds itself to its prophetic author. Under the figure of a stormy sea, suggested perhaps by the ancient myth of the conflict between the primeval flood and the Creator, the first strophe depicts the onset of a vast army. The army's goal is not stated, [but] we may pretty safely assume that Jerusalem was in the poet's mind. The second strophe predicts the scattering and flight of this menacing power; this is to be the result of the rebuke of One Who, in the present text, is unnamed—unquestionably Yahweh is intended. The third strophe dwells on the suddenness and completeness with which the peril will pass, yet in its closing [two lines] alludes to the spoliation and plunder to which the poet's countrymen (the Jews) are subject as he writes.

"Thus the poem seems to imply an invasion (of Judah), and the writer's conviction that worse is yet to threaten, but at the last moment, and suddenly, by the will of Yahweh, to be averted.

"The poem is thus the prophetic anticipation of such a course of events as is attributed in **chapters 36-37** (compare especially **37:36-37**) to Sennacherib's campaign against Palestine, and in particular Judah, in 701 B.C.E...Since Assyria is not mentioned, it is, of course, possible that the poem, like **Psalms 46**, was not actually written at the time of Sennacherib's campaign, but is merely reminiscent of the story of that campaign, and predictive of a similar issue out of like dangers in some later age.

"Mainly on the ground of the reference to 'many nations' (**verse 12**), Stade...and Marti consider the poem to be later than the age of Isaiah, and to refer, like **Isaiah 5:30; 10:33-34; Joel 4:14; Psalms 46**, to the fruitless assault of the nations of the world

(continued...)

⁴⁹(...continued)

on Jerusalem...But...the more commonly accepted explanation that the nations of **verse 12** are the many diverse peoples that composed the Assyrian army, and that the singular of **verses 13-14**, as in **5:25-29; 10:5** etc. is Assyria itself.” (Pp. 304-05)

Motyer entitles **17:12-14** “The locus of power in world affairs,” and comments that “It is plain that this oracle had an origin other than where it is now placed, for, as it stands, it refers to an unexplained (even if readily understood) *us* (**verse 14**). Taken, however, as a piece on its own it is a shapely poem on the theme of ‘the voice that rules the world’...

“The Sennacherib incident (**chapters 36-37**), whether foreseen or recalled, is the perfect background. But, detached from this background, it is a pointed statement on world rule: the metaphor of raging waters symbolizing the gathering tide of attack (**verses 12-13a**), the commanding voice (**verse 13b**), and the imagery of chaff in the wind for the attack dispersed (**verses 13c-14**).” (P. 160)

Oswalt entitles **verses 12-14** “The roaring of chaff.” And we ask, does the author expect us to believe that chaff can “roar”?

Oswalt comments that “The relationships among **17:1-11; 17:12-14; and 18:1-7** have provoked a great deal of controversy, but very little unanimity. The range of possibilities extends from no relationship to seeing **17:1-18:7** as a single unit...Between these two are two other alternatives: **17:12-14** goes with **17:1-11**...**17:12-14** goes with **18:1-7**...This study adopts the latter point of view...Alexander seems justified in stating that the two chapters form one statement of the doom of Judah’s enemies...

“That statement may not be pushed too far, however, for the materials are not unified in logical development or literary treatment...Both **17:12-14** and **18:1-7** bear the marks of being self-contained units. What is being suggested here is that these two segments make the same point and have been grouped together here because they do so...

“Like **10:5-34, 17:12-14** declare that although the sins of Israel will bring the nations upon her like a flood (**Isaiah 8:6-8**), that flood will not prevail in any final sense. Only Israel’s God is ultimate, and He will not permit His promises to His people to fail.” (Pp. 355-56)

Kaiser entitles **verses 12-14** “The Tempest of the Nations.”

He comments that “The meaning of this short, poetically intense prophecy is revealed only against the background of the conception of an eschatological tempest of the nations raging against Zion, a conception in which an older background in nature-myth can still be perceived in the first verse and a half. But modern commentators, with

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few exceptions, attribute it to the prophet Isaiah, mostly dating it in the period of the final revolt against Assyria led by Hezekiah about the year 701 B.C.E...

“If these passages [he is referring to **Isaiah 14:24-27; 29:1-8; 30:27-33** and **31:4-9**] are regarded as deriving in part or in whole from the prophet, it is necessary to regard him as the true father of Jewish eschatology and apocalyptic, and to accept that the kings of Judah were right to ignore its fantastic conceptions. For a king who bears a real responsibility for his people cannot indulge in the luxury of waiting for a besieged Jerusalem to be saved by the Theophany of Yahweh in a storm and an earthquake. Nor are such ideas possible for a prophet who still lives in the midst of a people capable of an active part in shaping its own history. When, almost two hundred years later, Deutero-Isaiah took up the cultic conceptions of Jerusalem and used their images to proclaim the coming redemption, he was still firmly rooted in history, in that he regarded the Persian King Cyrus as the real instrument of liberation...

“Later the Jews were excluded as a political factor from history; under the pressure of foreign overlords who repeatedly destroyed and replaced each other, and [under the pressure of] their own political impotence, they seemed to lack any chance at all of achieving their own freedom. Only then did they turn their ancient cultic conceptions into a myth possessing a characteristic charm and intensity of faith which even a critical commentator cannot overlook. About the same time legend took over the recollection of the salvation of Jerusalem by the capitulation (meanwhile forgotten or suppressed) of Hezekiah in the year 701 B.C.E. and created the figure of the prophet Isaiah, who prophesied the miraculous sparing of the city to the devout king and ultimately looked forward himself to the destiny of Jerusalem in the final age (compare **Isaiah 37:31-32**).” (Pp. 85-87)

Kaiser adds that “Even today faith must take into account the fact that God is the ultimate Lord of history...But even faith does not possess the guarantee that God will spare His Own in this age from distress and persecution, suffering and death. Nor has the believer any right, by trusting in the help of God, to relinquish his own responsibility for history...It is certain that not only individual human beings, but nations themselves fail with regard to God in the course of history; that violence and the absence of peace are the consequences of an unbelieving egoism, and that the true peace of the nations is impossible without humble brotherly love. Whether hope must ultimately look beyond this finite life is something which only one’s own faith can decide.” (P. 87)

How can we respond to Kaiser’s view? We are confused by his transposing so much of the Isaianic material into late post-exilic times, considering them the work of pseudo-Isaiahs with “apocalyptic dreams of an age of salvation.”

But we understand this last statement concerning faith in God as the ultimate Lord of history. We agree that the cause of war and lack of peace in history is rooted in unbelieving egoism, and the necessity of humble brotherly love. But beyond this, we have been captivated by Second Isaiah’s emphasis on servant-hood, and the ultimate

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servant—the “suffering servant” who gives up his life on behalf of others. We think of Jesus, who embodied that “suffering-servant” ministry in himself, living and dying by it. And we think of his call to all that would follow him, to “take up their crosses and follow him”—which we take to mean that we too are called to give up egoism, and to become “suffering-servants” in our time and place in history. Ultimately, we believe, that is the Divine way to peace. What do you think?

Translations of **verse 12** vary:

King James, “Woe to the multitude of many people, *which* make a noise like the noise of the seas; and to the rushing of nations, *that* make a rushing like the rushing of mighty waters!”

Tanakh, “Ah, the roar of many peoples That roar as roars the sea, The rage of nations that rage As rage the mighty waters —“

New Revised Standard, “Ah, the thunder of many peoples, they thunder like the thundering of the sea! Ah, the roar of nations, they roar like the roaring of mighty waters!”

New International, “Woe to the many nations that rage-- they rage like the raging sea! Woe to the peoples who roar-- they roar like the roaring of great waters!”

New Jerusalem, “Disaster! The thunder of vast hordes, a thunder like the thunder of the seas, the roar of nations roaring like the roar of mighty floods”;

Rahfs, “οὐαὶ πλῆθος ἐθνῶν πολλῶν ὡς θάλασσα κυμαίνουσα οὕτως παραχθήσεσθε καὶ νῶτος ἐθνῶν πολλῶν ὡς ὕδωρ ἠχήσει, “Woe (to) a multitude of many nations—like a sea surging / billowing; in this way you (plural) will be troubled, and (the) back of many nations like water will ring out.”

Alexander, “Hark! The noise of many nations! Like the noise of the sea they make a noise. And the rush of peoples! Like the rush of many waters they are rushing.”

Motyer comments that ‘Raging and the raging sea in particular are images of the restless, hostile world threatening the throne and people of God (compare **Psalms 93**). Sennacherib’s multi-national army (many nations; compare **Isaiah 10:8**) affords a concrete illustration of the notion of international, restless hostility to the Lord and His purposes, as found, for example, in **Isaiah 8:9-10** and **Psalms 2**. Here, Isaiah is indicating both what is the inner truth in every historical unrest and what will be preeminently true at the eschatological day.” (P. 160)

Oswalt comments on **verse 12** that “The coming hordes of the enemy make a noise like the roaring of the surf. Like the sound of the sea, their rumble seems implacable [not to be appeased, mollified, or pacified] and unrelenting.” (P. 356)

Watts states concerning **verse 12** that “These people who engross themselves in idolatry’s fantasies reflect here their hysteria in fear of anyone who might approach their city. When darkness descends (**verse 14**) they are terrified. Daylight reveals no one is there. It is ironic that the genre of poetry which was once used by the temple

(continued...)

כְּהַמּוֹת יַמִּים יְהַמְיוּן
וּשְׁאוֹן לְאֻמִּים
כְּשְׁאוֹן גַּם כְּבִירִים יִשְׁאוֹן:

Alas / woe⁵⁰ for a roar of many peoples,⁵¹
like roarings of seas they roar;

⁴⁹(...continued)

singers to portray Yahweh's unceasing care for His city would be cited by those whose pagan imaginations have been overcome with nightmarish fears." (Pp. 242-43)

Watts explains **verses 9-14** by stating, "Attention turns from Israel and mankind to Jerusalem. She, too, has been humiliated by the wars. But no salutary effect followed, no awakening of precious memories of faith. Rather, Jerusalem forgot Yahweh God Who had saved her. She cultivated her pagan passion and wailed her hysterical fears to the world." (P. 243)

⁵⁰Kaiser comments on **verse 12** that "With the introductory הוֹי, 'Ah, woe!', a passionate exclamation, the poet draws our attention to the images which follow. The 'many peoples' are as in **Micah 4:13** (compare **4:11**) the army of the 'final age' raging forward to attack Zion; the destruction of this army is to inaugurate the age of salvation for Israel and peace for the whole world. Its tumultuous roaring and thundering is as it were a repetition of the rebellion of the sea against its Creator (compare **Psalms 46:4, 7**)...The roaring and thundering of the sea is reduced to an image for the tempest of the nations." (P. 87)

But there is nothing said in the text concerning "the army of the final age, attacking Zion," nor is anything said in this text concerning inauguration of "the age of salvation and peace for the whole world." Kaiser brings all of this from other passages to read into the present passage, which only depicts the overcoming of an attack by nations on an unnamed object, applied by the author to "us."

⁵¹Slotki comments that the "many peoples" is referring to "the contingents of the subject nations composing the Assyrian army of invasion." (P. 84)

Alexander states that "The nations meant are not Gog and Magog...nor Syria and Israel...nor their allies and abettors...but all the hostile nations by whom Israel was scourged...with particular reference to Assyria, and especially to the army of Sennacherib." (P. 340)

and a crash⁵² of peoples,

like a crash of mighty waters they will crash!⁵³

17:13⁵⁴ לְאֲמִים כַּשֹּׁאֵן מִיַּם רַבִּים יִשְׁאֹן

⁵²Slotki comments on the word שֹׁאֵן, which he defines as “rushing” or “crash,” that “the Hebrew word expresses the idea of ‘destructive power’ as well as of swift movement.” (P. 84)

Note the repetition of שֹׁאֵן, “crash” three times in **verses 12-13**, and the repetition of the related verb, יִשְׁאֹן, “they will crash,” twice in these two verses.

⁵³Gray comments, “Compare **Isaiah 13:4** of the tumultuous onset of the Medes against Babylon, and **Joel 4:14** of the final and fruitless assault of the nations on Jerusalem.” (P. 305)

⁵⁴Alexander translates **verse 13**: “Nations, like the rush of many waters, rush; and he rebukes it, and it flees from afar, and is chased like the chaff of hills before a wind, and like a rolling thing before a whirlwind.”

He comments that “While there seems to be an obvious allusion to the flight of Sennacherib and the remnant of his hosts (**Isaiah 37:36-37**), the terms are so selected as to admit of a wider application to all Jehovah’s enemies, and thus prepare the way for the general declaration in the following verse [‘us’].” (Pp. 340-41)

Oswalt comments on **verse 13** that “In language reminiscent of **Psalms 46, 48, and 76**, Isaiah asserts that the inevitable onslaught of the mighty Assyrians is, in fact, an illusion. They are not crashing, devouring waves, but rather *chaff* flying on the wind from the hilltop threshing floors, or a rootless tumbleweed rolling before the storm. Both of these are lifeless and both are compelled by a force outside themselves. Moreover, both are without significance. Their coming and going are of no importance...

“So those who are enabled to see the events of the world from God’s perspective need not be troubled by the mighty conquerors who tread the earth’s stage. They are not nearly so significant as they appear...

[And we ask,] Who could have believed in the spring of 1942 that Germany and Japan, between them ruling almost half the globe, would be utterly gone in three years?” (P. 357)

Kaiser states that “**Verse 13a** remains within the conceptual world of the ancient mythical tradition of the victory of Yahweh over the sea, which we know in an older version from the Ugaritic epic of the battle of Baal against the sea-God Yam: just as, according to **Psalm 104:6**, Yahweh put to flight the waters by His thunderous voice at the founding of the earth, He would one day, in the decisive battle before the gates of

(continued...)

וְגַעַר בּוֹ

וְנָס מִמֶּרְחֶק

וְרִדְף כְּמִיץ הָרִים לְפָנֵי-רוּחַ

וְכַגְלִגַּל לְפָנֵי סוּפָה:

Peoples will crash like (the) crash of many waters!

And He rebuked it,⁵⁵

⁵⁴(...continued)

Jerusalem, drive away the nations by His mere rebuke (compare **Psalm 18:16; Job 26:7-9; 38:8-10; Nahum 1:4; Isaiah 50:2; Psalms 106:9; 9:6; 68:31; 80:17; Isaiah 66:15; Psalms 76:7 and 33:3...**

“The two following images which describe the scattering of the enemy in a panic are taken from a different setting, the everyday life of the farmer. When the thresher has ground up the sheaves of corn with the ears, the mixture is thrown against the wind with a winnowing shovel, the threshing floors being mostly upon the heights before the city, so that the chaff flies away and the heavier grains of corn fall to the ground. Similarly the wind blows across the harvested fields the thistle-balls which are formed from the withered and tangled plants.” (P. 88)

⁵⁵Oswalt comments on the phrase וְגַעַר, “and He will rebuke,” or “and He rebuked,” that “As Wildberger shows, the presence of גַּעַר, ‘to rebuke,’ in several passages relating to God’s conquest of the sea makes it likely that Isaiah is here drawing on the literary imagery embodied in the widespread ancient Near Eastern myth of the high God’s victory over the chaos monster in the form of the sea (compare **also Isaiah 27:1; 51:9; Job 26:12; Psalms 18:17**^{Heb} / **7**^{Eng}; **104:7; 106:9; Nahum 1:4**). Not that Isaiah was adopting that theology; he was simply taking over what would be powerful and emotive imagery to convey the distinctly biblical theology.” (P. 357)

Oswalt has written “The Myth of the Dragon and Old Testament Faith,” in **Evangelical Quarterly** 49 (1977), pp. 163-72.

Where our Hebrew text has וְגַעַר, the qal perfect with waw prefix, 1QIs^a has וַיִּגְעַר, qal imperfect with waw prefix. Both readings raise the question of whether or not the waw is meant as conversive / consecutive, and there is no preceding verb to help resolve the question.

and it fled far away.⁵⁶

And it was pursued like chaff of mountains⁵⁷ before a wind,
and like a whirlwind⁵⁸ before a storm.⁵⁹

17:14⁶⁰ לַעֲתָ עֶרְבֹה וְהָנְהָ בַלְהָה

⁵⁶Slotki notes that the Hebrew verbs are in the singular. “The entire army *shall flee and be chased* like one man.” (P. 84)

⁵⁷Slotki comments on the phrase “the chaff of the mountains,” that “wherever possible, threshing-floors were located on the tops of hills so that the wind might carry off the chaff.” (P. 84)

Motyer states that “Chaff is never merely a picture of speed and totality of dispersal but always of swift-acting Divine judgment before which its victims are helpless (**Isaiah 29:5**). Here it is an excellent foil to the surging threat of the incoming tide (**verse 12**).” (P. 160)

⁵⁸Slotki’s translation has “like the whirling dust.” The noun נִלְנֵל is defined by **Brown-Driver-Briggs** as “wheel,” “whirl,” or “whirling.” There is no mention of “dust” in the text.

⁵⁹Motyer comments on **verse 13** that “The simple word of Divine command rules the world (**Psalms 2:4-6; 46:6; Ezekiel 1:25**) and the same vocabulary expresses Divine rule of the ‘forces’ of creation in **Psalms 104:7**. Contextually, the thought runs beyond excitement at the greatness of such a God to the realism of trusting Him amid the threats of this world, however great, however international.” (P. 160)

⁶⁰Alexander translates / comments on **verse 14**: “*At evening-tide, and behold terror; before morning he is not. This is (or [may it] be) the portion of our plunderers, and the lot of our spoilers...*”

“Most writers suppose a specific allusion to Sennacherib or his host. It is best, at all events, to retain the singular form of the original, as being more expressive and poetical...Umbreit and others suppose night and morning to be here combined in the sense of a very short time, as in **Psalms 30:5**, ‘Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning’...Most interpreters, however, suppose an allusion to the destruction of Sennacherib’s army in a single night. Of these some, with Aben Ezra, understand by בַּלְהָה the terror of the Jews on the eve of that event, relieved in the morning by the sight of the dead bodies. Others, with Jarchi [Rashi], understand by it the sudden consternation of the Assyrians themselves when attacked by the destroying angel...

“The correct view of the verse before us seems to be, that while the imagery is purposely suited to the slaughter of Sennacherib’s army, the description is intended to

(continued...)

בַּטֶּרֶם בִּקְרֵי אֵינָנוּ
 זֶה חֶלֶק שׁוֹסֵינוּ
 וְגֹרֵל לְבִזְזֵינוּ:

At time of evening, and look–terror!⁶¹

Before morning, they are not!⁶²

⁶⁰(...continued)

include other cases of deliverance granted to God’s people by the sudden and complete destruction of their enemies. Calvin supposes this more general sense to be expressed by the figure of a storm at night which ceases before morning.” (Pp. 241-42)

Oswalt states that **verse 14** “climaxes the contrast which was developed in **verses 12** and **13**. In a series of terse statements he shows that it is not Israel’s fate which is at stake. In fact, it is the attackers who will be destroyed between night and morning. The comparison with the events of Sennacherib’s attack is very inviting (**37:36-38**).” (P. 357)

Kaiser comments that “**Verse 14** takes up the conception of the Divine redemption during the night, before the breaking of the dawn, which is to be found in association with the conception of the tempest of the nations in **Psalms 46:6** (compare also **Isaiah 30:29-31**)...

“Whereas stark terror and aimless confusion prevail in the besieged city in the evening, by the morning the billowing tempest has disappeared like a phantom (compare **Isaiah 27:9**)...The proto-apocalyptic poet concludes by contrasting the hope of the nations, here portrayed as plunderers and robbers, and their actual portion, which consists at best in the saving of their lives. It is not difficult to perceive behind these concluding lines the longing of the poet and his community to be relieved of foreign domination, to be free in a liberated country and to enjoy without restrictions what their own hands have produced.” (P. 89)

⁶¹Slotki comments on the word בַּלְיָהָ, “terror,” that the terror is “for those who survive *the wind* and *the storm*.” (P. 85)

We think that those who were destroyed by the wind and the storm would likewise know “terror”!

⁶²Slotki comments that “at eventide...before the morning” has reference to “the destruction of Sennacherib’s army,” which “actually occurred between evening and the following morning (compare **Isaiah 37:36**)...

(continued...)

This is (the) portion of those plundering us,
and (the) lot for those taking us as spoil!

⁶²(...continued)

He adds that the subject of the phrase אֵינְנִי, literally “it is not,” is the survivors; “the Hebrew has here also the singular, implying complete annihilation.” (P. 85)

Motyer comments that “**Psalm 46:5** could well, like the present oracle, be rooted in the experience of Sennacherib and probably also reflect a dramatic presentation of threat and deliverance used in temple worship. The word בְּלִיָּה, translated ‘sudden terror,’ has no necessary idea of suddenness. It...is the terror that grips the heart (**Job 18:11; 27:20**). Thus Sennacherib mesmerized the Judahites with terror—but by morning, they are gone / ‘nothingness of him,’ ‘not a sign of him.’” (Pp. 160-61)

1. **The Modern City of Damascus, Syria**

“Damascus (Arabic: Dimashq) is the capital and the largest city of Syria after Aleppo prior to the civil war. It is now most likely the largest city of Syria, due to the decline of Aleppo because of the ongoing battle for the city. It is commonly known in Syria as ash-Sham and nicknamed as the City of Jasmine (Arabic: Madīnat al-Yāsmīn). In addition to being one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world, Damascus is a major cultural and religious center of the Levant. The city had an estimated population of 1,711,000 as of 2009.

“Located in south-western Syria, Damascus is the center of a large metropolitan area of 2.6 million people (as of 2004). Geographically embedded on the eastern foothills of the Anti-Lebanon mountain range 50 miles inland from the eastern shore of the Mediterranean on a plateau 2,230 feet) above sea level, Damascus experiences a semi-arid climate because of the rain shadow effect. The Barada River flows through Damascus.

“First settled in the second millennium B.C.E., it was chosen as the capital of the Umayyad Caliphate from 661 to 750 C.E. After the victory of the Abbasid dynasty, the seat of Islamic power was moved to Baghdad. Damascus saw a political decline throughout the Abbasid era, only to regain significant importance in the Ayyubid and Mamluk periods. Today, it is the seat of the central government and all of the government ministries.

“Damascus was built in a strategic site on a plateau above sea level and about 50 miles inland from the Mediterranean, sheltered by the Anti-Lebanon mountains, supplied with water by the Barada River, and at a crossroads between trade routes: the north-south route connecting Egypt with Asia Minor, and the east-west cross-desert route connecting Lebanon with the Euphrates river valley...

“The Anti-Lebanon mountains mark the border between Syria and Lebanon. The range has peaks of over 10,000 feet and blocks precipitation from the Mediterranean sea, so that the region of Damascus is sometimes subject to droughts. However, in ancient times this was mitigated by the Barada River, which originates from mountain streams fed by melting snow. Damascus is surrounded by the Ghouta, irrigated farmland where many vegetables, cereals and fruits have been farmed since ancient times. Maps of Roman Syria indicate that the Barada river emptied into a lake of some size east of Damascus. Today it is called Bahira Atayba, the hesitant lake, because in years of severe drought it does not even exist.

“The modern city has an area of 41 square miles, out of which 30 square miles is urban, while Jabal Qasioun occupies the rest.

“The old city of Damascus, enclosed by the city walls, lies on the south bank of the river Barada which is almost dry (1 inch left). To the south-east, north and north-east it is surrounded by suburban areas whose history stretches back to the Middle Ages: Midan in the south-west, Sarouja and Imara in the north and north-west. These neighborhoods originally arose on roads leading out of the city, near the tombs of

religious figures. In the 19th century outlying villages developed on the slopes of Jabal Qasioun, overlooking the city, already the site of the al-Salihyah neighborhood centered on the important shrine of Sheikh Muhi al-Din ibn Arabi. These new neighborhoods were initially settled by Kurdish soldiery and Muslim refugees from the European regions of the Ottoman Empire which had fallen under Christian rule. Thus they were known as al-Akrad (the Kurds) and al-Muhajirin (the migrants) . They lay 1–2 miles north of the old city.

“From the late 19th century on, a modern administrative and commercial center began to spring up to the west of the old city, around the Barada, centered on the area known as al-Marjeh or the meadow. Al-Marjeh soon became the name of what was initially the central square of modern Damascus, with the city hall on it. The courts of justice, post office and railway station stood on higher ground slightly to the south. A Europeanized residential quarter soon began to be built on the road leading between al-Marjeh and al-Salihyah. The commercial and administrative center of the new city gradually shifted northwards slightly towards this area...

“In the 20th century, newer suburbs developed north of the Barada, and to some extent to the south, invading the Ghouta oasis. In 1956-1957 the new neighborhood of Yarmouk became a second home to thousands of Palestinian refugees. City planners preferred to preserve the Ghouta as far as possible, and in the later 20th century some of the main areas of development were to the north, in the western Mezzeh neighborhood and most recently along the Barada valley in Dummar in the northwest and on the slopes of the mountains at Berze in the north-east. Poorer areas, often built without official approval, have mostly developed south of the main city.

“Damascus used to be surrounded by an oasis, the Ghouta region, watered by the Barada river. The Fijeh spring, west along the Barada valley, used to provide the city with drinking water. The Ghouta oasis has been decreasing in size with the rapid expansion of housing and industry in the city and it is almost dry. It has also become polluted due to the city's traffic, industry, and sewage.” (Wikipedia, 8/21/2016)

2.

The Asherim in the Hebrew Bible

“An Asherah is a sacred tree or [some type of wooden object] that stood near Canaanite religious locations to honor the Ugaritic mother-Goddess Asherah, consort of El. The relation of the literary references to an asherah and archaeological finds of Judaeen pillar-figurines has engendered a literature of debate.

“The asherim were also cult objects related to the worship of the fertility Goddess Asherah, the consort of either Baal or, as inscriptions from Kuntillet ‘Ajrud and Khirbet el-Qom attest, Yahweh, and thus objects of contention among competing cults. The insertion of "pole" begs the question by setting up unwarranted expectations for such a wooden object: ‘we are never told exactly what it was,’ observes John Day. Though there was certainly a movement against Goddess-worship at the Jerusalem temple in the time of King Josiah, it did not long survive his reign, as the following four kings "did what was evil in the eyes of Yahweh" (**2 Kings 23:32, 37; 24:9, 19**). Further exhortations came from Jeremiah. The traditional interpretation of the Biblical text is that the Israelites imported pagan elements such as the Asherah poles from the surrounding Canaanites. In light of archeological finds, however, modern scholars now theorize that the Israelite folk religion was Canaanite in its inception and always polytheistic, and it was the prophets and priests who denounced the Asherah poles who were the innovators; such theories inspire ongoing debate.

References from the Hebrew Bible

“Asherim are mentioned in the books of **Exodus, Deuteronomy, Judges**, the **Books of Kings**, the **second Book of Chronicles**, and the **Books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Micah**. The term often appears as merely אֲשֵׁרָה, (Asherah) referred to as "groves" in the **King James Version**, which follows the **Septuagint [Rahlfs]** rendering as ἄλσος, plural, ἄλσων, and the Latin Vulgate *lucus* and "poles" in the **New Revised Standard Version**; no word that may be translated as "poles" appears in the text. Scholars have indicated, however, that the plural use of the term (English "Asherahs", translating Hebrew *Asherim* or *Asherot*) provides ample evidence that reference is being made to objects of worship rather than a transcendent figure.

“The **Hebrew Bible** suggests that the [Asherim] were made of wood. In the sixth chapter of the **Book of Judges**, God is recorded as instructing the Israelite judge Gideon to cut down an Asherah...that was next to an altar to Baal. The wood was to be used for a burnt offering.

“**Deuteronomy 16:21** states that YHWH (rendered as ‘the LORD’) hated Asherim: ‘Do not set up any [wooden] Asherah beside the altar you build to the LORD your God’ or as living trees: ‘You shall not plant any tree as an Asherah beside the altar of the Lord your God which you shall make.’ That Asherahs were not always living trees is shown in **1 Kings 14:23**: ‘their asherim, beside every luxuriant tree.’ However, the record indicates that the Jewish people often departed from this ideal. For example, King Menasseh placed an Asherah in the Holy Temple (**2 Kings 21:7**). King Josiah's reforms in the late 7th century B.C.E. included the destruction of many Asherim (**2 Kings 23**).

“Exodus 34:13 states: "Break down their altars, smash their sacred stones and cut down their Asherim." (**Wikipedia**, 8/21/2016)

3.

Astarte and Ashtaroeth in the Hebrew Bible

“Astarte or Ashtoreth is the Hellenized form of the Middle Eastern Goddess Ishtar, worshiped from the Bronze Age through classical antiquity. The name is particularly associated with her worship in the ancient Levant among the Canaanites and Phoenicians. She was also celebrated in Egypt following the importation of Levantine cults there. The name Astarte is sometimes also applied to her cults in Mesopotamian cultures like Assyria and Babylonia

“Astarte was connected with fertility, sexuality, and war. Her symbols were the lion, the horse, the sphinx, the dove, and a star within a circle indicating the planet Venus. Pictorial representations often show her naked. She has been known as the deified morning and / or evening star. The Deity takes on many names and forms among different cultures and according to Canaanite mythology, is one and the same as the Assyro-Babylonian Goddess Ishtar, taken from the 3rd-4th century Sumarian Goddess Inanna, the first primordial Goddess of the planet Venus. Inanna was also known by the Aramaic people as the God Attar, whose myth was construed in a different manner by the people of Greece to align with their own cultural myths and legends, when the Canaanite merchants took the first papyrus from Byblos (the Phoenician city of Gebal) to Greece sometime before the 8th century by a Phoenician called Cadmus the first King of Thebes.]

“Astarte was worshiped in Syria and Canaan beginning in the first millennium B.C.E. and was first mentioned in texts from Ugarit. She came from the same Semitic origins as the Mesopotamian Goddess Ishtar, and a Ugaritic text specifically equates her with Ishtar. Her worship spread to Cyprus, where she may have been merged with an ancient Cypriot Goddess. This merged Cypriot Goddess may have been adopted into the Greek pantheon in Mycenaean and Dark Age times to form Aphrodite. Stephanie Budin, however, argues that Astarte's character was less erotic and more warlike than Ishtar originally was, perhaps because she was influenced by the Canaanite Goddess Anat, and that therefore Ishtar, not Astarte, was the direct forerunner of the Cypriot Goddess. Greeks in classical, Hellenistic, and Roman times occasionally equated Aphrodite with Astarte and many other Near Eastern Goddesses, in keeping with their frequent practice of syncretizing other deities with their own.

“Other major centers of Astarte's worship were the Phoenician city states of Sidon, Tyre, and Byblos. Coins from Sidon portray a chariot in which a globe appears, presumably a stone representing Astarte. She was often depicted on Sidonian coins as standing on the prow of a galley, leaning forward with right hand outstretched, being thus the original of all figureheads for sailing ships. In Sidon, she shared a temple with Eshmun. Coins from Beirut show Poseidon, Astarte, and Eshmun worshiped together... At Carthage Astarte was worshiped alongside the Goddess Tanit.

“Ashtoreth is mentioned in the **Hebrew Bible** as a foreign, non-Judahite Goddess, the principal Goddess of the Sidonians or Phoenicians, representing the productive power of nature. It is generally accepted that the Masoretic "vowel pointing" indicating the pronunciation 'Ashtoreth,' is a deliberate distortion of "Ashtart", and that this is probably because the two last syllables have been pointed with the vowels

belonging to 'bosheth,' abomination), to indicate that that word should be substituted when reading. The plural form is pointed 'Ashtaroth'...

"The biblical Ashtoreth should not be confused with the Goddess Asherah, the form of the names being quite distinct, and both appearing quite distinctly in **1 Kings**. In Biblical Hebrew, as in other older Semitic languages, Asherah begins with an aleph or consonant א, while Ashtoreth begins with an ayin consonant ע, [עֲשֵׁתְרוֹת] indicating the lack of any plausible etymological connection between the two names. The biblical writers may, however, have conflated some attributes and titles of the two, as seems to have occurred throughout the 1st millennium Levant. For instance, the title 'Queen of heaven' as mentioned in **Jeremiah** has been connected with both." (Wikipedia, 8/23/2016)

אֲשֵׁרָה, Asherah,

- a. a Canaanite Goddess of fortune & happiness; having prophets **1 Kings 18:19**, an image **1 Kings 15:13 = 2 Chronicles 15:16, 2 Kings 21:7**, sacred vessels **2 Kings 23:4**, houses **2 Kings 23:7**
- b. a symbol of this Goddess, a *sacred tree or pole* set up near an altar **1 Kings 16:33, 2 Kings 13:6, 17:16, 18:4, 21:3, 23:6, 23:15**

The plural form of Asherah is given two spellings: אֲשֵׁרוֹת, feminine plural, and אֲשֵׁרִים, masculine plural.

We think that it was very easy for those speaking and writing Hebrew to confuse the name of this Canaanite Goddess / Goddesses, especially because of the similar sounding א and ע.

4. **Sun-Pillars as Objects of Worship in the Ancient Near East**

“An obelisk is a tall, four-sided, narrow tapering monument which ends in a pyramid-like shape or pyramidion at the top. These were originally called "tekhenu" by the builders, the Ancient Egyptians. The Greeks who saw them used the Greek 'obeliskos' to describe them, and this word passed into Latin and then English. Ancient obelisks are monolithic, that is, they consist of a single stone. Apart from its shape, this is an obelisk's major identifying characteristic, because it demonstrates that the people who raised them had the technological ingenuity required to shift and raise stones weighing hundreds of tons. Though this technological capacity exists today, most modern obelisks are made of several stones; some, like the Washington Monument, are buildings. Technically, these are not real obelisks, but are obelisk-shaped monuments.

“Obelisks were prominent in the architecture of the ancient Egyptians, who placed them in pairs at the entrance of temples. The word "obelisk" as used in English today is of Greek rather than Egyptian origin because Herodotus, the Greek traveler, was one of the first classical writers to describe the objects. A number of ancient Egyptian obelisks are known to have survived, plus the 'Unfinished Obelisk' found partly hewn from its quarry at Aswan. These obelisks are now dispersed around the world, and fewer than half of them remain in Egypt.

“The earliest temple obelisk still in its original position is the 68-foot 120-ton red granite Obelisk of Senusret I of the 12th Dynasty at Al-Matariyyah in modern Heliopolis. The obelisk symbolized the sun God Ra, and during the brief religious reformation of Akhenaten was said to be a petrified ray of the Aten, the sun disk. It was also thought that the God existed within the structure.

“Benben was the mound that arose from the primordial waters Nu upon which the Creator God Atum settled in the creation story of the Heliopolitan creation myth form of Ancient Egyptian religion. The Benben stone (also known as a pyramidion) is the top stone of the Egyptian pyramid. It is also related to the Obelisk...

“The Ancient Romans were strongly influenced by the obelisk form, to the extent that there are now more than twice as many obelisks standing in Rome as remain in Egypt. All fell after the Roman period except for the Vatican obelisk and were reerected in different locations.

“The largest standing and tallest Egyptian obelisk is the Lateran Obelisk in the square at the west side of the Lateran Basilica in Rome at 105.6 feet tall and a weight of 455 tons.

“Not all the Egyptian obelisks in the Roman Empire were set up at Rome. Herod the Great imitated his Roman patrons and set up a red granite Egyptian obelisk in the hippodrome of his new city Caesarea in northern Judea. This one is about 40 feet tall and weighs about 100 tons. It was discovered by archaeologists and has been re-erected at its former site.

“In Constantinople, the Eastern Emperor Theodosius shipped an obelisk in C.E. 390 and had it set up in his hippodrome [a hippodrome in ancient Greece or Rome was a course for chariot or horse races], where it has weathered Crusaders and Seljuks and stands in the Hippodrome square in modern Istanbul. This one stood 95 feet tall and weighed 380 tons. Its lower half reputedly also once stood in Istanbul but is now lost. The Istanbul obelisk is 65 feet tall.

“Rome is the obelisk capital of the world. The most well-known is probably the 82 feet, 331-ton obelisk at Saint Peter's Square in Rome. The obelisk had stood since C.E. 37 on its site on the wall of the Circus of Nero, flanking St Peter's Basilica. (Wikipedia, 8/23/2016)

5. The Worship of Tammuz in the Ancient Near East

“In Babylonia, the month Tammuz was established in honor of the eponymous God Tammuz, who originated as a Sumerian shepherd-God, Dumuzid or Dumuzi, the consort of Inanna and, in his Akkadian form, the parallel consort of Ishtar. The Levantine (‘Lord’) Adonis, who was drawn into the Greek pantheon, was considered by Joseph Campbell among others to be another counterpart of Tammuz, son and consort. The Aramaic name "Tammuz" seems to have been derived from the Akkadian form Tammuzi, based on early Sumerian Damu-zid. The later standard Sumerian form, Dumu-zid, in turn became Dumuzi in Akkadian. Tamuzi also is Dumuzid or Dumuzi.

“Beginning with the summer solstice came a time of mourning in the Ancient Near East, as in the Aegean: the Babylonians marked the decline in daylight hours and the onset of killing summer heat and drought with a six-day "funeral" for the God. Recent discoveries reconfirm him as an annual life-death-rebirth Deity: tablets discovered in 1963 show that Dumuzi was in fact consigned to the underworld Himself, in order to secure Inanna's release, though the recovered final line reveals that he is to revive for six months of each year.

“In cult practice, the dead Tammuz was widely mourned in the Ancient Near East. Locations associated in antiquity with the site of his death include both Harran and Byblos, among others. A Sumerian tablet from Nippur reads:

She can make the lament for you, my Dumuzid, the lament for you, the lament, the lamentation, reach the desert--she can make it reach the house Arali; she can make it reach Bad-tibira; she can make it reach Dul-šuba; she can make it reach the shepherding country, the sheepfold of Dumuzid.

O Dumuzid of the fair-spoken mouth, of the ever kind eyes, she sobs tearfully, O you of the fair-spoken mouth, of the ever kind eyes, she sobs tearfully. Lad, husband, lord, sweet as the date, [...] O Dumuzid!" she sobs, she sobs tearfully.

Tammuz in the Hebrew Bible

“These mourning ceremonies were observed at the door of the Temple in Jerusalem in a vision the Israelite prophet Ezekiel was given, which serves as a biblical prophecy which expresses the Lord's message at His people's apostate worship of idols:

Then he brought me to the door of the gate of the Lord's house which was toward the north; and, behold, there sat women weeping for Tammuz. Then said he to me, Hast thou seen this, O son of man? Turn thee yet again, and thou shalt see greater abominations than these. (**Ezekiel 8:14-15**)

“It is quite possible that among other Judeans the Tammuz cult was regarded as inconsistent with Yahwism. Ezekiel's testimony is the only direct mention of Tammuz in the **Hebrew Bible**, though echoes of Tammuz have been seen in the **Books of Isaiah**, and **Daniel**.” (Wikipedia, 8/25/2016)

6.

Adonis and Adonis-Gardens

“Adonis in Greek mythology, is a central figure in various mystery religions. In 1966, Wahib Attalah wrote that the ‘cult of Adonis belonged to women,’ and further asserted ‘the cult of dying Adonis was fully developed in the circle of young girls around Sappho on the Greek island of Lesbos, about 600 B.C.E., as a fragment of Sappho reveals.’

“There has been much scholarship over the centuries concerning the multiple roles of Adonis, if any, and his meaning and purpose in Greek religious beliefs. Modern scholarship sometimes describes him as an annually renewed, ever-youthful vegetation God, a life-death-rebirth deity whose nature is tied to the calendar. His name is often applied in modern times to handsome youths, of whom he is the archetype.

“The Greek Αδωνις, Adōnis was a borrowing from the Canaanite word adōn, meaning “lord, which is related to Adonai (Hebrew: אֲדֹנָי), one of the names used to refer to the God of the **Hebrew Bible** and still used in Judaism to the present day. Syrian Adonis is Gauas or Aos, akin to Egyptian Osiris, the Semitic Tammuz and Baal Hadad, the Etruscan Atunis and the Phrygian Attis, all of whom are deities of rebirth and vegetation.

“Adonis is the Hellenized form of the Phoenician word ‘adoni,’ meaning ‘my lord.’ It is believed that the cult of Adonis was known to the Greeks from around the sixth century B.C.E., but it is unquestionable that they came to know it through contact with Cyprus. Around this time, the cult of Adonis is noted in the **Book of Ezekiel** in Jerusalem, though under the Babylonian name Tammuz.

“The most detailed and literary version of the story of Adonis is a late one, in **Book X** of Ovid's **Metamorphoses**.

“The central myth in its Greek telling: Smyrna, daughter of Theias, king of Assyria, conceives a child by him through trickery. Theias finds out and is determined to kill her, when the Gods intervene and turn her into a myrrh tree. Nine months later the baby Adonis comes out of the tree. Aphrodite fell in love with the beautiful youth (possibly because she had been wounded by Eros' arrow). Aphrodite sheltered Adonis as a new-born baby and entrusted him to Persephone. Persephone was also taken by Adonis' beauty and refused to give him back to Aphrodite. The dispute between the two Goddesses was settled by Zeus (or by Calliope on Zeus' behalf): Adonis was to spend one-third of every year with each Goddess and the last third wherever he chose. He chose to spend two-thirds of the year with Aphrodite.

“Adonis was killed by a wild boar, said to have been sent variously by Artemis, jealous of Adonis' hunting skills or in retaliation for Aphrodite instigating the death of Hippolytus, a favorite of the huntress Goddess; or by Aphrodite's paramour, Ares, who was jealous of Aphrodite's love for Adonis; or by Apollo, to punish Aphrodite for blinding his son, Erymanthus. Adonis died in Aphrodite's arms, who came to him when she heard his groans.

“When he died she sprinkled the blood with nectar, from which sprang the short-lived anemone, which takes its name from the wind which so easily makes its petals fall. And so it is the blood of Adonis that each spring turns to red the torrential river, the Adonis River (also known as Abraham River or Nahr Ibrahim in Arabic) in modern Lebanon. Afqa is the sacred source where the waters of the river emerge from a huge grotto in a cliff 660 feet high. It is there that the myth of Astarte (Venus) and Adonis was born.” (**Wikipedia**, 8/22/2016)

