

**Isaiah Chapter 18, Hebrew Text with Translation and Footnotes**  
**An Enigmatic, Puzzling Prophetic Message of YHWH's Acceptance**  
**Addressed to an Unnamed People and Nation in Central Africa<sup>1</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup>There are four end-notes to **chapter 18**: (1) The Tsetse Fly; (2) The Land of Cush / Ethiopia; (3) Napata, the Ancient Capital of Ethiopia; and (4) The Nubian People.

Slotki entitles **chapter 18** "Assurance to Ethiopia."

He comments that "In fear of Assyria, the Ethiopians had sent envoys to Hezekiah either to enlist his support against, or encourage him in his resistance to, the king of Assyria."

He states that **verses 1-3** contain "A description of Ethiopia and a prophetic charge to the ambassadors sent to Hezekiah." (P. 85) But we ask, Where in the text is anything said about Hezekiah?

Alexander comments on **chapter 18** that "The two great powers of western Asia, in the days of Isaiah, were Assyria and Egypt or Ethiopia, the last two being wholly or partially united under Tirhakah, whose name and exploits are recorded in Egyptian monuments still extant, and who is expressly said in Scripture (**2 Kings 19:9**) to have come out against Sennacherib. With one or the other of these great contending powers, Judah was commonly confederate, and of course at war with the other. These historical facts, together with the mention of Cush in **verse 1**, and the appropriateness of the figures in **verses 4** and **5** to the destruction of Sennacherib's army, gave great probability to the hypothesis now commonly adopted, that the prophet here announces that event to Ethiopia, as about to be effected by a direct interposition of Jehovah, and without human aid." (P. 342)

But we note that neither Assyria or Egypt are mentioned by name, and the other nation, identified by Alexander as Ethiopia, is in fact an unnamed nation beyond the rivers of Ethiopia. Nothing is said in the text concerning Tirhakah or a combined Ethiopia-Egypt, nor is there any mention of Sennacherib and his army. If there is reference to Sennacherib's army and its destruction, it is in the metaphors of **verses 4** and **5**, and these metaphors can be understood in a very different way, as Alexander himself shows.

Alexander continues: "Some of the expressions here employed admit of so many interpretations, that it is best to give the whole as wide an application as the language will admit, on the ground...that it constitutes a part of a generic prophecy or picture of God's dealings with the foes of His people, including illustrations drawn from particular events, such as the downfall of Syria and Israel, and the slaughter of Sennacherib's army [but we ask, where is there any mention of the downfall of Syria and Israel, or the slaughter of Sennacherib's army?]."

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“The prophet first invites the attention of the Ethiopians and of the whole world to a great catastrophe [there is no such word as ‘catastrophe’ in the text] as near at hand (**verses 1-3**). He then describes the catastrophe itself, by the beautiful figure of a vine or vineyard suffered to blossom and bear fruit, and then, when almost ready to be gathered, suddenly destroyed [no–pruned!] (**verses 4-6**). In consequence of this event, the same people, who had been invoked in the beginning of the chapter, are described as bringing presents to Jehovah at Jerusalem (**verse 7**).” (P. 342)

Gray entitles **chapters 18-20** “Egypt and Ethiopia,” and entitles **chapter 18** “The Dismissal of the (Ethiopian) Envoys.” And we ask, where in this chapter is anything said concerning the “dismissal of envoys”?

Gray comments on the chapter that it is “an obscure and difficult poem...[that] opens with an apostrophe [address to someone not present] to a land (**verse 1**) which has sent (or, is sending) envoys by water (**verses 2a, b**). **Verse 2c-g** contains words addressed to these envoys, bidding them depart to a people some of whose national characteristics, such as their might and their power to inspire terror, are particularized, and whose land is described as dissected (?) by rivers. **Verse 3** is a warning, addressed to the world at large, to give heed when signals of war shall appear [but are they ‘signals of war’? We say, signals of impending Divine action]. In **verse 4** the poet claims to have received a revelation that Yahweh will watch immovable, unseen, unshaken. **Verse 5**, under the figure of a grape-crop ripening to the vintage, predicts calamity and destruction [? we say, predicts ‘pruning,’ which improves on, but does not destroy, the harvest!], which in **verse 6** are more literally described—certain people, unnamed, will perish and lie long unburied, a prey to carrion birds and beasts [? we say, severed branches and twigs, which will become nesting materials for wild birds and animals, with no mention of unburied corpses of people]...

“The poem yields no clear and unambiguous answer to the following questions among others...

1. What is the land addressed in **verse 1**?
2. Who delivers to the envoys the message recorded in **verse 2**?
3. Who, or what, is figured forth by the ripening crops of **verse 5**?
4. Who are the people that are to lie unburied?” (Pp. 307-08)

No, there are no clear, unambiguous answers to these questions, and Yes, there are many other questions that are raised in the attempt to interpret this ancient text / poem.

Oswalt entitles **chapter 18** “God’s message,” and states that he “considers **18:1-7** to be combined with **17:12-14** because both segments say the same thing in different words [but is this the case? We think the passages are quite different]...

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“In any case, this segment is not another of the oracles against the nations, as is evident superficially from the absence of **אָשׁוּר**, ‘burden,’ ‘oracle,’ at the outset. Instead, the same word is used as appeared in **17:12-14**: ‘woe’ [but we think that whereas the word means ‘alas’ or ‘woe’ in **17:12**, here in **18:1** it is meant as a call to attention, to looking and listening for a Divine signal and trumpet call, not a pronouncement of woe.]. Here, as there, the word points up the fateful and potentially dangerous times in which the prophet and his contemporaries were living [we say there is nothing in **18:1-7** pointing to a fateful and potentially dangerous time—rather, this passage points to a time of hope for an unnamed people far from Israel’s known world!]. It is not directed to the Ethiopians...No word of judgment is pronounced upon them. Rather, they are to be the bearers of a message that God will not allow oppression to come to its full fruition [but **18:1-7** depicts God waiting patiently for the harvest of the vineyard, and at the appropriate time, pruning the vine, a process common to the growing of grapes, intended to enable a greater harvest—not a word is found in this passage concerning God not allowing oppression!]. This is not in any sense a judgment oracle...Despite the Assyrian threat which Judah’s response to Damascus and Israel helped to provoke, God is the Master of the nations and is able to make Zion the place to which all peoples will come (compare also **Isaiah 2:1-4**).” (P. 359)

Motyer entitles the chapter “Whose purposes will be accomplished?” [but such a question is not raised anywhere in the chapter!]

He introduces the **18<sup>th</sup> chapter**: “In 715 the Ethiopian Piankhi mastered Egypt, founded the twenty-fifth dynasty and sought to play a part on the world stage. Envoys went to all the Palestinian states promising Egyptian aid in an anti-Assyrian rising. Isaiah mentions neither power but looks through the situation of the day to a wider horizon, not relating historical facts but the principles they embody...”

“Seen on its own terms the world knows no security but collective strength (**verses 1-2a** [we ask, Do these verses say that? We say, Not at all!]) Isaiah, however, has a better message to share, arising from the principles he had already drawn from the experience of Ephraim and Aram (**17:1-11**), in whose case collective strength failed (**17:1-5**). Security can be found only in the Lord (**17:7, 10**), and one day the remnant will enjoy it (**17:3, 6** [the only ‘remnant’ mentioned is the ‘remnant of Syria,’ not Israel’s remnant]). This is a microcosm of the Lord’s plan for the world. He rules all the nations (**17:12-14**), and it would be better for the ambassadors of collective security (**verses 1-2** [they say nothing about ambassadors of collective security! This is only Motyer’s imaginative reading of these verses!]), to take a different message to the far parts of the earth: to wait for the Lord (**verse 3** [not wait for YHWH, but be watching and listening for His signal and trumpet!]), for He is planning His sudden intervention (**verse 4**; compare **17:13-14** [in **chapter 17** it is YHWH’s rebuke and terror, causing the roaring nations to exist no more; here in **chapter 18** it is not sudden intervention, but the normal, timely work of pruning the vines at the appropriate moment, to enable better

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growth, and insure a greater harvest--nothing about destruction of the nations!]. The harvest expected from human plans will come to nothing (**verses 5-6** [no--the pruned twigs and branches become part of the nests / lairs of birds and wild animals, but the pruned vine is enabled to have better and more productive growth, leading to a bountiful harvest!]) but a world remnant will gather to the Lord in Zion (**verse 7** [the word 'remnant' does not occur; it is the mysterious, unknown nation(s) of central Africa--the 'ends of the earth' for the ancient Near East--that comes to YHWH in Zion!]). (P. 161)

Such an introduction to **chapter 18** is perplexing. The chapter itself does not say a word about such historical occurrences, and Motyer's introduction reads more like an introduction to **chapter 17** than to **chapter 18**! His summations of what the different verses in **chapter 18** say are misleading and inadequate, and we wonder how such an astute scholar of **Isaiah** can come to such conclusions!

Watts entitles **chapter 18** "Messengers from Ethiopia," and comments that "There is a remarkable lacuna [gap] in the literature on this passage." (P. 243)

He adds that "The chapter presents three movements: the approach of a delegation from 'the land of winged boats' brings dismay to Jerusalem (**verse 2b-c**); and it is anticipated that 'the nation tall and smooth-skinned' will bring gifts to Yahweh in Zion (**verse 7**). In between, all the world is called to take notice of the delegation's trip (**verse 3**). Yahweh intends to sit back and observe developments (**verse 4a**). An enigmatic explanation is offered which uses the parabolic language of the farmer trimming the grain of shoots before actual harvest time (**verses 4a-6**)." (P. 245)

We wonder whether Watts has adequately studied this text. It says nothing about winged boats bringing dismay to Jerusalem, and it does not call all the world to take notice of the delegation's trip--rather, **verse 3** calls the world to watch and listen for YHWH's sign and trumpet. The parabolic language of the farmer is not about grain, but about grapes growing on a vine, which the vine-grower prunes to enable a more abundant harvest. Watts' summation serves to obscure the passage, rather than explaining it.

<sup>2</sup>Motyer entitles **verses 1-3** "The world on its own terms," a title which seems to us to be totally inadequate and misleading. These verses say nothing about the world on its own terms!

Translations of **verse 1** vary:

**King James**, "Woe to the land shadowing with wings, which is beyond the rivers of Ethiopia:"

**Tanakh**, "Ah, land in the deep shadow of wings, Beyond the rivers of Nubia!"

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# אֲשֶׁר מֵעֶבֶר לְנַהַר־כּוּשׁ:

Hark! / Ho!,<sup>3</sup> land of whirring wings,<sup>4</sup>, <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>(...continued)

**New Revised Standard**, “Ah, land of whirring wings beyond the rivers of Ethiopia”;

**New International**, “Woe to the land of whirring wings along the rivers of Cush”;

**New Jerusalem**, “Disaster! Land of the whirring locust beyond the rivers of Cush”;

**Rahlfs**, οὐαὶ γῆς πλοίων πτέρυγες ἐπέκεινα ποταμῶν Αἰθιοπίας, “Woe [**NETS** has “Ah”], land of boats with wings beyond rivers of Ethiopia.”

(We are left with the question of the opening word—does it mean “Woe!” or “Disaster!”? Or does it only mean “Ah,” an exclamation of amazement? And this calls for an evaluation of the entire chapter. Is it a pronouncement of doom on this unnamed people beyond the rivers of Ethiopia? Or does it simply express amazement at what is seen there, and in fact predict hope for them? We say it predicts hope, since they are depicted as bringing tribute to YHWH of Armies!)

**Alexander**, “*Ho! Land of rustling wings, which art beyond the rivers of Cush (or Ethiopia)!*”

Gray comments on **verse 1** that the latter part of the verse “seems to distinguish the land apostrophized [addressed as if present] from the land of Cush as one more remote [we definitely agree]...Nevertheless it is customary to identify ‘the land beyond the rivers of Cush’ with the land of Cush itself.” It seems clear to us that the text is speaking of an unnamed land / people “beyond the rivers of Cush / Ethiopia.”

But, Gray adds, if this fact is disregarded, “we may perhaps infer from the description...that the unnamed land apostrophized is Ethiopia, and see in **verses 1-2** some trace of ‘wonder at the mysterious country and of regard for its people who by their advance against Egypt had won (from about 712 B.C.E. onwards) a place among the leading powers of their time.’” (P. 308)

Yes, it is only by disregarding the last part of **verse 1** that this conclusion can be drawn. But why should an interpreter disregard an integral part of the text he is commenting on?

<sup>3</sup>Alexander comments that “וְיָ” is rendered woe! [**Rahlfs**, οὐαὶ, ‘woe!’, ‘alas!’] by Cocceius, and Paulus; *hark!* by Augusti, but by most other writers, as a particle of calling, *ho!* or *ha!*” Gray translates by “Ah!” and comments that it is “simply exclamatory.” (P. 309)

Watts states that “*Woe* does not introduce a curse on Cush (Ethiopia). It is a cry of dismay by Jerusalemites at the news that the delegation is approaching. They assume that military operations in their land will bring renewed disasters.” (P. 245)

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But where in the text is anything said about “Jerusalemites,” or about “news that the delegation is approaching”? All of this is being read into the text by Watts.

We think the manner in which this opening word is translated depends upon what we make of the chapter as a whole. If the chapter is a message warning of soon coming destruction, then certainly it should be translated “Woe!” or “Alas!” But if the chapter is in fact a message of hope for an unnamed distant nation and people in the mysterious, unknown depths of Africa, then it should be translated “Hark!” or “Ho!”

We insist that even if the destruction of Sennacherib’s army lies behind the metaphors in **verses 4-5**, still it is a message of hope for the people of Judah who would be delivered by that event, and an even greater hope is envisioned by the message that the unnamed nation / people in the mysterious and unknown continent of Africa will be accepted into YHWH’s Zion.

<sup>4</sup>Slotki states that the “*buzzing of wings*” (his translation of **צִלְצַל כְּנָפַיִם**) is “a reference to the dreaded tsetse-fly, a winged insect abounding in the Nile-lands. The Hebrew *tsiltsal* (*buzzing*) closely resembles in sound the name *tsaltsalya* by which the insect is known among the Galla tribes. This explanation is more probable than that of the Targum, adopted by Kimchi [also known as RaDak] and some non-Jewish commentators, ‘winged boats,’ despite the resemblance of the Hebrew word to *zulzul*, the Arabic word for ‘ships.’” (P. 85) See end-note 1 for a **Wikipedia** article on the tsetse fly.

If this is in fact the meaning, we ask, What land in Africa is subject to the attack of tsetse-fly? Is the tsetse-fly confined to Ethiopia? Or do they not inhabit much of mid-continental Africa south of the Sahara, as is stated in end-note 1? Would not the ancient author of this passage have meant “all of Africa” by such a description? If you today were to be asked, What is the land of the tse-tse fly, how would you respond?

Alexander says nothing concerning the tsetse fly, but mentions different understandings of the term, including the spelling **צִלְצַל**, an intensive form of “shadow” and reflected in the Syriac and Greek translation of Aquila, *σκιά πτερύγων*, “shadow of wings” (compare **Psalms 17:8; 36:8; 57:2; 63:8**). Watts mentions that Jerome translated **צִלְצַל** by *umbra*, “shade,” “shadow.”

Alexander rejects this, stating that the double form **צִלְצַל** in every other case has reference to sound; and this has led some to suppose the word is an allusion to the sound made by locusts—and the fact is that one of the Hebrew names for locusts is **צִלְצַל**, a “whirring locust.” Others suggest the sound made by marching armies, which

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are sometimes called “wings.” He also notes that the plural noun צְלָצְלִים means “cymbals” (i.e. with clashing sounds), and that “from the resemblance of the ancient ships to cymbals, or of their sails to wings, or from both together, the phrase...is applied to ships by [Rahfs] πλοίων πτέρυγες, “of ships, wings.”

Oswalt states that “The prophet may be intending to say that the ships of the Ethiopians whiz up and down the rivers like winged insects. This view accords well with the reference to rivers in the second line of the verse and with the opening lines of **verse 2**. It also supports the picture of the Ethiopians as emissaries to the world [but the text does not depict the Ethiopians as emissaries to the world]. Finally, the references to sails as wings are almost universal among sailors.” (Pp. 359-60)

**Brown-Driver-Briggs** defines the noun צְלָצְלִים by “whirring,” “buzzing,” that is of insect’s wings. **Holladay** has “winged-cricket.”

Gray states that “*Land of the whirring of wings, or land of winged locusts*, are the safest rendering of the Hebrew text...Other translations that have been proposed are (1) *land of winged*, i.e. *swift, boats*...(2) *land of the shadow of both sides*...[meaning] either (a) the land over which shadow is cast by mountains on both sides of it, to wit, the mountains which flank the Nile valley on the east and the west; or (b) the land where objects at noon-day sometimes cast a shadow to the north and sometimes to the south...the interpretations cited here and others that have been offered are either philologically unsound or, in the context, of doubtful fitness.” (P. 309)

On the **Internet**, under the title “Noisy Insects of Africa,” numerous photos are given of the African cicada along with a number of articles, but we find no mention of the tsetse fly.

Motyer states that “*The land of whirring wings* originally referred to Egypt with its endemic [common to] profusion of flying insects, but Egypt is not now mentioned and the *whirring wings* constitute a picture of the busy, restless world.” (P. 161)

The text is obviously describing a land beyond the rivers of Cush / Ethiopia—but Motyer informs us that it is not about that distant, mysterious, unknown area of central and sub-Saharan Africa at all—it is depicting humanity, in a busy, restless world!

Such allegorical interpretation reminds us of Philo of Alexandria, or of the author of the **New Testament Book of Hebrews**. The whole world is a world of whirring wings! And while we might agree that the world is such a place, we insist that this is not what this verse means!

which (is) beyond<sup>5</sup> Ethiopia's<sup>6</sup>, <sup>2</sup> rivers—<sup>7</sup>, <sup>3</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>The phrase מֵעֵבֶר לְ, literally “from across / beyond to,” which we translate by “beyond,” is understood to mean “on this side,” or “on that side,” or “at the side,” or “along” by various translators.

Motyer translates by “along the rivers of Cush.” (P. 161)

Watts states that the phrase “means, literally, ‘beyond,’ ‘on the other side of’”, but goes on to state the entire phrase means “in regions adjacent to the rivers of Cush.” (P. 244)

עֵבֶר by itself means “region across or beyond,” or “side” according to **Brown-Driver-Briggs**. H.F. Fuhs, in his article on עֵבֶר in **Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament**, states that the noun מֵעֵבֶר “in general means ‘beyond’” and refers to **Isaiah 18:1** along with other passages (P. 423)

It is not wise to be dogmatic about the meaning of prepositions in Hebrew, since especially in later Hebrew prepositions are easily interchanged and used with varied meanings, and especially in a phrase like this with its two prepositions.

For the phrase מֵעֵבֶר לְ elsewhere in the **Hebrew Bible**, see **Numbers 22:1; 32:19; 32:32; 34:15; 35:14** (all with reference to the Jordan River, “across” or “beyond” the Jordan); **Deuteronomy 30:13** (with reference to the sea, “beyond” or “across” the sea, to get the word and bring it back); **Joshua 13:32; 14:3; 17:5; 18:7; Judges 7:25** (all with reference to the Jordan River, “across” or “beyond” the Jordan); **1 Kings 4:12** (with reference to a city, the other side of the city); **1 Kings 14:15** (with reference to the river Euphrates, “across” or “beyond” the Euphrates River); **1 Chronicles 26:30** (with reference to the Jordan River); **2 Chronicles 20:2** (with reference to the Dead Sea; from norther Israel Edom lies “across” or “beyond” the Dead Sea); and **Zephaniah 3:10**, where the exact phrase as found in **Isaiah 18:1** occurs:

3:10 מֵעֵבֶר לְנַהַר־כּוּשׁ  
עֲתָרִי בַת-פוֹצִי יוֹבֵלוֹן מִנְחָתִי:

From beyond to / across Kush's / Ethiopia's rivers,  
My worshipers, daughter(s) of My scattered ones will bring along My gift.

Gray states that “The sense *beyond, region beyond*, is the only meaning in such geographical expressions that is justified by usage.” (P. 317) We agree.

<sup>6</sup>The Hebrew כּוּשׁ, **kush** is defined by **Brown-Driver-Briggs**:

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1. as the name given to the first 'son' of  $\text{חַוִּי}$  (**Genesis 10:6, 10:7 = 1 Chronicles 1:8, 1:9**, translated by **Rahlf**s as  $\text{Χουζ}$ , by the Latin Vulgate as *Chus*, from whom descended the southernmost peoples known to Hebrews.
  
2. as the land and people of the southern Nile-valley, or Upper Egypt, extending from Syene (**Ezekiel 29:10**) indefinitely to the south, translated by **Rahlf**s  $\text{Αιθιοπια}$ ,  $\text{Αιθιοπες}$ , "Ethiopia," "Ethiopians"):
  - a. the land (**Isaiah 11:11, 18:1** (here), **Zephaniah 3:10, Ezekiel 29:10, Job 28:19, Esther 1:1, 8:9**).
  - b. the people **Isaiah 20:4, Jeremiah 46:9, Ezekiel 38:5**; personified, **Psalm 68:32**).
  - c. indeterminate, either land or people, or including both: (**Isaiah 20:3, 20:5, 43:3, 45:14, 2 Kings 19:9 = Isaiah 37:9, Nahum 3:9, Ezekiel 30:4, 30:5, 30:9, Psalm 87:4** (**Rahlf**s translates by  $\text{λαὸς Αἰθιοπων}$ , "people of Ethiopians."

For a **Wikipedia** article on Ethiopia, see our end-note 2.

Alexander mentions different understandings of  $\text{שְׁנֵי}$ , as meaning "Chusistan (German for Iran) or Turan (a land occupied by Iranians); Ethiopia and the opposite part of Arabia; and Ethiopia alone. (P. 343)

Oswalt states that "*Cush* is historically the land along the Nile south of the fourth cataract [‘The cataracts of the Nile are shallow lengths (or white water rapids) of the Nile River, between Aswan and Khartoum, where the surface of the water is broken by many small boulders and stones jutting out of the river bed, as well as many rocky islets. In some places, these stretches are punctuated by whitewater and are perhaps well characterized as rapids, while at others the water flow is smoother, but still shallow.’ **Wikipedia**, 9/1/2016]. It is included in what is today Ethiopia. As such, it was used as a metaphor for the ends of the earth...

"This seems to be the purpose of its usage here. If one wishes to convey a message to all the earth, then one should call messengers from the ends of the earth. At the same time, it is possible that historical events may have prompted Isaiah's use of this kind of reference...

"About 715 B.C.E. a new dynasty began to rule in Egypt (the 25<sup>th</sup> dynasty). This dynasty was Nubian or Cushite. This ruling family may have sent envoys to Judah as well as to Philistia and Moab to incite them to the revolt which produced Sargon's punitive action against Philistia in 711 B.C.E. If so, then it may have been the presence of these Ethiopian envoys in Jerusalem that sparked Isaiah's usage of them in this

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way.” (P. 360)

We note that Oswalt says “may have sent envoys to Judah, etc., not nearly as dogmatic as Motyer’s affirmation that this was the historical fact underlying **chapter 18**.

But **18:1-7** is not about Cush / Ethiopia—it is about an unnamed people / nation “beyond the rivers of Cush / Ethiopia. And it is that unnamed people / nation that is addressed, being told to send its messengers in their swift boats to the people described in **verse 2**, in ambiguous, difficult language, making their identity even more mysterious. We agree with Oswalt that these are messengers from the ends of the earth—in terms of the greatly limited world-view of the ancient Near East. And the thrust of the passage is that there is a message of their acceptance by YHWH of Israel.

But there is not a word mentioned in **18:1-7** about a new dynasty ruling in Egypt or in Ethiopia, and certainly nothing concerning that dynasty’s sending envoys to Jerusalem. Oswalt, like Slotki and Alexander and Motyer is using his imagination to read all of this into the text. And when one reads their commentaries, it is easy to assume that all of this is contained in the text—when in fact, it is not—not a word of it!

Motyer comments that “*Cush* is the upper Nile region, Ethiopia, symbolic of the most far-flung part of the known world. The Ethiopian dynasty of Piankhi...justifies this linking of Egypt and Ethiopia, but Isaiah here allows it to picture the immediate world stretching out to the borders of the remote.” (P. 161)

While we take sharp disagreement with Motyer’s overall interpretation of **chapter 18**, we agree with the last half of this comment. We think the text is depicting an unnamed land “beyond the rivers of Cush / Ethiopia.”

<sup>7</sup>Slotki comments that “It is suggested that the rivers are the Atbara and the Blue Nile (Bahr el-Azrak), and the ‘land beyond’ seems to refer to Napata which was the seat of the government, on the westward bend of the Nile. Some associate the embassy with Tirhakah, an Ethiopian king who was a contemporary of Sennacherib and Hezekiah (compare **Isaiah 37:9-11**).” (P. 85) For an article on Napata, the ancient capital of Ethiopia, see our end-note 3.

Alexander states that “The country thus described is understood by Cyril, Jerome [and others] to be Egypt; by most other writers Ethiopia; but by Knobel Saba or Meroe, a region contiguous to Ethiopia, and watered by its rivers, often mentioned with it, but distinguished from it.” (P. 343)

There are numerous rivers in Ethiopia. The largest of the rivers are: Agveiy, Akobo, Atbarah, Awash, Ayesha, Baro, Blue Nile, Dawa, Didessam Galetti, Ganale Dorya, Germama, Gibe, Guder, Jamma, Jubba, Mareb, Mille, Muger, Omo, Shebelle, and Tekezé.” (**Wikipedia**, 8/28/2016) Besides these, there is a large number of smaller rivers.

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The text's mention of a land beyond the rivers of Ethiopia seems to us to point to present-day Somalia, or even further south, beyond the Horn of Africa, in central or southern Africa, for example in Kenya or Tanzania, etc. What do you think?

Gray translates by "*Which is beyond the river of Cush,*" and says to compare **Zephaniah 3:10**, which has "from beyond the rivers of Cush they shall bring tribute." He comments that "In Zephaniah a vague term for a remote region is in place [but] not so here. The country in question is one which has sent envoys who are now in Jerusalem." (Pp. 309-10)

We disagree, and think that the statement here in **Isaiah 18:1** also refers to a remote region. There is nothing in the text saying that the envoys / messengers are in Jerusalem.

And we ask, Is there any parallel to this type of prophetic statement to unknown, distant nations in Africa, in the literature of the ancient Near East, especially as a message of hope (compare **chapter 19:18-25**)?

We find in Pritchard's **Ancient Near Eastern Texts** some half-dozen mentions of Ethiopia as a nation / people. But the only thing closely resembling a prophetic message to Ethiopia is found on pp. 447-48, "The Divine Nomination of an Ethiopian King," which tells of the selection of the Ethiopian King Aspalta, at Napata, by the God Amon-Re.

Our answer to the question is No—we find nothing comparable to these prophetic messages to foreign nations in **Isaiah 13-23**, in those ancient Near Eastern texts, in which foreign countries are largely mentioned as objects of plunder.

However, in the **Sibylline Oracles**, dated from 150 B.C.E. to 500 C.E. or later, there are many prophetic utterances made by the Sibyls to the nations of the world, a collection of which was made by the Romans to be consulted by the Roman senate in times of crisis.

J. J. Collins, translator of the **Sibylline Oracles** in James H. Charlesworth's **The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha**, Volume I, pp. 317-472, states that "The most characteristic feature of Sibylline oracles is the prediction of woes and disasters to come upon mankind...Like the [Hebrew] prophets, their words of doom are often directed against specific peoples and cities, and occasionally, at least, a ray of hope does penetrate their message, indicating restoration after the destruction. The disasters are due to the wrath of the Gods, which can be incurred by ritual offenses, but also, especially in the Jewish and Christian oracles, by ethical violations." (P. 318)

From **Encyclopedia Judaica** comes the following statement: The sibyl was a Greek prophetess-figure, apparently of Oriental origin. The sibyl utters her predictions

(continued...)

## 18:2<sup>8</sup> הַשְּׁלִיחַ בַּיָּם צִירִים

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<sup>7</sup>(...continued)

not on being consulted, like established oracles, but spontaneously, in ecstatic exclamations. She is believed to dwell in grottos, to wander through many countries and to live for 1,000 years. Originally conceived of as a single person, various sibyls are found later in different countries, some bearing individual names. From Alexander Polyhistor (first century B.C.E.) comes the earliest mention of a sibyl named Sambethe or Sabbe, described as Babylonian or Hebrew...

“Sibylline oracles, in hexametric verses, circulated in Athens in the fifth century B.C.E.; from Alexander the Great's time, these sided with the oppressed peoples and predicted doom to the wicked rulers. A standard figure in these oracles was the hoped for Mighty King from the East, who would liberate the conquered, punish the oppressors, and inaugurate a period of welfare and peace. A combination of Babylonian astrology and Persian millenarian speculations was the basis for a firm belief in a predestined future...

“In Rome, Sibylline Books, deposited in the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus, were consulted at moments when the senate had to make critical decisions. However, when the Roman Empire came to rule over Asia, Oriental sibylline literature evolved into virulent anti-Roman propaganda. Doubtless the strong note of hope for final redemption induced the Jews to adapt the popular pattern of sibylline poetry to the needs of their national-religious propaganda...

“Christians regarded the sibyl as a heathen prophetess predicting the coming of Jesus and integrated the Jewish sibylline poetry in a larger corpus of Christian oracles. The pagan sibyls and the prophets of Israel, as two kinds of messengers of Jesus' advent, stand side by side in Michelangelo's paintings on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Rome.” (On the Internet, 8/31/2016)

Our reading of the **Sybilline Oracles** convinces us that many of these oracles have been deeply influenced by the **Hebrew** and **Greek Bible**, with their universal viewpoint, markedly different from that of the ancient Near Eastern texts, where any hope is associated with the defeat of national enemies, while here in **Isaiah 18-19:18-25** long-term hope is promised to the unnamed farthest distant people, and even to Israel's long-time enemies, Egypt and Assyria!

<sup>8</sup>Translations of **verse 2** vary:

**King James**, “That sendeth ambassadors by the sea, even in vessels of bulrushes upon the waters, *saying*, Go, ye swift messengers, to a nation scattered and

(continued...)

וּבְכָל־יְגִמָּאׁ עַל־פְּנֵי־מַיִםׁ  
לְכוּׁ מִלְּאֲכָיִם קָלִים אֶל־גּוֹיׁ מִמְשָׁךְ וּמוֹרָט  
אֶל־עַם נֹרָא מִן־הוּא וְהַלְאָה  
גּוֹי קוֹ־קוּ וּמְבוֹטָה

<sup>8</sup>(...continued)

peeled, to a people terrible from their beginning hitherto; a nation meted out and trodden down, whose land the rivers have spoiled!"

**Tanakh**, "Go, swift messengers, To a nation far and remote, To a people thrust forth and away -- A nation of gibber and chatter -- Whose land is cut off by streams; Which sends out envoys by sea, In papyrus vessels upon the water!"

**New Revised Standard**, "sending ambassadors by the Nile in vessels of papyrus on the waters! Go, you swift messengers, to a nation tall and smooth, to a people feared near and far, a nation mighty and conquering, whose land the rivers divide."

**New International**, "which sends envoys by sea in papyrus boats over the water. Go, swift messengers, to a people tall and smooth-skinned, to a people feared far and wide, an aggressive nation of strange speech, whose land is divided by rivers."

**New Jerusalem**, "who send ambassadors by sea, in little reed-boats across the waters! Go, swift messengers to a nation tall and bronzed, to a people feared far and near, a mighty and masterful nation whose country is criss-crossed with rivers.

**Rahfs**, ὁ ἀποστέλλων ἐν θαλάσῃ ὄμηρα καὶ ἐπιστολὰς βυβλίνας ἐπάνω τοῦ ὕδατος πορεύσονται γὰρ ἄγγελοι κοῦφοι πρὸς ἔθνος μετέωρον καὶ ξένον λαὸν καὶ χαλεπὸν τίς αὐτοῦ ἐπέκεινα ἔθνος ἀνέλπιστον καὶ καταπεπατημένον νῦν οἱ ποταμοὶ τῆς γῆς, "the one sending forth by sea hostages and papyrus letters above the water; for light / nimble messengers / angels will go to a nation raised from the ground / high and a strange people, hard / difficult. Who is beyond it? (It is) a nation without hope and trampled down. Now the rivers of the land...(NETS translates by "he who sends hostages by sea and papyrus letters on the water! For swift messengers will go to a high nation, and a foreign and fierce people: who is beyond it? It is a nation without hope and trampled down. Now the rivers of the land...")

**Alexander**, "Sending by sea ambassadors, and in vessels of papyrus on the face of the waters. Go ye light (or swift) messengers, to a nation drawn and shorn, to a people terrible since it existed and onwards, a nation of double strength, and trampling, whose land the streams divide."

Alexander comments that "Nearly every word and phrase of this difficult verse has been the subject of discordant explanations." (P. 344) Yes, indeed! And we ask, Is this not additional evidence of the enigmatic / puzzling nature of the prophetic message?

אֲשֶׁר-בָּזְאוּ נְהַרְיִם אֶרְצוֹ:

the one sending forth<sup>9</sup> envoys / messengers<sup>10</sup> on the sea,<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Alexander comments that “the one sending forth” “refers not to God, but to the people mentioned in **verse 1.**” (P. 344)

But who is that people? It is a people “beyond the rivers of כְּנָעַן / Ethiopia,” but the text does not give their name.

<sup>10</sup>Alexander comments that the word צִירִים, our “envoys / messengers,” is understood by Bochart in the sense “images,” “supposing an allusion to the Egyptian practice, mentioned by Cyril, Procopius and Lucian, of sending an image of Osiris annually on the surface of the sea to Byblus [our Byblos] in Phoenicia [on the seacoast, one of the oldest continuously occupied cities in the world; in the **Hebrew Bible**, אֲנָבִל]. [Rahfs] renders the word ὄμηρα, ‘hostages’ [or ‘pledges’]; but all the latest writers [in the mid-1900s] are agreed in giving it the sense of ‘ambassadors,’ to wit, those sent to Ethiopia, or from Ethiopia to Judah.” (P. 344)

We think the translation “ambassadors” has come, not from the word itself, but from the attempt to make the statement fit into an imaginary historical context, being read into the text—that is, the sending of ambassadors either from Ethiopia to Judah, or from Judah to Ethiopia.

But we think the text points to an unnamed nation beyond the rivers of Cush / Ethiopia sending envoys / messengers to the unknown people that the text describes, but does not name. That people has been identified as the Nubians, the Ethiopians, the Assyrians (so, Watts, claiming that “the envoys from [the Ethiopian king] Shabaka are sent to Assyria to try to arrange for support or at least a promise not to interfere, as he presses his claims to authority over all Egypt,” p. 246; but none of this is stated in the text), and even the Jews.

Motyer comments on **verse 2** that “Isaiah begins this oracle from an implicitly world-wide perspective, which is continued in the description of *envoys going by sea in...boats over the water...*The efforts of international diplomacy do not stop at the known and easily accessible but reach to earth’s remotest ends.” (P. 161)

While we agree that the language leads to a “world-wide perspective,” we think it is a stretch of the language to understand it as meaning boats going world-wide, or as “efforts of international diplomacy” reaching “to earth’s remotest ends.”

Watts comments that “The messengers are sent on their way again. But commentators are not agreed to whom they are sent.” (P. 245)

<sup>11</sup>Slotki comments that by the “sea” the Nile River is meant. “The Nile which, like the Euphrates, is sometimes designated ‘sea’ (compare **Isaiah 19:5**).” (P. 85)

(continued...)

and in vessels of papyrus<sup>12</sup> upon (the) water's surface.

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<sup>11</sup>(...continued)

Alexander comments that יָם, “sea,” is “variously explained to mean the Red Sea, the Mediterranean, and the Nile (**Isaiah 19:5; Nahum 3:8**).” (P. 344)

Watts agrees with Clements that “It is not impossible that ‘the sea’ means the Mediterranean coast.” (P. 244)

Kaiser states that the poet / author “is also able to mention the light boats made of bundles of papyrus, which must have been regarded, especially by people from Palestine, as very characteristic of Egypt. They could be carried easily round rapids [such as occur at the ‘cataracts’ of the Nile] and were particularly popular for hunting in the papyrus thickets...[but] these boats were not suitable, due to their limited durability, for lengthy journeys. The use of the Nile rafts outside the Delta is unthinkable.” (P. 93)

Can you imagine papyrus boats crossing the mighty oceans of the world? See the next footnote, and remember the story of Thor Heyerdahl (1914-2002), a Norwegian adventurer and ethnographer, who became known for his Kon-Tiki expedition in 1947, in which he sailed 5,000 miles) across the Pacific Ocean in a hand-built raft floating on nine balsa-logs, from South America to the Tuamotu Islands. The expedition was designed to demonstrate that ancient people could have made long sea voyages, creating contacts between separate cultures. But was Heyerdahl's balsam-wood raft similar to the boats made of papyrus?

<sup>12</sup>Slotki states concerning “vessels of papyrus” that “The ambassadors from Ethiopia to Jerusalem would come down the Nile in light and swift skiffs built of the leaves of the papyrus, accommodating one of two passengers. They were used on that part of the river which ordinary boats could not navigate.” (P. 85)

We think Slotki is reading this matter of “ambassadors from Ethiopia to Jerusalem” into the text, rather than its being actually found there.

Where our Hebrew text has וּבַכֵּלֵי-גִמְאָה, “and in vessels of papyrus,” **Rahlfs** has καὶ ἐπιστολὰς βυβλίνας, “and letters, papyrus ones.” Perhaps the Greek translator had never seen a vessel / boat made from papyrus—we admit that a boat made out of paper seems impossible—and therefore the translator substituted “letters” for “vessels,” thinking that this would make more sense.

Alexander states that it “is now universally explained to mean vessels made of the papyrus plant, the use of which upon the Nile is expressly mentioned by Theophrastus, Pliny, Lucan and Plutarch.” (P. 344)

An article on “Reed Boats” in **Wikipedia** states that “Reed boats and rafts, along with dugout canoes and other rafts, are among the oldest known types of boats. Often

(continued...)

Go<sup>13</sup> swift messengers<sup>14</sup> to a nation<sup>15</sup> tall and smooth,<sup>16</sup> 4

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<sup>12</sup>(...continued)

used as traditional fishing boats, they are still used in a few places around the world, though they have generally been replaced with planked boats. Reed boats can be distinguished from reed rafts, since reed boats are usually waterproofed with some form of tar. As well as boats and rafts, small floating islands have also been constructed from reeds.

“The earliest discovered remains from a reed boat are 7000 years old, found in Kuwait. Reed boats are depicted in early petroglyphs [a form of rock art] and were common in Ancient Egypt. A famous example is the ark of bulrushes in which the baby Moses was set afloat. They were also constructed from early times in Peru and Bolivia, and boats with remarkably similar design have been found in Easter Island. Reed boats are still used in Peru, Bolivia, Ethiopia, and until recently in Corfu. The explorations and investigations of...Thor Heyerdahl have resulted in a better understanding of the construction and capabilities of reed boats.” (8/30/2016)

See the numerous photos of reed boats on the **Internet**. Also there are a number of articles on papyrus vessels from the **International Standard Bible Encyclopedia** available on the Internet.

<sup>13</sup>Slotki comments that this word, “Go!” is the beginning of the prophet’s message to the envoys. (P. 85)

Alexander states that “The second clause of the verse (לכו, ‘Go!’ etc. is regarded by some writers as the language of the people who had just been addressed, as if he had said, ‘sending ambassadors [envoys / messengers] (and saying to them) go,’ etc. More probably, however, the prophet is still speaking in the name of God.” (P. 344)

Probably, yes...but the text does not identify the speaker—another indication of the ambiguity of the text, that can be taken in so many different ways!

Gray holds that with this imperative, “Go,” the envoys / messengers are being told to “depart from Jerusalem and return home.” (Pp. 308, 311)

But Jerusalem is not so much as mentioned, nor is anything said about “returning home.” All of this is being read into the text by Gray, which he admits by stating “This interpretation assumes great compression, not to say obscurity, but it is preferable to the alternative that makes the words an address to the Ethiopians to their envoys as they set out on their mission to the Jews.” (P. 311)

And again we ask, Where in the text is anything said about a “mission to the Jews”? And we disagree that this is the only alternative.

(continued...)

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<sup>13</sup>(...continued)

Oswalt comments that “If the prophet was intending to give a message to the Ethiopian rulers of Egypt, it seems more likely he would have said ‘Return.’ Also, it is not at all clear who the people are to whom he sends the message [we say, the messengers]. *Tall and smooth* are frequently said to be references to the tall, bronze-colored Ethiopians, but the translation of these two words is not at all certain...The rest of the verse has an even less clear reference to the Ethiopians, who were not great conquerors and not universally feared...

“If Isaiah is not speaking of the Ethiopians, then whom? The two alternatives are that he is referring to some other literal, historical people or that he is using a figure of speech [we say there is another alternative—he is speaking to the unnamed, unknown, mysterious occupants of Africa beyond the rivers of Cush / Ethiopia, i.e. beyond the horn of Africa]. One is the Assyrians (so, Clements) and the other is the Medes (so, Kissane). In the first case the envoys would be being told in something of a sarcastic manner, ‘Don’t talk to us about rebelling. Go talk to the Assyrians, the source of the problem. Tell them they will one day bring gifts to Yahweh (**verse 7**)...The function of going to the Medes seems more clear. They are the destroyers and are being summoned to prepare to act as God’s agents (**13:17; 21:2**).

“Yet, even this suggestion falters in view of the broad, general statement which the poem is making. The only thing approaching a message appears in **verse 3**, and all that it says is for the world to be alert to God’s acts [signal and trumpet]. This seems to support the figurative conception of the material. Swift envoys are called from the ends of the earth and sent to the mightiest people imaginable—a composite of all human greatness. But this mighty people is as nothing before a God Who works as inexorably as the heat and as imperceptibly as the mist. Ultimately, even this mighty people will bring its homage to God’s dwelling (**verse 4**), in Zion (**verse 7**).” (Pp. 360-61)

Again we state, there is not a hint of either the Assyrians or the Medes in the language of **18:1-7**.

Motyer comments on **verse 3**, stating that “We may assume that the command in **verse 2b** was originally the mandate given to the envoys as they left Egypt for foreign courts in the interests of anti-Assyrian diplomacy. [Quite an assumption, since not a word is said of envoys leaving Egypt for foreign courts, and not a word concerning anti-Assyrian diplomacy!]....

“In its present context, however, it leads into **verse 3**, which is Isaiah’s world-wide message, not Pharaoh’s. We can picture the scene, then, like this: Pharaoh’s envoys reach Jerusalem, and Isaiah takes the opportunity to publicize what he would wish them to say to the world and, clothing himself in all his authority as the Lord’s prophet, sends them on their way as if they were his envoys [we agree that **verse 3** is Isaiah’s message, and that it is intended for all the world; but there is no basis in the text for Motyer’s imaginative picture of the scene—not a mention of Pharaoh’s envoys, or

(continued...)

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<sup>13</sup>(...continued)  
of their reaching Jerusalem]...

“First, he (Isaiah) addresses the whole world...Secondly, he calls the world to wait expectantly for an unmistakable summons—a banner (as **Isaiah 11:10**) a trumpet (compare **Isaiah 27:13**). The visible and the audible combine to give them every opportunity to know what is afoot and to respond (and leaves them without excuse [of course, there is not a word of this in the text!]). Thirdly, he appeals to them [to see and hear].” (P. 162)

Kaiser holds to the identification of this people as the Ethiopians. He states that “Just as Herodotus described the Ethiopians as ‘the tallest and most beautiful people of the world (**Book III, 20** and **114**), the proto-apocalyptic poet [Kaiser’s name for the late post-exilic prophet—not Isaiah] also emphasizes their height and their smooth, hairless skin, though he did not think it worth while to mention that their skins were dark. Once highly regarded as Pharaoh’s mercenaries, they had impressively and lastingly demonstrated their military ability to the Palestinians by the conquest of Egypt under the kings of the twenty-fifth dynasty, which they set up.” (P. 93)

<sup>14</sup>Slotki states that the envoys are called “swift” because of their coming “by the swift skiffs.” (P. 85) Skiffs are “shallow, flat-bottomed open boats with a sharp bow and square stern.”

<sup>15</sup>Slotki states that the nation meant is the Ethiopians. (P. 86) But we think the text is clearly speaking about a nation “beyond the rivers of Cush / Ethiopia.”

<sup>16</sup>Slotki’s translation of the phrase גוי מְמוֹשָׁךְ וּבְזוּרָט [our “tall and bare-skinned”] is “tall and of glossy skin,” but Slotki notes that the Hebrew is literally “drawn out and polished.” He comments that “The bronzed appearance of the Ethiopians may account for the description in the text. Others regard the phrase as denoting beauty, and point out that the full description well fits the modern Nubians of the Sudan who are to the present day both tall and handsome.” (P. 86)

Gray refers to **Herodotus 3.20** which describes the Ethiopians as “the tallest and most beautiful of men,” and he adds that “There is no reason why the Hebrews should not have admired the burnished copper color of the Ethiopians, for even **Jeremiah 13:23** [‘Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopards his spots?'] need not be interpreted as though the ancient Hebrew shared the modern white man’s objection to color.” (P. 312)

For a **Wikipedia** article on the Nubian people, see our end-note 2. We think the text is referring to people further to the south than the Nubians—the Cushites, or Ethiopians, to the south of Nubia or Sudan, to a people “beyond the rivers of Cush /

(continued...)

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<sup>16</sup>(...continued)

Ethiopia,” i.e., unknown, unnamed people of Africa.

Alexander states that these epithets or descriptive phrase “are applied by some to the Jews, and supposed to be descriptive of their degraded and oppressed condition. Gesenius and others apply them to the Ethiopians, and make them descriptive of their warlike qualities.”

He states that מְּמֹשֶׁשׁ, **memushshak**, according to usage, means drawn or drawn out, which is applied by some to the shape of the country, by others to the numbers engaged in foreign war, by [Rahlfs] and Hitzig to the stature of the people...

“מֹרֵט, for מְּמֹרֵט [this is the actual spelling in 1QIs<sup>a</sup>, with the *waw* written in above the line] properly denotes shorn or shaven, and is applied by some to the Ethiopian and Egyptian practice of shaving the head and beard, while others understand it as a figure for robbery and spoliation [taking property by illegal or unethical means]. Some understand it to mean smoothed or smooth, and by implication beautiful. Others apply it to the character, and take it in the sense of brave or fierce [how ambiguous, puzzling!]

“מִן־הוּא [‘from / beyond him / himself / it’] is by some applied to time from the first and hitherto, from the earliest time, from this time; by others to place, from this place and onward. In favor of applying it to time, are the analogous expressions in **1 Samuel 18:9**, while **1 Samuel 20:22** justifies the last sense [again, how ambiguous]...

“קו־קו־ is explained by Clericus to be the proper name of the Egyptian plant called *kiki*. Most writers take it in its usual sense of ‘line,’ i.e. as some suppose, a rule or precept, the people being described as burdened with superstitious rites; according to others, a measuring line, meted or meting out others to destruction; according to a third class, a boundary line, enlarging its boundaries. Some make it mean *on every side*, and other *by degrees*, in both cases qualifying that which follows. But the latest German writers [in the mid-nineteenth century] make the word identical with [an Arabic word] meaning power, the reduplication signifying double strength [again, how ambiguous]...

“מְּבוֹסֵה must then have an active sense, a people of trampling, i.e. trampling on their enemies. Those who apply the description to the Jews give the word of course a passive sense, a people trampled on by their oppressors [again, how ambiguous]...

“By rivers, in the last clause, some suppose nations to be meant, or the Assyrians in particular; but most writers understand it literally as a description of the country [again, how ambiguous]...

(continued...)

to a people more fearsome / awesome<sup>17</sup> than he, and further,<sup>18</sup>  
a mighty nation, and down-treading,<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>(...continued)

“**בזא** is explained by the Rabbins as a synonym of **בזז**, to spoil or plunder, and a few [Hebrew] manuscripts read **בזזו**. Others give the verb the sense of nourishing, watering, overflowing, washing away, promising; but the best sense is that of cutting up, cutting through, or simply dividing, in allusion to the abundant irrigation of Ethiopia. Vitringa supposes this clause to refer to the annual overflowing of the Nile, and the one before it to the Egyptian practice of treading the grain into the soil when softened by the inundation.” (Pp. 344-45)

And we ask, Is there another verse in the entire **Bible**, so filled with ambiguities, leading to so many differing interpretations? How can any serious student of the text be dogmatic concerning the verse’s meaning? And again we ask, How can anyone hold that the **Bible’s** message is simple and clear, not in need of careful translation and interpretation? In any other literature, the student would be tempted to give up when faced with such difficulties as this. But in a classical document such as the **Book of Isaiah**, which has such importance for biblical theology, the student must not give up, but continue to struggle to discern the meaning of the text, avoiding easy, simplistic solutions. All of this ambiguity is further evidence of the enigmatic, puzzling nature of the prophetic message!

What do you think? We are deeply grateful to Alexander for his mid-nineteenth century patient in-depth study of the **Book of Isaiah**, in spite of our occasions of disagreement with his interpretations.

<sup>17</sup>**King James** translates **נֹרְאָה** by “terrible,” but other English translations have “feared.” It could be translated “awesome.”

<sup>18</sup>Slotki’s translation of the line **אֶל-עַם נֹרְאָה מִן-הַיּוֹמָה לְאַתָּה** is “To a people terrible from their beginning onward.” Other translations are: “to a nation scattered and peeled,” “a people thrust forth and away,” “to a nation tall and smooth,” and *καὶ ξέρον λαὸν καὶ χαλεπόν*, “and a strange / foreign and fierce people.”

Slotki comments that “Perhaps the meaning is ‘feared from that (place) and onward,’ i.e. near and far; alternatively ‘from that (time it came into being) and onward.’” (P. 86)

What do you think the text means? Is it “clear”? Or is it ambiguous?

<sup>19</sup>This line, **וּמְבוֹסָה וּמְבֹרָה וּמְבֹרָה וּמְבֹרָה**, is given varying translations: “a nation meted out and trodden down,” “A nation of gibber and chatter,” “a nation mighty and

(continued...)

whose country rivers divide / cut through.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>(...continued)

conquering,” “an aggressive nation of strange speech,” “a mighty and masterful nation,”

**Rahfs** has ἔθνος ἀνέλπιστον καὶ καταπεπατημένον, “a nation / people without hope and trodden down.

Slotki’s translation has “a nation that is sturdy and treadeth down,” and he comments that “the Hebrew קָו־קָו, *qaw qaw* is analogous to an Arabic verb which denotes strength.” (P. 86)

We think that instead of “a nation that...treadeth down” the translation should be “a nation that is trodden down.” What do you think? Again we ask, Is the text “clear,” or is it ambiguous?

Gray notes that “קָו־קָו, if the *makkeph* be omitted [קָו־קָו] the [word] *perhaps* means ‘*might*’...Improbable alternatives are ‘(nation of, i.e. using, or subjected to) *measuring line (upon) measuring line*; or (nation of, i.e. given over to) *line (upon) line* (compare **Isaiah 28:10**), i.e. rites and superstitions.” (Pp. 317-18)

Watts states that “קָו means a measuring line. The reduplicated form appears only here (and **verse 7**) in Hebrew. In **Isaiah 28:10** and **13** it seems to be used as a meaningless sound which leads [some commentators] to see it as a designation for a foreign language.” (P. 244)

As we study this passage, and see its greatly varying translations, we have trouble identifying which line is being translated by the English translations, especially in **Tanakh**.

And we are reminded of those who claim that the **Bible** is “simple and clear,” “without need for interpretation,” “only needing faith and obedience.” Such simplistic claims are simply not true. The **Bible** needs careful, scholarly translation and interpretation, combined with humble searching for its meaning and application, with much less dogmatism, but then, of course, willingness to obey the message as we understand it and are convicted of its relevance and truth!

<sup>20</sup>Ethiopia is certainly a country which is “cut through” or “divided” by rivers, but it is not by any means the only country so characterized. So is Egypt; so is Sudan; so are many other countries.

Watts notes that “כָּוַע occurs only here and **verse 7**. **Brown-Driver-Briggs** translates ‘divide,’ ‘cut through’ in dependence on the Syriac...The ancient Versions had

(continued...)

<sup>20</sup>(...continued)

trouble with the word, but offer no good solution.” (P. 244)

<sup>21</sup>Slotki comments on **verse 3** that “The message to be carried by the envoys is intended not only for Ethiopia, but for all the inhabitants of the world.” (P. 86)

Alexander translates and comments on **verse 3**: “*All ye inhabitants of the world, and dwellers on the earth, shall see as it were the raising of a standard on the mountains, and shall hear as it were the blowing of a trumpet.* Another construction, more generally adopted, makes the verbs imperative, and the ׀ a particle of time, as it usually is before the infinitive. So the **English Version**: *see ye when he lifteth up an ensign on the mountains, and when he bloweth a trumpet hear ye.* There seems, however, to be no sufficient reason for departing from the strict translation of the verbs as future [imperfect]; and if this be retained, it is better to make ׀ a particle of comparison. In either case, the verse invites the attention of the world to some great event...

“According to Vitranga, Gesenius, Rosenmueller and Maurer, the signals meant are those of the Assyrian invader, or those announcing his destruction; but according to Doederlein, Hitzig, Hendewerk and Knobel, the signals by means of which the Ethiopians would collect their forces.” (P. 345)

Need we emphasize again the ambiguity of the biblical text?

Kaiser comments that “The inhabitants of all the land in the world are to look when the banner is set up and the signal horn blown...

“The aim of the attack could well be Zion, if the background of the expectation is the tempest of the nations against Jerusalem and the people of God, as would be suggested by **Isaiah 17:12ff.** But it may be that the proto-apocalyptic prophet understood the military signs in a more general sense as indications of the onset of the day of Yahweh, as in **Joel 2:1** (compare also **Isaiah 27:13**)...

“This day is not to come only upon all who are lofty and proud among the people of God (compare **2:1-12ff.**) but also upon their enemies and the nations of the whole earth, to bring a terrifying end upon them and at the same time to prepare the way for the untrammled rule of God over the earth (compare **Isaiah 13:6; Jeremiah 46:10** and **Ezekiel 30:20ff.**)...Thus we may regard this passage as a very early form of the **New Testament** hope of the signs of the end, which according to **Matthew 24:6-7** were also to include wars between the nations.” (P. 94)

But notice how Kaiser has to refer to other passages from different parts of the **Bible** to support this view—none of which is mentioned in the text of **Isaiah 18**. There is

(continued...)

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<sup>21</sup>(...continued)

no mention of an “attack,” or of “Zion.” There is no mention of “the tempest of the nations against Jerusalem and the people of God.” There is nothing said about “military” signs, although sometimes the “signal” and the “ram’s horn” were associated with battle. The text does not mention the “day of Yahweh,” nor is any mention made of “the lofty and proud” or “their enemies.” The text does not say anything about “a terrifying end of the nations.” It does not mention the “untrammelled rule of God over the earth.”

Kaiser is reading all of these ideas into the text of **Isaiah 18**, and we think, unjustifiably so.

There can be little doubt that the raising of a signal, שֵׁנַי, and the sounding of a trumpet oftentimes signify that war and destruction are coming—see for example, **Isaiah 5:26; 13:2; Jeremiah 4:5; 51:27**—but the who and where and when are not indicated in any way by the text, which only calls on all people everywhere to watch and listen.

The noun translated “signal,” שֵׁנַי, while most often used as a signal for war and destruction, is also used with reference to God’s mighty acts of salvation, for example the root of Jesse is called a שֵׁנַי, “signal for the peoples” in **Isaiah 11:10**, pointing them to the place of assembly and rest.

In **Isaiah 49:22** the “signal” is for the return of exiles to their homeland, and in **Isaiah 62:10** the “signal” proclaims the coming of salvation.

A similar observation can be made concerning the blowing of a trumpet—which is commonly used as a signal in war-time (**Job 39:24; Jeremiah 4:5, 19, 21; 6:1, 17; 42:14; 51:27; Hosea 5:8; Joel 2:1; Amos 2:2; 3:6; Zephaniah 1:16**). But the trumpet is also used for the summoning people to observe the fiftieth year of Jubilee (**Leviticus 25:9**), or for announcing the bringing of the ark of the covenant into Jerusalem (**2 Samuel 6:15; 1 Chronicles 15:28**), or accompanying the worship of YHWH (**Psalms 47:6; 98:6; 150:3**), or announcing the new moon, or a feast day (**Psalms 81:4<sup>Heb</sup> / 3<sup>Eng</sup>**); or as a call to fasting and prayer (**Joel 2:15**).

Thus both the “signal” and the “trumpet,” used here in **Isaiah 18:3**, are ambiguous, and may refer to something other than war.

Again we note that even this verse, which is easily translated and understood in comparison with **verse 2**, has nonetheless been and continues to be interpreted in greatly varying senses, with interpreters attempting to apply it to specific peoples and places and times, whereas the text does not make such applications.

Gray comments on **verse 3** that it is “a warning addressed not in particular to the

(continued...)

## כְּנֹשְׂאֵי־נֶסֶם הָרִים תִּרְאוּ

וְכַתְּקֵעַ שׁוֹפָר תִּשְׁמְעוּ:

All who inhabit (the) world,<sup>22</sup> and those dwelling (in the) earth,

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<sup>21</sup>(...continued)

envoys (**verse 2**) or their countrymen, but to the world at large. Yahweh is about to manifest His might to the nations. When the signals are given, let all men give heed.” (Pp. 312-13)

But we ask, where does the text say the voice is a “warning”? And where does it say anything about “manifesting YHWH’s might”? We say **verse 3** is a call to attention, an announcement that a signal will be given and a trumpet will sound—both of which are important for all the world’s people to pay attention to. And the message is one of great hope, we think—God is preparing a great harvest, and the unnamed people(s) of the farthest end of the earth will be accepted into YHWH’s Zion!

Oswalt comments on **verse 3** that “this verse makes it plain that the ultimate addressees of Isaiah’s message are not merely a royal court somewhere. It is the whole human family which is called to witness the evidence of God’s Lordship. When the signals are given, then the world must be prepared to perceive the evidence which God grants...that He is indeed at work.” (P. 361)

And we say, how much better could it be shown that the whole human family is intended as the recipient of this message, than to have the message directed to and spoken by the unnamed, unknown people of central Africa, “beyond the rivers of Cush / Ethiopia”?

<sup>22</sup>The noun תִּבְלָל, “world,” has a much broader view in mind than אֶרֶץ, “earth,” “land.” It is used in **Isaiah** to mean the whole world. See the following “universal” statements:

**Isaiah 13:11**, where YHWH is depicted as saying, “I will punish the world for its evil.”

**Isaiah 14:17**, where the dead in sheol say to the fallen king of Babylon, “Are you the man...who made the world like a desert?”

**Isaiah 14:21**, where it is commanded to “Prepare slaughter for all the fallen king’s sons, lest they fill the face of the world with cities.”

**Isaiah 18:3**, (here), the addressee is “all you inhabitants of the world.”

(continued...)

when a signal is raised (on the) mountains, look!

And when a ram's horn is blown, listen!<sup>23</sup>

18:4<sup>24</sup> כִּי לֵאמֹר יְהוָה אֵלַי

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<sup>22</sup>(...continued)

**Isaiah 24:4**, “the world languishes and withers”;

**Isaiah 26:9**, “when Your (YHWH’s) judgments are in the earth, the inhabitants of the world learn righteousness.”

**Isaiah 26:18**, “the inhabitants of the world have not fallen”;

**Isaiah 27:6**, “In days to come, Jacob / Israel...will fill the whole world with fruit.”

**Isaiah 34:1**, the world, and all that comes from it is called to hear!

<sup>23</sup>Slotki comments that the metaphors of an ensign being lifted up and of a horn being blown are “metaphors to express the idea that God will announce the fall of Assyria in some miraculous way so that all the world will know of it.” (P. 86)

We say, The exhortation of the verse is for earth’s citizens to pay attention to the Divine signs that YHWH will give to humanity in its history. But exactly what the signals are announcing, is not made clear by the text. The author of the text affirms that YHWH is at work in human history, and he calls upon the entire world to watch for signs and sounds of the Divine action.

But it is not possible for human beings to say what that action is going to be before it happens—their responsibility is to watch for the signals, not to attempt to “put God in a box,” as Job’s friends did, saying what His actions must be—which is what comments such as Slotki’s and others seek to do.

<sup>24</sup>Motyer entitles **verses 4-7** “The Lord’s patience and precisely timed intervention.”

He comments that “The opening ‘For’...introduces Isaiah’s explanation of the message he has put in the envoy’s mouths. He has had a word from the Lord (*This is what the Lord says to me*) which makes it more appropriate to wait for Him to act than to engage in a flurry of diplomacy.” (P. 162)

But where in the text is anything said about “a flurry of diplomacy”? Motyer is reading this into the text.

Slotki comments that **verses 4-6** contain “The revelation on which the assurance of the prophet in his message to the ambassadors is based.” (P. 86)

Alexander translates / comments on **verse 4**: “*For thus said (or saith) Jehovah to me, I will rest (remain quiet) and will look on (as a mere spectator) in my dwelling-*

(continued...)

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<sup>24</sup>(...continued)

*place, like a serene heat upon herbs, like a cloud of dew (or dewy cloud), in the heat of harvest (i.e. the heat preceding harvest, or the heat by which the crop is ripened)...*

“This verse assigns a reason for the preceding invitation to attend [listen, watch]. The obvious meaning of the figure is, that God would let the enemy proceed in the execution of his purpose until they were nearly accomplished...The meaning seems to be, that He would not only abstain from interfering with the enemy, but would even favor his success to a certain point, as dew and sunshine would promote the growth of plants.” (P. 345)

But we ask, Where does the text mention an enemy proceeding with his purposes? No doubt the text can be interpreted and understood in this way—as both Slotki and Alexander do, but they are reading this into the text, rather than finding it there.

The metaphor of waiting for the harvest, and the necessity for pruning before the harvest comes, can be applied to numerous situations—not necessarily to Assyria’s plans. Compare **John 15:1-8**, where Jesus applies the metaphor of the vine and its pruning to his followers.

Gray comments on **verse 4** as follows: “Go away. We need no human alliance; for Yahweh has assured me of His purpose. He is sufficient.” (P. 313)

This is indeed an example of “reading between the lines.” Nothing like this is said in the text!

Oswalt comments on **verse 4**: “Isaiah now shares the word which has come to him. When the flag is raised and the trumpet sounds, what mighty acts will God perform? The answer will be disappointing to those who always expect God to do the stupendous and overwhelming. As in Elijah’s ‘still small voice’ (**1 Kings 19:12**), the Lord asserts that His work will be quiet and unassuming, but nevertheless complete...

“From one point of view, **verse 4** comes as a surprise. Swift messengers are summoned and sent to a mighty people. The world is called to hold itself in readiness. The suspense mounts. What cataclysm is going to be unleashed [where in the text is anything said about a ‘cataclysm being unleashed’]? The truth is that the quiet look of the Sovereign is of greater importance than the mightiest of the world’s armies (**Psalms 2:1-4; 33:13-17; 80:14; Lamentations 5:1; Isaiah 63:15**). For to Him do do nothing (שָׁקֵט, ‘sit quietly’) but merely look on is of greater significance than all the deliberations in all the world’s chancelleries. But like the quiet heat which builds until it is almost unbearable by mid-afternoon, or the curtains of mist which drift up the valleys from the coast, God makes His presence known and felt.” (P. 362)

(continued...)

(אֲשַׁקוּטָה) [אֲשַׁקְטָה] וְאֶבִּיטָה בְּמִכּוֹנֵי  
כָּחֶם צֶחַ עָלַי-אֹר  
כְּעַב טַל בְּחָם קִצִּיר:

Because in this way YHWH spoke to me:

I will be quiet,<sup>25</sup> and I will look<sup>26</sup> from my abode,<sup>27</sup>

<sup>24</sup>(...continued)

Motyer comments on **verse 4** that “The Lord watches, unobserved, ‘like the glowing heat that comes with light, like the dew-cloud in the heat of harvest.’ As naturally and inevitably as there is heat with light and dew in harvest so the Lord is present, unobserved, remaining *quiet*. He watches, not *from* but ‘*in My dwelling*,’ for He

is not only the transcendent God in heaven but the present God in the affairs of earth. But *heat* and *dew* are not just incidental to harvest, they are actual contributory factors in the ripening [Yes!]. Thus, the Lord is more than a Watcher; He presides over the process.” (P. 162)

Watts states that “The solo voice that speaks in the first person [in **verse 4**] requires identification. Similar passages occur in **21:2-4, 6, 10** and in **22:14**. The last instance is identified by the succeeding verse to be Shebna. Hezekiah’s prime minister who is undoubtedly the designer of Judah’s foreign policy throughout this period...

“The solo passages in the first person, not otherwise identified from **18:4** through **chapter 22**, are assigned to Shebna.” (P. 246)

But we ask, Assigned by whom? There is nothing in the text to identify the voice speaking, and we think it is precarious to think that a statement made by Shebna four chapters later means this statement can be assigned to Shebna likewise.

<sup>25</sup>The Masoretes offer two readings: first, the *kethibh*, “what is written,” אֲשַׁקוּטָה, “I will be quiet”; and second, the *qere*, “to be read,” אֲשַׁקְטָה, with the same meaning. The only difference is in the pointing.

<sup>26</sup>Slotki holds that the two phrases should be combined, “I will quietly look on.” (P. 86)

Gray likewise states that in the text’s “*I will be quiet and look forth*,” “the two verbs might be freely rendered *untroubled I will watch*.”

He adds that “The clause expresses not unconcerned inactivity, but observation

(continued...)

like heat glowing upon sun-light,<sup>28</sup>

like a cloud of dew in (the) heat<sup>29</sup> of harvest.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup>(...continued)

free from anxiety as to the issue...The verb **הִבִּיט**, *look forth*, is used of the Divine observation of the world and its inhabitants and needs; so **Psalms 33:13-14; 80:15; Lamentations 5:1; Isaiah 63:15**. The world may be in turmoil, but Yahweh

undisturbed keeps watch, in readiness for action in His sure abode which cannot be shaken.” (P. 313)

<sup>27</sup>Slotki states that “My dwelling-place” means Jerusalem. (P. 86)

We think it more probably refers to God’s “heavenly dwelling-place,” from which He observes all peoples on the earth below. See **Psalms 14:2; 33:13; 53:2; 113:6** and **Lamentations 3:50**. But the text does not make the reference clear.

Gray comments that “The term **מִכּוֹן** is significant, and is inadequately represented by *dwelling-place*...It is a place which is firmly fixed, which endures and cannot be shaken.” (P. 313) **Brown-Driver-Briggs** defines **מִכּוֹן** as “fixed or established place, foundation.”

<sup>28</sup>Gray translates this line by “Like the dazzling heat above the light,” and states that “this line contains, like the next, a comparison rather than, as many have supposed, a note of time...But neither the translation nor the point of comparison is free from ambiguity.” (P. 313)

Yes...it is the very nature of the prophetic message to be ambiguous, puzzling.

<sup>29</sup>Watts notes that the Hebrew “**בְּהַיָּט**” means ‘in (the) heat of.’ [But **Rahfs**], Syriac and Latin Vulgate have apparently read **בְּיוֹם** ‘in the day of.’” (P. 245)

<sup>30</sup>Slotki comments on the last two lines in this verse that “As the heat and the dew mysteriously and slowly but steadily and surely ripen the crops, so will God’s purposes against Assyria silently mature and manifestly come to fruition.” (P. 86)

Perhaps...but we think the two lines are depicting YHWH’s quiet observance of earth’s activities from His heavenly dwelling-place, which is compared to the sunshine with its heat and the dew hidden within a cloud—mysterious, quiet, penetrating and inescapably accomplishing their work. And we ask, where is anything said in this text concerning “God’s purposes against Assyria”? Is not Slotki reading all of this into the text? We say, Perhaps...but the text does not make it explicit.

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<sup>30</sup>(...continued)

Gray translates by “*Like a cloud of night-mist,*” and states that it is a comparison from the night, as was the last from the day...The night mist, or rain, which is an invaluable feature of the hot season from May, and especially from August, to October [in Palestine]. The westerly winds bring much moisture from the Mediterranean, and this condenses under the action of the cool night air into something like a Scotch mist...To the Hebrews this moisture, which might be sufficient to drench the hair of those out in it (**Song of Solomon 5:2**), seemed to descend from heaven...by night... What, then is the point of the comparison? Do the figures enforce the stillness, or the watchfulness, or the fostering care of Yahweh?

(1) Dillmann remarks [that] just as in the harvest season, glowing heat by day and heavy dew by night, both necessary for the ripening of the crops, continue constant over the country, so will God remain unmoved, undisturbed, though still ripening the plans of the Assyrians [but where is anything said about the plans of the Assyrians?]

(2) Marti sees in the glowing motionless heat, and in the lofty clouds driven by no wind, out of sight but pouring down the dew in harvest, altogether admirable figures for the unseen but all-seeing God, exalted far above all that is human, undisturbed by the movement of the world, but carrying through His will. Like heat and dew-cloud, Yahweh can remain quiet while events in Asia excite the famous, powerful, and distant people of Ethiopia; even so should Yahweh’s people remain quiet, confiding in Him. More than this is not told the Ethiopians, nor needs to be said to the Jews, who should know that in quietness lies their deliverance (**Isaiah 7:4-9; 28:7; 30:15**).” (Pp. 314-15)

Both Dillmann and Marti read these matters of “the plans of the Assyrians” and “events in Asia” into the text, which in fact does not mention them, but only speaks of the coming of the harvest following the pruning of the vines. And in fact, the imagery, while highly suggestive, can be interpreted in many differing ways, again demonstrating the enigmatic, puzzling nature of the prophetic message.

Kaiser states that in **verses 5-6**, “The next image, a paraphrase for the right moment for the destruction of the Ethiopians [but the text does not mention the destruction of the Ethiopians, or anyone else!], may have been suggested by the ‘Song of the Vineyard’ (**5:1ff.**)...”

“In Palestine the vines flower in May. The grapes begin to ripen in August. September is the normal month for gathering them. At the first pruning before the flowers bloom the bunches which did not bear any fruit in the previous year are removed...At the second pruning, after flowering and when the fruit is setting, the shoots and leaves which cover the grapes are cut away to increase the yield...”

“In view of the lack of heating material in Palestine it is usual to dry the shoots that have been cut off and to use them for fires. [Kaiser is getting this information from Dalman, **Arbeit und Sitte in Paelastina** IV, pp. 330-31]...”

(continued...)

<sup>30</sup>(...continued)

“Just as the farmer knows when he has to take up his pruning hook and cut the surplus shoots off, Yahweh knows when the hour has come for the visitation of the nations and therefore of the Ethiopians [but there is not a word in the text about the visitation of the nations or of the Ethiopians!]...

“It is difficult to tell how far the interpretation of the final element in the metaphor should be pressed, the abandonment of the pruned shoots to the birds of prey as a summer dwelling and the beasts of the earth as a winter dwelling...An interpretation which takes into account the grapes which remain and ripen on the vine is not possible in the case of this image, which is concerned only with the fate of the surplus growth.” (Pp. 95-96)

We think the imagery of the grape-vine, and the [Divine] pruning of the vine at the proper time, leads to the view that God is preparing a bountiful vintage / harvest among the nations of the earth. Kaiser and others hold that **verse 7** was not an original part of the poem—but the poem, as it has come down to us, includes **verse 7**, and it depicts the kind of vintage / harvest that is being grown—the coming of that unknown, farthest-off people(s) / nation(s) of the world, coming with their offering(s) to YHWH in Mount Zion! (Compare **Isaiah 2:2-5; 45:14; 60:3-4; 66:18-21** and **Zephaniah 3:8-10**.)

What do you think the prophetic message intends by this imagery?

<sup>31</sup>Alexander translates **verse 5**: “*For before the harvest, as the bloom is finished, and the flower becomes a ripening grape, he cuts down the branches with the pruning knives, and the tendrils he removes, he cuts away.*”

He comments that “The obvious meaning of the figure is, that although God would suffer the designs of the enemy to approach completion, He would nevertheless interfere at the last moment, and destroy both him and them...As if he had said, let all the world await the great catastrophe—for I will let the enemy almost attain his end—but let them still attend—for before it is attained, I will destroy him.” (P. 346)

Perhaps...but where in the text is there mention of “the enemy,” or “the great catastrophe”? We see in the text the metaphor of a farmer, representing God, quietly awaiting the harvest, and before the harvest, pruning the vine, and getting rid of the pruned branches and twigs, which will belong to the birds and wild animals to use as their habitat in both summer and winter, but the vine is not depicted at an “enemy”—rather it is the source of a rich harvest, having been made richer by the pruning, a harvest depicted in **verse 7** as the bringing of tribute to God by this unnamed foreign nation / people.

Gray states that “if **verse 2** is the courteous refusal on the part of the Jews of help from Ethiopia [nothing is said in **verse 2** about the Jews or about a refusal of help

(continued...)

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<sup>31</sup>(...continued)

from Ethiopia!], **verses 5-6** are best regarded as a prediction of the overthrow of the Assyrians. Still this interpretation is anything but obvious.” (P. 308) We agree.

Again, Gray comments that if **verse 5** is connected to **verse 4**, “the line of thought must be somewhat as follows: Yahweh quietly watches (**verse 4**) the ripening vintage of the Assyrian plans, because He has determined just before the crop is ripe to slash the vine to pieces (**verse 5**), i.e. (**verse 6**) Yahweh permits the advance of the Assyrians, but just as they expect to gain the object of their invasion He will destroy them. One and all will lie unburied in the land they have invaded. Compare **17:12-14; 14:24-27; 37:36-37.**” (P. 315)

All of this application to the Assyrian plans, their advance, and then their destruction, is being read from these passages Gray refers to, and imported into **Isaiah 18**, which does not have not one hint of them. And it is ridiculous, we think, to call the pruning of the vine “slashing the vine to pieces”!

No, what Gray said earlier is true; his interpretation is anything but obvious! The fact is that there is nothing said in these verses about the “overthrow of the Assyrians,” or of their being “slashed to pieces”! And we ask, Is that the proper or realistic way to envision “pruning a grape-vine,” “slashing it to pieces”?

Oswalt comments on **verse 5** that “God will carefully watch the situation developing on the earth and then, like the farmer who prunes back his vines, God will cut off the luxuriant foliage and leave it. The image here refers to the practice of cutting off those tendrils and leaves which are not bearing fruit and would thus take sustenance from those that are. Like the farmer, God will not act too soon or too late. Once the fruit is formed and there is no doubt, God’s pruning knife will go into action.” We agree with Oswalt thus far, and emphasize that the depiction is that of God’s making sure that a great harvest will follow.

But Oswalt goes on to say, “The historical circumstance which comes most quickly to mind is that of Sennacherib’s attack upon Judea. At the last moment, when the conclusion seemed foregone, God quietly put in His knife and the Assyrian tendrils lay on the ground, cut off.” (P. 362) Yes, those images have come to Oswalt’s mind, but the text says nothing of Sennacherib or his attack on Judea.

In terms of the pruning imagery, the pruning did not come “at the last moment,” i.e., the harvest, but some time before the last moment, allowing time for the grapes to fully develop and mature, enabling a bountiful vintage / harvest to occur. There is no mention of the sudden destruction of an enemy in the text—only the slight indication that can be found in the mention birds of prey coming upon the results of the pruning, the twigs and the branches which have been discarded, but nothing is said of them devouring the twigs and branches. We think the birds of prey would better serve as figures for the invading Assyrians; and we also note that birds of prey have to build

(continued...)

כֶּתֶם־פֶּרֶחַ  
 וּבֶסֶר גָּמֵל  
 יִהְיֶה נֹצֵה  
 וְכָרַת הַזְּלִזְלִים בַּמַּזְמֵרוֹת  
 וְאֶת־הַנְּטִישׁוֹת הַסִּיר הַתּוֹ:

Because, before harvest,<sup>32</sup>  
 when a bud is finished,  
 and a sour grape ripens<sup>33</sup>  
 there will be a blossom,  
 and he will cut off the shoots with the pruning knife,

<sup>31</sup>(...continued)  
 nests out of whatever materials are available, just as do other birds.

<sup>32</sup>Watts notes that “קִצִּיר” means ‘grain harvest’ which comes in early summer... The harvest of grain occurs at the same time that the work in the vineyards must be done.” (P. 245) But we think the word is used for any kind of harvest, whether of grain or of grapes, as it obviously, in our opinion, being used here.

Slotki comments that here in **verse 5** “The metaphor of the preceding verse is continued; but the *harvest* here symbolizes Assyria’s hope of conquest which will be suddenly frustrated, for *He will cut off*, etc.” (Pp. 86-87)

We say, the harvest will surely come—but it will be YHWH’s harvest, made more plentiful by YHWH’s pruning of the vine—and it is not depicting Assyria’s harvest! We ask, Where in this chapter is Assyria so much as mentioned?

<sup>33</sup>Gray comments that “the בֶּסֶר [boser] is a fully formed but immature and sour grape, as the use of the term in the proverb (**Jeremiah 31:29a**) sufficiently shows.” (P. 315)

### Jeremiah 31:29,

In those days, they will not say again,  
 Fathers ate [בֶּסֶר] unripe / sour grape(s),  
 and (the) teeth of children / sons will be blunted / numbed!

and the twigs he turned aside, he struck away.<sup>34</sup>

18:6<sup>35</sup> יֵעֲזְבוּ יַחֲדוֹ לְעֵיט הַרִים

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<sup>34</sup>This last line of **verse 5** is given varying translations:

**King James**, “and take away *and* cut down the branches.”

**Tanakh**, “And lop off the trailing branches.”

**New Revised Standard**, “and the spreading branches he will hew away.”

**New International**, “and cut down and take away the spreading branches.”

**New Jerusalem**, “and the shoots taken off, cut away.”

**Rahfs**, καὶ τὰς κληματίδας ἀφελεῖ καὶ κατακόψει, “and the brushwood (?) he will take away and will cut off.” **NETS** has “and take away the small branches and cut them off.”

<sup>35</sup>Slotki comments on **verse 6** that “The metaphor is now dropped, and the fate of the invading host is described in all its stark terror.” (P. 87)

Gray likewise states, “The invaders will fall in such numbers that carrion birds [buzzards, vultures, etc.] and beasts will feed on them year in and year out; compare **Ezekiel 39:11-15**.” (P. 315)

And we ask, Where in this chapter is “an invading host” so much as mentioned? We think Slotki and Gray (along with others) have allowed their imaginations to interpret this chapter!

**Rahfs**, instead of translating the Hebrew phrase לְעֵיט הַרִים, literally “to bird(s) of prey of mountains,” has τοῖς πετεινοῖς τοῦ οὐρανοῦ, “to the birds of the heaven,” which has no specific suggestion of “carrion birds,” but could include them, as **1 Samuel 17:44-46** and **Jeremiah 7:33** demonstrate.

Alexander translates / comments on **verse 6**: “*They shall be left together to the wild birds of the mountains, and to the wild beasts of the earth (or land), and the wild bird shall summer thereon, and every wild beast of the earth (or land) thereon shall winter...*”

“It is commonly supposed that there is here a transition from the figure of a vineyard to that of a dead body, the branches cut off and thrown away being suddenly transformed into carcasses devoured by beasts and birds...But this interpretation, though perhaps the most natural, is not absolutely necessary. As the act of devouring is not expressly mentioned, the reference may be, not to the carnivorous habits of the animals, but to their wild and solitary life. In that case, the sense would be, that the amputated branches, and the desolated vineyard itself [where is anything said about a ‘desolated vineyard’?] shall furnish lairs and nests for beasts and birds...”

“The general meaning of the verse is obvious...Beasts and birds shall occupy the spot [? We say, the pruned branches and twigs] throughout the year. According to the

(continued...)

וּלְבַהֲמַת הָאָרֶץ  
 וּקְזַן עָלָיו הָעֵיט  
 וְכָל-בַּהֲמַת הָאָרֶץ עָלָיו תִּחְרָף:

They<sup>36</sup> shall be left to bird(s) of prey<sup>37</sup> of the mountains,

<sup>35</sup>(...continued)

common explanation of the verse as referring to dead bodies, it is a hyperbolic description of their multitude, as furnishing repast [feast] for a whole year to the beasts and birds of prey.” (P. 346)

Oswalt comments on **verse 6**: “This verse picks up the thought of **verse 5** with its cut-off tendrils, but moves to a more literal figure and pictures the corpses of the enemy strewn over the whole countryside (compare **Ezekiel 39:11-16** for the same imagery). God has produced a victory no human army could achieve. The vultures and the wild animals have a year-round feast on the fallen. Undoubtedly this is an accurate prediction of this situation after Sennacherib’s hasty departure. The burial of 185,000 corpses would have been a monumental task, leaving ample time for the carrion eaters to make their contribution.” (Pp. 362-63)

<sup>36</sup>Slotki states that the “they” means “the corpses of the Assyrian warriors lying before the walls of Jerusalem.” (P. 87)

And we ask, Where in this chapter is anything said about “the corpses of the Assyrian warriors”? And where is anything said about “the wall of Jerusalem”? The use of “bird of prey” might possibly indicate the feeding of such birds on corpses, but that is the only possible indication of such an understanding.

<sup>37</sup>The noun used here is עֵיט, defined by **Brown-Driver-Briggs** as meaning “a bird of prey,” also known as raptors, birds that hunt and feed on other animals.

“The term “raptor” is derived from the Latin word *rapere* (meaning to seize or take by force). These birds are characterized by keen vision that allows them to detect prey during flight, and powerful talons and beaks.

“Many species of birds may be considered partly or exclusively predatory. However, in ornithology, the term “bird of prey” taken literally...has a wide meaning that includes many birds that hunt and feed on animals and also birds that eat very small insects. In ornithology, the definition for ‘bird of prey’ has a narrower meaning: birds that have very good eyesight for finding food, strong feet for holding food, and a strong curved beak for tearing flesh. Most birds of prey also have strong curved talons for catching or killing prey...

(continued...)

and to animals of the earth;  
 and the bird(s) will summer on it,  
 and every animal of the earth will spend the harvest-time on it!<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup>(...continued)

“An example of this difference in definition, the narrower definition excludes storks and gulls, which can eat quite large fish, partly because these birds catch and kill prey entirely with their beaks, and similarly bird-eating skuas, fish-eating penguins, and vertebrate-eating kookaburras are excluded. Birds of prey generally prey on vertebrates, which are usually quite large relative to the size of the bird. Most also eat carrion, at least occasionally, and vultures and condors eat carrion as their main food source...

:Many raptor species are considered apex predators. Most birds of prey are avivores that feed on other birds. (With the exception of scavengers and osprey.) Avian avivores are beneficial to humans due to prey on Avian pests and rabbits that are harmful pests to humans.” **Wikipedia**, 9/1/2016)

With the use of this word, the view of Slotki and Gray and Oswalt (along with many others) makes sense, inclining us to think of the verse as depicting the devouring of human bodies killed in battle. But birds of prey have to make nests, as also do wild animals—and the verse makes much better sense in its context to take it as describing the birds of prey and the wild animals building their nests and lairs out of the twigs and branches that were pruned from the grape-vine, since there is no mention of devouring of corpses.

<sup>38</sup>The last two lines of **verse 6** have to do with what happens to the twigs and branches that have been pruned from the grape-vine, preparing for the harvest, and that have been left for the birds and wild animals:

Hebrew:

וְקִץ עֲלֵיוֹ הָעֵיט  
 וְכָל-בְּהֵמַת הָאָרֶץ עֲלֵיו תַחֲרֹף:

And the bird(s) of prey will summer upon it (3<sup>rd</sup> person masculine singular),  
 and every animal of the earth upon it (3<sup>rd</sup> person masculine singular) will spend the harvest-time.

(Does this mean the birds of prey and the animals will eat the twigs and branches both in the summer and in the fall / harvest-time? We say, Hardly! Rather, it must mean they will use the discarded twigs and branches to build their nests and lairs both in the summer-time, and in the later season, fall, or winter, for lying upon. Our English translations all have “summer and winter on them,” except for **New International**, which interpolates the phrase, “will feed on them” with reference to the birds, and implies the same thing for the animals.

(continued...)

<sup>38</sup>(...continued)

But would either birds of prey or carnivorous animals eat twigs and branches?  
We think not. Rather, while they could well use them for building nests and lairs,  
they would never eat them!)

Greek:

καὶ συναχθήσεται ἐπ’ αὐτοὺς τὰ πετεινὰ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ  
καὶ πάντα τὰ θηρία τῆς γῆς ἐπ’ αὐτὸν ἥξει

And the birds of the heaven will be gathered together upon them,  
and all the wild animals of the earth upon it will come.

(The Greek word for birds [πετεινά] is the general word for birds, whether wild or domestic; the word for animals [θηρία] implies “wild animals.” There is nothing in the Greek that implies eating—only coming together upon them [the birds] and coming upon it [the wild animals].

Motyer comments that “Taking **verses 5** and **6** together, it is clear that the harvest which the Lord reaps and then leaves for the birds and beasts is that which the implied earth rulers intended to reap for themselves. They have watched their plans maturing but just as they reached out for the sickle to reap their reward, the Divine hand preceded them—the sudden act of the real world Ruler (compare **17:12-14**). This was perfectly illustrated in Sennacherib.” (P. 162)

This is, we think, mistaken. The picture is not of the Lord reaping a harvest and then leaving it for the birds and beasts. Rather, it is the picture of the Lord pruning the grape-vine some time before the harvest, enabling the vine to be more productive in the coming harvest. What the Lord leaves for the birds and beasts is the pruned-off twigs and branches, not the mature grapes of harvest-time! This is not at all an allegory for the destruction of Sennacherib’s troops; rather, it is a metaphor for the Divine harvest that YHWH is enabling for all peoples and nations!

<sup>39</sup>Slotki entitles **verse 7** “Epilogue.” He comments that “In the wonderful acts here described, Ethiopia will recognize God’s supreme power, and in homage will send envoys with gifts to the Lord of Hosts Whose earthly dwelling-place is in Zion.” (P. 87)

But in fact “Ethiopia” is not mentioned, nor are “envoys.” We say the people / nation being mentioned is the same unnamed people / nation of **verse 2**, to whom messengers are sent—and this means the far off, unknown people(s) / nation(s) of Africa—that is, those that are beyond the rivers of Cush / Ethiopia.

Alexander translates / comments on **verse 7**: “At that time shall be brought a gift to Jehovah of hosts, a people drawn out and shorn, and from a people terrible since it

(continued...)

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<sup>39</sup>(...continued)

*has been and onward (or still more terrible and still farther off), a nation of double power and trampling, whose land streams divide, to the place of the name of Jehovah of hosts, mount Zion...*

“Here, as in **verse 2** [see our footnote 16], the sense of some particular expressions is so doubtful, that it seems better to retain, as far as possible, the form of the original, with all its ambiguity, than to attempt an explanatory paraphrase...

“All are agreed that we have here the prediction of an act of homage to Jehovah, occasioned by the great event described in the preceding verses [the metaphor of an awaited harvest, with pruning of the vine before the harvest]...

“The Jews, who understand the second verse as a description of the sufferings endured by Israel, explain this as a prophecy of their return from exile and dispersion, aided, and as it were presented as an offering to Jehovah, by the heathen (see **Isaiah 66:20** [‘And they [the nations] shall bring all your brothers from all the nations as an offering to YHWH’]...

“The older Christian writers understand it as predicting the conversion of the Egyptians or Ethiopians to the true religion...Whoever, says Gesenius, is fond of tracing the fulfilment of such prophecies in later history, may find this one verified in...the fact that Abyssinia is at this day [mid-19th century] the only great Christian power of the East...Gesenius himself, with the other recent Germans, understands the verse as describing a solemn contemporary recognition of Jehovah’s power and Divinity, as displayed in the slaughter of Sennacherib’s army...

“The most natural construction of the words would seem to be that the gift to Jehovah should consist of one people offered by another [that does not seem natural to us!...]...If another, it may be Ethiopia as distinguished from Egypt, or Meroe as distinguished from Ethiopia. If the same, it may be either Egypt, or more probably the kingdom of Tirhakah, including Ethiopia and Upper Egypt.” (P. 347)

Gray calls **verse 7** “A prose appendix, probably added to the poem by a later hand.” According to him, it means that “In the age to come the people described in **verse 2d-g** will bring tribute to Yahweh in Zion; compare **Psalms 68:30<sup>Heb</sup> / 29<sup>Eng</sup>; 72:10; 76:11<sup>Heb</sup> / 12<sup>Eng</sup>** and **Zephaniah 3:10.**” (P. 316)

For us, neither the Jewish interpretation nor that of the Christian writers is found in the text, which says nothing of Israel’s exile and dispersion, or their being presented as an offering to YHWH, and which says nothing of the slaughter of an army; nor does it make any distinctions between Ethiopia, Meroe, and Egypt.

We say the text depicts a gift (perhaps another nation / people) being brought to YHWH by this mysterious, unnamed nation / people, symbolizing the universal nature of YHWH’s outreach to and acceptance of humanity in His heavenly Zion—a hope that

(continued...)

עִם מְמוֹשֵׁף וּמִזֹּרֵט  
 וַיַּעַם נֹרָא מִן־הוּא וְהִלְאָה  
 נְוִיָּא קוֹ־קוּ וּמְבוֹסָה  
 אֲשֶׁר בְּזָאוּ נְהָרִים אֶרְצוֹ  
 אֶל־מְקוֹם שֵׁם־יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת  
 הַר־צִיּוֹן:

At that time,<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup>(...continued)

goes far beyond Jewish nationalism, and is further elaborated on in **Isaiah 19:18-22**.

What do you think?

Oswalt states that “The poem ends with a different kind of embassy in view than the one with which it began (Skinner). Instead of incitement to revolt by envoys from the Ethiopian king of Egypt, incitement for Judah to take its destiny into its own hand, Isaiah envisions a day when that mighty imaginary people who sum up all the world’s

power will come to Jerusalem bearing homage to her God, Who is truly mightiest in the world (**Isaiah 2:1-4**).” (P. 363) We agree! What do you think?

<sup>40</sup>Slotki states that this phrase means “when the predicted events will have come to pass.” (P. 87)

Watts translates the phrase by “In such a time,” and states that it “most appropriately refers to the events envisioned in **verses 3-6** and planned for in **verses 1-2** to take place, that is, when Ethiopia and Assyria begin their campaign against lower Egypt.” (P. 246)

But this whole idea of Ethiopia and Assyria beginning a campaign against lower Egypt has been read into the chapter, which makes no mention of such activities. We think that Watts has not taken the language of the text seriously.

See footnote 47 for further discussion of the phrase “at that time.”

a gift<sup>41</sup> will be brought to the YHWH of Armies--  
 a people<sup>42</sup> tall and smooth,<sup>43</sup>  
 and from a people more fearsome / awesome than he and further--<sup>44</sup>  
 a mighty nation and down-treading,<sup>45</sup>  
 whose land rivers cut through / divide--<sup>46</sup>

<sup>41</sup>The Hebrew word for “gift” is the rare word שִׁי, “a gift offered in homage” (Brown-Driver-Briggs), which occurs here in **Isaiah 18:7**, and then elsewhere only at:

**Psalm 68:30**<sup>Heb</sup> / **29**<sup>Eng</sup>

מֵהִיכָלְךָ עַל־יְרוּשָׁלַם  
 לְךָ יִבְיִלּוּ מַלְכִים שִׁי:  
 From Your temple, over Jerusalem--  
 to You kings will bear gift(s).

**Psalm 76:12**<sup>Heb</sup> / **11**<sup>Eng</sup>

נִדְרֵי וְשִׁלְמוֹ לִיהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם  
 כֹּל־סְבִיבָיו יִבְיִלּוּ שִׁי לַמּוֹרָא:  
 Make a vow, and fulfill it to the YHWH your (plural) God!  
 All (who are) around Him, let them bring a gift to the Fearsome One!

<sup>42</sup>Where our Hebrew text has עַם, “a people,” without any preposition, **Rahlfs** has ἐκ λαοῦ, “out of a people,” and 1QIs<sup>a</sup> has מֵעַם, “from a people.”

Watts notes that the Qumran reading is the same as the following line, which has וּמֵעַם, “and from a people.” The Hebrew text can be understood as saying that “a people will be offered to YHWH,” while the Greek text says the offering will be “from a people.”

<sup>43</sup>For this phrase, “a people tall and smooth,” see footnote 16 on **verse 2**. The phrase is exactly the same, except in **verse 2** it is “a nation tall and smooth.”

<sup>44</sup>This is almost the identical phrase that occurs in **verse 2**, only here in **verse 7** the phrase begins with “and from...” while in **verse 2** the phrase begins with “and to...”

<sup>45</sup>See footnote 19 for this identical phrase in **verse 2**.

<sup>46</sup>Here again, for this identical phrase, see **verse 2** with footnote 20. There can

(continued...)

to (the) place of YHWH of Armies' name,  
Mount Zion.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup>(...continued)

be little doubt that the nation being referred to is the same nation that is depicted in **verse 2**, which Slotki identifies as Ethiopia, but which we think is describing an unnamed nation, beyond and to the south of Ethiopia, in the heart of the sub-continent of Africa.

However this may be decided, it is perfectly clear that the message which has to do with this nation is not a message of “Woe!”, but rather a message of “Awe!”, or one of calling, *Ho!* or *Ha!* The message of YHWH’s welcome into His “Mount Zion” is not meant exclusively for Israel, but is also meant for the farthest off nation(s) of the earth! This is an awesome conclusion, one that calls for the attention of earth’s inhabitants!

<sup>47</sup>Gray comments that “*The place of the name of the Yahweh* [means] the place where Yahweh causes His name to dwell, where He manifests Himself, where all acceptable offerings must be brought.” (P. 316) He is referring to **Deuteronomy 12:5, 11:**

**12:5,** Instead, to the place which YHWH your God shall choose,  
out of all your tribes, to place His name there,  
to cause it to dwell,  
you shall resort to / seek out,  
and you shall come there!

**12:11,** And it will happen—  
(at) the place which YHWH your God will choose,  
to cause His name to dwell there,  
there you shall bring everything which I am commanding you people,  
your offerings-up, and your sacrifices,  
your tithes, and your hand’s offering,  
and every choice (part) of your vows,  
which you shall vow to the YHWH. (P. 316)

**Rahfs’** translation of this verse is: ἐν τῷ καιρῷ ἐκείνῳ ἀνενεχθήσεται δῶρα κυρίου σαβαωθ ἐκ λαοῦ τεθλιμμένου καὶ τετιλμένου καὶ ἀπὸ λαοῦ μεγάλου ἀπὸ τοῦ νῦν καὶ εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα χρόνον ἔθνος ἐλπίζον καὶ καταπεπατημένον ὃ ἐστὶν ἐν μέρει ποταμοῦ τῆς χώρας αὐτοῦ εἰς τὸν τόπον οὗ τὸ ὄνομα κυρίου σαβαωθ ἐπεκλήθη ὄρος Σιων, “In that time gifts will be brought up / offered to Lord Sabaoth from a people having been oppressed and having been plucked, and from a great people from the present and into the ages of time, a people hoping and having been trodden down, which is in a part of a river of its country, to the place where the name of Lord Sabaoth was called, Mount Zion.”

(continued...)

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<sup>47</sup>(...continued)

Motyer comments on **verse 7** that “This verse describes the consummation [meaning the ‘ultimate goal,’ the ‘fulfillment of all things,’ in the final end of history]... There will be those world-wide who have waited for the banner to be raised and the trumpet sounded (**verse 3**), and now they will become pilgrims to the place of the Name of the Lord Almighty (‘of hosts’...), i.e. Mount Zion!’...The omnipotent Lord brings the world home to Mount Zion for there alone He made His name to dwell.” (Pp. 162-63)

If Motyer is taking the opening phrase of verse 7, **בְּעֵת הַהִיא**, “at that time,” to be a technical eschatological phrase, meaning the consummation of all things, at “the end of time,” we think that is a very shaky basis for interpretation. While the phrase can point to a future time, it is a very common phrase, used simply to point to a certain time, such as something that has occurred in the past, or something that is being described as presently occurring, sometimes being translated “at the same time,” or “from that day on,” and in **Jeremiah** and **Zephaniah** points to a future time when YHWH will either bless or punish His people Israel.

The exact phrase occurs some 41 times in the **Hebrew Bible**, at: **Joshua 5:2; 6:26; 11:10, 21; Judges 3:29; 4:4; 11:26; 12:6; 21:14, 24; 1 Kings 8:65; 11:29; 14:1; 2 Kings 8:22; 16:6; 18:16; 20:12; 24:10; 1 Chronicles 21:28, 29; 2 Chronicles 7:8; 13:18; 16:10; 21:10; 28:16; 30:3; 35:17; Ezra 8:34 / 35; Nehemiah 4:16; Esther 8:9; Isaiah 18:7** (here, pointing to the time when the twigs and branches are being used by the birds of prey and the wild animals); **20:2; Jeremiah 3:17** (pointing to the future time when faithless Israel returns to YHWH, and the ark of the covenant is forgotten); **4:11** (pointing to a future time of judgment on Israel); **8:1** (pointing to a future time of pagan idolatry in Jerusalem); **31:1** (pointing to a future time of good things happening to Israel with the renewal of her covenant with YHWH); **Amos 5:13** (a time for the prudent person to keep silence); **Micah 3:4** (a time when YHWH will not answer prayer); **Zephaniah 1:12** (a time when YHWH searches Jerusalem to punish certain people); **3:19, 20** (both verses pointing to a future time of YHWH’s blessing Zion’s people and restoring their fortunes).

The text does not depict YHWH “bringing the world home to Zion,” (in the “consummation”) as Motyer says, but rather depicts the unnamed, distant people(s) of central Africa bringing a gift to YHWH in Zion—perhaps bringing another nation / people. Motyer is reading far too much into this text—but which is indeed a text of hope for the future.

Watts’ explanation of **chapter 18** on pp. 246-48 simply repeats his efforts to tie all of the statements in the chapter to historical events. It is to be understood in terms of Shabaka, the Ethiopian ruler, “to whom the answer is given correctly that they should seek out the Assyrian overlord...At that point (**18:3**) a picture of the potential inherent in that moment is spread over the next chapter. The Lord promises to ‘remain quiet,’ i.e. approving [but does ‘remaining quiet’ mean ‘approving’?], as the coalition between Ethiopia and Assyria is forged with the ostensible purpose of putting the Egyptian delta

(continued...)

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<sup>47</sup>(...continued)  
under firm Ethiopian rule.

“At that time, Assyria will bring gifts to Zion (**18:7**) to obtain their support in the campaign against Egypt (the delta) and to recognize its loyalty in sending the delegation on to Nineveh (**18:2**). At this point, Yahweh abandons His Spectator position to enter the conflict, ensuring victory over Egypt by creating internal dissension (**19:2-4**), by drying up the vitally important river (**verses 5-10**), and by confusing the vaunted wisdom of the Egyptian counselors (**verses 12-15**).

“The result would be demoralization of Egyptians so that even tiny Judah’s forces bring terror to them (**19:16-17**); colonization of five cities in Egypt by

Palestinians, probably as garrison cities (**19:18**); recognition of Yahweh in Egypt, leading to worship and dependence on Him (**verses 19-22**); an open highway for diplomatic and commercial activity between Egypt and Assyria, with relations so cordial that the two worship together (**verse 23**); and finally, Israel, whose position lies astride the highway just mentioned, occupying a position exceeded only by Egypt and Assyria with her influence being a blessing for all the land. The beneficent result is possible because Yahweh would call Egypt ‘My people’ (compare **verses 19-22**) and Assyria ‘My handwork’ (**compare 10:5-6**) and Israel ‘My inheritance,’ her historic,’ her historic title.

“One must keep in mind that all this is predicated on Judah’s having learned her lesson from Damascus (**chapter 17**) and on her having acted as a loyal vassal (**18:3, 7; 19:17**). This would apply if Hezekiah had followed policies of peace and servitude like his father Ahaz.” (Pp. 246-47)

The problem with this analysis is that none of it is found in the text of **Isaiah 18**. Every bit of it is being read into the text, and in our view, mistakenly. We will wait to evaluate his analysis of **chapter 19** at the end of that chapter. But as Watts goes on to admit, “As a matter of historical fact, this dream or vision was not fulfilled. Hezekiah did not follow his father’s policies, but succumbed to the hawkish ideas of his advisors who never gave up their false hope that Judah’s salvation lay in Egypt’s re-assuming sovereignty over the region.” (P. 247)

We do not think these chapters from **13-23** are that closely linked—but rather are separate, enigmatic prophetic messages uttered by Isaiah at different times, to various foreign nations / cities / peoples. In comparison with the other literature coming from the ancient Near East, these chapters reveal YHWH God as the God of all people and nations, Who knows and is concerned with what is happening in those peoples and nations who are “foreign” to Israel. He is not a “tribal” or “parochial” [limited, narrow-minded] God, but the God of the whole earth. And as we see in **chapter 18**, He has welcome and acceptance for the unknown people(s) / nation(s) at the most distant parts of the known earth in Isaiah’s time.

(continued...)

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<sup>47</sup>(...continued)

And while the prophet speaks a word of judgment against Egypt in **chapter 19**, the chapter closes with an astounding prophetic / Divine hope for the uniting of Assyria, Egypt, and Israel, as together worshiping as His people! We believe that this is the kind of hope that breathed in the heart of Jesus, as He welcomed and ministered to people of every race and nationality in his day, daring to reach out across the narrow confines of legalistic Judaism to heal and forgive and give new life to both Jews and non-Jews, even including the hated Roman occupiers of Israel. And we wonder—do we Christians today dare to have this same kind of hope-filled vision, daring to welcome and worship together with the Muslims and Hindus [and Jews, and illegal immigrants] who live beside us in our communities? Or will we turn from these people in fear, refusing to have anything to do with them?

1.

## The Tsetse Fly

“The word *tsetse* means “fly” in Tswana, a language of southern Africa. Recently, *tsetse* without the fly has become more common in English, particularly in the scientific and development communities. The word is pronounced *tseh-tseh* in the Sotho languages and is easily rendered in other African languages.

“Tsetse, sometimes spelled *tzetze* and also known as tik-tik flies, are large biting flies that inhabit much of mid-continental Africa between the Sahara and the Kalahari Deserts. They live by feeding on the blood of vertebrate animals and are the primary African biological vectors [biting insects or ticks, that transmit a disease or parasite from one animal or plant to another] of trypanosomes [single-celled parasitic protozoans with a trailing flagellum, infesting the blood], which cause human sleeping sickness and animal trypanosomiasis [sleeping sickness], also known as nagana. Tsetse flies include all the species in the genus *Glossina*, which are generally placed in their own family, *Glossinidae*.

“Tsetse have been extensively studied because of their disease transmission. These flies are multivoltine [having several broods in a season], typically producing about four generations yearly, and up to 31 generations total over their entire life-spans.

“Tsetse are crudely similar to other large flies, such as the housefly, but can be distinguished by various characteristics of their anatomy, two of which are easy to observe. Tsetse fold their wings completely when they are resting so that one wing rests directly on top of the other over their abdomens. Tsetse also have a long proboscis [the tubular feeding and sucking organ of certain invertebrates such as insects], which extends directly forward and is attached by a distinct bulb to the bottom of their heads.

“Fossilized tsetse have been recovered from the Florissant Fossil Beds in Colorado, laid down some 34 million years ago. Twenty-three species of tsetse flies are known.” (**Wikipedia**, 8/27/2016)

2.

## The Land of כּוּשׁ, “Ethiopia.”

“Ethiopia, officially known as the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, is a sovereign state located in the Horn of Africa. It shares a border with Eritrea to the north and northeast, Djibouti and Somalia to the east, Sudan and South Sudan to the west, and Kenya to the south. With nearly 100 million inhabitants, Ethiopia is the most populous landlocked country in the world, as well as the second-most populous nation on the African continent after Nigeria. It occupies a total area of 420,000 square miles, and its capital and largest city is Addis Ababa.

“Some of the oldest evidence for anatomically modern humans has been found in Ethiopia, which is widely considered the region from which modern humans first set out for the Middle East and places beyond. According to linguists, the first Afroasiatic-speaking populations settled in the Horn region during the ensuing Neolithic era. Tracing its roots to the 2nd millennium B.C.E., Ethiopia was a monarchy for most of its history. During the first centuries C.E., the Kingdom of Aksum maintained a unified civilization in the region, followed by the Ethiopian Empire circa [about] 1137 C.E.

“Ethiopia derived prestige with its uniquely successful military resistance during the late 19th-century Scramble for Africa, becoming the only African country to defeat a European colonial power and retain its sovereignty. Subsequently, many African nations adopted the colors of Ethiopia's flag following their independence. It was the first independent African member of the 20th-century League of Nations and the United Nations. In 1974, at the end of Haile Selassie's reign, power fell to a communist military dictatorship known as the Derg, backed by the Soviet Union, until it was defeated by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front, which has ruled since about the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

“Ethiopia is a multilingual nation with around 80 ethnolinguistic groups, the four largest of which are the Oromo, Amhara, Somali, and Tigrayans. Most people in the country speak Afroasiatic languages of the Cushitic or Semitic branches. Additionally, Omotic languages are spoken by ethnic minority groups inhabiting the southern regions. Nilo-Saharan languages are also spoken by the nation's Nilotic ethnic minorities.

“Ethiopia is the place of origin for the coffee bean which originated from the place called Kefa (which was one of the 14 provinces in the old Ethiopian administration). It is a land of natural contrasts, with its vast fertile West, jungles, and numerous rivers, and the world's hottest settlement of Dallol in its north. The Ethiopian Highlands are Africa's largest continuous mountain ranges, and Sof Omar Caves contain Africa's largest cave. Ethiopia has the most UNESCO World Heritage Sites in Africa.

“Ethiopia's ancient Ge'ez script, also known as Ethiopic, is one of the oldest alphabets still in use in the world. The Ethiopian calendar, which is approximately seven years and three months behind the Gregorian calendar, co-exists alongside the Borana calendar. A slight majority of the population adheres to Christianity (mainly the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church and P'ent'ay), while around a third follows Islam

(primarily Sunni Islam). The country is the site of the Migration to Abyssinia and the oldest Muslim settlement in Africa at Negash. A substantial population of Ethiopian Jews, known as Bete Israel, resided in Ethiopia until the 1980s, but most of them have since gradually emigrated to Israel.

“Ethiopia is one of the founding members of the United Nations, the Group of 24 (G-24), the Non-Aligned Movement (G-77) and the Organization of African Unity. Ethiopia's capital city Addis Ababa serves as the headquarters of the African Union, the Pan African Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, African Aviation Training Headquarters, the African Standby Force, and much of the global Non Government Organizations focused on Africa. In the 1970's and 1980's, Ethiopia suffered from civil wars and communist purges which devastated its economy. The country has begun to recover recently however, and now has the largest economy (by Gross Domestic Product) in East Africa and Central Africa. According to Global Fire Power, Ethiopia has the 42nd most powerful military in the world, and the third most powerful in Africa. (Wikipedia, 8/28/2016)

### **The Scramble for Africa**

“The ‘Scramble for Africa’ was the invasion, occupation, division, colonization and annexation of African territory by European powers during the period of New Imperialism, between 1881 and 1914. It is also called the Partition of Africa and the Conquest of Africa. In 1870, only 10 percent of Africa was under European control; by 1914 it had increased to 90 percent of the continent, with only Ethiopia (Abyssinia), the Dervish state and Liberia still being independent.

“The Berlin Conference of 1884, which regulated European colonization and trade in Africa, is usually referred to as the starting point of the scramble for Africa. Consequent to the political and economic rivalries among the European empires in the last quarter of the 19th century, the partitioning of Africa was how the Europeans avoided warring amongst themselves over Africa. The latter years of the 19th century saw the transition from "informal imperialism" (hegemony), by military influence and economic dominance, to the direct rule of a people which brought about colonial imperialism.

3.

### **Napata, the Ancient Capital of Ethiopia**

“The site of Napata, the ancient capital of Ethiopia, the Kush of the Old Testament...is in the Dongola Province, but over two hundred miles up-stream from our excavations at Kerma. A great bend in the river lies between the two places, so that the current, which runs northward at Kerma, flows almost southward at Napata. The city of Napata appears to have lain on both sides of the Nile, but the part on the western bank is that best known in modern times. Here stands the great table mountain of sandstone called Gebel Barkal, the landmark by which the district was first known to modern travelers. Among the ancients it was venerated as the " Holy Mount/\* in which dwelt Amon of Napata...

“Under the precipitous eastern wall of this mountain the ruins of the great temples have always been visible; and on the low hills to the southwest fifteen small pyramids could be counted, some of them with the casing nearly intact. Since early in the last century Gebel Barkal has drawn the attention of all the great European travelers who came up the Nile looking for the ancient Meroe and for the older Napata. Hanbury and Waddington, Cailliaud, Hoskins and Lepsius all attempted surveys and descriptions of its temples and monuments. Many pieces of sculpture and a number of historical inscriptions of great importance have been carried away from the site to enrich the great Egyptian museums of Cairo and other cities. Nevertheless, the Gebel Barkal temples, and above all, the pyramids beside the mount, had never been systematically explored.

“At Kerma our excavations had to do with the older period of Ethiopian history, the Egyptian occupation of the Sudan in the Middle Empire (2000 B.C.E.) and the development of the remarkable Egypto-Nubian civilization of this isolated community. At Napata it is a later period, after the Egyptian reconquest of the Sudan in the sixteenth century B.C.E., which is the subject of our investigation. For about five centuries after its reconquest the country was under a series of Egyptian governors whose title at first was " King's Son, Governor of the Southern Countries," and later, "King's Son of Kush (Ethiopia), Governor of the Southern Countries," often with the added title, "Fan-bearer on the right hand of the King"...

“The first governor of Ethiopia known to us during this period was named Thury, who, in the eighth year of Amenophis I (about 1550 B.C.E.), made his inscription recording his names and titles as viceroy on the rocks of the Island of Uranarti in the Second Cataract. After him the names of the viceroys are known with an occasional break down to the end of the Nineteenth Dynasty, or for nearly three hundred years...

“The administration of Ethiopia by this long line of viceroys resulted in a thorough Egyptianizing of the country. Egyptian officials and soldiers were scattered about the land; temples to Egyptian Gods were built in all large towns; and Egyptian learning, as well as the practice of Egyptian handicrafts, was widespread. During the Twentieth Dynasty our list is less secure, and finally ends with the name of Herihor, the high priest who supplanted the last of the twelve kings named Ramses. It has been inferred from very meagre inscripational evidence that Ramses II, or one of his predecessors, made over the Southern Countries to Amon, that is, to the Amon priesthood. Another point

not yet clear is the reference to the office of the viceroy of Kush in the funerary tablet of Nesikhonsu, Queen of Pinezem II of the Twenty- first Egyptian Dynasty. It is clear, however, that the Amon priesthood who controlled the appointment of the king and his officials in Egypt must have exercised an equal power over the appointments in the Southern Countries.

“In the troubled times of the Twentieth to the Twenty-third Dynasties, Egypt was often divided into two separate administrations, of which the Southern or Theban principality was usually under the more or less independent control of the high priest of Amon. Whatever the political status of Ethiopia, there must always have existed a certain sympathy and intercourse between the priests of Amon- Re of Napata and the priests of Amon-Re of Thebes.

“After an obscurity lasting three centuries, Ethiopia reappears in a blaze of power and authority as the land of Amon par excellence, claiming even to be the original home of Amon and of the Egyptians. The will of the God, expressed by his manifestations in his temple at Napata, was the supreme law of the land, deposing kings and appointing kings, sending out the army to fight and take booty, and exacting a fair share for the temple service of all the income of the land from trade or war or natural production. It is small wonder that the Ethiopians, when they had overrun Egypt at the command of Amon, were ready to boast that it was Amon-Re of Ethiopia, abiding in the "Holy Mount" of Napata, who had now added Egypt to his domain, and that, in fact, the Amon worshipers of Egypt were themselves originally Ethiopians.

“Out of an obscure background of faith in the great God of Napata and His oracles given in His temple, the men of this "miserable" land were spurred by local successes to attempt the impossible, and, as so often happens, found the impossible coming to pass. The military leaders and the priests who controlled the oracles were no doubt largely of Egyptian descent, but the mass of the levies must have been Nubians or negroes. Egypt fell into their hands and the kings of Napata ruled over Egypt and Ethiopia. The great conqueror was Piankhy and his successors were Shabaka, Shabatoka, Tirhaka and Tanutamon. Shabaka attempted to stem the Assyrian conquest of Western Asia by assisting Hezekiah of Judah and the other small Palestinian states. Tirhakah (as Shabaka' s commander-in-chief) is mentioned in **2 Kings** as fighting against Sennacherib; and the Assyrian inscriptions tell of his wars with Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal. He lost Egypt to Esarhaddon, won it back and lost it again to Ashurbanipal. His successor, Tanutamon, restored the Ethiopian domination over Egypt, but he was apparently the last of the great kings of Ethiopia.

“After a gallant struggle against an empire with myriads of soldiers and the wealth of Western Asia at its disposal, the little Ethiopian theocracy was driven back to its narrow home, a strip of black land stretching a few hundred miles along the Nile. Its greatest asset was the command of the three great caravan roads trod by those who carried the trade with Central Africa and Abyssinia. Its population was less than half a million. It is doubtful whether, in its resources of men and natural wealth, Ethiopia was much better off than Judah or Israel. After the retirement of Tanutamon to Napata, the Ethiopian monarchy still held to its theocratic notions and to the fiction of its world power, and the kings chosen by the great God still carried on successful wars (probably

to the south) in the name of Amon, and filled the temples of Napata with loot. They made their statues after the Egyptian manner and held to the traditions of Egyptian arts and crafts as well as those of religion.

“All our information about Ethiopia after the loss of Egypt came from five Egyptian inscriptions from the great temple at Gebel Barkal. These inscriptions describe the selection by Amon of Espalut as king of Ethiopia, the reign of a king, Harsiotef, and the accession of a king, Nastesen.” (Report of Dr. George A. Reisner, Director of the Harvard University-Museum of Fine Arts Egyptian Expedition, on the Internet, 8/29/2016)

4.

## The Nubian People

“Nubians are the people that inhabited the region south of Egypt, known today as Sudan and mainly settled along the banks of the Nile. They were very famous for their horsemanship, riding their horses bareback and holding on by their knees, making them light, mobile, and efficient, and a good cavalry choice. Their Nubian language is an Eastern Sudanic language, part of the Nilo-Saharan phylum.

“The Old Nubian language is attested from the 8th century, and is thus the oldest recorded language of Africa outside of the Afro-Asiatic group. It was the language of the Noba nomads who occupied the Nile between the First and Third Cataracts and the Makorae nomads who occupied the land between the Third and Fourth Cataracts following the collapse of the Kingdom of Kush sometime in the 4th century C.E. The Makorae were a separate tribe who eventually conquered or inherited the lands of the Noba: they established a Byzantine-influenced state called the Kingdom of Makuria which administered the Noba lands separately as the eparchy of Nobadia. Nobadia was converted to Miaphysitism by the Orthodox priest Julian and Bishop Longinus of Constantinople, and thereafter received its bishops from the Pope of Alexandria.

“The name "Nubia" or "Nubian" has a contested origin. It may originate with an ancient Egyptian noun, *nebu*, meaning gold. Another etymology claims that it originates with the name of a particular group of people, the Noubai, living in the area that would become known as Nubia. Scholars may also refer to Nubians as Kushites, a reference to the Kush, the territory of the Nubians as it was called by Ancient Egyptians. It may originate with the Greek historian Strabo, who referred to the Nubas people.

“The earliest history of ancient Nubia comes from the Paleolithic Era of 300,000 years ago. By around 6,000 B.C.E., the Nubians had developed an agricultural economy and had contact with Egypt. The Nubians began using a system of writing relatively late in their history, when they adopted the Egyptian system. Ancient Nubian history is categorized according to the following periods:

- A-group culture (3700-2800 B.C.E.)
- C-group culture (2300-1600 B.C.E.)
- Kingdom of Kerma (2500-1500 B.C.E.)
- Nubian contemporaries of Egyptian New Kingdom (1550-1069 B.C.E.)
- Kingdom of Napata and Egypt's Nubian dynasty XXV (1000-653 B.C.E.)
- Kingdom of Napata (1000-275 B.C.E.)
- Kingdom of Meroe (275 B.C.E.-300/350 C.E.)
- Kingdom of Makuria (340-1317 C.E.)
- Kingdom of Nobatia (350–650 C.E.)
- Kingdom of Alodia (600s–1504 C.E.)

“Nubia consisted of four regions with varied agriculture and landscapes. The Nile river and its valley lay in the north and central parts of Nubia, allowing farming using irrigation. The western Sudan had a mixture of peasant agriculture and nomadism. Eastern Sudan had primarily nomadism, with a few areas of irrigation and

agriculture. Finally, there was the fertile pastoral region of the south, where Nubia's larger agricultural communities were located.

“Nubia was dominated by kings from clans that controlled the gold mines. Trade in exotic goods from other parts of Africa--ivory, animal skins--passed to Egypt through Nubia.” (**Wikipedia**, 8/28/2016)

