
ISAIAH 18: 1 Ah, the land of the rustling of wings, which is beyond the rivers of Ethiopia;

This chapter contains a very obscure prophecy; possibly designed to give the Jews, and perhaps the Egyptians, whose country is supposed to be meant, Isa 18:1, Isa 18:2, and with whom many Jews resided, an indignation of God's interposition in favor of Sion, Isa 18:3, Isa 18:4; and of his counsels in regard to the destruction of their common enemy, Sennacherib, whose vast army, just as he thought his projects ripe, and ready to be crowned with success, Isa 18:5, should become a prey to the beasts of the field, and to the fowls of heaven, Isa 18:6; and that Egypt should be grateful to God for the deliverance vouchsafed her, Isa 18:7.

This is one of the most obscure prophecies in the whole Book of Isaiah. The subject of it, the end and design of it, the people to whom it is addressed, the history to which it belongs, the person who sends the messengers, and the nation to whom the messengers are sent, are all obscure and doubtful. - L.

Verse 1

Wo to the land - הוי ארץ hoi arets! This interjection should be translated ho! for it is properly a particle of calling: Ho, land! Attend! Give ear!

Shadowing with wings "The winged cymbal" - צלצל כנפים tsiltsal kenaphayim. I adopt this as the most probable of the many interpretations that have been given of these words. It is Bochart's: see Phaleg, 4:2. The Egyptian sistrum is expressed by a periphrasis; the Hebrews had no name for it in their language, not having in use the instrument itself. The cymbal they had was an instrument in its use and sound not much unlike the sistrum; and to distinguish it from the sistrum, they called it the cymbal with wings. The cymbal was a round hollow piece of metal, which, being struck against another, gave a ringing sound: the sistrum was a round instrument, consisting of a broad rim of metal, through which from side to side ran several loose laminae or small rods of metal, which being shaken, gave a like sound. These, projecting on each side, had somewhat the appearance of wings; or might be very properly expressed by the same word which the Hebrews used for wings, or for the extremity, or a part of any thing projecting. The sistrum is given in a medal of Adrian, as the proper attribute of Egypt. See Addison on Medals, Series 3. No. 4; where the figure of it may be seen. The frame of the sistrum was in shape rather like the ancient lyre; it was not round.

If we translate shadowing with wings, it may allude to the multitude of its vessels, whose sails may be represented under the notion of wings. The second verse seems to support this interpretation. Vessels of bulrushes, גומא gome, or rather the flag papyrus, so much celebrated as the substance on which people wrote in ancient times, and from which our paper is denominated. The sails might have been made of this flag: but whole canoes were constructed from it. Mat sails are used to the present day in China. The Vulgate fully understood the meaning of the word, and has accordingly translated, in vasis papyri, "in vessels of papyrus." Reshi vesselis. - Old MS. Bib. This interpretation does not please Bp. Lowth, and for his dissent he gives the following reasons: -

In opposition to other interpretations of these words which have prevailed, it may be briefly observed that צלצל tsiltsel is never used to signify shadow, nor is כנף canaph applied to the sails of ships. If, therefore, the words are rightly interpreted the winged cymbal, meaning the sistrum, Egypt must be the country to which the prophecy is addressed. And upon this hypothesis the version and explanation must proceed. I farther suppose, that the prophecy was delivered before Sennacherib's

return from his Egyptian expedition, which took up three years; and that it was designed to give to the Jews, and perhaps likewise to the Egyptians, an intimation of God's counsels in regard to the destruction of their great and powerful enemy.

Which is beyond the rivers of Ethiopia "Which borders on the rivers of Cush" - What are the rivers of Cush? whether the eastern branches of the lower Nile, the boundary of Egypt towards Arabia, or the parts of the upper Nile towards Ethiopia, it is not easy to determine. The word מעבר meeber signifies either on this side or on the farther side: I have made use of the same kind of ambiguous expression in the translation.

ISAIAH 18: 2 that sends ambassadors by the sea, even in vessels of papyrus on the waters, saying, "Go, ye swift messengers, to a nation tall and smooth, to a people awesome from their beginning onward, a nation that measures out and treads down, whose land the rivers divide!"

Verse 2

In vessels of bulrushes "In vessels of papyrus" - This circumstance agrees perfectly well with Egypt. It is well known that the Egyptians commonly used on the Nile a light sort of ships, or boats, made of the reed papyrus. *Ex ipso quidem papyro navigia texunt.* Pliny, 42:11.

Conseritur bibula Memphitis cymba papyro.

Lucan, 4:136.

Go, ye swift messengers - To this nation before mentioned, who, by the Nile, and by their numerous canals, have the means of spreading the report in the most expeditious manner through the whole country: go, ye swift messengers, and carry this notice of God's designs in regard to them. By the swift messengers are meant, not any particular persons specially appointed to this office, but any of the usual conveyers of news whatsoever, travelers, merchants, and the like, the instruments and agents of common fame. These are ordered to publish this declaration made by the prophet throughout Egypt, and to all the world; and to excite their attention to the promised visible interposition of God.

Scattered "Stretched out in length" - Egypt, that is, the fruitful part, exclusive of the deserts on each side, is one long vale, through the middle of which runs the Nile, bounded on each side to the east and west by a chain of mountains seven hundred and fifty miles in length; in breadth from one to two or three days' journey: even at the widest part of the Delta, from Pelusium to Alexandria, not above two hundred and fifty miles broad. Egmont and Hayman, and Pococke.

Peeled "Smoothed" - Either relating to the practice of the Egyptian priests, who made their bodies smooth by shaving off their hair, (see Herod. 2:37); or rather to their country's being made smooth, perfectly plain and level, by the overflowing of the Nile.

Meted out "Meted out by line" - It is generally referred to the frequent necessity of having recourse to mensuration in Egypt, in order to determine the boundaries after the inundations of the Nile; to which even the origin of the science of geometry is by some ascribed. Strabo, lib. 17 sub init.

Trodden down - Supposed to allude to a peculiar method of tillage in use among the Egyptians. Both Herodotus, (lib. ii.), and Diodorus, (lib. i.), say that when the Nile had retired within its banks, and

the ground became somewhat dry, they sowed their land, and then sent in their cattle, (their hogs, says the former), to tread in the seed; and without any farther care expected the harvest.

The rivers have spoiled "The rivers have nourished" - The word בָּזְאוּ bazeu is generally taken to be an irregular form for בָּזְזוּ bazezu, "have spoiled," as four MSS. have it in this place; and so most of the Versions, both ancient and modern, understand it. On which Schultens, Gram. Hebrews p. 491, has the following re; mark: "Ne minimam quidem speciem veri habet בָּזְאוּ bazau, Esai. Isa 18:2, elatum pro בָּזְזוּ bazazu, deripiunt. Haec esset anomalia, cui nihil simile in toto linguae ambitu. In talibus nil finire, vel fateri ex mera agi conjectura, tutius justiusque. Radicem בָּזְאָ bazā olim extare potuisse, quis neget? Si cognatum quid sectandum erat, ad בָּזְהָ bazah, contempsit, potius decurrendum fuisset; ut בָּזְאוּ bazeu, pro בָּזוּ bazu, sit enuntiatum, vel בָּזְיוּ baziv. Digna phrasis, flumina contemunt terram, i.e., inundant." "בָּזְאָ baza, Arab. extulit se superbius, item subiecit sibi: unde praet. pl. בָּזְאוּ bazeu, subjecerunt sibi, i.e., inundarunt." - Simonis' Lexic. Heb.

A learned friend has suggested to me another explanation of the word. בָּזְאָ baza, Syr., and בִּזְאָ beiza, Chald., signifies uber, "a dug," mamma, "a breast;" agreeably to which the verb signifies to nourish. This would perfectly well suit with the Nile: whereas nothing can be more discordant than the idea of spoiling and plundering; for to the inundation of the Nile Egypt owed every thing; the fertility of the soil, and the very soil itself. Besides, the overflowing of the Nile came on by gentle degrees, covering with out laying waste the country: "Mira aequae naturae fluminis, quod cum caeteri omnes abluant terras et eviscerent, Nilus tanto caeteris major adeo nihil exedit, nec abradit, ut contra adjiciat vires; minimumque in eo sit, quod solum temperet. Illato enim limo arenas saturat ac jungit; debetque illi Aegyptus non tantum fertilitatem terrarum, sed ipsas." - Seneca, Nat. Quaest., 4:2. I take the liberty, therefore, which Schultens seems to think allowable in this place, of hazarding a conjectural interpretation. It is a fact that the Ganges changes its course, and overruns and lays barren whole districts, from which it was a few years back several miles distant. Such changes do not nourish but spoil the ground.

ISAIAH 18: 3 All you inhabitants of the world, and you dwellers on the earth, when a banner is lifted up on the mountains, look! When the trumpet is blown, listen!

Verse 3

When he lifteth up an ensign "When the standard is lifted up" - I take God to be the Agent in this verse; and that by the standard and the trumpet are meant the meteors, the thunder, the lightning, the storm, earthquake, and tempest, by which Sennacherib's army shall be destroyed, or by which at least the destruction of it shall be accompanied; as it is described in Isa 10:16, Isa 10:17; Isa 29:6, and Isa 30:30, Isa 30:31. See also Psa 76:1-12 (note), and the title of it, according to the Septuagint, Vulgate and Aethiopic. They are called, by a bold metaphor, the standard lifted up, and the trumpet sounded. The latter is used by Homer, I think with great force, in his introduction to the battle of the gods; though I find it has disgusted some of the minor critics: - Βραχε δ' ευρεια χθων, Αμφι δε σαλπιγζεν μεγας ουρανος.

Il. 21:388. "Heaven in loud thunders bids the trumpet sound,
And wide beneath them groans the rending ground."

Pope

ISAIAH 18: 4 For the LORD said to me, "I will be still, and I will see in my dwelling place, like clear heat in sunshine, like a cloud of dew in the heat of harvest."

Verse 4

For so the Lord said unto me "For thus hath Jehovah said unto me" - The subject of the remaining part of this chapter is, that God would comfort and support his own people, though threatened with immediate destruction by the Assyrians; that Sennacherib's great designs and mighty efforts against them should be frustrated; and that his vast expectations should be rendered abortive, when he thought them mature, and just ready to be crowned with success; that the chief part of his army should be made a prey for the beasts of the field and the fowls of the air, (for this is the meaning of the allegory continued through the fifth and sixth verses); and that Egypt, being delivered from his oppression, and avenged by the hand of God of the wrongs which she had suffered, should return thanks for the wonderful deliverance, both of herself and of the Jews, from this most powerful adversary.

Like a clear heat "Like the clear heat" - The same images are employed by an Arabian poet: -

Solis more fervens, dum frigus; quumque ardet

Sirius, tum vero frigus ipse et umbra.

Which is illustrated in the note by a like passage from another Arabian poet: -

Calor est hyeme, refrigerium aestate.

Excerpta ex Hamasa; published by Schultens, at the end of Erpenius's Arabic Grammar, p. 425.

Upon herbs "After rain" - "אור" aur here signifies rain, according to what is said Job 36:11 : 'The cloud scatters his rain.'" - Kimchi. In which place of Job the Chaldee paraphrast does indeed explain אורו auro by מטריה matereyh; and so again Job 36:21 and Job 36:30. This meaning of the word seems to make the best sense in this place; it is to be wished that it were better supported.

In the heat of harvest "In the day of harvest" - For בחם bechom, in the heat, fourteen MSS., (several ancient), the Septuagint, Syriac, Arabic, and Vulgate read ביום beyom, in the day. The mistake seems to have arisen from כחם kechom in the line above.

ISAIAH 18: 5 For before the harvest, when the blossom is over, and the flower becomes a ripening grape, he will cut off the sprigs with pruning hooks, and he will cut down and take away the spreading branches.

Verse 5

The flower "The blossom" - Hebrews her blossom; נצה nitsah, that is, the blossom of the vine, גפן gephen, vine, understood, which is of the common gender. See Gen 40:10. Note, that by the defective punctuation of this word, many interpreters, and our translators among the rest, have been led into a grievous mistake, (for how can the swelling grape become a blossom?) taking the

word נצח nitstah for the predicate; whereas it is the subject of the proposition, or the nominative case to the verb.

ISAIAH 18: 6 They will be left together for the ravenous birds of the mountains, and for the animals of the earth. The ravenous birds will summer on them, and all the animals of the earth will winter on them.

ISAIAH 18: 7 In that time, a present will be brought to the LORD of Armies from a people tall and smooth, even from a people awesome from their beginning onward, a nation that measures out and treads down, whose land the rivers divide, to the place of the name of the LORD of Armies, Mount Zion.

Verse 7

The present "A gift" - The Egyptians were in alliance with the kingdom of Judah, and were fellow-sufferers with the Jews under the invasion of their common enemy Sennacherib; and so were very nearly interested in the great and miraculous deliverance of that kingdom, by the destruction of the Assyrian army. Upon which wonderful event it is said, 2Chr 32:23, that "many brought gifts unto Jehovah to Jerusalem, and presents to Hezekiah king of Judah; so that he was magnified of all nations from henceforth." It is not to be doubted, that among these the Egyptians distinguished themselves in their acknowledgments on this occasion.

Of a people "From a people" - Instead of עַם am, a people, the Septuagint and Vulgate read מֵעַם meam, from a people, which is confirmed by the repetition of it in the next line. The difference is of importance; for if this be the true reading, the prediction of the admission of Egypt into the true Church of God is not so explicit as it might otherwise seem to be. However, that event is clearly foretold at the end of the next chapter. - L.