

CHAPTER 18

INTRODUCTION TO ISAIAH 18

This chapter is a prophecy of the desolation of a land or country, described by the wings with which it was shaded, and by the rivers by which it was situated, (²³¹⁰¹Isaiah 18:1) by its messengers and message to another nation, which is also described, (²³¹⁰²Isaiah 18:2) all the nations of the world are called upon to observe the judgment about to be inflicted on it, (²³¹⁰³Isaiah 18:3) and a promise is made, that at the same time God will take up his rest and dwelling among his own people, and refresh and protect them, (²³¹⁰⁴Isaiah 18:4) and the time, and manner, and nature of the destruction of the people before threatened, are metaphorically expressed, (²³¹⁰⁵Isaiah 18:5,6) and the issue of all will be the glory of God, since these people will be brought, in after times, as a present to him in Mount Zion, (²³¹⁰⁷Isaiah 18:7).

Ver. 1. *Woe to the land shadowing with wings, &c.*] Or, “O land”, as calling to it; so Aben Ezra and Kimchi. It is very difficult to determine what land is here meant: some think the land of Assyria is here designed, as Aben Ezra and others, and so it is a continuation of the prophecy concerning the destruction of the Assyrians, in the three last verses of the preceding chapter (²³¹¹²Isaiah 17:12-14); the stretching out of whose wings is mentioned, (²³¹⁰⁸Isaiah 8:8) and thought to be referred to here; others are of opinion that the land of Judea is intended, which trusted under the shadow of the wings of Egypt and Ethiopia, to whom the characters in the next verse (²³¹⁰²Isaiah 18:2) are supposed to belong: but the more generally received sense is, that either Egypt or Ethiopia themselves are pointed at, described as “shadowing with wings”; not with the wings of birds, as Jarchi interprets it, which flocked thither in great numbers, the country being hot, and so shaded it with their wings; but rather with mountains, with which Ethiopia, at least some part of it, was encompassed and shaded; or else with ships, whose sails are like wings, and which resorting hither, in numerous fleets of them, and hovering about their coasts and ports, seemed to shadow them; to which agrees the Septuagint version, “Woe to the land, the wings of ships!” and so the Targum,

“Woe to the land to which they come in ships from a far country, whose sails are stretched out, as an eagle that flies with its wings;”

so Manasseh Ben Israel^{f345} renders them,

“Woe to the land, which, under the shadow of veils, falls beyond the rivers of Ethiopia.”

The word translated “shadowing” is used for a cymbal, (~~106~~2 Samuel 6:5) (~~105~~Psalm 150:5) and so it is rendered here in the Vulgate Latin version, “Woe to the land, with the cymbal of wings”: and some think the “sistrum”, is meant, which was a musical instrument used by the Egyptians in their worship of Isis; and which had wings to it, or had transverse rods in the middle of it, which looked like wings, one of which may be seen in Pignorius^{f346}; and so it describes the land of Egypt, famous for its winged cymbals. Minucius Felix^{f347} makes mention of the swallow along with the sistrum, which was a bird of Isis; and which some say was placed over the statue of Isis, with its wings stretched out.

Which [is] beyond the rivers of Ethiopia; the principal of which were Astaboras and Astapus^{f348}, and also Nile itself, which came out of Ethiopia into Egypt: or, “which is on this side of the rivers of Ethiopia”^{f349}; and so may intend Egypt, which bordered on this side of it towards Judea; or, “which is beside the rivers of Ethiopia”^{f350}; and so may denote Ethiopia itself, situated by these rivers. The Targum renders it,

“the rivers of Judea.”

Some would have it, that the rivers of Arabia Chusaea are meant, which, lay between Judea and Egypt, as Besor, Rhinocorura, Trajan, and Corys; and Arabia seems rather to be meant by “Cush”, than Ethiopia in Africa, since that lay beyond the rivers of Egypt, rather than Egypt beyond the rivers of Ethiopia.

Ver. 2. *That sendeth ambassadors by the sea*, &c.] The Red Sea, which washed the coasts of Egypt and Ethiopia, and which were united into one kingdom under Sabacus, or So the Ethiopian, called king of Egypt, (~~120~~2 Kings 17:4) and this kingdom, or rather the king of it, is here described as sending ambassadors by sea to foreign courts, to make leagues and alliances, and thereby strengthen himself against attempts made on him; though some understand it of one part of Ethiopia, on one side of the Red Sea, sending to that on the other side; and some of Tirhakah the Ethiopian

sending messengers to the king of Assyria to bid him defiance, and let him know he intended to fight him; and at the same time sent to the Jews, that they might depend upon his protection and help, (^{<230>}Isaiah 37:9) some understand this of the Egyptians sending to the Ethiopians, to let them know of the Assyrian expedition; and others, of their sending to the Jews, with the promise of a supply; and the word for “ambassadors” signifying “images”, (^{<23516>}Isaiah 45:16) some have thought it is to be understood of carrying the head of Osiris, and the image of Isis, from place to place, in proper vessels:

even in vessels of bulrushes upon the waters; or, “upon the face of the waters”^{f351}; where these light vessels floated without sinking, not drawing the quantity of waters as vessels of wood did. Both the Egyptians and Ethiopians had ships made of the “papyrus”^{f352}, or “biblus”^{f353}, a sort of rush, that grew upon the banks of the Nile, and which were light, and moved swiftly, and were also safest; there was no danger of their being broken to pieces, as other vessels, on shelves, and rocks, and in waterfalls: yea, Pliny^{f354} says, that the Ethiopian ships were so made, as to fold up and be carried on their shoulders, when they came to the cataracts.

[Saying], go, ye swift messengers; the word “saying” is not in the text, nor is it to be supplied; for these are not the words of the nation before described, sending its messengers to another nation after described, either the Jews or the Assyrians; but they are the words of God to his messengers, angels or men, who were swift to do his will, whom he sends to denounce or inflict judgment upon the same nation that is before mentioned, with which agrees (^{<2300>}Ezekiel 30:9):

to a nation scattered; that dwelt in towns, villages, and houses, scattered about here and there; or who would be scattered and dissipated by their enemies: or, “drawn out”, and spread over a large tract of ground, as Ethiopia was:

and peeled; of their hair, as the word signifies; the Ethiopians, living in a hot country, had very little hair upon their bodies. Schultens^{f355}, from the use of the word in the Arabic language, renders it,

“a nation strong and inaccessible:”

to a people terrible from their beginning hitherto; for their black colour and grim looks, especially in some parts; and for the vast armies they brought into the field, as never were by any other people; (see ^{<412B>}2

Chronicles 12:3 14:9) and they might well be said to be so from the beginning, since Nimrod, the mighty hunter, was the son of Cush, from whence the Ethiopians have the name of Cushites, and is the name Ethiopia is called by in the preceding verse (²³⁸⁰Isaiah 18:1):

a nation meted out, and trodden down: to whom punishment was measured by line, in proportion to their sins, and who in a little time would be trodden under foot by their enemies:

whose land the rivers have spoiled: which must not be understood literally of Niger and Nilus, of Astapus and Astaboras, which were so far from spoiling the land, that it was much more pleasant and fruitful for them; but figuratively, of powerful princes and armies, that should come into it, and spoil and plunder it; (see ²³⁸⁰Isaiah 8:7). Jarchi and Kimchi interpret it of the kings of the nations of the world; and so the Targum,

“whose land the people spoil.”

Some understand all this of the Assyrians, whose army was now scattered, and its soldiers exhausted, who had been from the beginning of their monarchy very terrible to their neighbours, but now marked for destruction; and whom the Ethiopians, who dwelt by the rivers, despised, as some render the words: and others interpret them of the Jews, as overrun by the Assyrian army like a mighty river, by whom they were scattered, and peeled, and spoiled, and plundered; who from their beginning had been very terrible, because of the wonderful things wrought for them at the Red Sea, in the wilderness, and in the times of Joshua and the judges; and because of the dreadful punishments inflicted on them; but the first sense is best. Vitringa interprets all this of the Egyptians, whose country was drawn out or long, their bodies peeled or shaved; a people terrible to their neighbours, and very superstitious; a nation of line and line, or of precept and precept.

Ver. 3. *All ye inhabitants of the world, and dwellers on the earth, &c.]* All the men of the world are here called upon, either by the Lord, or rather by the prophet, to be eye and ear witnesses of the judgment that should be inflicted upon the above nation, and of the salvation of his own people; which should be so manifest, that all should see it as easily as an ensign set up on a mountain; and the news of it should ring through the earth, and be as plainly heard as when a trumpet is blown: unless it should be thought that these are the words of the messengers sent to the above nation,

addressing them in such terms, assuring them, that, however stupid and secure they were now, they should quickly see the sign and hear the alarm of war; it being usual to call any large kingdom the world, and the earth:

see ye, when he lifteth up an ensign on the mountains; or ye shall see this as clearly as when a flag is set up on a mountain; or ye shall be sensible of this judgment coming on, when a standard shall be set up on the mountains, to gather the people to war. Viringa interprets this of the mountains of Judea, where the Assyrians would set up their banners, and blow their trumpets, as follows:

and when he bloweth a trumpet, hear ye; or, “ye shall hear”; the trumpet sounding as an alarm of war, by which the people will be summoned, and come to execute the judgment threatened. The Targum is,

“ye shall hear the redemption;”

that is, of Israel, in the times of the Messiah, and in the war of Gog and Magog; of which times Jarchi and Kimchi interpret this whole prophecy.

Ver. 4. *For so the Lord said unto me, &c.*] The prophet Isaiah, both what goes before, and follows after:

I will take my rest; these are not the words of the prophet, as some think, like those of Habakkuk, (^{<3811>}Habakkuk 2:1) but of the Lord himself, signifying that he would, as he always did, enjoy himself, amidst all the commotions that were in the world; or that he would take up his rest among his people in Zion, of which he had said, this is my rest for ever, (^{<38214>}Psalm 132:14) or rather that he would be still and quiet, and as one asleep and at rest, that took no notice of what was doing, nor interpose between parties preparing for war, and laying schemes for the ruin of each other; not help the one nor hinder the other, but let them go on a while with their designs:

and I will consider in my dwelling place: in heaven, what is to be done; for though the Lord may seem sometimes to take no notice of what is done on earth, yet he sees and knows all things, and considers in his own mind what is fit and proper that he should do, who works all things after the counsel of his own will: or, “I will look upon my dwelling place”^{f356}; Jerusalem, Mount Zion, the temple, the sanctuary, where his Shechinah dwelt; here he promises to look in a way of grace and favour, with delight and pleasure,

to comfort and refresh his own people; so the Targum paraphrases this and the preceding clause,

“I will make my people to rest, I will make them to rest, and I will delight in my holy habitation to do them good:”

like a clear heat upon herbs; or “after rain”, as Aben Ezra and Kimchi, (see ⁴⁰²⁴2 Samuel 23:4) when then the sun shines forth brightly after a shower of rain, which revives the plants and herbs, and makes them grow:

[and] like a cloud of dew in the heat of harvest; which is very desirable and welcome, which cools the air, refreshes the earth, plumps the corn, and is very grateful to the harvestman; and both metaphors may signify how grateful is the appearance of God to and for his people, his presence with them, the light of his countenance on them, and his protection of them; (see ²³⁴⁵Isaiah 4:5,6) and so the Targum,

“blessings and consolations will I bring to them quickly, as heat burning by means of the sun, and as a cloud of dew in the heat of harvest:”

though the whole may be understood in a very different sense, as it is by some, thus; that though the Lord for a while may seem to take no notice of what is doing below, yet he in heaven beholds what is done, and looks in a way of wrath and anger upon his enemies, as the sun looks with its scorching heat upon the herbs, and dries them up; and as a cloud which brings a large dew or rain with it, which is very hurtful in harvest time; and this sense seems most agreeable to the context.

Ver. 5. *For afore the harvest, &c.*] Or vintage: the above metaphor is carried on; before the designs and schemes of the people above described are ripe for execution, who promised themselves a large harvest of their neighbours:

when the bud is perfect; when the bud of the vine is become a perfect grape, though unripe; when the scheme was fully laid, and with perfect and consummate wisdom as imagined, though not brought into execution:

and the sour grape is ripening in the flower; things go on and promise well, as if the issue would be according to expectation, and there would be a good vintage. The sour grape may denote the temper and disposition of the above people against their enemies, their ill nature, and enmity to them;

or the sins and transgressions, for which the judgment denounced came upon them:

he shall both cut off the sprigs with pruning hooks, and take away [and] cut down the branches; as the vinedresser; or rather as one that has no good will to the vine, cuts it with pruning hooks, not to make it better, but worse, and cuts off, not the dead withered and useless parts of it, but the sprigs that have buds and flowers, or unripe grapes, upon them, and even whole branches that have clusters on them, and takes them and casts them away, to be trodden under foot, or cast into the fire; so the Lord, or the king of Assyria, the instrument in the hand of God, should cut off the Ethiopians, or the Egyptians, with the sword, both small and great, when their enterprise should fail, and their promised success: or this is to be understood of the destruction of Sennacherib's army by the angel, when he was full of expectation of taking Jerusalem, and plundering that rich city. Jarchi and Kimchi interpret it of the destruction of the armies of Gog and Magog. The Targum is,

“and he shall kill the princes of the people with the sword, and their mighty ones he shall remove and cause to pass over.”

Ver. 6. *They shall be left, together unto the fowls of the mountains, and to the beasts of the earth, &c.]* That is, both sprigs and branches; with the fruit of them, which being unripe, are disregarded by men, but fed upon by birds and beasts; the fruits by the former, and the tender sprigs and green branches by the latter; signifying the destruction of the Ethiopians or Egyptians, and that the princes and the people should fall together, and lie unburied, and become a prey to birds and beasts; or the destruction of the Assyrian army slain by the angel, as Aben Ezra and others; though some interpret it of the army of Gog and Magog, as before observed; (see ^{<6917>}Ezekiel 39:17-20 ^{<6917>}Revelation 19:17,18):

and the fowls shall summer upon them, and all the beasts of the earth shall winter upon them; not that the one should feed upon them in the summer time, and the other in the winter; the fowls in the summer time, when they fly in large flocks, and the beasts in the winter, when they go together in great numbers, as Kimchi; but the sense is, that the carnage should be so great, there would be sufficient for them both, all the year long.

Ver. 7. *In that time shall the present be brought unto the Lord of hosts, &c.]* Not exactly at the time when this destruction should be, but some time after, even in Gospel times; for to them this part of the prophecy refers:

of a people scattered and peeled; this explains what the present is, that shall be brought to the Lord; it is a people, and therefore not the spoils of Sennacherib's army, as some interpret it; nor yet the people of the Jews, that shall be brought by the Gentiles out of all nations in the latter day, as an offering to the Lord, as Aben Ezra and Kimchi; (see ^{<3111>}Isaiah 11:11 66:20)^{f357}; but the Ethiopians or Egyptians, described (^{<2382>}Isaiah 18:2) as here, who, being converted, shall stretch out their hands to God, submit unto him, and present themselves soul and body as an acceptable sacrifice unto him; when these prophecies in (^{<4981>}Psalm 68:31 ^{<3110>}Zephaniah 3:9,10) shall be fulfilled, and which began to be in the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch, (^{<4427>}Acts 8:27) and of which there were other instances in the times of the apostles, and in following ages:

and from a people terrible from their beginning hitherto; that is, some of the people, not all of them; the same people are designed as before, only this Hebraism is used, to show a distinction among them:

a nation meted out, and trodden under foot, whose land the rivers have spoiled; these descriptive characters, with those in the preceding clauses, are retained, to show that the same people are here meant as in (^{<2382>}Isaiah 18:2) and to magnify the riches of God's grace, in the conversion of a people to whom such characters belonged; which show that it was not owing to themselves, or any deserts of theirs, but to the free favour and good will of God:

to the place of the name of the Lord of hosts, the mount Zion; hither the present was to be brought, and here the persons to present themselves to the Lord, even in the mount Zion, the church of God; where the name of the Lord is named and called upon, his word is preached, his ordinances are administered, and where he dwells, and grants his presence.