

Isaiah 17-18, The Burden of Damascus

Overview

Note Isaiah's recurrent occupation with ambassadors in these burdens:

- 14:32 What shall *one* then answer the messengers of the nation?
- 16:1 Send ye the lamb to the ruler of the land
- Now a preoccupation with the Syrian-Ephraimite coalition (17:1-3) and a description of Ethiopian ambassadors (18:1, 2).

Repeatedly, he argues that Judah should not trust in alliances with pagan nations for its security. Rather, They will one day send their tribute to the Lord in Jerusalem.

His message is particularly apt at a time when the government of the land in which we are pilgrims is placing so much emphasis on diplomacy and international embassies (Obama's tour to Russia, Rome, and Africa this past week). Our nation, like Judah, needs to learn to trust in the Lord.

Text

Structurally, an initial introduction is followed by three paragraphs about “in that day” (17:4, 7, 9), and then two “woe”s (17:12; 18:1).

17:1-3, The Failure of the Syro-Ephraimite Conspiracy

The joint reference to Damascus and Ephraim shows that the historical context is ch. 7, where Ahaz was choosing between joining their coalition against Assyria, and appealing to Assyria for help against them.

17:1 The burden of Damascus.--The capital of Syria.

Behold, Damascus is taken away from *being* a city, and it shall be a ruinous heap.--Just a pile of rubble.

2 The cities of Aroer *are* forsaken: they shall be for flocks, which shall lie down, and none shall make *them* afraid.--“Them” refers to the flocks. They will roam freely through the ruined towns with no interference.

3 The fortress also shall cease from Ephraim, and the kingdom from Damascus, and the remnant of Syria.--Both Ephraim and Damascus will no longer be leading powers with strong fortresses, but will be reduced to an impoverished remnant from whom all power has been removed.

they shall be as the glory of the children of Israel, saith the LORD of hosts.--The formula identifies this as a summary, marking the end of this section.

Damascus and Ephraim wanted Judah to join them in their coalition against Assyria. On the contrary, their only hope of glory is in joining Israel. This opening theme is repeated in the second “woe” in ch. 18.

17:4-11, Effect of That Day

As Isaiah has predicted all along, the coalition will be unable to stem the Assyrian advance, but will fall beneath it.

The order of the three “in that day” sections is negative, then positive, then negative again.

4 And in that day it shall come to pass, that the glory of Jacob shall be made thin, and the fatness of his flesh shall wax lean.--v.3b insisted that Syria's fate would be defined by Israel's and not the other way around, and in the near future that fate is gloomy.

5 And it shall be as when the harvestman gathereth the corn, and reapeth the ears with his arm; and it shall be as he that gathereth ears in the valley of Rephaim.--The Valley of Rephaim is a broad valley that leads up to Jerusalem from the west. Open to the rains from the Mediterranean, its terraces have always been fruitful. Assyria will reap Ephraim and Damascus as easily as a reaper gathers the crop at harvest time. They will not be able to offer any resistance.

The image of conquest as harvest introduced here ties the entire prophecy together; cf. 17:11; 18:4-5, and recall that the Revelation uses this image to describe the day of the Lord, and the gathering of believers together with the destruction of the wicked (Rev 14:14-20).

6 Yet gleaning grapes shall be left in it, as the shaking of an olive tree, two or three berries in the top of the uppermost bough, four or five in the outmost fruitful branches thereof, saith the LORD God of Israel.--After the harvest, a few overlooked olives remain on the tree. That will be the extent of the remnant that Syria and Damascus will enjoy.

7 At that day shall a man look to his Maker,--An unusual verb, meaning “to gaze intently at,” that is, for help.

An interesting clue to its meaning is its use in 2 Sam 22:42, and the use of another verb to replace it in the parallel passage Ps 18:42:

2Sa 22:42 They **looked** [ישעו from שעה], but *there was* none to save; *even* unto the LORD, but he answered them not.

Psa 18:41 They **cried** [ישועו from שוע], but *there was* none to save *them*: *even* unto the LORD, but he answered them not.

The interchange of “look” and “cry” is partly due to the similarity of the roots, but is possible only because of the semantic overlap. In 2 Sam our verb clearly has the sense “look for help.”

Syria and Ephraim looked to alliances for security. The only true source of security is the Lord.

Isa 45:22 Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth: for I *am* God, and *there is* none else.

and his eyes shall have respect to the Holy One of Israel.--Literally, “his eyes are toward the Holy One.” The expression often denotes dependence and subservience:

Psa 123:2 Behold, as the eyes of servants *look* unto the hand of their masters, *and* as the eyes of a maiden unto the hand of her mistress; so our eyes *wait* upon the LORD our God, until that he have mercy upon us.

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Psa 25:15 Mine eyes *are* ever toward the LORD; for he shall pluck my feet out of the net.

Psa 145:15 The eyes of all wait upon thee; and thou givest them their meat in due season.

Think about how attentive your dog is to you when he expects that you are about to give him a treat. In the same way, we should fix our attention constantly on the Lord, eager for his approval and trusting in his provision.

Interestingly, the same expression also describes God's attention toward his children:

Psa 33:18 Behold, the eye of the LORD *is* upon them that fear him, upon them that hope in his mercy;

Psa 34:15 The eyes of the LORD *are* upon the righteous, and his ears *are open* unto their cry.

Like a doting mother whose attention is always on her children, so the Lord is focused on his people.

The combination of the two recalls God's exhortation to Abraham,

Gen 17:1 I *am* the Almighty God; walk before me, and be thou perfect.

The believing life is we live with our attention fixed on the Lord, in the recognition that his attention is fixed on us. We often say of two lovers that they have eyes only for each other. This is to be the relation of the believer and the Lord.

8 And he shall not look to the altars, the work of his hands, neither shall respect *that which his fingers have made, either the groves, or the images.*--Note the contrast between "his maker" and the central two items in this chiasmic verse, "the work of his hands" and "that which his fingers have made." It is foolish to think that anything we have made can deliver us. If we made it, we are stronger than it, so how can it save us?

The judgments of that day will persuade people that only their creator is worthy of their trust.

9 In that day shall his strong cities be as a forsaken bough, and an uppermost branch, which they left because of the children of Israel: and there shall be desolation.--Now he returns to the image of judgment as harvest. The few cities that remain are like the overlooked olives after harvest.

10 Because thou hast forgotten the God of thy salvation, and hast not been mindful of the rock of thy strength,--The verbs now become second person feminine singulars, perhaps reflecting the custom of referring to a city as "daughter" (e.g., "daughter Zion," "daughter Babylon").

This attitude is the opposite of "looking unto" and "having respect to" in v. 7. If we fix our attention on the Lord, he will protect us, but if not, judgment will come.

therefore shalt thou plant pleasant plants, and shalt set it with strange slips:--If there is to be a harvest, there must first be a planting.¹ The language continues to be figurative. If you have forgotten God, what kind of plants will you sow? They will be "pleasant," pleasing to the flesh, but "strange," foreign, alien. Having turned from God, Israel imported the false religions of the nations around them.

11 In the day shalt thou make thy plant to grow, and in the morning shalt thou make thy seed to flourish:--Isaiah pictures her laboring hard to cultivate these strange slips, these pagan plants.

¹ The prefix forms are probably to be understood as progressives, not futures. "You habitually do this."

but the harvest shall be a heap in the day of grief and of desperate sorrow.--Omit the "but." Her labor will yield abundant fruit—of judgment and disappointment.

Gal 6:8 For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting.

17:12-18:7, The Woe Overflows

The burden on Damascus and Ephraim now reaches others, in keeping with the general theme of That Day, the great and terrible Day of the Lord. The nations that threaten them will in turn be destroyed.

12 Woe to the multitude of many people[s], which make a noise like the noise of the seas; and to the rushing of nations, that make a rushing like the rushing of mighty waters! 13 The nations shall rush like the rushing of many waters:--In the first instance, the metaphor recalls 8:7-8,

7 Now therefore, behold, the Lord bringeth up upon them the waters of the river, strong and many, even the king of Assyria, and all his glory: and he shall come up over all his channels, and go over all his banks:

In view of the reference to the coalition in vv. 1-3, this may indeed be the first reference. Assyria will dash itself against the nation like a mighty wave against the shore, but will be broken. But as we see throughout the burdens, these specific historical references are just illustrations of the coming Day of the Lord, when the ragings of all nations will be proven ineffective.

but God shall rebuke them, and they shall flee far off,--The image of God rebuking the waves recalls our Savior's power over the storm on the Sea of Galilee:

Mar 4:41 What manner of man is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?

In contrast to the imposing power of the ocean's waves, Isaiah now describes them with two other images, showing how weak the nations are before the Lord.

and shall be chased as the chaff of the mountains before the wind,--People thresh their grain on flat stony areas on the hillsides, exposed to the wind, so that the chaff can be carried away. The mighty armies of the nations will be no more substantial than the cloud of fine dust that blows away from the hillsides during threshing season.

and like a rolling thing before the whirlwind.--As another example, he presents the tumbleweed, a dried weed that breaks off and rolls along the desert floor before the wind.

14 And behold at eveningtide trouble; and before the morning he is not.--When the people lie down at night, they are surrounded by a threat, which has dissolved by the morning. This is in fact what happened to the Assyrians at the gates of Jerusalem.

2Ki 18:17 And the king of Assyria sent Tartan and Rabsaris and Rabshakeh from Lachish to king Hezekiah with a great host against Jerusalem. And they went up and came to Jerusalem.

Rabshakeh delivered his ultimatum, which Hezekiah spread before the Lord. The Lord replied through Isaiah that the Assyrian would be destroyed. The record continues,

2Ki 19:35 And it came to pass that night, that the angel of the LORD went out, and smote in the

camp of the Assyrians an hundred fourscore and five thousand: and when they arose early in the morning, behold, they *were* all dead corpses.

This is the portion of them that spoil us, and the lot of them that rob us.--God will not leave his people undefended.

The section that follows is extremely difficult, with many unique words and indirect allusions. But the general thrust is quite clear.

18:1 Woe to the land shadowing with wings, which is beyond the rivers of Ethiopia: 2 That sendeth ambassadors by the sea, even in vessels of bulrushes upon the waters,-- "Vessels of bulrushes" were used in the lands along the Nile. Heyerdahl's Ra and Tigris expeditions² show that they were capable of voyaging to distant lands, even crossing the Atlantic. The reference to "shadowing with wings" is obscure, but perhaps alludes to the sails on these vessels. Ethiopia is here pictured as sending out ambassadors to distant lands. This action aligns with Ethiopia's historical opposition to Assyria, recorded in 2 Kings,

2 Ki 19:9-10 And when [Rabshakeh] heard say of Tirhakah king of Ethiopia, Behold, he is come out to fight against thee:

In Isaiah's account, Rabshakeh concludes that Hezekiah is allied with Egypt.

Isa 36:6,9 Lo, thou trustest in the staff of this broken reed, on Egypt; whereon if a man lean, it will go into his hand, and pierce it: so *is* Pharaoh king of Egypt to all that trust in him. 9 How then wilt thou turn away the face of one captain of the least of my master's servants, and put thy trust on Egypt for chariots and for horsemen?

saying, Go, ye swift messengers,--Ignore the word in italics. Here the Lord returns a message to the nation that sent out the embassy. "You have come trying to enlist us in your opposition to Assyria. Here is what you shall tell your government."

to a nation scattered and peeled, to a people terrible from their beginning hitherto; a nation meted out and trodden down, whose land the rivers have spoiled!--Very obscure, but probably describing the Ethiopians and their allies.

- **Scattered**, lit. "drawn out," long, tall, reflecting the unusual height of many African races
- **Peeled**, having little body hair.
- **Terrible from their beginning hitherto**, with a history of warlike activity. There are several examples of from the Egyptian tombs of model armies of African soldiers to serve the deceased in the afterlife, as early as the 11th dynasty (2000 BC).³
- **Meted out**, an expression used in 28:10, 13 to mimic unintelligible speech, "speaking a foreign tongue"
- **Trodden down**, or "treading," describing their relentless marching

2 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thor_Heyerdahl

3http://www.eternalegypt.org/EternalEgyptWebsiteWeb/HomeServlet?ee_website_action_key=action.display.element&story_id=5&module_id=31&language_id=1&element_id=60577&ee_messages=0001.flashrequired.text

- **Spoiled** or “divided,” referring to the Nile and its tributaries that run through it.

3 All ye inhabitants of the world, and dwellers on the earth, see ye, when he lifteth up an ensign on the mountains; and when he bloweth a trumpet, hear ye.--This warning is not just for the Ethiopians, but for all those upon the earth. When you hear the call to war, consider this.

4 For so the LORD said unto me, I will take my rest, and I will consider in my dwelling place like a clear heat upon herbs, and like a cloud of dew in the heat of harvest.--The Lord is surprisingly passive! He just sits back and watches. If anything, he sends heat and dew to hasten the ripening of the threat.

5 For afore the harvest, when the bud is perfect, and the sour grape is ripening in the flower, he shall both cut off the sprigs with pruning hooks, and take away and cut down the branches.--Then, at the last minute, he steps in and chops the vine to pieces.

How different his intervention is from that of men. We justify preemptive action, whether sanctions or war, to keep an adversary from growing too strong. Humans know that given time and resources, any one party can become strong enough to destroy any other. The Lord just sits back and lets them come almost to the full power, so that he can show how overwhelming his power is.

Compare his words to Abraham:

Gen 15:13-16 Thy seed shall be a stranger in a land *that is* not theirs, and shall serve them; and they shall afflict them four hundred years; ... 16 But in the fourth generation they shall come hither again: for the iniquity of the Amorites *is* not yet full.

He waits for a nation's sin to become fully ripe before he harvests them.

6 They shall be left together unto the fowls of the mountains, and to the beasts of the earth: and the fowls shall summer upon them, and all the beasts of the earth shall winter upon them.--The cut down branches and immature fruit, instead of bringing joy to those who labored to produce it, will form nests for the wild beasts.

7 In that time shall the present be brought unto the LORD of hosts of a people scattered and peeled, and from a people terrible from their beginning hitherto; a nation meted out and trodden under foot, whose land the rivers have spoiled, to the place of the name of the LORD of hosts, the mount Zion.--Here is what the ambassadors should do. Instead of forming a human coalition against threats like Assyria, they should send their tribute to the Lord and recognize him the only true power over all the earth. Like Damascus and Ephraim in vv. 1-3, instead of drawing Judah away from trust in the Lord, they should seek the glory of the children of Israel.