

ISAIAH

Chapter 18

A Prophecy Against Cush

Woe to the land of whirring wings long the rivers of Cush,² 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.³ All you people of the world, you who live on the earth, when a banner is raised on the mountains, you will see it, and when a trumpet sounds, you will hear it.⁴ This is what the LORD says to me: “I will remain quiet and will look on from my dwelling place, like shimmering heat in the sunshine, like a cloud of dew in the heat of harvest.”⁵ For, before the harvest, when the blossom is gone and the flower becomes a ripening grape, he will cut off the shoots with pruning knives, and cut down and take away the spreading branches.⁶ They will all be left to the mountain birds of prey and to the wild animals; the birds will feed on them all summer, the wild animals all winter.⁷ At that time gifts will be brought to the LORD Almighty from a people tall and smooth-skinned, from a people feared far and wide, an aggressive nation of strange speech, whose land is divided by rivers—the gifts will be brought to Mount Zion, the place of the Name of the LORD Almighty.

18:1–7 See Zep 2:12. (CSB)

In ch 17, Isaiah exposed the folly of putting confidence in an alliance with Israel’s northern neighbor. Now, he warns against making a defensive pact with a nation far to the south. (TLSB)

18:1 *whirring wings*. Either a reference to insects (perhaps locusts) or a figurative description of the armies of Cush (see 7:18–19). (CSB)

May correspond to the boats mentioned in v 2, alluding to the sails or the oars of the messengers sent out from this far-flung land. Another interpretation is that this is actually against the nation of Cush, and that Israel is to send messengers to them to give God’s response. (TLSB)

THE prophet now turns to the south, an area noted especially for shipping. First of all, however, he prophesies against those who are beside the Red Sea, which is stagnant and has many papyrus reeds, from which ships were constructed, and these people are called Arabian or lower Egyptians. *Woe*, he says, *to the land* that has the shades of wings, that is, of ships. These only fly with sails as birds do with wings, that is, as a people very active in commerce puts its trust in ships.

For in the Scriptures a shade denotes protection. The prophets hated and rebuked nothing so much as a trust placed “elsewhere” and not in God. (Luther)

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Cush. Nubia or ancient Ethiopia (not to be confused with modern Ethiopia, which is located farther to the southeast), south of Egypt. In 715 B.C. a Cushite named Shabako gained control of Egypt and founded the 25th dynasty. (CSB)

rivers of Cush. Canals and branches (19:6) that constitute the Nile. Cush was in the Upper Nile region, of which Ethiopia and Nubia were a part. (TLSB)

18:2 sea. Perhaps the Nile River (cf. 19:5; Na 3:8, where the same Hebrew word is translated “river”). (CSB)

He is describing the mania of those people, namely, truly a plundering and thievish people, a pursuit which they think is lawful for them. And most of their operation is on the Red Sea, by which merchandise comes to Alexandria and from there to other places. (Luther)

papyrus boats. See note on Ex 2:3. (CSB)

Light, fast boats made of papyrus reeds. (TLSB)

The Hebrews called all utensils vessels. Here they mean ships. (Luther)

Go, swift messengers. With the message contained in vv. 3–6. (CSB)

That is, messengers, so that the report may reach that land, namely, that the king of the Assyrians and war and disaster are coming. (Luther)

people tall and smooth-skinned. Probably the peoples of Cush and Egypt. Unlike Semites, they were clean-shaven (see note on Ge 41:14). (CSB)

Likely refers to their clean-shaven appearance. (TLSB)

The Greek historian Herodotus described the Ethiopians of his day as “the tallest and most beautiful of mankind.” They were so different from the Jews and so different from the Assyrians – a different culture separated by race, distance, and environment. Yet they would benefit from the deliverance of the Lord. (PBC)

near and far. Widely known. (TLSB)

rivers. The Nile and its tributaries. (CSB)

Rivulets and channels of the Nile south of Egypt. (TLSB)

That is, where each one is cut off so as to be isolated, where there is no social intercourse, and they live in the midst of waterways. A people without laws. According to the authors, they can be named Troglodytes, Ishmaelites, etc. (Luther)

18:3 *All you people of the world.* † All the nations arrayed against God's people Israel. (CSB)

Isaiah first prophesies war against them and then starvation. The inhabitants of this world, that is, the neighbors and inhabited areas. Concerning the banner on the mountains see Is. 13:4 above. (Luther)

banner. See 5:26 and note. (CSB)

trumpet. Used to summon troops. (CSB)

The Lord's message to the world is plain to see. There is a visual element in signal and an audible element in the trumpet. The people are commanded to look and hear, leaving them without excuse or ignorance. (TLSB)

mountains. Heights in plain sight. (TLSB)

18:4 *remain quiet.* In the face of the hostility of the nations, the Lord will not act immediately; but when they are in the full growth of summer (v. 5), he will cut them down. (CSB)

Namely, when very hopefully the earth will have brought forth its sprouts, then I will destroy them with an intense heat so that they will not reach maturity. Even so it often happens now too. Among the Hebrews rain is called light, because they call all sad experiences darkness and all joys light. He says, "I will keep the clouds from raining. Then I will add an intense heat, which is more harmful after a rain, because with the rain it draws out the juice of the crops so that they cannot grow." (Luther)

He did not act immediately, but He was not idle or ignorant of the situation. It simple was not His time yet to act. God's calm, powerful words contrast with the fear in the hearts of the people of Cush. (PBC)

2 Peter 3:8-9, ⁸ But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. ⁹ The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

dwelling. Heaven or the temple in Jerusalem. The gaze of the Lord is enough to make His presence felt. He waits for the right moment to act. (TLSB)

A CLOUD OF DEW – dewy cloud. Mildew. This is indeed harmful when the dew falls at the same time the sun is shining. For it shrivels and consumes in such a manner that worms and caterpillars are born from it. Men, he says, will receive no fruit from them, but birds and beasts will use them as best they can. Allegorically, however, this means that it will be with the people just as with the fruits of the field. The *heat* is the king of Assyria, who will devour that blooming, that is, enlarged, people and the young and the handsome and the strong, so that they will be booty for the birds and beasts, and thus the spoilers will be despoiled. (Luther)

18:5 BEFORE THE HARVEST – Just when all seems to be going well for the nations, when all of the work is at the moment paying off, the Lord enacts His own harvest – judgment (Rev. 14:15). (TLSB)

HE WILL CUT... TAKE AWAY – Pruning of power and authority is what meant here. Pruning normally took place after the harvest. God's judgment comes at an unexpected time. (TLSB)

18:6 *They*. The people. (TLSB)

birds of prey ... wild animals. Cf. 56:9; Jer 7:33; Eze 32:4; 39:17–20. (CSB)

So devastating that animals will feed on the nation all seasons without ceasing (Ezek 39:17). (TLSB)

18:7 AT THAT TIME – At last, he says, also those Troglodytes and Arabians will bring gifts to the Lord in Jerusalem; that is, trouble will give understanding, and the rod will make well-behaved children. A wild people will be changed and will become devout to the Lord. Thus Luke says in Acts 2:5: “Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven.” Again, there was the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8:27 ff. But in this way the prophet shows that a remnant of this people is to be saved, that from among the worst will come the holiest, but on the contrary, the holiest in Jerusalem will be the most depraved. Thus God will perplex the devil. At Rome is the head and the seat of the devil. The cross is the bier of Saint Robber, as the ancient line puts it. *Amor* read backwards is the capital of the world and the beast of the earth. (Luther)

See v. 2. *gifts*. According to 2Ch 32:23 gifts were brought to Hezekiah after Sennacherib's death. The Moabites were asked to send tribute to Mount Zion in 16:1 (cf. 45:14; Zep 3:10). (CSB)

The remnant of the once-great people mentioned in v 2 comes to the Lord to pay homage (cf 2:2–3; 11:9). The promise is for the Gentiles as well as the people of Israel (e.g., Ps 76:11–12). (TLSB)

place of the Name. See Dt 12:5 and note. (CSB)

Ch 18 The Lord’s plans are clearly signaled and sounded. All who dwell on earth should look and listen. The Lord makes known His message of salvation with unmistakable clarity—of Law and Gospel, of judgment and grace. Those who refuse to look and listen will be cut off from the Lord at an unexpected time. The Lord promises grace and every blessing to those who look to Him and hear His Word in faith. Through Jesus, we will be welcomed into the Lord’s presence in the heavenly Mount Zion. • O Lord, give us ears to hear Your Word and to believe it. And as we hear Your Word, bless us with faith, hope, and love. Amen. (TLSB)