

Isaiah 17-18 David Linden, March 2012

One can get lost in a passage like this if unaware of changes in perspective. It has five sections:

- 1) 17:1-3 Israel and Aram
- 2) 17:4-9 Israel only
- 3) 17:9,10 Explanation re Israel
- 4) 17:12-14 Threat of many nations
- 5) 18:1-7 International alliance

1) 17:1-3 Israel and Aram Ephraim = Israel. In Isaiah 7 the threat to Jerusalem was this combination of nations that conspired against Judah. The Lord said it would fail (8:4). Though old enemies (2 Kings 13:4,5), they joined together to resist Assyria when it became the great danger to them. Israel forgot they were the people of God. Both Ephraim and Damascus will share the same “glory”. If the people in Jerusalem heard this oracle early, then it was more of the word of the Lord to them that this is what will happen to those who put their trust in men not the Lord. Without faith it is impossible to please God (Hebrews 11:6).

We do not know where Aroer is, an ancient location. “Left to flocks” of sheep means there will be no people around to frighten the sheep. Judgment is often pictured as quietness because the former inhabitants are gone (Lamentations 1:1). Yet there is a hint here of salvation. The word *remnant* is a term for those God will save, and Aram has a remnant to share Israel’s glory. “*In wrath remember mercy*” (Habakkuk 3:2); there is a Gentile remnant too!

2) 17:4-9 Concerning Israel Only Vv. 4-6: The oracle is about Damascus, but now the attention is given to Israel who had joined up with Damascus. Israel will fade but not die. The reaper in the field does not get all the grain; farmers shaking olives off the trees do not get all of them; some olives are left. The promise of a remnant emerges again. Why is this so important? The Lord made covenant promises to Abraham that his descendants would be a great nation (Genesis 12:2) and a blessing to all other nations (Genesis 12:3). They will survive

because God is faithful, and the Lord Jesus must come through them.

17:7-9 Israelite survivors, greatly sobered by God’s judgment, look to the Holy One of Israel. They learned their lesson. Now they have no other gods and make no images. (An Asherah pole was erected to a female deity.) To have the true God and to worship Him in no other way than the way He has commanded are inseparable. Israel tried to worship the LORD with images of Him! One can try to call upon the true God, but breaking the second commandment means the first commandment will be broken every time the second is. (This is the classic reformed view of worship.) V.9, their cities will be desolate. This is the end of their earthly strength.

3) 17:9,10 Explanation re Israel Where did they go wrong? They forgot the Lord Who was their real fortress and their Savior, so their fortress cities were destroyed. Those cities with stone walls could not save them. Within their land they could see the overgrown ruins of fortress cities overthrown by the Israelites in the days of Joshua. Those cities did not save the Canaanites. Poor Israel fell into the same misplaced trust. They too trust in fortresses rather than in the Lord who overthrew them in the time of their forefathers. They forgot their real Rock. God warned of forgetting in Deuteronomy 8:10-20. Notice how close Isaiah 17:5 and 10 are to Deuteronomy 32:15: *Jeshurun [Israel] grew fat and kicked; filled with food, he became heavy and sleek. He abandoned the God who made him and rejected the Rock his Savior.* Israel is pictured in this paragraph to a farmer who does much work and gains for it a harvest of nothing.

4) 17:12-14 Threat of many nations Sometimes Isaiah will switch from discussing a specific threat like Babylon and speak of the whole world, as in chapter 13. Here it is again. Everything we read here fits the Assyrian attempt to enter Jerusalem very well. The words in v. 14 “sudden terror” and “before morning

they are gone,” describe the Assyrian threat. In the morning the people of Jerusalem looked out on a dead Assyrian army (37:36).

Why would the Holy Spirit have Isaiah speak this way? I cannot guess the mind of God, but we can observe that this is often the way He has spoken in the Psalms. Psalms describe a wide variety of troubles, yet they often do not identify so tightly to some event that we might miss that the words apply to us in our situation. Likewise, the people of God were not just attacked outside the walls of Jerusalem long ago. To say, “This is the portion of those who loot us” (v.14) is deliberately vague as to looters, so we might apply it in other situations. The church is under attack all the time, but the gates of hell will not overcome it (Matthew 16:18). It helps all generations to read, “the raging of many nations”. This is true because the Assyrian attack is not an isolated incident but a typical one. The great lesson here is that “no weapon forged against you will prevail” (54:17). The Assyrian was gone suddenly, struck down by God, and like chaff blown away never to return again (Psalm 1:4).

5) 18:1-7 International alliance This could be taken as a separate oracle, but the word *oracle* is not used here. It probably was not a message to Cush, but one mentioning that region. The ‘Woe’ is to Egypt, for the land of whirring wings is Egypt. The Nile River would overflow its banks creating puddles for flies to breed – thus “the whirring wings”. To the south in Cush, large rivers join to form the Nile. The picture is of Egypt sending out ambassadors calling for help even south to Cush, a land divided by rivers. The tall people of Cush or Ethiopia had skin noted by ancient people (Jeremiah 13:23) probably because it was so dark. Here the skin is said to be smooth, and their language was also different, and they struck fear in people probably because of their skill in battle.

I think the idea in this passage is that Egypt is seeking help in all directions against the power of Assyria – another example of the world getting organized by an alliance to face the enemy. This is man’s wisdom and it will fail.

Assyria could boast of itself in chapter 10; the others like Egypt boasted of their strategy. Both policies ignore God.

Some background: Trusting in Egypt for help was a long-time temptation for the Lord’s people; see Jeremiah 2:14-19, where Jeremiah speaks of this sinful policy including a mention of Assyria many years after Assyria was destroyed. In Jeremiah 42 they long for Egypt again.

Some teachers think this banner to the nations is again God calling the nations to see what He will do with this Egyptian strategy. It is like saying, “Look and listen, here is what will happen.” The Egyptians promote their plan, but in vv. 4-7 God reveals what will really happen.

18:4-7 God says He will be quiet but is watching. Heaven is His home and the earth is His footstool (66:1). The effort of these nations is like a vine growing. All seems to be going according to plan. God lets the vine progress past the stage of budding to the emergence of the fruit. Before harvest time, when men hope for the reward of their labor, God cut off the branches. All their efforts were a waste. They fail again. Egypt does not prevail; Assyria defeats her. It was a terrible defeat. Only animals and birds feast on the branches all summer and all winter. The people do not; all their effort was in vain.

This passage is another instance of the raging of the nations we read of in 17:12-14. There is no peace for the wicked (57:20,21), so the world can be organized in peace only when it rallies to the banner of Christ, the Root of Jesse (11:10).

18:7 Heathen coming to the Lord They were described as aggressive (v.2) and “a people feared far and wide.” They were people who lived far away, yet they come to the Lord bringing gifts to Mount Zion. Isaiah has this repeated message of other nations coming to the Lord, evidence of a Gentile remnant. God’s salvation will be world wide (11:9) and will include people from Cush (11:11). When they come they will say, “*Surely God is with you, and there is no other, there is no other God,*” (See 45:14 in the NIV; Cush is mentioned again.)

