
Isaiah 17-18

Presented by
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Chapter 17 – introduction

- This chapter deals with Aram, whose capitol was Damascus and with Ephraim, that is Israel.
 - As we recall, Aram was among those who joined with the Northern Kingdom against Judah, trying to pressure them into an anti-Assyrian coalition.
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Some historical background

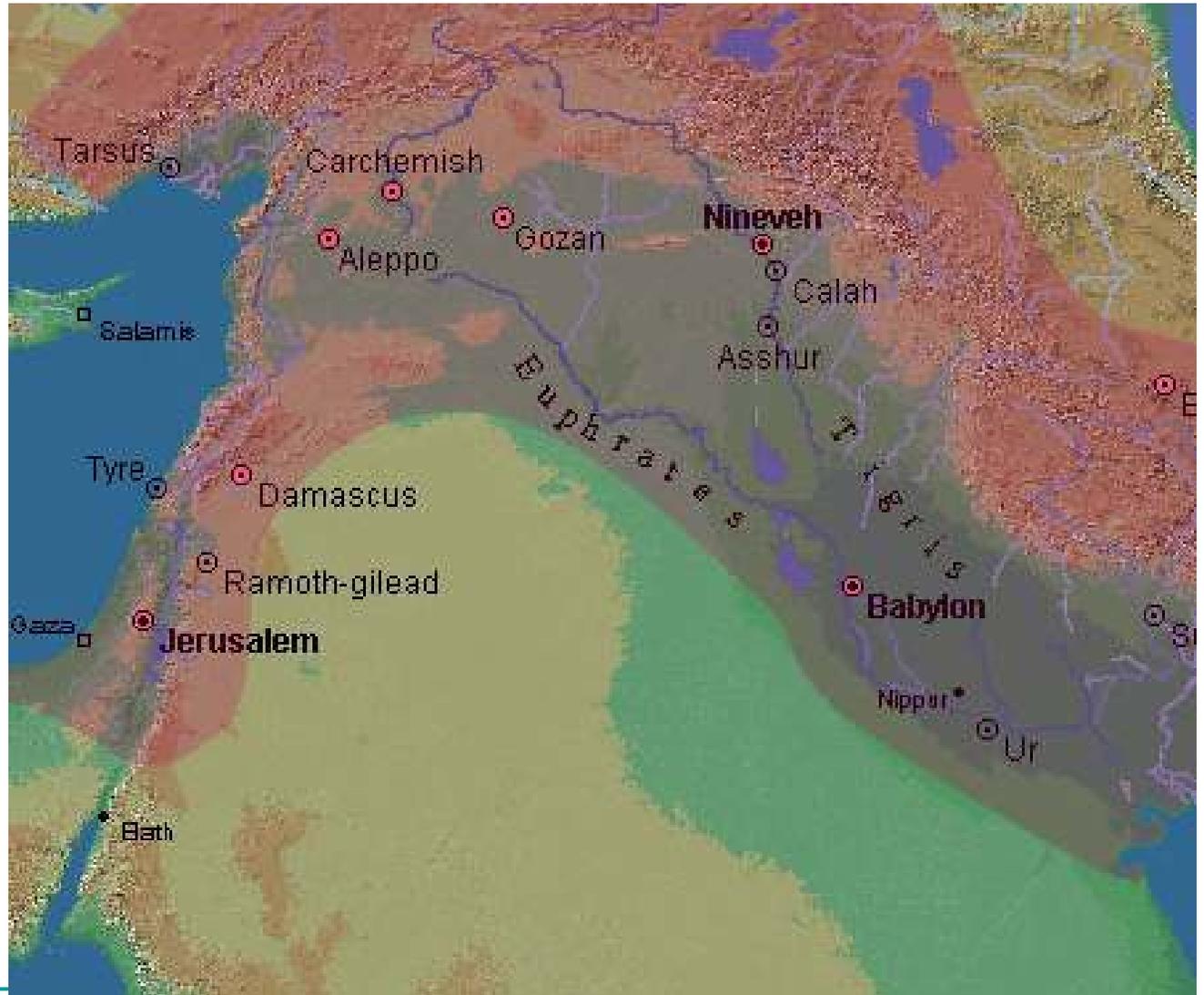
- An excerpt from John Bright helps us to understand the big picture in which the 2 kingdoms find themselves:
 - “In the third quarter of the eighth century, Israel was confronted by circumstances that altered her status decisively and permanently. We have, up to this point, traced the history of two independent nations. Though they had fought with their neighbors continually, and on occasion been humiliated, they had never lost political self-determination; nor had their fortunes, although not unaffected by the current of larger world affairs, ever been dependent upon the whim of empires far away, save indirectly. The truth is that the entire history of Israel through the five hundred years of her existence as a people had been spun out in a great power vacuum; no empire had existed that had been in a position to trouble her deeply and permanently. As a result, she had never known an emergency that she had not in some way been able to master, and so to survive. After the middle of the eighth century this was never to be the case again.”¹

□ ¹ John Bright, *A History of Israel*, 3d ed., Westminster aids to the study of the Scriptures (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981).

The Assyrian Empire

- Into this power vacuum, the Assyrian empire rose in power and aggression.
- Many small kingdoms fell to their aggression; some cultures ceased to exist, though their people were not all killed, of course.

□ Map from Logos deluxe map set



The Assyrian approach to rebellion

- There is more good information in Bright, including:
 - "The campaigns of Tiglath-pileser differed from those of his predecessors in that they were not tribute-gathering expeditions, but permanent conquests. In order to consolidate his gains, Tiglath-pileser adopted a policy which, although not wholly novel, had never been applied with such consistency before. Instead of contenting himself with receiving tribute from native princes and punishing rebellion with brutal reprisals, Tiglath-pileser, when rebellion occurred, habitually deported the offenders and incorporated their lands as provinces of the empire, hoping in this way to quench all patriotic sentiment capable of nurturing resistance. This policy, consistently followed by Tiglath-pileser and copied by all his successors, was one of which Israel would in turn learn the meaning."^{1b}

- 1b Ibid.

The text vs. 1-6 – Blenkinsopp translation

1. An oracle about Damascus. See, Damascus has ceased to be a city, it has become a heap of ruins;
 2. the cities of Aroer are deserted, they will serve as pasture for herds that will lie there undisturbed.
 3. There will be no more fortified cities in Ephraim, nor sovereignty in Damascus; what remains of Aram will resemble what the glory of Israel has become. A word of [Hashem] of the hosts.
 4. On that day Jacob's weight will diminish, the fat waste away from his body;
 5. It will be as when a reaper gathers in the standing corn, harvesting the ears in armfuls; as when one gleanes the ears of corn in the Valley of Rephaim;
 6. As when one beats an olive tree and only gleanings are left in it – two or three berries at the top of a bough, four or five on the branches of the fruit tree. This is the word of [Hashem], G-d of Israel.
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A translation issue

- One of the problems for which the people (which ones?) are rebuked is found in verse 7 and 8. Blenkinsopp translates it as follows:
 - “On that day: People will look to their Maker, their eyes will turn towards the Holy One of Israel. They will not look to their alters, the work of their hands; they will not turn their gaze to that which their fingers have made [the Asherah steles and incense alters].”
 - Interestingly, the text that Blenkinsopp has in brackets, is in the text in Hebrew in that location. Brackets in most sources indicates something added, but this is not the case here.
 - His translation, however, is at variance with others, including D. Mandel, who translates it as “Asherim or the sun images.” and Stone that translates it as “Asherah trees or sun images.”
 - I bring this up because of its interesting connection to archeology.
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The Archaeological Encyclopedia of the Holy Land by Avraham Negev

- This book, in an entry on the fortified Judean city of Lachish, lists the following find:
 - “Beneath the interior of the Hellenistic temple were found objects belonging to an Israelite high-place, including a large stone stele (*massebah*), the remains of the trunk of an olive tree which had been intentionally buried (an *asherah*?), and several pits containing broken stone stelae and votive objects.” (emphasis in original)
 - Stelae are flat slabs of stone with engravings
 - The passage continues: “Nearby was a room (12 feet by 16 feet) with plastered benches along its walls and a platform in its western corner. Near the platform were found a horned incense stone altar and a number of clay incense burners, as well as numerous other pottery vessels. This shrine was destroyed in the 10th century bc.”
 - Obviously this is too early for Isaiah, but it shows that this problem had been around for a while.
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- Negev continues: “Thus, as at Arad and Beer-Sheba, the Israelite Iron Age tradition persisted into the later period, at which time Lachish was again inhabited by Jews (cf. Neh. 11:30). This conclusion is also supported by the following evidence: Sennacherib’s reliefs show two decorated *incense burners*;” (emphasis added)
 - Incense burners seems to fit with Blenkinsopp, but Negev continues with more valuable information.
 - “more than 150 small stone incense burners of the Persian period were found at Lachish; and an identical building dating from the Late Bronze Age to the early Hellenistic period was already discovered in the first excavations at a small distance southeast of the *Solar Shrine*, in which a stone incense altar was also found.”¹ (emphasis added)
 - Jastrow, in his dictionary, translates the Hebrew word in question “hamanim” as solar pillars, thus agreeing with the 2 Jewish translators.

□ 1. Avraham Negev, *The Archaeological Encyclopedia of the Holy Land*, 3rd ed. (New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1996, c1990).

BAR on Asherah shrines

- William G. Dever talks about the Asherah in the context of house shrines and folk religion.
- Asherah was the “Canaanite mother goddess.”
- Mr. Dever posits, based upon the Biblical texts, that “many ancient Israelites, perhaps even the majority, worshiped Asherah...”²
- I would disagree with his hypothesis that the majority worshiped this way throughout the land, since Dr. Brauner said in class that most idols were found in the north.
- However, both our chapter in Isaiah and archeology shows that it was a problem, at least for a segment of the population.

□ 2. Dever, W. “A Temple Built for Two.” Biblical Archeology Review March/April 2008 Volume 34, Number 2, 55.

House shrines

- Some Israelites had an unfortunate habit of having house shrines that included Asherah, in the form of a woman, or simply as stylized vegetative pillars, in a throne motif that included two seats.³
 - Interestingly, the recently published shrines were likely made in Moab or perhaps Ammon, dating from either the 9th or 8th century B.C.E, which puts them in the time of our Prophet, though not from the land of Israel.⁴
 - 3. Ibid, 55.
 - 4. Ibid, 56.
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Examples of Conflation?

- To the right is a house shrine with a throne that BAR posits was built for two, G-d and Asherah.
- This one was likely from a site in Moab, but it is significantly empty.
- It is important to notice both the tree columns (associated with Asherah), and the fact that the thrones are empty.⁵
- 5. Ibid, 54 (image), 56 (information).



Other examples

- This example, from an Egyptian painting, show the goddess as a tree.
- BAR gives this as farther evidence that the “tree-columns of the *naoi*, or house shrines...would have been understood as representations of the goddess herself.”⁶
- 6. Ibid, 57.





- William Dever also notes that there is no mention of these shrines in the Bible,⁷ but clearly our passage in Isaiah indicates worship of Asherah was a problem.
- The image to the left, part of the same collection as the previous shrine example, has women, rather than trees, supporting the shrine. This connects the tree image to Asherah again.⁸
- 7. Ibid, 57.
- 8. Ibid, 58.

Palmate columns in Israelite architecture

- This is the top of an Israelite column from Ramat Rahel. Columns like this were common to both Israelite and Judahite architecture in the 10th to 8th century.
- Dever says these columns “probably [are] deeply rooted in the old Canaanite identification of Asherah as a tree-goddess.”⁹
- 9. Ibid, 59



Israelite examples

- The example to the right, like the first example, is empty. The difference is, this one is Israelite, from the Northern Kingdom (but possibly built in Transjordan). The palmate columns connect it with Asherah.
- Many female terra cotta figures have been found in both Israel and Judah, indicating that worship of Asherim was a problem in both kingdoms.¹⁰



■ 10. Ibid, 62

Empty thrones?

- Perhaps, suggests Dever, the double throne is empty because of an Israelite “reluctance to portray [Hashem] himself.”¹¹
 - Mr. Dever posits that Asherah was written out of the Bible after reformists forced her out of the mainstream picture.¹²
 - This confuses folk with official religion. Though he had previously put Asherah in the folk category, his assumption that she was written out of the Bible assumes she had a place in official religion, something I think unlikely.
- 11. Ibid, 62
 - 12. Ibid, 62



How wide spread was idolatry in Judah?

- According to John Bright, “The policy of Ahaz had produced a situation in many respects intolerable to loyal [Hashem]ists. It is unlikely that Isaiah and Micah were the only ones to be angered by the social abuses that the regime tolerated, while paganizing tendencies, though condoned by many, undoubtedly evoked a more strenuous opposition than similar practices ever had in northern Israel... Overt apostasy to paganism was probably the exception rather than the rule in Judah.”
- While he is speaking largely of Assyrian imports, and their rarity, he makes the case that Judah had “by this time progressed far beyond an easy tolerance of popular religious practices such as might once have been possible even there.”¹³

■ 13. John Bright, *A History of Israel*, 3d ed., Westminster aids to the study of the Scriptures (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981).

The text vs. 9-11 Blenkinsopp translation

9. On that day: Their fortified cities will be like the deserted sites of the Hivites and Amorites which they abandoned when attacked by the Israelites. There will be a scene of desolation.
10. You have forgotten your G-d who saves, the Rock, your fortress, you have not kept in mind; therefore plant your shoots of Adonis, sow the slip of an alien god.
11. Even if you got them to sprout the day you planted them, or got them to blossom the morning you sowed them, the crop will be gone when disease comes along with incurable pain.
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The text vs. 12-13 Blenkinsopp translation

12. Hear the thunder of many peoples, they thunder like the thunder of the sea! Hear the roaring of the nations, they roar like the roaring of mighty waters!
 13. [the nations roar like the roaring of many waters]. When he rebukes them they flee far away, blown away by the wind like chaff on the hills, like specks of dust by the whirlwind.
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Comfort – back to the text

- Chapter 17 (vs. 14) ends with Isaiah assuring the south that they will survive the assault on Jerusalem from Assyria. Blenkinsopp translates it: “As night approaches there is terror, but before the day dawns they are no more. This is the fate of those who despoil us, the lot of those who plunder us.” (p 306)
 - In his commentary, while acknowledging that the widely held opinion is that it was during Sennachrib’s siege of Jerusalem, he feels that this refers to somewhere between the time of Sennacherib and Josiah.
 - It is my opinion, given the events surrounding the Assyrian attack on Jerusalem, that this (and thus all of chapter 17), fits best in the context of the time of King Hezekiah and this siege.
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II Kings 18-19 speaks

- Hezekiah, who among other things, “removed the high places, and broke the images, and cut down the Ashera,” rebelled against the king of Assyria.¹⁴
- “And in the fourteenth year of king Hezekiah Sennacherib king of Assyria came up against all the fortified cities of Judah, and took them. And Hezekiah king of Judah sent to the king of Assyria to Lachish, saying, I have offended; withdraw from me; that which you put on me will I bear. And the king of Assyria imposed on Hezekiah king of Judah three hundred talents of silver and thirty talents of gold.”¹⁵
- Hezekiah sent them tribute, however, this did not satisfy the Assyrians, who attacked Jerusalem.

■ 14. Mandel, D., *Judaic Classics Tanakh*.

■ 15. Ibid.

- Hezekiah prays to G-d, who assures him that the city of Jerusalem will stand, and that a remnant of the people would remain.
- In fact, chapter 19 says the following “And the servants of king Hezekiah came to Isaiah. And Isaiah said to them, Thus shall you say to your master, Thus said the L-rd, Be not afraid of the words which you have heard, with which the servants of the king of Assyria have blasphemed me. Behold, I will send a blast upon him, and he shall hear a rumor, and shall return to his own land; and I will cause him to fall by the sword in his own land.”¹⁵
- Most relevant to the end of chapter 17 is the following verse: “And it came to pass that night, that the angel of the L-rd went out, and struck in the camp of the Assyrians a hundred and eighty five thousand; and when they arose early in the morning, behold, they were all dead corpses. And Sennacherib king of Assyria departed, and went and returned, and lived in Nineveh.”¹⁵

15. Ibid

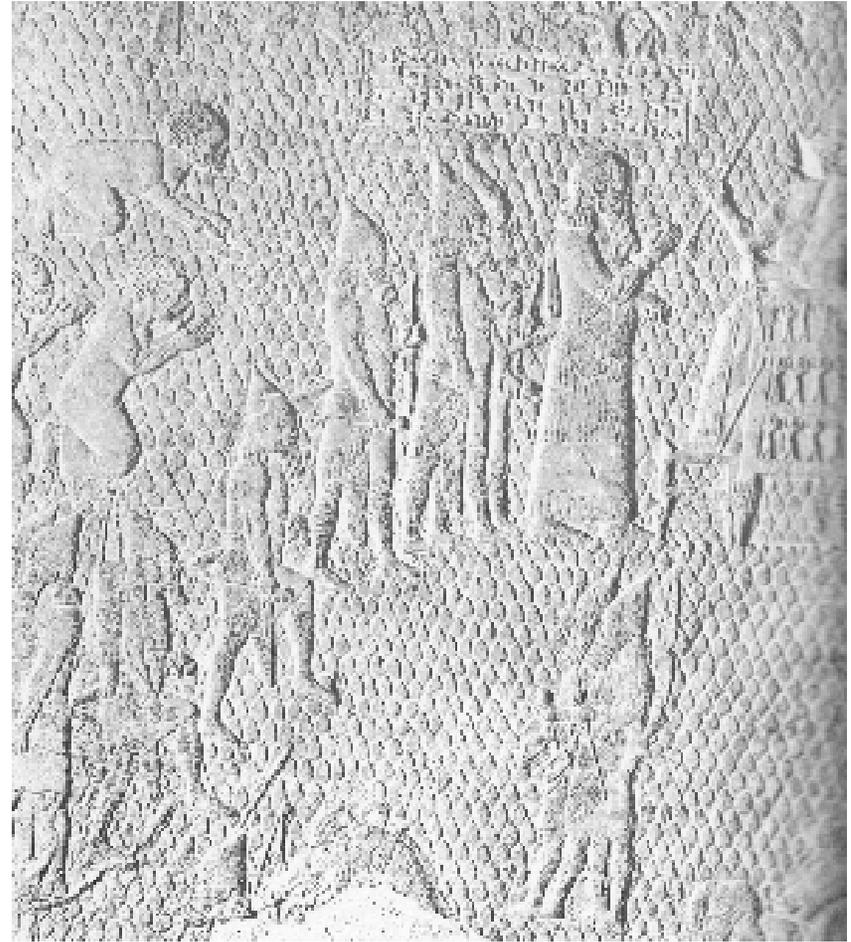
The Assyrian Account (from ANET)

- “As to Hezekiah, the Jew, he did not submit to my yoke, I laid siege to 46 of his strong cities, walled forts and to the countless small villages in their vicinity, and conquered (them) by means of well-stamped (earth-)ramps, and battering-rams brought (thus) near (to the walls) (combined with) the attack by foot soldiers, (using) mines, breeches as well as sapper work. I drove out (of them) 200,150 people, young and old, male and female, horses, mules, donkeys, camels, big and small cattle beyond counting, and considered (them) booty. Himself I made a prisoner in Jerusalem, his royal residence, like a bird in a cage....His towns which I had plundered, I took away from his country and gave them [to Philistine city states].”¹⁶

□ 16. Pritchard, J. (ed.). “Sennacharib (704-681): The Siege of Jerusalem.” The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958, p 200.

Tribute and booty

- The account continues, detailing the tribute sent by Hezekiah, though the amount of silver is higher than that listed in the Biblical account of 300. Sennacherib lists 800 talents of silver.
- He also says that Hezekiah sent various treasures as well as concubines, musicians, and his own daughters!¹⁷
- 17. Ibid, 200-201.



Sennacharib receives spoils from the sack of Lachish.
(Image is a detail from figure 102 of Pritchard)

Chapter 18 – introduction

- This chapter is about the alliance with Egypt, which lends support to the end of chapter 17 being about the siege of Jerusalem during Hezekiah's time.
 - There are some problems with Blenkinsopp's translation of parts of chapter 18, as well as some of his interpretation, in my opinion.
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Verse 1-2 in Blenkinsopp

1. Woe to a land full of buzzing insect wings beyond the rivers of Kush, which sends its envoys by sea, in reed vessels over the water!
2. Go, swift messengers, to a nation tall and smooth-skinned, to a people feared far and near, a nation strong and conquering whose land divides rivers.



Egyptian
reed boat

Encarta '99

Comments on vs. 1

- Clearly verse 1 refers to an Egypt ruled by Kush, which according to a recent National Geographic issue, was in modern day Sudan. The NJPS translates Kush as Nubia, apparently recognizing this.
 - The Egyptians were known for their reed boats, a small one of which is being made in the image in the previous slide. Interestingly, while the NJPS does talk about “swift messengers,” it moves the boats down to the end of verse 2. D. Mandel, in his translation for the Judaic Classics Library, translates it as papyrus boats. Papyrus was made from the same reeds as these boats.
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Comments on vs. 2

- Verse two, where Blenkinsopp translates “to a nation tall and smooth-skinned,” NJPS translates as “To a nation far and remote,” with their famous statement in the footnotes, “meaning of Hebrew uncertain.” D. Mandel agrees with Blenkinsopp, translating it as “tall and smooth” without mentioning skin. The Stone Tanakh has it “dragged and plucked.” Jastrow seems to support the translation dragged and plucked, though there are several meanings possible for the first Hebrew word.
 - The Stone Tanakh translation, in context, leads to a rather different interpretation than Blenkinsopp. “Woe to the land of clamorous wings, on the other side of the rivers of Cush, which sends agents into the sea, in papyrus vessels upon the surface of the water. ‘Go, fleet messengers, to the nation that is dragged and plucked, to the people that inspired awe from the day it came into being onward, the nation that is detested and trampled, whose land was ravished by kings.’”
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- Looking for a moment at Blenkinsopp again, “Go, swift messengers, to a nation tall and smooth-skinned, to a people feared far and near, a nation strong and conquering whose land divides rivers.”
 - This is an instruction to the messengers. They, coming from Egypt, are to go to the nation that is “tall and smooth skinned,” “tall and smooth,” “dragged and plucked,” or “far and remote.”
 - Since they are going to that nation, Blenkinsopp’s interpretation of this as referring to the Nubians themselves is untenable. They would not send messengers to themselves.
 - Thus, I tend to agree with the Jewish interpretations that have it as either “dragged and plucked,” or “far and remote.” This has bearing on a later disagreement I have with Blenkinsopp.
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Chapter 18:3-6 in Blenkinsopp

3. All you denizens of the world, you who live on the earth, when the signal is raised in the hills you will see it, when the trumpet sounds you will hear it.
 4. This is what [Hashem] said to me: "I will calmly look down from my dwelling while the heat is bright in the sunlight, while the dew covers the ground at the time of the vintage."
 5. For before the vintage, when the blossoms are gone, and the seed-berry is ripening into a grape, he will cut off the shoots with pruning shears, lop off and remove the branches.
 6. They will be abandoned to birds of prey on the hills and to the beasts of the earth. Birds of prey will live off them in the summer, all the beasts of the earth in the winter.
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Chapter 18:7 in Blenkinsopp

7. At that time: Tribute will be brought to [Hashem] of the hosts from a people tall and smooth-skinned, a people feared far and near, a nation strong and conquering, whose land is divided by rivers. Their tribute will be brought to Mount Zion, the place where the name of [Hashem] of hosts is invoked.
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Commentary and a contrasting view

- Blenkinsopp sees this and verse 2 as indicating that the “Nubeans and Sabean Arabs (only the latter are described as being remarkably tall) will acknowledge [Hashem] as the true G-d but will be brought to Jerusalem as slaves...”
 - While NJPS and D. Mandel seem to agree that another nation will bring tribute, possibly Cush, there is no mention there or in Blenkinsopp’s translation of slaves. This ties in with Blenkinsopp’s view that Isaiah predicts world dominion (chapter 11).
 - The Stone Tanakh translation implies something quite interesting in its translation of verse 7: “At that time an offering will be brought to HASHEM, Master of Legions – [namely,] the people that is dragged and plucked, and some of the people that inspired awe from the day it came into being onward, the nation that is oppressed and trampled, whose land was ravished by rivers; to the place [wherein rests] the Name of HASHEM, Master of Legions – Mount Zion.”
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- In their brief commentary, the Stone Tanakh make it very clear that they believe this to mean the Jewish people will be returned to the land of Israel by the nations of the world. They see the rivers as a “metaphor for foreign invaders,” following the Targum (an ancient translation of the text into Aramaic).
 - They say to see also Isaiah 66:20, which in NJPS reads “And out of all the nations, said the L-rd, they shall bring all your brothers on horses, in chariots and drays, on mules and dromedaries, to Jerusalem My holy mountain as an offering to the L-rd—just as the Israelites bring an offering in a pure vessel to the House of the L-rd. “
 - Soncino also sees this as a prophecy that returns Israel to its land.
 - These represent a vastly different viewpoint than the rather negative one that Blenkinsopp paints into the text. I prefer Stone and Soncino’s interpretation to Blenkinsopp’s.
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