

# ISAIAH<sup>a</sup> 16

Hope Floats<sup>b</sup>  
(Isaiah 17-18)

Isaiah 17-18 Revised Standard Version (RSV)

## An Oracle concerning Damascus

**17** An oracle concerning Damascus<sup>c</sup>.

Behold, Damascus will cease to be a city,  
and will become a heap of ruins.<sup>d</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Her cities will be deserted for ever;  
they will be for flocks,  
which will lie down, and none will make them afraid.<sup>e</sup>

<sup>3</sup> The fortress will disappear from E'phraim,  
and the kingdom from Damascus;  
and the remnant of Syria will be  
like the glory of the children of Israel,  
says the LORD of hosts.<sup>f</sup>

<sup>4</sup> And in that day  
the glory of Jacob will be brought low,  
and the fat of his flesh will grow lean.<sup>g</sup>

<sup>5</sup> And it shall be as when the reaper gathers standing grain  
and his arm harvests the ears,  
and as when one gleans the ears of grain  
in the Valley of Reph'aim.<sup>h</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Gleanings will be left in it,  
as when an olive tree is beaten—  
two or three berries  
in the top of the highest bough,  
four or five  
on the branches of a fruit tree,  
says the LORD God of Israel.<sup>i</sup>

<sup>7</sup> In that day men will regard their Maker, and their eyes will look to the Holy One of Israel;<sup>j</sup> <sup>8</sup> they will not have regard for the altars, the work of their hands, and they will not look to what their own fingers have made, either the Ashe'rim<sup>k</sup> or the altars of incense.<sup>l</sup>

<sup>9</sup> In that day their strong cities will be like the deserted places of the Hivites and the Amorites, which they deserted because of the children of Israel, and there will be desolation.<sup>m</sup>

<sup>10</sup> For you have forgotten the God of your salvation,  
and have not remembered the Rock of your refuge;  
therefore, though you plant pleasant plants  
and set out slips of an alien god,<sup>n</sup>  
<sup>11</sup> though you make them grow on the day that you plant them,  
and make them blossom in the morning that you sow;  
yet the harvest will flee away  
in a day of grief and incurable pain.<sup>o</sup>  
<sup>12</sup> Ah, the thunder of many peoples,  
they thunder like the thundering of the sea!  
Ah, the roar of nations,  
they roar like the roaring of mighty waters!<sup>p</sup>  
<sup>13</sup> The nations roar like the roaring of many waters,  
but he will rebuke them, and they will flee far away,  
chased like chaff on the mountains before the wind  
and whirling dust before the storm.<sup>q</sup>  
<sup>14</sup> At evening time, behold, terror!  
Before morning, they are no more!  
This is the portion of those who despoil us,  
and the lot of those who plunder us.<sup>r</sup>

## An Oracle concerning Ethiopia

**18** Ah<sup>s</sup>, land of whirring wings<sup>t</sup>  
which is beyond the rivers of Ethiopia<sup>u</sup>;  
<sup>2</sup> which sends ambassadors by the Nile,  
in vessels of papyrus upon the waters!  
Go, you swift messengers,  
to a nation, tall and smooth,  
to a people feared near and far,  
a nation mighty and conquering,  
whose land the rivers divide.<sup>v</sup>  
<sup>3</sup> All you inhabitants of the world,  
you who dwell on the earth,  
when a signal is raised on the mountains, look!  
When a trumpet is blown, hear!  
<sup>4</sup> For thus the LORD said to me:  
“I will quietly look from my dwelling  
like clear heat in sunshine,

like a cloud of dew in the heat of harvest.”<sup>w</sup>  
<sup>5</sup> For before the harvest, when the blossom is over,  
and the flower becomes a ripening grape,  
he will cut off the shoots with pruning hooks,  
and the spreading branches he will hew away.  
<sup>6</sup> They shall all of them be left  
to the birds of prey of the mountains  
and to the beasts of the earth.<sup>x</sup>  
And the birds of prey will summer upon them,  
and all the beasts of the earth will winter upon them,  
<sup>7</sup> At that time gifts will be brought to the LORD of hosts  
from a people tall and smooth,  
from a people feared near and far,  
a nation mighty and conquering,  
whose land the rivers divide,  
to Mount Zion, the place of the name of the LORD of hosts.<sup>y</sup>

**Revised Standard Version (RSV)**

Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1946, 1952, and 1971 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

© Copyright 2017 by Whitman H. Brisky, all rights reserved. No copyright claimed on text of Scripture quoted above which is owned by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.

---

<sup>a</sup> The Titles of the lessons in this study are borrowed from those given by **Jhan Moskowitz** of Jews for Jesus to the chapter titles in his recorded study of Isaiah upon which much of this study is based. I owe a great debt to Jhan, my late friend and brother in the Lord, who was called Home before his time, not only for much of the work in this study, but also for giving me a whole new perspective on the Scriptures and the Jewish Messiah. Jhan’s original recordings may be downloaded from the Jews for Jesus web site. <http://jewsforjesus.org/jhan-moskowitz>

Most current translations of Isaiah into English are based on the Masoretic (Hebrew) text which was primarily copied, edited and distributed by Jew known as the Masorettes, mostly from the ben Asher family. These Jews lived in the Middle East, especially Jerusalem, Tiberias and Mesopotamia, between the 7<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D., a high point of Jewish civilization in the that region. The earliest Masoretic extant texts are from the 9<sup>th</sup> century. The Masoretic text is similar to other Hebrew texts from Qumran (mostly from the first three Centuries before the Messiah) and others from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century. However, there are other Hebrew textual traditions in circulation prior to the standardization of the Masoretic text. The Great Isaiah Scroll (1QIsa) is a virtually complete copy of Isaiah from Qumran which has been carbon dated between 325 B.C. and 100 B.C. This history indicates that the accepted Hebrew text of Isaiah was substantially settled well before the coming of the Messiah. The Masoretic text of Isaiah has numerous differences of both greater and lesser significance when compared to the manuscripts of the Septuagint, a Koine Greek version of the Scriptures in common use in the Middle East, where this version of Greek was the *lingua franca* at the time of the Messiah. Indeed, where the Gospels and Paul’s letters quote Scripture, it is mostly quoted from the Septuagint. The Septuagint was created among diaspora Jews in Egypt beginning during the reign of Ptolemy Philadelphus (283-246 B.C.) and was completed by 132 B.C., likely from Hebrew texts which differed from the tradition that would later give rise to the Masoretic text. There are extant manuscripts of portions of the Septuagint from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century B.C. and citations to

---

the Septuagint from other sources from the early part of that Century. The Septuagint was the basis of the Old Latin and Vulgate (the authoritative Roman Catholic Latin translation) translations of the Bible and for all Catholic translations until the middle of the last Century. It remains the authoritative version for Greek Orthodox Christians. In the endnotes for these outlines I frequently quote an English translation of the Septuagint version of Isaiah where it differs significantly from the Masoretic text. The Septuagint is particularly useful for Biblical scholars seeking to interpret the Greek of the Messianic Writings (New Testament) because it is likely that the meanings attributable to words used by the Apostolic writers, who were all most familiar with the Septuagint, would be the same as the meaning of those words as used in the Septuagint.

We must approach our study of Isaiah from the standpoint of humility, and recognize that we study from faith and not knowing all the answers. While there are parts that seem fairly clear, there are other parts that are debated. This study will attempt to identify where the scholarship is essentially in agreement, and where there are debated passages and meanings.

There are a number of recurring images or “motifs” in Isaiah, including (1) the Holiness of God, (2) David’s City, Jerusalem, Zion or God’s Holy Mountain, (3) a restoration to the conditions of the Garden that will reverse the curse of Original Sin (Gn 3), (4) the “seed” or descendant of Abraham and David, and judgment upon the nations, and (5) faith in God. Isaiah’s overall theme appears to be that God will judge sin, but at the end of the day, He will use His Messiah to bring reconciliation and healing and establish the Messianic Kingdom.

While there is some debate among scholars regarding the date and authorship of the Book, this study will assume that Isaiah is the primary author, and that it is relatively contemporaneous with the times it describes. Even if others had a hand in authoring some parts of the Book, or in editing, arranging and copying the Book, the inspiration of the Holy Spirit need not be limited to those men and women who actually wrote the text of Scripture. It can extend also to those who may have edited or copied the original text, those who compiled it, and those who decided which texts were to be included within the Scriptural Canon. There is good reason to believe that Isaiah may be a sort of “greatest hits”, with various writings of Isaiah throughout his ministry arranged in the final form to make a point about Judah, Jerusalem, the coming Jewish Messiah and the plan of salvation. It is also likely that much of Isaiah was first spoken, or recited, in the form of sermons or prophetic statements, and then written down and collected into the form we have today.

We cannot know whether we have, in the compiled book, the complete original sermons or poems. Nor do we know the context in which they were preached or recited, though in some cases we can make a good guess about that context. It is possible, even likely, that at least some of them were created in a specific context of time and place, endowing them with a specific contemporary meaning, but that when recombined into the final product we have today, the individual pieces take on a new meaning in this new context. Thus we may find multiple meanings for the same passage, including, e.g. a meaning in the original context in which it was spoken (if that can be determined), a meaning in the context of the short term history of the Judah, Assyria and Babylon, and a Messianic or eschatological meaning.

Much of the Book is in the form of Hebrew poetry. While the translation into English causes a loss of many of the poetic elements, some of those that remain will be identified as we go along. One thing that is apparent is that poetry, in Hebrew and English, allows the use of images which can paint a powerful picture of what is going on without being a literal description. Isaiah will make liberal use of these images. When God speaks in verse, it helps to elevate the dignity of what He says. Poetry also casts a much larger shadow than prose. If an historical event is described in prose, it would normally be just a description of that event. But by putting it in verse that single historical event can have a much bigger meaning in a larger context. In addition, verse, even unaccompanied by music, is easier to remember, and recite, than is prose. These two aspects of poetry may help explain why many of the Prophets, including Isaiah, wrote in verse. It is not clear that Isaiah’s verse was ever set to music, though music was an aspect of at least some of the Prophets, 1Sm 10:5; 2Ki 3:15. If any of Isaiah’s verse were set to music, none of the actual music has survived.

Isaiah himself does not appear in the Book until Chapter 6 when the beginning of his ministry is described. In verse 1:1 he tells us that his ministry began in the year King Uzziah (783-742 B.C.; 2Ki 15:1-7, 2Ch 26:1-23) died and continued through the time of Kings Jotham (742-735 B.C.; 2Ki 15:32-38, 2Ch 27:1-9), Ahaz (735-715 B.C.; 2Ki 16:1-17:41, 2Ch 28:1-27) and Hezekiah (715-687 B.C.; 2Ki 18:1-20:21, 2Ch 29:1-32:33). In 721 B.C., the Assyrian army captured the Israelite capital at Samaria and carried away the citizens of the northern kingdom into captivity. The virtual destruction of Israel left the southern kingdom, Judah, to fend for itself among warring Near Eastern kingdoms. At the time of Samaria’s fall, there existed two kings in Judah — Ahaz and his son Hezekiah — who ruled as co-regents. After the fall of the Northern Kingdom, the kings of Judah tried to extend their influence and protection to those inhabitants who had not been exiled. They also sought to extend their authority northward into areas previously controlled by the Kingdom of Israel. The latter part of the reign of Ahaz, and most of that of Hezekiah were periods of stability during which Judah was able to consolidate both politically and economically. Although Judah was a vassal of Assyria during this time and paid an annual tribute to the powerful empire, it was the most important state between Assyria and Egypt. In 715 B.C., following the death of Ahaz, Hezekiah became the sole regent of Judah and initiated widespread religious reforms, including the breaking of religious idols. During 2016 archaeological evidence of these reforms was discovered in Israel, <http://www.foxnews.com/science/2016/09/28/archaeologists-unearth-ancient-gate-shrine-in-israel.html>. Hezekiah built Hezekiah’s tunnel, still in existence today, to insure that water was available during a siege, <http://www.biblicalarchaeologytruth.com/hezekiahs-tunnel.html>. He re-captured Philistine-occupied lands in the Negev desert, formed alliances with Ashkelon and Egypt, and made a stand against Assyria by refusing to pay tribute. In response, Sennacherib attacked Judah, laying siege to Jerusalem in 701 B.C. God destroyed Sennacherib’s army outside Jerusalem and the siege was broken. The records of royal Assyria state that while Sennacherib captured many cities in Judah, Jerusalem was only besieged,

---

not captured, thus agreeing with the Biblical account. Archaeologists have recently uncovered the ruins of Sennacherib's palace in Nineveh under the ruins of Jonah's Tomb, <http://www.foxnews.com/science/2017/03/06/biblical-kings-palace-uncovered-beneath-shrine-destroyed-by-isis.html> Archaeologists have also discovered a royal seal of Hezekiah picturing a winged sun which may refer to the events of Is 38:8 in which the sun appeared to move backward in the sky, <http://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/biblical-sites-places/jerusalem/king-hezekiah-in-the-bible-royal-seal-of-hezekiah-comes-to-light/>. After being saved from the Assyrians, Judah survived until c. 600 B.C. when the Babylonians destroyed the City and carried the leaders into exile. The Exiles were first allowed to return to Jerusalem in 539 B.C. after Babylon fell to the Persians.

The entire Book of Isaiah is identified in 1:1 as a "vision" meaning, in a broad sense, divine revelation, 2Ch 32:32, Ob 1, Nah 1:1, Am 1:1, Mi 1:1, Hab 1:1. The visions in Isaiah are not arranged chronologically. In order to understand Isaiah, we always need to ask how the text relates to the rest of the text of the section in which it appears, how the sections of the Book are connected, and why they are arranged the way they are. The central theme of Chapters 1-39 is the "King." Chapters 40-55 have to do with the "Suffering Servant." And Chapters 56-66 have to do with a restored Jerusalem, with the key theme in those chapters being the "Conqueror."

The initial section on the "King" may also be divided into separate sections. Chapters 1-5 describe the overall background of a sinful time in Judah of greed, hypocrisy, and judgment. Even in these chapters, there were hints of a restoration. Isaiah 6 is Isaiah's call. Chapters 7-12 (the Book of Emmanuel) are all about the birth of a son, explicitly in 7-9 and 11 and implicitly in 6 and 10, who will be Emmanuel. Chapter 12 is a hymn of thanksgiving for what God has done, and has promised to do. The other sub-sections are Chapters 13-23 and 24-37.

The **first 5 chapters** could have taken place during any, or all, of the time of Isaiah's ministry and are perhaps best understood as setting the scene, or painting a picture, of the spiritual condition of Judah during Isaiah's ministry. In **Chapter 6**, Isaiah is given his ministry by God, a ministry to preach to a people who will not hear, and who will continue to be estranged from God and His law, that is, an unsuccessful ministry. Indeed, in some way, the failure to respond to Isaiah's preaching will be used to help convict the people of Judah, Rm 10:14-21. Yet even here, there is a hope of redemption for the remnant. The context for **Chapters 7 and 8** are a rebellion by Syria and Israel against their overlord Assyria. Syria and Israel wish to attack Judah, remove Ahaz of the line of David, and replace him with a King who will join them in an alliance against Assyria. Isaiah warns Ahaz against doing so, but Ahaz chooses to protect himself against Syria and Israel by making an alliance with Assyria thus becoming a vassal of Assyria. Thereafter except for brief periods, Judah will have lost its existence as an independent state. In Chapter 7, Emmanuel is referred to, but remains a mystery. We learn a little more about in in **Chapter 8**, and in **Chapters 9** and 11 we get a much fuller picture. **Chapter 11** ends with images from the Exodus which is the touchstone of the salvation history in the Hebrew Scriptures. By using that image, Isaiah calls up the story of God as redeemer of Israel, and all of its implication for salvation history.

**Chapter 12** is a Psalm of thanksgiving for God's help and rescue and the conclusion of, or coda for, the Book of Emmanuel, which was introduced in Chapter 6. In some way, not clearly defined because this is poetry, the song expresses that the wrath of God is turned away and the relationship with God restored in joy and thanksgiving. This Psalm should be compared to Chapter 6, in which Isaiah himself confesses his sin to God (a man of unclean lips living among a people of unclean lips), and God brings forgiveness for Isaiah through the touch of a hot coal to his lips. Now, in Chapter 12, for the remnant, something of the same sort has happened, the sin of the remnant has been forgiven so that the relationship with God can be restored. Similar to the Passover itself, where God saw the blood on the doorposts and stayed His hand, God will recognize His people and leave a remnant. Although the details are not clear, we know from the intervening chapters that this child, Emmanuel, will be instrumental in this restoration.

**Chapter 13** begins a new subsection of the "King" section of the Book which will run through Chapter 24. The theme of this section is the goyim, or the Nations, including Judah, and contains prophecies of destruction for the various nations surrounding Judah. Isaiah uses these stories of judgment against these nations as illustrations of what God will do in the Eschaton. In this subsection judgment upon individual nations are linked with scenes of universal and cosmic Doom and assurances of better times for God's people. The link with 8<sup>th</sup> Century Judah is not broken altogether, but the historical horizon is extended far into the future. The first nation, in **Chapters 13 and 14**, is Babylon. Isaiah in Chapter 13 prophesies the conquest and eventual destruction and abandonment of Babylon, an event, over a century in the future, in 539 BC, with several specific details about that event including that the destruction will be at the hands of the Medes. During Isaiah's time, the Medes were allied with Babylon against Assyria. The Chapter consists of two poems, vs. 2-16, which do not mention Babylon, and vs. 17-22 which makes specific reference to conquest by the Medes. There is debate about whether the first poem is about Babylon specifically, or has a more general application. Both poems share, however, the fact that they describe the coming Day of the Lord. The end of Chapter 14 (vs. 24-32) and **Chapters 15 and 16** are, on their face, prophecies against Assyria, Philistia and Moab, ancient neighbors and adversaries of Israel. In **Chapter 16**, the exiles of Moab will seek shelter in Judah but be denied because of their arrogance, in this case the refusal to reject Moab's own gods and submit to the God of Abraham. As a result of that refusal, they are destroyed.

Jhan reminds us that the meaning of most stories is found in its end. We know the end of the story is Jesus, which allows us to interpret Isaiah in light of that ending. The central theme of Isaiah, and indeed all of Scripture, is that, after the Fall, God still desired to live with mankind, but could not do so because of Sin. Scripture discloses that Jesus the Messiah is that plan by which God will bring us back from corruption and sin, and His anger will turn to comfort.

---

<sup>b</sup> Chapters 17 & 18 contain oracles ostensibly about Damascus (Syria) and Cush (Ethiopia), respectively. The first three verses of Chapter 17 are about Damascus, but verses 4-11 are a poem about the fall of Israel due to the failure of Israel's alliance with Syria. Verses 12-14 are about the Assyrian attack on Jerusalem that failed suddenly. Taken together they are yet another lesson about trusting God rather than trusting in the devices of men. In Chapter 18, Cush seeks an alliance with Judah but is rejected. Unlike Damascus, however, Cush will be preserved and even serve as an ambassador for God to the gentiles.

<sup>c</sup> Damascus was the capital of Syria, Aram. Syria and Israel made an alliance against Assyria but Assyria, under Tiglath-Pileser III, captured Damascus in 732 B.C. and annexed Israel to Assyria. Ahaz, King of Judah, paid tribute to Assyria, 2Ki 16:1-14.

<sup>d</sup> (1) Is 13:1; Gn 14:15, 15:2; 2Ki 16:9; Jr 49:23; Am 1:3-5; Zec 9:1; Ac 9:2; Is 9:16, 8:4, 10:9, 25:2; Jr 49:2; Mi 1:6. Damascus is to be destroyed by the Assyrians. It is not clear whether this poem was written immediately after the capture and destruction of Damascus and Syria in 732 B.C., or before the event. In a sense it does not matter because the point is not about Syria, but about the futility of trusting in men.

<sup>e</sup> (2) Nu 32:34; Is 7:21-22; Ezk 25:5; Zep 2:6; Mi 4:4; Jr 7:33. Aroer is not in Syria or Israel, but in Moab. It is not clear why this place is referred to in a prophecy about Syria. It may be there for poetic reasons. Or, it may be a copying or transcription error because the place name has the same consonants as the Hebrew for "ruined city". The sheep will be able to lie down because there will be no people there to disturb them.

<sup>f</sup> (3) Is 7:8, 7:16, 8:4, 17:4; Hos 9:11. Ephraim is, in this context, another name for Israel. It had not yet been completely conquered when Syria fell, but would fall soon and be taken into exile, 722 B.C., because Syria, its shield, had fallen. Damascus is not mentioned in the rest of the Chapter.

<sup>g</sup> (4) Is 10:3, 10:16. The next section of this chapter, vs 4-11, is unified by the use of "in that day" three times and its references to the northern kingdom of Israel. The description of Israel here is of a person wasting away from disease.

<sup>h</sup> (5) Is 17:11; Jr 51:33; Jl 3:13; Mt 13:30; 2Sm 5:18-22. Although there will be great destruction and dislocation, the gleanings refer to what is left for the poor after the farmer harvests the grain. The image shows that there will still be a remnant even after the Assyrians.

<sup>i</sup> (6) Dt 4:27; Is 24:13, 27:12; Ob 5.

<sup>j</sup> (7) Is 10:20; Hos 3:5, 6:1; Mi 7:7. For the remnant, there will a recognition of the Holy One of Israel as God, and a time of repentance. The Hebrew for man here is "Adam" representing not just Israel, but all mankind. "In that day" people from every tribe and nation will recognize God.

<sup>k</sup> Asherah was a Canaanite goddess and female consort of Baal. Queen Jezebel may have brought the worship of Asherah into the northern kingdom. The cult encouraged immoral sexual practices and attracted many people. The Bible repeatedly warns against the worship of Asherah (Ex 34:13; Dt 12:3, 16:21). King Manasseh was condemned for erecting an Asherah pole in God's temple, 2Ki 21:7.

<sup>l</sup> (8) 2Ch 34:7; Is 27:9, 2:8, 2:20, 30:22, 31:7; Ex 34:13; Dt 7:5; Mi 5:14. Those who have survived will no longer worship the created things, but rather the creator.

<sup>m</sup> (9) The strong cities will be desolate because the people have forgotten the God of salvation. One of the attributes of God is being a savior. His inclination and desire is to save us. But instead of relying on God for our salvation, we look to our own plans and devices and are disappointed. The Prophet reminds the people that they don't worship rocks, trees, man made idols, etc. Instead they worship the God that brought them out of Egypt. But they have forgotten God. The Rock is where water came from in the Exodus, but is also the Messiah. Some

---

commentators have that the cities referred to in this verse are those of the Canaanites captured by Israelites in the conquest of the Land.

<sup>n</sup> (10) The Prophet here is using imagery from the Exodus. I have a note in my Bible that this refers to the old Canaanite cities after they were driven out, and then Israel was driven out.

<sup>o</sup> (11) Ps 90:6; Jb 4:8. What is that garden? But what it is saying is your garden may grow, but in the end it will come to nothing.

<sup>p</sup> (12) Is 5:30; Jr 6:23; Ezk 43:2; Lk 21:25; Ps 18:4.

<sup>q</sup> (13) Ps 9:5. Chafe in the wind is used of judgment. That is when the grain is winnowed in the wind. The grain, remnant, falls, but the chafe blows away.

<sup>r</sup> (14) 2Ki 19:35. Us here is the prophet identifying with Judah. The army of Assyria, including units from many nations in the Assyrian Empire, that had beaten Israel, will attack Judah and wash over it, but they will be gone in the morning, 2Ki 19:35, because God will intervene.

<sup>s</sup> Chapter 18 is connected with Chapter 17 because both begin with the same word, translated as “ah”, “behold”, “alas” or “woe”.

<sup>t</sup> Whirring wings perhaps refer to locusts.

<sup>u</sup> Ethiopia, Cush or the Upper Nile region.

<sup>v</sup> (2) Is 18:7. Ambassadors from Ethiopia are coming to Jerusalem to ask for an alliance. But Isaiah warns against such an alliance. Instead, the Ethiopians will be God’s missionaries to tell the world, when the time comes, that God is God, v. 3.

<sup>w</sup> (4) Is 26:19.

<sup>x</sup> (6) Jr 7:33.

<sup>y</sup> (7) Ps 68:31. Ethiopia will come to Zion at the end of time.