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November 5th: Isaiah 18 & Mark 12:35–13:13

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Messengers to Cush. Judgment upon the Temple.

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Transcript

Isaiah chapter 18. 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. For before the harvest, when the blossom is over and the flower becomes a ripening grape, he cuts off the shoots with pruning hooks, and the spreading branches he lops off and clears away.

They shall all of them be left to the birds of prey of the mountains and to the beasts of the earth, and the birds of prey will summer on them, and all the beasts of the earth will winter on them. At that time tribute 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. In Isaiah chapters 18-20 the prophecies concerning the nations move on to consider the nations to the further south, Egypt and Cush, which would include modern day Ethiopia or Sudan.

As Christopher Seitz notes, this section is unusual in treating Egypt and the land to its south separately in chapters 18 and 19 and then together in chapter 20. Cush was one of the people groups mentioned in the list of the nations in Genesis chapter 10. The

kingdom of Cush was to the south of Egypt.

We don't have many references to it in scripture. During the reign of King Asa, a Cushite named Zerah had invaded Judah with an immense army, an event recorded in 2 Chronicles chapter 14 verses 9-15. On that occasion the Lord had delivered his people.

The Cushite kingdom, centred upon the city of Napata, attacked Upper Egypt under Kashta in the middle of the 8th century. His successors, Pianchi and Shebaka, eventually brought the entirety of Egypt under Cushite rule, establishing the 25th dynasty. In contrast to the messages to the nations that preceded it, chapter 18 is not introduced as an oracle but as a woe, much as we see in verses 12-14 of the preceding chapter.

The land is described as a land of whirring wings that is beyond the rivers of Cush. Some have understood the word translated whirring wings in the ESV as a reference to the sort of vessels that the Cushites used upon the river. Elsewhere we see this word used in reference to the locust or some other insect in Deuteronomy chapter 28 verse 42.

This it seems to me is the more likely meaning of the term here. However, the Septuagint and the Targum both understand the term to be in reference to ships so that reading does have a long pedigree. The Cushites are described as sending ambassadors by the sea in vessels of papyrus.

These vessels would have been used to navigate the Nile. If they stuck close to the shore, they could also have been used for a sea journey towards Judah. The business of these ambassadors is debated.

Was this part of a plan for an anti-Assyrian rebellion? Later on in chapter 31 for instance, the Lord will declare the futility of those who go down to Egypt for help. Brevard Charles for instance proposes that we understand this chapter in the context of Hezekiah's attempts to build such an alliance against the Assyrians. Alec Macchio relates it to earlier events as the newly established 25th dynasty under Pianchi itself engaged in diplomatic efforts to form an anti-Assyrian conglomeration of nations.

This might make more sense for the fact that at the beginning of verse 2, it seems to be Cush that initiates the diplomatic exchange. The question of the identity of the swift messengers in the second part of verse 2 and their design destination is one that divides the commentators. Are these the same messengers as have been mentioned in the first part of verse 2? However, if the messengers that have been sent from Cush are being sent back to Cush, it is odd that they are not simply told to return.

The description of the people to whom they are sent, a nation that is tall and smooth, is repeated in verse 7. Some commentators see a parallel with this and chapter 45 verse 14. Thus says the Lord, the wealth of Egypt and the merchandise of Cush and the Sabeans, men of stature, shall come over to you and be yours. They shall follow you,

they shall come over in chains and bow down to you.

They will plead with you, saying, Surely God is in you, and there is no other, no God besides him. Yet the description of the men of stature there is not so clearly related to Cush as it is within these verses. Furthermore, as there is no reference to them being smooth or hairless, the parallel may not be as strong as many people think.

A people feared near and far, a nation mighty and conquering, does not seem to fit Cush that well. Some have seen this then as a reference to Assyria. Alternatively, as Joseph Blenkinsop suggests, this might be a more sarcastic way of speaking about the people of Cush.

He sees the envoys here not as Cushite being sent back but as Judeans being sent to Cush. The message that is delivered does not seem to relate to Cush more directly. Rather, it is a message delivered to the whole world, speaking about what the Lord will do.

The raised signal might draw our minds back to Isaiah chapter 13 verse 2 at the very beginning of the section concerning the nations. On a bare hill, raise a signal, cry aloud to them, wave the hand for them to enter the gates of the nobles. The object of the Lord's judgement is also a matter of debate.

If we read it alongside verses 12 to 14 of the preceding chapter, as Gary Smith notes, it would make most sense to relate it to the Assyrians. God is enthroned above all the events of the earth. His throne is in no way unsettled.

He looks down calmly upon the things that are taking place. At the appropriate time, he will act decisively against his enemies. If verses 5 to 6 are in reference to the Assyrians, the word would have been fulfilled with the cutting back of Sennacherib's army, as the Lord prevented Sennacherib from taking over Jerusalem in 701 BC.

This would be a message of hope to both Judah and Cush. Much as the Lord described cutting back the vine of Moab, the spreading vine of Assyria would also be cut back. And as the Lord cut off from this vine, the pieces would be left for the birds of prey of the mountains and the beasts of the earth.

The end of verse 6 might be a reference to birds of prey and beasts of the earth making their home in the ruins of a former city. Alternatively, we might think of the birds of prey feeding upon the 185,000 that were dead of the Assyrians when the Lord slew them at their unsuccessful siege of Jerusalem. The short chapter is bracketed by another reference to the people tall and smooth, feared near and far, the nation mighty and conquering, whose land the rivers divide.

In Isaiah chapter 2 verses 2 to 4, we read the following prophecy. And many people shall come and say, The chapter ends with a prophecy that this time will come for Cush too.

They will bring tribute to the Lord of Hosts, to Mount Zion.

Nations that were worried about paying tribute to the cruel Assyria would one day pay tribute to the Lord, the righteous and good ruler of all of the earth. A question to consider, in the context of the reign of King Hezekiah and the insecurities of Judah during that period, what lesson might they have taken from this prophecy? Mark chapter 12 verse 35 to chapter 13 verse 13. And as Jesus taught in the temple, he said, How can the scribes say that the Christ is the son of David? David himself in the Holy Spirit declared, The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet.

David himself calls him Lord, so how is he his son? And the great throng heard him gladly. And in his teaching he said, Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes and like greetings in the marketplaces, and have the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honour at feasts, who devour widows' houses, and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.

And he sat down opposite the treasury and watched the people putting money into the offering box. Many rich people put in large sums. And a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which make a penny.

And he called his disciples to him and said to them, Truly I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the offering box, for they all contributed out of their abundance. But she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on. And as he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, Look, teacher, what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings! And Jesus said to him, Do you see these great buildings? There will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.

And as he sat on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter and James and John and Andrew asked him privately, Tell us, when will these things be? And what will be the sign when all these things are about to be accomplished? And Jesus began to say to them, See that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name, saying, I am he, and they will lead many astray. And when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed.

This must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places.

There will be famines. These are but the beginning of the birth pains. But be on your guard, for they will deliver you over to councils, and you will be beaten in synagogues, and you will stand before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them.

And the gospel must first be proclaimed to all nations. And when they bring you to trial and deliver you over, do not be anxious beforehand what you are to say, but say

whatever is given you in that hour. For it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit.

And brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child. And children will rise against parents and have them put to death. And you will be hated by all for my name's sake.

But the one who endures to the end will be saved. At the conclusion of his various conflicts with the leaders of the people, the scribes, the Pharisees, the Herodians, and the Sadducees, in Mark chapter 12, Jesus asks a question to them. Psalm 110 is a Davidic psalm in which David refers to the Christ as his Lord, which makes no sense if the Christ is merely his son.

The Christ seems to be more than merely the son of David according to the flesh. This is a conundrum for those who lack the fuller understanding of Christ that would emerge through his resurrection. The full character of the messianic secret, when it was revealed, would answer this question.

Jesus warns about the scribes. They are concerned with the praise of men and with social status. They love the markers and the honorific titles that come with religious authority.

And there's clearly some exaggeration and satire in Jesus' description of them. But Jesus is very concerned that his disciples learn from their example and do not follow it. The ministers of Christ must be meek.

They must not be those who exalt themselves over others. They must not be those who see leadership as a matter of personal honor rather than about the service of their master, the Lord. True ministry in the kingdom is such that the one who is most humble will be most exalted.

The scribes, by contrast, are predatory leaders. They consume the sheep, especially the most vulnerable. They are hypocrites.

They're fixated on getting honor from men, but cover up their inside, the fact that they are not pious people at all. They are whitewashed tombs, as we see in Matthew 23. The story of the widow's two small coins that is read here needs to be read alongside what immediately precedes it.

All too often it's taken out of context and the point is missed. The widow is investing all of her livelihood in the temple, which is about to be destroyed on account of the sin of the people and their rulers. This isn't a parable about healthy sacrificial giving, but about the way that corrupt religious leadership preys upon the weakest of all and heaps up judgment for itself.

The prophecy of the destruction of the temple that follows should be directly related to the oppression of such people as the widow. The leaders of the people devour the

houses of widows, so their great house will be devoured. Read carefully in context, the story of the widow's two small coins is a horrifying story of the way that wicked religious leaders abuse the flock.

As Jesus leaves the temple at the beginning of chapter 13, one of his disciples admires the temple buildings. Jesus makes clear, however, that the buildings are condemned to destruction. Not one stone will remain upon another.

All will be torn down. Jesus teaches concerning the judgment upon Jerusalem and its temple on the Mount of Olives later, to Peter, James, John and Andrew. His three core disciples and Andrew, Peter's brother.

Remember that these four disciples were the four disciples that were called at the very beginning of the gospel in chapter 1, just after Jesus had declared that the time had come for the kingdom of God and just after his baptism and his temptation in the wilderness. The gospel is returning to its beginning point. We're hearing about the fulfillment of the kingdom of God.

There'll be a new set of temptations and then there will be the baptism of Jesus' death and then the announcement of his coming. We are coming full circle. Jesus teaches concerning the judgment upon Jerusalem and its temple on the Mount of Olives, which Mark makes clear to the reader is opposite the temple.

The disciples are looking at the city and its temple as Jesus is declaring its coming fate. Jesus begins by listing a number of things that would happen in advance of his coming. Not direct signs of his coming itself, but things that would anticipate and go before his coming.

They needed to recognize that these things anticipated but did not herald the coming of Christ so that they would not be led astray. A number of unsettling events would occur before his coming. There would be false teachers and false christs both within and without the church.

There would be wars, famines, earthquakes and other disasters. These are just the beginning of birth pains. The birth of a new world order still hasn't taken place.

This is the world going into labour but the new birth has not yet occurred. Not every dramatic world event is of cosmic significance and the events that are of cosmic significance often don't seem to have sufficient drama. Who would think that the great famines and disasters and other things in the world's history can be largely forgotten, whereas the crucifixion of a first century Galilean carpenter is the event on which all history turns.

The disciples will face persecution but this will serve as an opportunity and occasion for witness before rulers. The witness of the disciples to governors and kings is extremely

important. Jesus is a king and a ruler and the disciples are his emissaries to the rulers of this world declaring his kingdom to their kingdoms.

The gospel will be spread throughout all the nations, throughout the known world. The nations will hear of this new king. Yet they will face treachery and betrayal even from their own families.

They will be hated but if they persevere they will be saved. A question to consider. Why do you think that Jesus underlines his point in the way that he does, drawing his disciples attention to the widow, singling her out from the crowd? What more might we learn from this?