

Ethiopia

Isaiah 18

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Commentaries about this Chapter:

To us, this brief chapter is the most difficult one of all the sixty-six chapters of Isaiah. Although this prophecy is a short one, it probably ranks as the most obscure chapter in the whole Book of Isaiah.

Let's see if we can figure out why it is here...

What do we know about Ethiopia?

Ethiopia is South of Egypt and corresponds to what is now called the Sudan. Most of the land is in the Sahara Desert and the majority of the population is Arabs with African blacks making up the largest minority. Today, 91% of the population is Muslim, 5% Christian and the remaining 4% being folk religions or unaffiliated.

- Ethiopia (aka Cush) is mentioned in Ezekiel 38 as joining with Russia, Turkey, Iran, and Libya in a coalition against Israel in the time-frame of the Lord's return.

What do we know about Ethiopia in Isaiah's day?

In the days of Isaiah (740-680 B.C.), Ethiopia was a major world power, ruling Egypt and a chief rival to Assyria. Since Judah was caught in the middle of this conflict, it might make sense for Judah to align herself with Ethiopia against Assyria.

- In 715 B.C. an Ethiopian named Shabako gained control of Egypt as founder of the twenty-fifth dynasty. Ethiopian domination continued until 633 B.C. when a native Egyptian regained the throne.
- Ethiopia of Isaiah's day designates a much larger area than today — an area including the Sudan and Somalia.

Isaiah 18:1-7 – Proclamation Concerning Ethiopia

*Woe to the land shadowed with buzzing wings,
Which is beyond the rivers of Ethiopia,*

² *Which sends ambassadors by sea,*

Even in vessels of reed on the waters, saying,

“Go, swift messengers, to a nation tall and smooth of skin,

To a people terrible from their beginning onward,

A nation powerful and treading down,

Whose land the rivers divide.”

³ *All inhabitants of the world and dwellers on the earth:*

When he lifts up a banner on the mountains, you see it;

And when he blows a trumpet, you hear it.

⁴ *For so the Lord said to me,*

“I will take My rest,

And I will look from My dwelling place

Like clear heat in sunshine,

Like a cloud of dew in the heat of harvest.”

⁵ *For before the harvest, when the bud is perfect*

And the sour grape is ripening in the flower,

He will both cut off the sprigs with pruning hooks

And take away and cut down the branches.

⁶ *They will be left together for the mountain birds of prey*

And for the beasts of the earth;

The birds of prey will summer on them,

And all the beasts of the earth will winter on them.

⁷ *In that time a present will be brought to the Lord of hosts*

From a people tall and smooth of skin,

And from a people terrible from their beginning onward,

A nation powerful and treading down,

Whose land the rivers divide—

To the place of the name of the Lord of hosts,

To Mount Zion.

v1 – Why was Ethiopia described as a land shadowed with buzzing wings?

The Nile Valley is famous for its many whirring insects.

v2 – What would be the purpose of Ethiopia sending ambassadors by sea?

The scene pictures Ethiopian ambassadors who come to make an alliance with Judah and the other nations of the region against Assyria.

What was the message of the Ethiopian ambassadors?

Go, swift messengers, to a nation tall and smooth of skin: As the Ethiopian ambassadors invite Judah to rebel against the Assyrians, they ask Judah to send swift messengers back to Ethiopia (*to a nation tall and smooth of skin...a nation powerful*), and the Ethiopians would hope to hear that Judah has rebelled against Assyria and aligned itself with Ethiopia and Egypt.

v3 – What was the message to the inhabitants of the world?

The alarm sounded to the nations was to take notice of what God is about to do.

- God proclaims war against the enemies of his people. He gives notice that he is about to do a great work, as Lord of hosts.
- Let all enlist under God's banner, and be on his side, and hearken to the trumpet of his word.

v4 – What did the Lord tell Isaiah?

“I will take My rest”: The LORD God rejected the alliance with Ethiopia because He was more than able to deal with the Assyrians Himself. He could take His rest without the help of the Ethiopians. If God had wanted to muster an army against Assyria, He would have raised a banner or sounded a trumpet. God was fully able to do it and would do it when the time was right.

Why do you think there was no rebuke or judgment against Ethiopia announced here?

It wasn't as if God was going to judge Ethiopia for their offer of an alliance. Perhaps the idea is that it is a well-intentioned but unnecessary offer. Instead, Judah was to trust in the LORD.

v5 – What would God prune?

He will both cut off the sprigs with pruning hooks and take away and cut down the branches: God can “prune” Assyria all by Himself. He will destroy the Assyrian army so completely that they will be left together for the mountain birds of prey.

v5-6 – What would become of the Assyrian army?

This seems to refer to the overthrow of the Assyrian army by a destroying angel, when the dead bodies of the soldiers were scattered like the branches and sprigs of a wild vine, which the Gardener has cut to pieces. And they shall be left to the fowls of the mountains, and the beasts of the earth, to prey on, both winter and summer.

v7 – What is the present that will be brought to the Lord of hosts?

Isaiah announces a day when Ethiopians will come and worship the LORD and bring gifts to Him to the place of the name of the LORD of hosts, to Mount Zion.

What is the place of the name of the Lord?

Jerusalem... Instead of Israelite messengers bringing news to Ethiopia of an alliance against the Assyrians, the day will come when Ethiopians will come and worship at Mount Zion.

When would the Ethiopians worship the Lord in Jerusalem?

This would certainly happen during the Millennial Kingdom. However, this was foreshadowed in Acts 8:26-40, when an Ethiopian came to worship the Lord in Jerusalem and trusted in Jesus at the preaching of Philip.

- It was also fulfilled in the strong Ethiopian church of the first few centuries, and the enduring Ethiopian church today.

Who was the Ethiopian eunuch?

The Ethiopian eunuch was a high court official of Candace, queen of Ethiopia. He was in Israel to worship the Lord at the temple as a Jewish proselyte. On his trip home to Ethiopia, he had a life-changing encounter with Philip the evangelist (Acts 8:26–40).

What was a eunuch?

A eunuch is a man who has been castrated so that he may be a trusted servant in a royal household (see Esther 1:10; 4:4; and Daniel 1:9).

- A king would castrate his servants to ensure they would not be tempted to engage in sexual activity with others in the palace (specifically, the royal harem).
- Being a eunuch also would keep them from plotting an overthrow (eunuchs were incapable of setting up a dynasty of their own).
- Eunuchs have been employed in many civilizations of the Ancient Middle East, Ancient Greece and Rome, China, Korea, and Thailand.

What did Jesus have to say about eunuchs?

Matthew 19:12 – *For there are eunuchs who were born thus from their mother's womb, and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake. He who is able to accept it, let him accept it.*

There are many reasons a man would not have offspring including by choice... not marrying or having children in order to have more time to serve the kingdom of heaven was commended.

How is the story of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8 is a great example of how evangelism works?

Philip was obedient to God following the promptings of the Holy Spirit. He initiated a conversation by asking a question that connected him to the eunuch (*do you understand what you are reading?*) And he knew the eunuch had to be a seeker who was open to the Holy Spirit because of the question he asked (*how can I, unless someone guides me?*)

So, what principles stand out from the story of the Ethiopian eunuch?

The account reveals the importance of these three things: the Word of God, the Holy Spirit's leading, and a human evangelist.

1. In order for a person to accept the truth, he must first hear the truth preached... *How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher?* (Rom 10:14).
2. The Spirit of the Lord had been preparing the eunuch's heart to receive the gospel. As the eunuch read Isaiah, he began to ask questions, and at just the right moment the Lord brought Philip across his path.
3. The field was "ripe for harvest" (John 4:35), and Philip was God's laborer in the field. This was no coincidence. It was God's plan from the very beginning, and Philip was obedient to that plan.

Why do you think the Ethiopian eunuch was a Jewish proselyte?

Because of the Queen of Sheba generations before.

Who was the Queen of Sheba?

The Queen of Sheba was a woman of great wealth, beauty, and power. Most biblical scholars believe Sheba to have been a well-established city of Ethiopia. It is clear that the Queen of Sheba ruled alone and was not enamored with the religions in her own land.

How did the Queen of Sheba become a Jewish proselyte?

The Queen of Sheba traveled to Jerusalem as she had "*heard about the fame of Solomon and his relationship to the LORD, [and] came to test Solomon with hard questions*" (1 Kings 10:1). As God had granted Solomon the gift of wisdom (1 Kings 3:5-12), "*nothing was too hard for the king to explain to her*" (1 Kings 10:3). After a meal together, the Queen of Sheba declares how impressed she is with Solomon's answers, hospitality, and the reputation that preceded him. The story ends with an exchange of resources and the Queen of Sheba returning "*with her retinue to her own country*" (1 Kings 10:13).

What traditions have been associated with the Queen of Sheba?

Here are some speculative and interesting traditions that cannot be declared factual:

- Sources outside the Bible suggest that the Queen of Sheba conceived a child in secret with King Solomon.
- Some Bible commentators have suggested that the nameless woman in the Song of Solomon is the Queen of Sheba (with the man being King Solomon).
- Whether she has any relation to the "Sheba" mentioned in Genesis 10:7 and 28, or if she was the ancestor of "Candace, queen of the Ethiopians" (Acts 8:27), is, again, open to speculation.

Why did Jesus mention the Queen of Sheba?

Matthew 12:42 – *The queen of the South will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and indeed a greater than Solomon is here.* Jesus reaffirming her historical personage while making the point that, despite being originally pagan in belief and Gentile in race, the Queen of Sheba recognized the truth and reality of God, unlike the religious leaders who opposed Jesus. As such, they would be condemned for their ignorant and defiant nature.

What lessons can be learned from the story of the Queen of Sheba?

- First, like King Solomon, believers are to show evidence of God's favor in their lives, whatever their role, profession, or environment.
- Second, the reputation of believers should precede them by their godly words and actions, for we are "Christ's ambassadors" (2 Corinthians 5:20).

Besides the Ethiopian eunuch, what evidence is there for the spiritual legacy of the Queen of Sheba?

There is the fulfillment of this prophecy addressing the return of the Jews to Israel in preparation for the return of the Lord:

Fear not, for I am with you; I will bring your descendants from the east, and gather you from the west; I will say to the north, 'Give them up!' And to the south, 'Do not keep them back!' Bring My sons from afar, and My daughters from the ends of the earth. (Isaiah 43:5-6)

When biblical prophecy is fulfilled, it is exact in every detail, even the order of the Jews returning to Israel. Their return began in the Middle East from Syria, Iraq, and Jordan in 1930-1940. Then the Jews returned from Western Europe after WWII. They returned from Russia which is north of Israel starting in 1988 and finally from Ethiopia to the south as part of Operation Solomon, in 1991.

- The Jews are officially back in their land!

What was Operation Solomon?

Within 36 hours on May 24-25, 1991, 14,325 Ethiopian Jews were covertly airlifted from Addis Ababa to Israel during Operation Solomon, the largest-ever individual Aliyah mission undertaken from any country in the world.

In 1991, Ethiopia had been embroiled in a decades-long civil war and was facing a famine. Rebel forces were advancing toward Addis Ababa and the Jews there, causing grave concern among Israeli and American-Jewish agencies on the ground in Ethiopia. Diplomats negotiated a deal with the Ethiopian government for their evacuation.

- After President George H.W. Bush sent a letter to the new Ethiopian President, an agreement was reached on May 23, allowing Jews to leave Ethiopia all at once. Operation Solomon started the next day and a few days after it was completed, Addis Ababa fell to the rebels.

Operation Solomon involved 35 Israeli aircraft, including Israeli Air Force C-130s and El Al Boeing 747s. One plane broke and holds the Guinness world record for the most passengers on an aircraft. All the seats had been removed, and at least 1,088 people were on board, including two babies born in-flight.

Operation Solomon was the third Aliyah mission from Ethiopia to Israel. Before the mission, there were two similar operations called Operation Moses and Operation Joshua, which were the alternative ways that Ethiopian Jews could leave before they were forced to put an end to these types of programs.

- Operation Solomon airlifted almost twice as many Ethiopian Jews to Israel as Operation Moses. Between 1990 and 1999, over 39,000 Ethiopian Jews entered Israel.

Aftermath: Socio-economic strife...

Estimates in 2006 suggested that ~80% of adult immigrants from Ethiopia were unemployed and had to live off welfare. But by 2016, only 20% were unemployed.

- The transition from the rural, largely illiterate lands of Ethiopia to a highly urban workforce in Israel has proved difficult, especially when considering the fact that most Ethiopian Jews do not speak Hebrew and were in competition with other, more highly skilled immigrant workers.
- Younger generations of Ethiopian Israelis, who have grown up and been educated in Israel, still have a disproportionate amount of trouble finding work suggests racial or even religious bias.
- There has been debate over whether or not Ethiopian Jews should be considered Jewish in the first place.

So, why do you think this chapter on Ethiopia is included here?

It was encouraging to Judah that they would not be alone in God's blessings, there would be Gentile nations that would be blessed as well.

- This is especially encouraging to us today since the church is mostly made up of Gentiles!

What applications come to mind from our discussion?

- God will judge the enemies of his people; you don't want to be on the side against God... repent & be on His side.
- Evangelism involves the Word of God, the Holy Spirit's preparation, and a human preacher.
- Believers should show evidence of God's favor in their lives, whatever their role, profession, or environment.
- The reputation of believers should precede them by their godly words and actions.
- The legacy of believers is far reaching, evangelism is the ultimate multilevel marketing program.
- Prophecy is fulfilled in detail and is thus the best evidence of the Bible being God's Word.