

Isaiah Part 11: Prophecies against Moab, Syria and Ethiopia

Isaiah 15 to 18

An oracle concerning Moab (Isaiah 15 and 16)

The founder of the people of Moab was the son born of the incestuous relationship between Lot and one of his daughters, when his daughters made Lot drunk after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19 v 37). The Moabites settled in the plains to the south-east of Israel, in what is modern-day Jordan. At times, the Moabites were great enemies of Israel: Balak, king of Moab, hired Balaam the prophet, hoping that he could curse Israel (Numbers 22 v 10 to 12); then Eglon, king of Moab, oppressed Israel in the days of the Judges (3 v 12 to 14). During the time of Saul and David, Israel established firm control over Moab (e.g. 2 Samuel 8 v 2), but later the kings of Israel were not always able to keep them under their dominance.

At the same time, there was a Moabite connection with Israel. Moab was ‘related’ to Israel because Lot was Abraham's nephew. Because of this, God told Israel in Deuteronomy 2 v 9 that they were not to destroy Moab and take their land. Moreover, David himself had Moabite ancestry, as his great-grandmother Ruth was from Moab, and David entrusted his father and mother to the protection of the king of Moab when he was a fugitive from Saul (1 Samuel 22 v 3, 4). In end-times Moab will elude the rule of the Antichrist (Daniel 11 v 41). So there is much sadness and empathy on Isaiah's part as he describes the coming judgment on Moab...

- In these chapters, what does Isaiah say about the severity of God's judgment, and the reasons why such judgment is inevitable? In what ways does Isaiah express empathy for Moab in her sufferings?

“Her fugitives flee to Zoar” (Isaiah 15 v 5) – Zoar was the city from which Lot and his daughters escaped, hiding in the mountains, before Lot's daughters committed incest with their father, and brought forth the child Moab, the father of the Moabites. Many of the other place names are obscure.

The idea behind “send the lamb to the ruler of the land” (Isaiah 16 v 1) is that Moab should resume their bringing of tribute to Jerusalem, thereby submitting themselves to the true God again. This kind of tribute (i.e. lambs) is described in 2 Kings 3 v 4 and 5, where Mesha, King of Moab, stopped paying tribute when King Ahab of Israel died. Here, Isaiah counsels Moab to resume payment of this tribute.

“Let the outcasts of Moab sojourn among you; be a shelter to them from the destroyer” (v 4) – this represents a change of focus, and appears to be an end-times prophecy of how Moab (“Sela” = Petra, Moab's capital, v 1) will be a place of refuge for Jews escaping from the Antichrist during the Tribulation (see Revelation 12 v 6, 13, 14). They will be protected from the destroyer until destruction ceases and the oppressors vanish from the land. Then the throne of the Messiah will be established “in steadfast love”, and Jesus will sit on the throne “in the tent of David” (v 5), seeking justice and hastening righteousness.

An oracle concerning Damascus (Syria) (Isaiah 17)

Damascus was one of the greatest and most beautiful cities of the ancient world, and the capital of the ancient nation of Syria, located to the north-east of Israel; the northern tribes of Israel, around the Sea of Galilee, had constant interaction with Syria. But “Damascus will cease to be a city and will become a heap of ruins” (v 1), as happened during the coming Assyrian invasion.

- Notice the repetition of the phrase ‘in that day’ (v 4, 7 and 9), suggesting that Isaiah may be looking ahead to the end-times. What positive effect does God's judgment have in v 7 and 8?
- In v 11 Isaiah describes the futility of the Syrians' hard work – their plantings will result in a harvest that fails – see also Psalm 127 v 1, 2 and Haggai 1 v 6. What is the root cause of their failure, as expressed in v 10? In what ways is this a warning for us? See Deuteronomy 8 v 18, Psalm 119 v 55.

An oracle concerning Cush (Ethiopia) (Isaiah 18)

“That is beyond the rivers of Cush (i.e. Ethiopia)” (v 1) – in Isaiah’s day, Ethiopia was a major world power, ruling Egypt and a chief rival to Assyria. Since Judah was caught in the middle between these conflicting powers, it would make sense for Judah to align herself with Ethiopia against Assyria. “Which sends ambassadors by the sea” (v 2) – the scene pictures Ethiopian ambassadors travelling by sea to make an alliance with Judah and other nations against Assyria. “Go, you swift messengers, to a nation tall and smooth... a nation mighty and conquering” (v 2) – the ambassadors ask Judah to send messengers back to the Ethiopians, who hoping that Judah had rebelled against Assyria and aligned herself with Ethiopia and Egypt.

“The LORD said to me: ‘I will quietly look from my dwelling...’ (v 4) – God rejects the alliance with Ethiopia, because he is more than able to deal with the Assyrians himself. Significantly, there is no rebuke against Ethiopia: God does not judge the Ethiopians for their offer of an alliance. The idea is that it is a well-intentioned but unnecessary offer: instead, Judah is to trust in God! “He cuts off the shoots with pruning hooks” (v 5) – God can ‘prune’ Assyria (without help from Ethiopia), and destroy the Assyrian army so completely that they will be left for the mountain birds of prey (v 6).

“At that time tribute will be brought to the Lord of hosts from a people tall and smooth... to Mount Zion, the place of the name of the Lord of hosts” (v 7) – the phrase ‘at that time’ again suggests that the focus shifts to end-times. ‘Tribute will be brought’ translates the Hebrew phrase *יָבֹל־שַׁי* (*yubal-shay*), where ‘shay’ means a specific, or special ‘gift or present, offered as homage’. The word ‘shay’ is used in only two other verses in the Bible: Psalm 68 v 29 and Psalm 76 v 11.

So, what is this special ‘tribute’ or gift? Why is it so important?

Isaiah 18 v 7: The Ark of the Covenant and the Mercy Seat

[Source: Chuck Missler, “The Book of the Prophet Isaiah”, Koinonia House Inc, 2014]

Six ‘Ark’ theories: The Ark of the Covenant was *not* in Herod’s temple during Jesus’ lifetime: it had disappeared long before. So, where did it go?

1. taken by Menelik to Ethiopia during King Solomon’s apostasy? (the official Ethiopian view)
2. taken by Shishak (2 Chronicles 12 v 9)? (Indiana Jones, Raiders of the Lost Ark)
3. hidden by Jeremiah on Mt. Nebo?
4. hidden under the Temple Mount? (the traditional Rabbinical view)
5. taken by the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar?
6. taken to Egypt during King Manasseh’s atrocities (2 Kings 21 v 2 to 16; 2 Chronicles 34 v 22 to 28)?

2 Chronicles 35 v 3: “[King Josiah] said to the Levites who taught all Israel and who were holy to the Lord, ‘Put the holy ark in the house that Solomon the son of David, king of Israel, built. You need not carry it on your shoulders...’”. It doesn’t say that they complied! The Levites had apparently taken the ark (and the mercy seat) (i) out of the temple; (ii) out of Jerusalem; (iii) out of the jurisdiction of Manasseh (who was attempting to eliminate Mosaic Judaism), south to Egypt for protection under Pharaoh Neco (noting that Pharaoh Neco was not Egyptian, but Ethiopian...)

2 Chronicles 35 v 20 to 22: “After all this, when Josiah had prepared the temple, Neco king of Egypt went up to fight at Carchemish on the Euphrates, and Josiah went out to meet him. But he sent envoys to him, saying, “What have we to do with each other, king of Judah? I am not coming against you this day, but against the house with which I am at war. And God has commanded me to hurry. Cease opposing God, who is with me, lest he destroy you.” Nevertheless, Josiah... did not listen to the words of Neco from the mouth of God, but came to fight in the plain of Megiddo...”

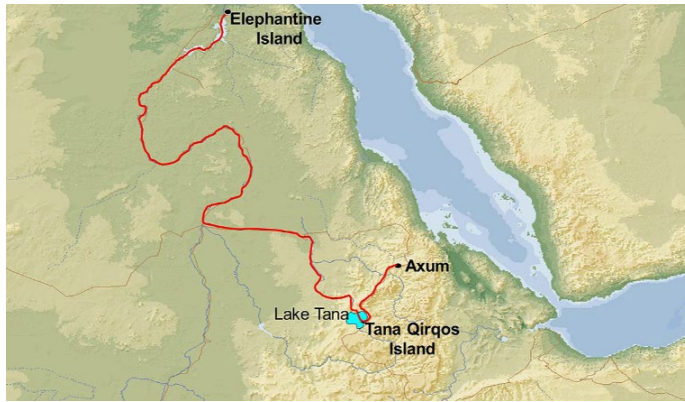
Consider the following questions:

- Why did Josiah persist in attacking Pharaoh Neco? Why did Pharaoh Neco feel that he had God on his side? How could Pharaoh Neco have had instructions “from the mouth of God”?

The suggestion is that Pharaoh Neco had the Ark in his possession, and therefore ‘felt’ that God was on his side; and Josiah attacked Neco (who in turn was attacking the Assyrians, Israel’s enemies) because he wanted the Ark back!

The documented tradition is that the Ark was taken progressively south-eastwards, and was kept at the following locations (see map):

- 642 to 470 BC: Elephantine Island, Egypt (southernmost border town and garrison)
- 470 BC to 330 AD: Tana Qirqos Island, Lake Tana, Ethiopia
- 330 AD to present day: Axum, Ethiopia



The suggestion is that the gold-plated wooden Ark of the Covenant (or what remains of it), and the Mercy Seat (solid gold), are presently being guarded by Ethiopian priests in an underground chamber at St Mary’s of Zion Church, Axum, Ethiopia. For nearly 2,500 years this ‘sacred treasure’ has been guarded by the Ethiopians, and is destined to be presented to the Messiah at Mount Zion, Jerusalem, when he returns to rule the earth. How fitting and appropriate that the ‘throne of glory’ from which Jesus reigns will be (at least symbolically) the golden ‘Mercy Seat’ that used to form the lid of the 3,500-year old Ark of the Covenant!

Jeremiah 3 v 16, 17: *“And when you have multiplied and been fruitful in the land, in those days, declares the Lord, they shall no more say, “The ark of the covenant of the Lord.” It shall not come to mind or be remembered or missed; it shall not be made again. At that time Jerusalem shall be called **the throne of the Lord**, and all nations shall gather to it, to the presence of the Lord in Jerusalem, and they shall no more stubbornly follow their own evil heart...”*

“The throne of the Lord” – it is the Mercy Seat – and not the Ark of the Covenant – that is the definition of the Holy of Holies, and the issue at stake here, in the end-times and the millennium. And this may well turn out to be the special ‘tribute’ or ‘gift’ described in Isaiah 18 v 7!

Prayer – Lord God, we thank you for the amazing truths written in these chapters. Help us to listen carefully to the warning not to forget the ‘God of our salvation’, and always to remember ‘the Rock of our refuge’. Help us to be encouraged by the promise that ‘in that day’ a throne will be established in steadfast love, and on it will sit in faithfulness in the tent of David one who judges and seeks justice and is swift to do righteousness – Jesus our Lord and king! Help us Lord to trust in you always, in Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.