

## ISAIAH 17 | *Harvest of Pain*

### *Damascus Decimated*

1 An oracle/pronouncement (מִשְׁאָ) concerning Damascus.<sup>1</sup>

Behold, Damascus will cease to be a city and will become a heap of ruins [732 bc]. 2 The cities of Aroer [Moab?]<sup>2</sup> are deserted. They will be for flocks that will lie down, and none will make them afraid. 3 The fortified city (מְבֻצָּר) will disappear from Ephraim [722 bc] and the kingship (מְמַלְכָה) from Damascus [732 bc], and the remnant (שְׁאֵר) of Syria will be like the “glory” (כְּבוֹד) of the children of Israel, declares Yahweh of hosts (יְהוָה יְצַבְּאוֹת).

### *Three “In that Days” for Israel*

#### *Gleanings in Jacob*

4 And *in that day* [722 bc] the “glory” of Jacob will be brought low, and the fat of his flesh will grow lean. 5 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 Rephaim. 6 Gleanings (עֲלִילֵי־וַיִּת) 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, declares Lord Yahweh of Israel.

#### *Man Will Look to His Maker*

7 *In that day* man will gaze/look (שָׁעָה) to his Maker/Creator (עֹשֶׂה), and his eyes will see/look on (רָאָה) the Holy One of Israel. 8 He will not gaze/look (שָׁעָה) to the altars, the work of his hands (יָדָי), and he will not look on what his own fingers have made, either the Asherim or the altars of incense.

#### *Harvest of Pain*

9 *In that day* their strong cities will be like the deserted places of the wooded heights and the hilltops, which they deserted because of the children of Israel, and there will be desolation. 10 For you have forgotten (שָׁכַח) the God of your salvation (יְשׁוּעָה) and have not remembered the Rock of your mountain stronghold/refuge/fortress (מְעוֹז). Therefore, though you plant pleasant plants and sow the strange/prohibited (זָר) vine-branch, 11 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 (קִצְוִיר) will flee away in a day of grief and incurable pain.

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<sup>1</sup> This oracle precedes Assyria’s conquering of Damascus in 732 bc.

<sup>2</sup> Aroer was a city in Moab, which is difficult to understand. Some Greek manuscripts say “abandoned forever.” Perhaps there was another “Aroer” in Syria.

### *Nations Chased Like Chaff*

12 Hoy (הוי)! The agitation/turmoil/noise (הַמּוֹן) of many peoples (עַמִּים). They roar (המה) like the roaring (המה) of the sea! The noise/roar/tumult (שֹׁאֵן) of nations (לְאֻמִּים). They roar (שאה) like the roaring (שאה) of mighty waters! 13 The nations (לְאֻמִּים) roar (שאה) like the roaring (שאה) of many waters, but he [Yahweh] will rebuke (גער) them, and they will flee far away, chased like chaff on the mountains before the wind and whirling dust before the storm. 14 At evening time, behold, terror! Before morning, they are no more! This is the portion of those [nations] who loot us [Israel], and the lot of those who plunder us [Israel].

## Commentary

### 1. Introduction.

- a. So far in the oracles against the nations (Is 13-23), we have learned:<sup>3</sup>
  - (1) God organises history for the good of his people (Babylon).
  - (2) God will fulfil the Davidic covenant (Philistia).
  - (3) Gentile nations will benefit from the Davidic kingdom (Moab).
- b. In Is 17-18, Isaiah turns from two southern nations (Philistia and Moab), to two northern nations (Syria and Israel), and then back to a southern nation (Cush).
  - (1) The oracle in Is 17 is addressed to Damascus, but his main focus is Israel.
  - (2) God treats Israel and Syria together because they formed an alliance against Judah in 735-732 bc (Is 7:1).
- c. This oracle (Is 17:1-18:7) is a mosaic in five pieces: 17:1-3; 17:4-9; 17:10-11; 17:12-14; 18:1-7.
  - (1) Is 17:1-3 is dated prior to the fall of Damascus in 732 bc.
  - (2) Is 18:1-2 is dated to the diplomatic activity of Ethiopia-Egypt around 714-11 bc.
  - (3) These two chapters cover 20-30 years of Isaiah's ministry and were brought together deliberately.<sup>4</sup>
- d. The message of the oracle is to rely on God, not man, because God is supreme.
  - (1) "For every influential power, there is always a greater one which can reduce it to desolation. The only hope is in the greatest power of all."<sup>5</sup>

### 2. Damascus Decimated (Is 17:1-3).

- a. **Is 17:1-3** 1 An oracle/pronouncement (מִשְׁפָּט) concerning Damascus.<sup>6</sup> Behold, Damascus will cease to be a city and will become a heap of ruins [732 bc]. 2 The cities of Aroer [Moab?] are deserted. They will be for flocks that will lie down, and none will make them afraid. 3 The fortified city (מְבִצֵּר) will disappear from Ephraim [722 bc] and the kingship (מְמַלְכָה) from Damascus [732 bc], and the remnant (שְׁאֵר) of Syria will be like the "glory" (כְּבוֹד) of the children of Israel, declares Yahweh of hosts (יְהוָה יְהִי עִזָּתוֹ).
- b. Syria and Israel allied themselves against Assyria and Judah (Is 7:2), but Isaiah prophesied their defeat (Is 8:4). Assyria would conquer Syria in 732 bc and Israel in 722 bc.
- c. A remnant of Syria, however, will survive (v. 3), though its "glory" will not be great. Isaiah is being sarcastic. The fate of Syria contrasts starkly with the fate of Babylon. Today, Damascus is a thriving city. Babylon is still a heap of ruins.

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<sup>3</sup> J. A. Motyer, *Isaiah*, 156.

<sup>4</sup> J. A. Motyer, *Isaiah*, 155.

<sup>5</sup> J. N. Oswalt, *NICOT*, 1:350.

<sup>6</sup> This oracle precedes Assyria's conquering of Damascus in 732 bc.

### 3. Gleanings in Jacob (Is 17:4-6).

- a. **Is 17:4-6** 4 And *in that day* [722 bc] the “glory” of Jacob will be brought low, and the fat of his flesh will grow lean. 5 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 Rephaim. 6 Gleanings (עֲלֵלִים) 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, declares Lord Yahweh of Israel.
- b. The three “in that days” (vv. 4, 7, 9) refer to short-term events, specifically, Assyria’s conquering of Israel in 722 bc.
- c. Israel’s “glory” (v. 4) is a false glory. Isaiah is being sarcastic.
- d. Israel’s remnant will be very few (vv. 5-6).
  - (1) “Folds of gray skin hang from the man who once was fat and shining. The lush fields of the Valley of Rephaim southwest of Jerusalem are cut over, and all that remains of the rich crop are a few stray stalks fallen from the reapers’ arms and left for the poor to pick up. The olive trees have been beaten with sticks to shake off the ripe fruit and only a few odd olives are left to be picked off by the poor.”<sup>7</sup>
  - (2) Isaiah later uses this same imagery to describe the end times.
    - (a) **Is 24:13** 13 It shall be in the midst of the earth among the nations, as when an olive tree is beaten, as at the gleaning when the grape harvest is done.

### 4. Man Will Look to His Maker (Is 17:7-8).

- a. **Is 17:7-8** 7 *In that day* man will gaze at/look (שׁעָה) to his Maker/Creator (עֹשֶׂה), and his eyes will see/look on (רָאָה) the Holy One of Israel. 8 He will not gaze/look (שׁעָה) to the altars, the work of his hands (מְצֻדָּה), and he will not look on what his own fingers have made, either the Asherim or the altars of incense.
- b. One day man, Israel especially, will look to Yahweh and not to his idols (vv. 7-8). Notice the repletion of the two works for look (שׁעָה and רָאָה).
  - (1) **Ex 20:2-3** 2 I am Yahweh your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. 3 You shall have no other gods before me.
  - (2) **Ho 8:14** 14 Israel has forgotten his Maker and built palaces, and Judah has multiplied fortified cities.
- c. Asherah was the mistress of El, the Canaanite high god. She was the Canaanite version of the Mesopotamian Ishtar and Egyptian Isis. In some myths she appears alongside Astarte, Baal’s mistress, but in others she is Baal’s mistress. In the fertility cult she was represented by a grove of trees, perhaps poplars, surrounding the Baal altars on the high places. These trees or poles had phallic significance.<sup>8</sup>
  - (1) **Ex 34:13** 13 You [Israel] will tear down their altars, break their pillars, and cut down their Asherim.
  - (2) **Dt 16:21** 21 You shall not plant any tree as an Asherah beside the altar of Yahweh your God that you shall make.
  - (3) **Jdg 6:25** 25 That night Yahweh said to [Gideon], Take your father’s bull, and the second bull seven years old, and pull down the altar of Baal that your father has, and cut down the Asherah that is beside it.

<sup>7</sup> John N. Oswalt, *NICOT*, 1:350.

<sup>8</sup> John N. Oswalt, *NICOT*, 1:353.

(4) **2 Ch 34:4-7** 4 They chopped down the altars of the Baals in [Josiah's] presence, and he cut down the incense altars that stood above them. And he broke in pieces the Asherim and the carved and the metal images, and he made dust of them and scattered it over the graves of those who had sacrificed to them. ...6 And in the cities of Manasseh, Ephraim, and Simeon, and as far as Naphtali, in their ruins all around, 7 he broke down the altars and beat the Asherim and the images into powder and cut down all the incense altars throughout all the land of Israel. Then he returned to Jerusalem.

## 5. Harvest of Pain (Is 17:9-11).

- a. **Is 17:9-11** 9 *In that day* their strong cities will be like the deserted places of the wooded heights and the hilltops, which they deserted because of the children of Israel, and there will be desolation. 10 For you have forgotten (שכח) the God of your salvation (יְשׁוּעָה) and have not remembered the Rock of your mountain stronghold/refuge/fortress (מְעוֹז). Therefore, though you plant pleasant plants and sow the strange/prohibited (רַק) vine-branch, 11 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 (קְצִיר) will flee away in a day of grief and incurable pain.
- b. Israel has forgotten God. She no longer turns to him for safety (v. 10).
  - (1) **Ps 18:2** 2 Yahweh is my rock (סֶלֶעַ), my mountain stronghold (מְצוּדָה), and my deliverer (פֹּלֵט), my God, my rock (צוּר) in whom I take refuge (חָסִיתִי), my shield (מִגָּן), and the horn (קַרְנֵי) of my salvation (יְשׁוּעָה), my high point (מִשְׁעָבֵי).
- c. The activity in vv. 10-11 probably refers to the Adonis cult, where potted plants were force-bloomed and then allowed to die as symbolic of the fertility cycle of the world. Worshipers believed that by reenacting the myth of the dying and rising vegetation-god, they would secure a good crop for themselves.<sup>9</sup>

## 6. Nations Chased Like Chaff (Is 17:12-14).

- a. **Is 17:12-14** 12 Hoy (הוֹי!) The agitation/turmoil/noise (הִמּוֹן) of many peoples (עַמִּים). They roar (הִמָּה) like the roaring (הִמָּה) of the sea! The noise/roar/tumult (שִׁאוֹן) of nations (לְאֻמִּים). They roar (שָׂאָה) like the roaring (שָׂאָה) of mighty waters! 13 The nations (לְאֻמִּים) roar (שָׂאָה) like the roaring (שָׂאָה) of many waters, but he [Yahweh] will rebuke (גִּעַר) them, and they will flee far away, chased like chaff on the mountains before the wind and whirling dust before the storm. 14 At evening time, behold, terror! Before morning, they are no more! This is the portion of those [nations] who loot us [Israel], and the lot of those who plunder us [Israel].
- b. The nations thunder and roar (vv. 12-13).
  - (1) **Ps 2:1-2** 1 Why do the nations rage restlessly (רָגַשׁ) and the peoples plot in vain? 2 The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against Yahweh and against his Messiah (מָשִׁיחַ) saying....
  - (2) **Ps 46:6** 6 The nations rage (הִמָּה), the kingdoms totter. He utters his voice, the earth melts.
- c. But Yahweh will rebuke them (v. 13).

<sup>9</sup> John N. Oswalt, *NICOT*, 1:354.

- (1) **Is 8:9-10** 9 Be broken, you peoples, and be shattered. Give ear, all you far countries. Strap on your armor and be shattered. Strap on your armor and be shattered. 10 Take counsel together, but it will come to nothing. Speak a word, but it will not stand, for God is with us [Israel]....
  - (2) **Ps 2:4-6** 4 He who sits in the heavens laughs. The Lord holds them in derision. 5 Then he will speak to them in his wrath and terrify them in his fury saying, 6 As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill.
  - (3) **Ps 93:3-4** 3 The floods have lifted up, Yahweh, the floods have lifted up their voice. The floods lift up their roaring. 4 Mightier than the thunders of many waters, mightier than the waves of the sea, Yahweh on high is mighty!
  - (4) **Joe 3:11-12** 11 Hasten and come, all you surrounding nations and gather yourselves there. ... 12 Let the nations stir themselves up and come up to the Valley of Jehoshaphat. For there I [Yahweh] will sit to judge all the surrounding nations.
  - (5) **Zec 14:2-3** 2 I will gather all the nations against Jerusalem to battle, and the city shall be taken, the houses plundered, and the women raped. Half of the city shall go out into exile, but the rest of the people shall not be cut off from the city. 3 Then Yahweh will go out and fight against those nations as when he fights on a day of battle.
- d. The nations will flee in terror (v. 13-14).
- (1) **Is 29:5** 5 The multitude of your foreign foes will be like small dust, and the multitude of the ruthless like passing chaff.
  - (2) **Ps 104:7** 7 At your rebuke they fled. At the sound of your thunder they took to flight.
  - (3) The God of the Bible is in charge of history, and history is headed somewhere.
    - (a) **Ps 73:16-20** 16 When I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task, 17 until I went into the sanctuary of God. Then I discerned their end. 18 Truly you set them in slippery places. You make them fall to ruin. 19 How they are destroyed in a moment, swept away utterly by terrors! 20 Like a dream when one awakes, Lord (יְהוָה). When you rouse yourself, you despise them as phantoms.
    - (b) Those enabled to see world events from God's perspective need not be troubled by the mighty conquerors who tread the earth's stage. They are not nearly so significant as they appear.<sup>10</sup>

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“As the Lord organizes history for the good of his people (the Babylon oracle) and purposes to keep the Davidic promises (the Philistia oracle), opening them to the Gentiles also (the Moab oracle), his actions under all these headings are holy and just. Sin is not overlooked [even in Israel, (the Damascus Ephraim oracle)].”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> John N. Oswalt, 1:357.

<sup>11</sup> Alec Motyer, 156.

“Judah need not fear her neighbors; it is God with whom she should come to terms.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> John N. Oswalt, 1:351.