

**ARE THE KUSHITES DISPARAGED IN  
ISAIAH 18? KUSH APPLIED AS A  
LITERARY MOTIF IN THE  
HEBREW BIBLE**

MARTA HØYLAND LAVIK

VID SPECIALIZED UNIVERSITY, STAVANGER, NORWAY/  
STAVANGER UNIVERSITY HOSPITAL STAVANGER,  
NORWAY / STELLENBOSCH UNIVERSITY, SOUTH AFRICA

**INTRODUCTION**

In his book, *The Rescue of Jerusalem: The Alliance of Hebrews and Africans in 701 BC*, Henry T. Aubin demonstrates the Kushites' significant influence on ancient Palestine in the late eighth and early seventh centuries BCE, and indicates that biblical scholarship has been and still to some extent is reproachful of this ancient African nation.<sup>1</sup> This, he argues, is peculiar, as the Hebrew Bible "depicts them [the Kushites] in exceptionally generous terms."<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> H.T. Aubin, *The Rescue of Jerusalem* (New York: Soho Press; Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 2002), 284. Although trying to be conscious about the preconceptions of my Norwegian theological training and general Western horizon of understanding, I am aware I can never escape the fact that my interpretation is influenced by the fact that I am a female, middle-aged, white Northern European biblical scholar, cf. D.T. Adamo who labeled my reading of his articles about Kush as "Eurocentric," D.T. Adamo, "The Images of Cush in the Old Testament: Reflections on African Hermeneutics," in M. Getui, K. Holter and V. Zinkuratiire (eds.), *Interpreting the Old Testament in Africa. Papers from the International Symposium on Africa and the Old Testament in Nairobi, October 1999* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 65–74 (70–71).

<sup>2</sup> Aubin, *Rescue*, 165. There is a contemporary growing interest among biblical scholars for the Kush texts. The Norwegian Professor Knut Holter should be commended for initiating research and for building networks between European/Western and African/African-American biblical scholars: "Today, however, African and European biblical studies can probably be said to share texts in the sense that previously marginalized texts—such as for example African texts, expressing African experiences and concerns—are increasingly being acknowledged as playing a role in biblical interpretation." K. Holter, "Evaluation: Dialogue and Interpretative Power," in H. de Wit and G. O. West (eds.), *African and European Readers of the Bible in Dialogue. In Quest of a Shared Meaning, Studies of Religion in Africa*, (Supplements to the Journal of Religion in Africa, 32; Leiden: Brill 2008), 409–16 (412).

Where Aubin is mainly interested in how the Kushites contribute to *history*, I am primarily occupied with how Kush is applied as a *literary* motif in the Hebrew Bible. As Isaiah 18 accumulates central biblical associations to the ancient African power Kush, it is here used to exemplify how the motif Kush is used in the Hebrew Bible.

In his chapter 13, “Evidence for the Kushites, V,” Aubin presents some texts from the Book of Isaiah which “concern events leading up to the crisis of 701.”<sup>3</sup> Although Aubin states that “the prophet is respectful of Kush itself,” he perceives Isaiah 18 (together with chapters 20 and 31) as passages which “show the prophet’s skepticism (not the same thing as negativism) toward the capacity of Kushites to cope with the mighty Assyrians.”<sup>4</sup> From a literary point of view, does the portrayal of Kush and Kushites in Isaiah 18 really show the author’s skepticism towards them? And is it likely that the Kushites are “potential victims of Judah’s folly?”<sup>5</sup> In my view, the key to answer this lies in how one understands the functions of the motif Kush, and how one perceives the metaphorical language of Isa 18:5–6; therefore this paper’s title, “Are the Kushites disparaged in Isaiah 18?” The present contribution will show that an investigation of the rhetoric of the text will strengthen Aubin’s claim that the Kushites are sympathetically described throughout the Hebrew Bible.

The biblical text is best understood when its situational references are comprehended.<sup>6</sup> The functions of a motif are always tied to the motif’s particular context, therefore a brief survey of the Kush texts in the Hebrew Bible is needed.<sup>7</sup>

### KUSH IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

The Hebrew Bible contains 56 references to Kush and Kushites.<sup>8</sup> Some may refer to the Kassites in Babylon, or to a

---

<sup>3</sup> Aubin, *Rescue*, 171–72.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

<sup>6</sup> W. Kahl, “Intertextual Hermeneutics—Contextual Exegesis. A Model for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Exegesis,” *International Review of Mission. World Council of Churches* 89/345 (2000), 421–33 (430): “The biblical text can only be understood in the setting of its cultural, socio-economic and situational references.”

<sup>7</sup> This general survey is taken from my monograph, *A People Tall and Smooth-skinned: The Rhetoric of Isaiah 18* (VTSup, 112; Leiden: Brill, 2007), 73–81. Reproduced with permission from the copyright owner.

<sup>8</sup> כּוּשׁ occurs 30 times, and כּוּשִׁי 26 times in the Hebrew Bible, A. Even-Shoshan, *A New Concordance of the Bible* (Jerusalem: Kiryat Sepher, 1983), 527. This presentation is indebted to Holter’s survey of references to African nations and people mentioned in the Hebrew Bible, see K. Holter, “Africa in the Old Testament,” in G.O. West and M.W. Dube (eds.), *The Bible in Africa. Transactions, Trajectories and Trends* (Leiden: Brill 2000), 569–581. See also R.S. Sadler, *Can a Cushite Change His Skin? An Examination of Race, Ethnicity, and Othering in the Hebrew Bible*, (LHBOTS, 425; New York: T & T Clark, 2005), for an overview of this body of texts.

tribal group presumably living on the south-western border of Judah.<sup>9</sup> Still, the majority clearly refers to the ancient African nation Kush, and Aubin is right saying that the Hebrew Bible in general depicts the Kushites “in exceptionally generous terms.”<sup>10</sup>

The literal meaning of the motif Kush points to the African nation known as Kush in Ancient Near Eastern sources, and as Ethiopia in Graeco-Roman sources.<sup>11</sup> This land was located south of Egypt between the first and sixth cataracts of the Nile, and throughout the third and second millennia B.C.E. there were close relations between Kush and Egypt.<sup>12</sup> For the better part of a century (in the eighth and seventh centuries BC) Kush governed all of Egypt, and at times parts of Egypt, in what is known as the Twenty-fifth Kushite dynasty. This climax of the history of Kush is close in time to the origin of most of the Hebrew Bible, and it is therefore relevant to ask whether or not this military and political achievement of Kush within Egypt is reflected in one or another way in the literary portrayal of Kush.<sup>13</sup>

References to Kush are found in all three divisions of the Hebrew canon: the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. The

---

<sup>9</sup> Cf. S. Hidal, “The Land of Kush in the Old Testament,” *Svensk Exegetisk Årsbok* 41–42 (1977), 97–106. See also R.W. Anderson, “Zephaniah ben Kushi and Kush of Benjamin,” in S.W. Holloway and L.K. Handy (eds.), *The Pitcher is Broken. Memorial Essays for Gösta W. Ahlström* (JSOTSup, 190; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 45–70, and R.D. Haak, “‘Kush’ in Zephaniah,” *ibid.*, 238–51. D.T. Adamo, “Ethiopia in the Bible,” *African Christian Studies* 8 (1992), 51–64 (51) emphasizes an African location of all references to Kush in the Hebrew Bible: “Everywhere the word ‘Cush’ is used with a clear cut identification, it refers to Africa.”

<sup>10</sup> Aubin, *Rescue*, 165.

<sup>11</sup> For surveys of the history of the ancient Kush, see B.C. Trigger, B.J. Kemp et al., *Ancient Egypt. A Social History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); D. O’Connor, *Ancient Nubia. Egypt’s Rival in Africa* (Philadelphia: The University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Pennsylvania, 1993); T.G.H. James, *A Short History of Ancient Egypt. From Predynastic to Roman Times* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1995/1998); J.D. Hays, “The Cushites: A Black Nation in Ancient History,” *BSac* 153 (1996), 270–80; L. Török, *The Kingdom of Kush. Handbook of the Napatan–Meroitic Civilization* (HdO, 31; Leiden: Brill, 1997); and J. Pope, *The Double Kingdom under Taharqo. Studies in the History of Kush and Egypt, c. 690–664* (CHANE, 69; Leiden: Brill, 2014).

<sup>12</sup> Traditionally, this relationship has been explained in terms of a superior Egypt and an inferior Kush. More recently, however, it has been argued that the two should be seen as more equal rivals, as “two major powers competing for resources and lands of the Lower Nile.” Cf. O’Connor, *Ancient Nubia*, 2.

<sup>13</sup> Isaiah 18 most likely alludes to pre-exilic political conditions, and as a text dealing with political alliances presumably in the eighth century BCE it might indirectly refer to the Kushite control over Egypt. By this stance, I put myself in an opposite position from the so-called “minimalists” who hesitate to draw lines between any Hebrew Bible text and what could be called historical conditions outside the texts. My contention is that the Hebrew Bible texts in some or the other way relate to the milieu in which they originated.

motif Kush appears six times in the Pentateuch, of which four are to be found in Genesis (Gen 2:13; 10:6, 7, 8), and two in Numbers (Num 12:1,1). It is used once as a geographical location (Gen 2:13), and five times as personal names. Gen 2:13 reads: “The name of the second river is Gihon; it winds through the entire land of Kush.” As Gihon is the name of a spring in Jerusalem, the reference to the African Kush seems odd. However, an African location is not impossible as there is a strong tradition for relating the name Gihon to the river Nile (cf. LXX Jer 2:18; Ben Sira 24:27).<sup>14</sup> The geographical reference to Kush in Gen 2:13 includes Africa in the world map reflected in Gen 2:13.<sup>15</sup>

In the Law there are five more occurrences of Kush, first, three in the Table of nations (Gen 10:6,7,8), where Kush is mentioned first in a series of Ham’s four sons. Kush is here applied as a personal name.<sup>16</sup> Further, vv. 10–12 list several places and cities that the son of Kush established. Of Kush’s stock comes one who is said to be the first to have a great dominion on the earth. Although Kush is here a personal name, Kush is mentioned first in Gen 10:6 probably due to a geographical orientation starting from the far south.<sup>17</sup> The two last references to Kush in the Law are found in a narrative in Num 12 about Moses and his Kushite wife.<sup>18</sup>

The former prophets comprises eight references (2 Sam 18:21 (x2), 22, 23, 31, 32 (x2); 2 Kgs 19:9), and the latter prophets twenty-five (Isa 11:1; 18:1; 20:3, 4, 5; 37:9; 43:3; 45:14; Jer 13:23; 36:14; 38:7, 10, 12; 39:16; 46:9; Ezek 29:10; 30:4, 5, 9; 38:5; Amos 9:7; Nah 3:9; Zeph 1:1; 2:12; 3:10). The eight references in the

---

<sup>14</sup> Cf. T.K. Cheyne, *The Book of the Prophet Isaiah. Critical Edition of the Hebrew Text Arranged in Chronological Order and Printed in Colours Exhibiting the Composite Structure of the Book with Notes* (SBONT, 10; Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1899), 108–109, and E. Ullendorff, *Ethiopia and the Bible* (Schweich Lectures; London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 2–3. Cf. the discussion in C. Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, (BK, 1/1; Neukirchen Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1974), 297–98, where an African location of Kush is suggested.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. S. Hidal, “The Land of Kush”; K. Holter, “Africa in the Old Testament,” 575, and T. Stordalen, *Echoes of Eden: Genesis 2–3 and Symbolism of the Eden Garden in Biblical Hebrew Literature* (CBET, 25; Leuven: Peeters, 2000), 279–281.

<sup>16</sup> E.A. Speiser, “The Rivers of Paradise,” in R. von Kienle, A. Moortgat et al. (eds.), *Festschrift Johannes Friedrich zum 65. Geburtstag am 27. August 1958 gewidmet* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1959), 473–85 (475), states that Kush in the Table of Nations is an eponym of the Kassites in Mesopotamia. For the same opinion, see J.D. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion. An Entry into the Jewish Bible* (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1985), 131.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. D.T. Adamo, “The Table of Nations Reconsidered in African Perspective (Genesis 10),” *Journal of African Religion and Philosophy* 2 (1993), 138–43. The table of nations is repeated in 1 Chr 1.

<sup>18</sup> For solutions to why Miriam and Aaron criticizes Moses, see D.T. Adamo, “The African Wife of Moses: An Examination of Numbers 12:1–9,” *ATIJ* 18 (1989), 230–37; Hays, “The Cushites,” 270–80; and Holter, “Africa in the Old Testament,” 569–81 (576).

former prophets are found in two different narratives, both alluding to the military ability of the Kushites. The first narrative (2 Sam 18) depicts a Kushite officer in king David's army (vv. 21–33) reporting Absalom's death to the king (vv. 32–33). The other narrative (2 Kings 19) gives the Kushite king Taharqo a supporting role in the deliverance of Jerusalem (v. 9). Both narratives implicitly refer to Kushites in relation to the people of YHWH, and portray the two individuals from Kush as having important roles in society.

From the twenty-five references to Kush in the latter prophets, the Kushites are featured in various ways. In Isaiah 18 and Jer 13:23 Kushites are described in anthropological terms. The wealth of Kush is alluded to in Isa 43:3 and 45:14. In Isa 20, YHWH's people are warned against trusting Kush. The allusion to a military reputation of Kush is reflected in lists (Ezek 38:5 and Nah 3:9), and in the narrative about the officer Ebed-Melech (Jer 38–39). A comparison between Kush and Israel is made in Amos 9:7 where Israel's exodus from Egypt is compared to other peoples' similar experiences.<sup>19</sup> Kush is sometimes used as a limit of the borders of the world, such as in Ezek 29:10. The opening verse of Zephaniah (1:1) introduces the prophet as the son of Kushi.<sup>20</sup> Further, Kush represents the far south in the prophet's geographical orientation (Zeph 2:4–15, v. 12). Kush is mentioned in the context of salvation (Isa 11:11–12; 18:7; Zeph 3:10).

The Writings have seventeen references to Kush and Kushites; three of these are found in the Psalms (7:1; 68:32; 87:4), one in Job (28:19), two in Esther (1:1; 8:9), one in Daniel (11:43), three in 1 Chronicles (1:8, 9, 10), and seven in 2 Chronicles (12:3; 14:8, 11, 12 (x2); 16:8; 21:16). Ps 68:32 [Eng: 68:31] probably alludes to the motif of Kushites bringing gifts to YHWH in Jerusalem: "Envoys will come from Egypt; Kush will quickly stretch out her hands to God." Ps 87:4 mentions pilgrims from different nations, including Kush. Job 28:19 alludes to the wealth of Kush. The two references to Kush in Esther (1:1; 8:9) describe Kush as the south-western border of the world. In Dan 11:43 Kushites are mentioned in the context of wealth and riches. The narrative in 2 Chr 14:8–14 [Eng: 14:9–15] depicting a high number of soldiers is typical for holy war rhetoric: "Now

---

<sup>19</sup> Cf. D.T. Adamo, "Amos 9:7–8 in an African Perspective," *Orita* 24 (1992), 76–84, R. Smith, "A New Perspective on Amos 9:7a," *JITC* 22, (1994), 36–47, K. Holter, "Is Israel Worth More to God than Kush? An Interpretation of Amos 9:7," in K. Holter (ed.), *Yahweh in Africa. Essays on Africa and the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Peter Lang, 2000), 115–25.

<sup>20</sup> R.W. Anderson argues that this reflects a Kushite presence in the land of Israel, cf. Anderson, "Zephaniah ben Cushi," 45–70, while others argue for an African origin of the prophet Zephaniah, cf. G. Rice, "The African Roots of the Prophet Zephaniah," *JRT* 36 (1979), 21–31, and D.T. Adamo, "The Black Prophet in the Hebrew Bible," *Journal of Arabic and Religious Studies* 4 (1987), 1–8.

Zerah the Kushite came out against them with an army of a million men and 300 chariots, and he came to Mareshah” (2 Chr 14:8).

From this survey it is clear that the motif Kush literally refers to an ancient African nation that was located south of Egypt. Non-literally, the motif Kush is in the Hebrew Bible associated with the following: Richness, military reputation, abundance, remoteness, and relation to Zion in eschatological times.<sup>21</sup>

### THE PERSUASIVE ARTISTRY OF ISAIAH 18

Most scholars, when interpreting Isaiah 18, go into questions about geography and history—to the expense of describing the text’s persuasive artistry. My purpose here is not to reconstruct historical events Isaiah 18 might refer to, but rather to attend to the text’s rhetorical capacity in my conversation with Aubin’s thirteenth chapter.<sup>22</sup> Such a literary analysis can complement a more historically based picture of Kush and Kushites.

Isaiah 18 has puzzled scholars as it does not provide a story told straight forward, but rather delivers its message in what can be likened to a set of photo slides randomly put together. The constant shift in scene, perspective and characters confuses the contemporary reader—as it presumably also did the ancient audience.<sup>23</sup> In v. 1 there is a הוי, “Ah!,” cried out over the land along the rivers of Kush, followed by v. 2 where messengers are introduced and the land and people of Kush are vividly described. In v. 3 “all” who live on earth are encouraged to be attentive when the banner will be raised and the horns blown. In v. 4 the perspective changes again when the only character on the scene is YHWH – who is said to watch intently and calmly from his dwelling place. In vv. 5–6 the scene is the vineyard where “he” cuts off the quivering tendrils to which the vine attaches itself in order to climb. Verse 7 repeats much of v. 2 and brings the Kushites in focus again, but this time in relation with YHWH Sebaot on Mount Zion. As will be evident, despite these abrupt shifts, an inner logic is grasped when one comprehends the imagery of v. 5.

---

<sup>21</sup> Aubin, *Rescue*, 283: “the Hebrew Bible in fact praises the Kushites, treating them as pious exceptions in a pagan world, a people who are drawn to the worship of the Hebrews’ own deity, Yahweh.”

<sup>22</sup> A more extensive rhetorical analysis of Isaiah 18 is pursued in my monograph, *A People Tall and Smooth-skinned: The Rhetoric of Isaiah 18* (VT Suppl, 112; Leiden: Brill, 2007). Only what is relevant for the fresh discussion with Aubin’s chapter thirteen is here elaborated on from the monograph.

<sup>23</sup> Several scholars find it difficult to see a coherence between the various strophes of the text, cf. B.S. Childs, *Isaiah and the Assyrian Crisis* (SBT Second Series, 3; London: SCM, 1967), 45; W. Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1–39* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 152; and Aubin, *Rescue*, 228.

**STROPHE I, vv. 1–2: THE ATTRACTIVE KUSH**

Except for one line (v. 2aγ: לכו מלאכים קלים), all of Isa 18:1–2 describes either the geography or the inhabitants of the land of Kush:<sup>24</sup>

- v. 1a Ah! land of buzzing wings
- v. 1b from along the rivers of Kush,
- v. 2aα sending envoys by sea
- v. 2aβ and in vessels of paper-reed over the waters.
- v. 2aγ Go, swift messengers
- v. 2aδ to a nation tall and smooth-skinned,
- v. 2aε to a people feared from that day and onwards,
- v. 2bα [to] a nation line upon line and down-treading,
- v. 2bβ whose land rivers cut through.

Isaiah 18 opens with a הוי which can be rendered “Ah,” “Alas,” “Ha.” Although it usually expresses some kind of dissatisfaction and pain, it is not as strong as אוי, “woe.”<sup>25</sup> הוי occurs in the Hebrew Bible in three different forms of usage.<sup>26</sup> First, הוי

---

<sup>24</sup> The translation of Isaiah 18 is mine. When other biblical texts are cited, they are taken from *The New Revised Standard Version*. Not all scholars would agree that Isa 18:1–2 describes Kush. A quite common suggestion is that Isa 18:2 describes Assyria, cf. R.E. Clements, *Isaiah 1–39* (NCBC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980/1994), 164, who cites W. Janzen, *Mourning Cry and Woe Oracle* (BZAW, 125; Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 1972), 60–61. See also A. Gileadi, *The Literary Message of Isaiah* (New York: Hebraeus 1994), 149. H. Wildberger, *Jesaja 13–27* (BK, 10/1; Neukirchen–Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1978), 689, however, proposes Kush, and M.A. Sweeney, *Isaiah 1–39 With an Introduction to Prophetic Literature* (FOTL, 16; Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1996), 257, suggests Egypt. Another suggestion is that the Medes are referred to in Isa 18:2, cf. E.J. Kissane, *The Book of Isaiah* (Dublin: Browne and Noland, 1960), 198, who suggests that the people referred to in Isa 18:2 are described in Isa 13:17 (the Medes): “there is nothing in the description here which is out of harmony with this [Isa 13:17].” J.N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah. Chapters 1–39* (NIC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 361, also suggests the Medes to be portrayed in 18:2.

<sup>25</sup> As the LXX uses the same word to translate both הוי and אוי, this might suggest that there is no essential difference between the two interjections. This is however contradicted by the different syntax of the two words, cf. the statistical survey of G. Wanke, “הוי und אוי,” *ZAW* 78 (1966), 215–18, which is rechecked by C. Hardmeier in H.W. Wolff, *Dodekapropheten 2. Joel und Amos* (BK, 14/2; Neukirchen–Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1969), 284–87. See H.–J. Zobel, “הוי,” *TbWAT* 2:382–83, for a presentation of the statistical survey from Wanke and Hardmeier.

<sup>26</sup> This is also suggested by R.J. Clifford, “The Use of *Hôy* in the Prophets,” *CBQ* 28 (1966), 458–64. For the meaning and application of הוי, see also E. Jenni, “הוי,” *THAT* 1 (1971), 474–77.

occurs in funeral laments (cf. 1 Kgs 13:30, Jer 22:18; 34:5).<sup>27</sup> In such lamentations הוי is usually followed by a noun indicating the relationship between the person who mourns and the one who is dead, cf. 1 Kgs 13:30: הוי אחי “alas my brother.” Second, הוי can be found in vocative appeals or addresses functioning as a way of getting the attention and expressing either an invitation (Isa 55:1), a moan (Jer 47:6) or a warning (Zech 2:10 (x2), 11).<sup>28</sup> Third, הוי appears in prophetic indictments (Isa 10:5; 17:12; 28:1). All three uses of the word הוי may have passed through the minds of the audience of Isaiah 18. By the opening הוי over Kush the audience most likely perceives the speech as a judgment, or at least a warning to Kush. This הוי is, however, somewhat confusing as long as what follows is a positive description of the Kushites (v. 2).

Isa 18:1 alludes to other texts where rivers and Kush are mentioned, cf. Gen 2:13 and Zeph 3:10. The connection between rivers and Kush has the effect of associating Kush with abundance, richness and fertility. But does Isa 18:1 describe Kush or does it refer to a region beyond Kush? Zeph 3:10 has the same wording as is found in Isa 18:1: מעבר לנהרי-כוש, often translated “beyond the rivers of Kush.” The word מעבר (v. 1b) consists of a preposition מן, “from,” and a noun, עבר (masculine singular absolute), which is often rendered “region across or beyond.”<sup>29</sup> Most translators therefore render מעבר לנהרי-כוש of Isa 18:1 “beyond” the rivers of Kush without any discussion.<sup>30</sup> However, in addition to its most common rendering, מעבר can also be translated “along,” or “on the side of,” cf. 1 Sam 14:4, 40; 1 Kgs 5:4; 7:20, 30.<sup>31</sup> The word עבר is applied especially of a

<sup>27</sup> For this usage, cf. J. Scharbert, *Der Schmerz im Alten Testament*, (BBB, 8; Bonn: Hanstein, 1955), 71.

<sup>28</sup> For a study of the presence or absence of a vocative element after the הוי, see D.R. Hillers, “*Hôy* and *Hôy*—Oracles: A Neglected Syntactic Aspect,” in C.L. Meyers and M. O’Connor (eds.), *The Word of the Lord Shall Go Forth. Essays in Honor of David Noel Freedman in Celebration of His Sixtieth Birthday* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1983), 185–88.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. H.-P. Stähli, “עבר,” *THAT* 2 (1976), 200–204.

<sup>30</sup> Some scholars treat v. 1b as a gloss, cf. B. Duhm, *Das Buch Jesaja übersetzt und erklärt*, (HKAT 3, 1; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1892), 137–39; K. Marti, *Das Buch Jesaja* (KHC, 10; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1900), 147; and H. Donner, *Israel unter den Völkern. Die Stellung der klassischen Propheten des 8. Jahrhunderts v. Chr. zur Aussenpolitik der Könige von Israel und Juda* (VTSup, 11; Leiden: Brill, 1964), 122. J.P.U. Lilley, “By the River-side,” *VT* 28 (1978), 165–71, makes a systematic examination of the use of עבר, supporting and extending the conclusions of B. Gemser, “*Be’ever hajjardēn*: In Jordan’s borderland,” *VT* 2 (1952), 349–55. Lilley translates מעבר in both Isa 18:1 and Zeph 3:10 “beyond,” but regards “beside” acceptable (Lilley, “by the River-side,” 167). He concludes that מעבר “normally means ‘beyond,’ unless the force of *min*, ‘from,’ predominates” (ibid., 171).

<sup>31</sup> This is also argued by B. Gemser, “*Be’ever hajjardēn*: In Jordan’s borderland,” *VT* 2 (1952), 351: “Thus ‘*eber* signifies undoubtedly “region across, other side” but just as well “region alongside, side.” For the translation of מעבר in Isaiah 18, see BDB. See also *HALAT*, 738, who puts Isa 18:1 under the heading “Seite,” and translates, לנהרי-כוש



riverside region, and according to B. Gemser, **מַעְבַּר לְנַהֲרֵי-כוּשׁ** in Isa 18:1 can therefore be translated “alongside the rivers of Ethiopia” to give an appropriate meaning.<sup>32</sup> E. Vogt translates **לְנַהֲרֵי-כוּשׁ** in Isa 18:1: “*in regione iuxta flumina Kus*,” “in the region by/along the rivers of Kush.”<sup>33</sup> Of the commentaries, O. Procksch renders **מַעְבַּר לְנַהֲרֵי-כוּשׁ**, “ein Zugang zu den Strömen von Kusch,” referring to Isa 16:2 and Gen 32:23.<sup>34</sup> More recently, J.D.W. Watts, following H. Wildberger, takes the phrase **מַעְבַּר לְנַהֲרֵי-כוּשׁ** as an obvious reference to the African nation Kush.<sup>35</sup> This is also presupposed by T. Stordalen who renders **לְנַהֲרֵי-קוּשׁ מַעְבַּר** [šū], “from the region of the rivers of Cush.”<sup>36</sup>

In v. 2 the motif “river” (together with “waters”/“sea”) is applied literally about the geography of Kush and about the travelling route of the Kushites. When the people living along the rivers of Kush are introduced, they are not explicitly named, but described in a threefold way: 1) by their habit of sending envoys by sea (2aα–2aβ), 2) by the look of their bodies (2aδ), and 3) by what their reputation is like (2aε–2bα). According to v. 2 they master the element of water (“sending envoys by sea”), they have a characteristic look – as if their bodies are shining – they are feared, and they are down-treading.

In addition, v. 2 describes messengers travelling to and from Judah. Although not stated explicitly, the messengers most likely refer to human envoys. The terms **מְלָאכִים** and **צִירִים** in v. 2aα and 2aγ are two groups of messengers, one delegation from Kush and one from Judah. Although the mission’s purpose is not stated, I agree with Aubin that this poetic description of movements over the waters (in v. 2) may indicate diplomatic relations, showing a “common defense strategy” of Judahites and Kushites.<sup>37</sup>

*Summing up:* Isaiah 18 opens with a **הוֹי** which is followed by a description of the land of Kush and its inhabitants. In Isa 18:1–2 Kush is associated with abundance (cf. Gen 2:13; Zeph 3:10, here: “whose land rivers cut through”), as the most remote part of the world (here “from along the rivers of Kush”), in anthropological terms (cf. Jer 13:23, here: “tall and smooth-skinned”),

---

**מַעְבַּר**, “im Umkreis der Ströme von Kusch.”

<sup>32</sup> B. Gemser, “*Be‘ēver hajjarden*,” 352. E. Vogt, “*‘eber bayyarden = regio finitima Iordani*,” *Bib* 34 (1953), 118–19 renders **מַעְבַּר (מ)** “on the other side of.” Often, however, Vogt stresses, **מַעְבַּר (מ)** has one of the following nuances of meaning: *iuxta*, “by,” “along;” *prope*, “near,” “close by;” *adiacentem*, “adjacent to;” *latus*, “side” (right or left).

<sup>33</sup> Vogt, “*‘eber bayyarden*,” 118.

<sup>34</sup> O. Procksch, *Jesaia I übersetzt und erklärt* (KAT, 9; Leipzig: Deichertsche, 1930), 236–38.

<sup>35</sup> See Wildberger, *Jesaja 13–27*, 678–679, who renders **מַעְבַּר**, “im Umkreis,” and J.D.W. Watts, *Isaiah 1–33* (WBC, 24; Waco: Word Books 1985), 244, who translates **מַעְבַּר** “in the region of” the rivers of Kush. Wildberger and Watts both follow Vogt’s suggestion. Their reference to Vogt’s critical note to **מַעְבַּר** is, however, incorrect. It is found in *Bib*, and not in *BZ* as Wildberger and Watts inform.

<sup>36</sup> Stordalen, *Echoes of Eden*, 280. See also Aubin, *Rescue*, 172 n. 32 for the same view.

<sup>37</sup> Aubin, *Rescue*, 229.

and as having a military reputation (cf. 2 Kgs 19:9; Isa 37:9, here: “down-treading”). This positive description is somewhat confusing as long as a הוּ is cried out to the Kushites.

***STROPHE II–III, vv. 3–4: TAKE NOTICE OF YHWH AND BE QUIET!***

From the close description of the land and people of Kush in vv. 1–2, the perspective is widened and more distant in v. 3 which calls the attention of “all who dwell in the world.” The motifs applied in v. 3 (standard, horn, mountains) together with the intense attendance of YHWH (v. 4) give expectations of dramatic events ahead:

- v. 3aα All who dwell in the world,  
 v. 3aβ and who inhabit the earth,  
 v. 3bα when a standard is raised [on the] mountains,  
 you shall see,  
 v. 3bβ and when a horn is blown, you shall hear.  
 v. 4aα For thus says YHWH to me:  
 v. 4aβ I will be quiet and gaze in my dwelling place  
 v. 4bα like glowing heat of [the] light,  
 v. 4bβ like a cloud of dew in [the] heat of harvest.

In a military sense, the נֹס, “standard,” that is set up on a mountain or hill either provides orientation (Isa 13:2; 30:17), marks where the army is to assemble (Isa 5:26), or indicates where the attack is to be performed (Jer 51:12). The נֹס can also serve as a sign of the victor’s claim to possession when the defeat is accomplished (Jer 50:2). Worth noticing is that נֹס is not mentioned in any Hebrew Bible description of battles, it only appears in prophetic emulations of such.<sup>38</sup> The setting up of a standard is in 18:3 accompanied by the blowing of a horn.

The meaning of שׁוֹפָר, “horn,” is an alarm horn that most likely belongs to a wild goat or a ram.<sup>39</sup> From the Hebrew Bible, the שׁוֹפָר has at least three interrelated areas of usage: war, warning, and worship.<sup>40</sup> Subsequently, in v. 3 the שׁוֹפָר is used as a

<sup>38</sup> Cf. H.-J. Fabry, “נֹס,” *TbWAT* 5:468–73 (471): “Die Funktion militärischer Feldzeichen ist uns also nur bekannt durch die metaphorisierende prophetische Rezeption des Rituals vom Heiligen Krieg.” In the ancient Near East, however, standards symbolize the gods advancing into battle. See M. Weippert, “‘Heiliger Krieg’ in Israel und Assyrien,” *ZAW* 84 (1972), 460–93 (477).

<sup>39</sup> “Die Bestimmung der Tierart ist aber unsicher”, according to H. Ringgren, “שׁוֹפָר,” *TbWAT* 7:1195–96 (1195), see also J. Braun, *Music in Ancient Israel/Palestine. Archaeological, Written and Comparative Sources* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 26.

<sup>40</sup> Most commonly, scholars distinguish between two forms of usage of the שׁוֹפָר, the military and the cultic, cf. I.H. Jones, “Musical Instruments,” *ABD* 4:934–39 (936), and K.D. Jenner, “The Big Shofar (Isaiah 27:13): A Hapax Legomenon,” in H.J. Bosman, H. van Grol et al. (eds.), *Studies in Isaiah 24–27. The Isaiah Workshop—De Jesaja Werkplaats*

signal to make “all” attentive of activities or events expected to be carried out in the (near) future.<sup>41</sup> Along with its literal meaning, the horn's non-literal meaning is being an instrument that signals danger, peace, or theophanies.

Another central motif of Isa 18:3 is **הר**, “mountain.” In the Hebrew Bible, **הר/הרימו** refers to: 1) the topography of Israel (cf. Gen 10:30; Josh 20:7; Amos 4:1; Mal 1:3),<sup>42</sup> 2) territorial boundaries (cf. Judg 17–18; 19:1), 3) lookout posts/focal points (cf. Isa 40:9; 42:11), 4) asylum for fugitives (Josh 2:16, 22; 1 Sam 13:6; 14:22; Ezek 7:16), 5) the foundations of the earth (Job 9:5; Ps 90:2),<sup>43</sup> 6) the connecting link between heaven and earth (Deut 32:22; Jonah 2:7; Ps 104:4–6), 7) sites of theophanies (cf. Deut 4:11; 1 Kgs 19:11–14; Mic 1:3; Ps 18:7 [Eng: 18:6]; 97:4–5),<sup>44</sup> and 8) the place where (the name of) YHWH dwells (cf. Isa 18:7; Ps 68:16–17 [Eng: 68:15–16]; 78:67–68; 132:13–14).<sup>45</sup> Non-literally, mountains are older than creation or are among the first to be created (Prov 8:25; Job 15:7), they are binding together the three strata: the netherworld, earth and heaven (Exod 20:4; Prov 8:22–29), and will last forever (Gen 49:26; Hab 3:6). These latter qualities of mountains culminate in the Hebrew Bible notion of mountains as sacred places, and the “holy mountain” – which refers to Jerusalem and the temple mount.<sup>46</sup> Zion is the place

---

(Leiden: Brill, 2000), 157–82 (162). Here, the category “warning” is added as the warning to repent seems different from clear contexts of war or worship. However, in a number of instances, all three categories are interrelated, and play on each other.

<sup>41</sup> The opening of Isaiah 18 could indicate that **שופר** (in v. 3) is used to warn Judah about Kush as an enemy. This is suggested by H.–M. Lutz, *Jahwe, Jerusalem und die Völker. Zur Vorgeschichte von Sach 12:1–8 und 14:1–5* (Neukirchen Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1968), 134, and Ringgren, “**שופר**,” 1195.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. A.W. Schwarzenbach, *Die geographische Terminologie im Hebräischen des alten Testaments* (Leiden: Brill, 1954), and Y. Aharoni, *The Land of the Bible. A Historical Geography* (London: Burns and Oates, 1967), 24–29.

<sup>43</sup> For a brief presentation of the same concept of mountains as foundations of the earth in the ancient Near East, cf. E.J. Hamlin, “The Meaning of ‘Mountains and Hills’ in Isa 41:14–16,” *JNES* 13 (1954), 186, and H.G.Q. Wales, *The Mountain of God. A Study in Early Religion and Kingship* (London: Quaritch, 1953), 6–31.

<sup>44</sup> Apparently, non-Israelites perceived YHWH to be a typical “mountain-god,” cf. 1 Kgs 20:23–28.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. for instance G. Westphal, *Jahwes Wohnstätten nach den Anschauungen der alten Hebräer. Eine alttestamentliche Untersuchung* (Giessen: Töpelmann, 1908). According to R.J. Clifford, the notion that YHWH dwelt on Mount Zion seems to be a direct borrowing from the Ugaritic epics, cf. R.J. Clifford, *The Cosmic Mountain in Canaan and the Old Testament* (HSM, 4; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), 131.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. A.J. Wensinck, *The Ideas of the Western Semites Concerning the Navel of the Earth* (Amsterdam: Müller, 1916), 11–12, and H. Schmidt, *Der heilige Fels in Jerusalem. Eine archäologische und religionsgeschichtliche Studie* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck), 1933), 78–102. According to S. Talmon, “**הר**” *TbWAT* 2:459–83 (468), holy places are located on hills and mountains in order to reduce the distance between earth and heaven, “die Spanne zwischen Erde und Himmel zu verkleinern.”

where the name of YHWH dwells (Isa 18:7), and the place where eschatological events will be fulfilled.<sup>47</sup> In Isa 18:3, הרים serves mainly as a focal point (cf. Judg 9:7; 2 Chr 13:4; Isa 13:2; 40:9; Nah 2:1 [Eng: 1:15]).<sup>48</sup> This plays however together with the notions of mountains as a connecting link between heaven and earth, and mountains as sites of theophanies.<sup>49</sup>

In the Hebrew Bible, מכון, “place,” is often somewhat inadequately rendered as “dwelling place,” as the word can be translated “fixed or established place,” “foundation.” The term is used about a place which is firmly fixed, which endures and cannot be shaken (Exod 15:17; Ps 89:15; 93:1–2; 97:2; 104:5; Isa 4:5). In all but one occurrence (Ps 104:5), מכון refers to the dwelling place of God, either in heaven or in the temple.<sup>50</sup> Isa 18:4 does not reveal whether YHWH’s dwelling place is in heaven or in the temple/Zion, but most scholars understand מכון in Isa 18:4 to refer to YHWH’s heavenly dwelling.<sup>51</sup>

The attitude YHWH will have in his dwelling place (“quiet” and “gaze”) is explained through two similes. YHWH will be quiet and gaze “like glowing heat of light” (v. 4b $\alpha$ ), and “like a cloud of dew in the heat of harvest” (v. 4b $\beta$ ). In the Hebrew Bible, שקט, “be quiet,” may be used of YHWH’s inactivity (Ps 83:2; Isa 62:1; Jer 47:6–7), but it is also used to express freedom from annoyance or care (Ezek 16:42; Ruth 3:18), or to express a tense quietness (Ps 76:9 [Eng: 76:8]).<sup>52</sup> In Isa 18:4, שקט seems

---

<sup>47</sup> Cf. S. Talmon, “*Har and Midbar: An Antithetical Pair of Biblical Motifs*,” in M. Mindlin et al. (eds.), *Figurative Language in the Ancient Near East* (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1987), 117–42 (133): “After all previously chosen places had been rejected (Ps. 78:67; 68:15–16), God’s presence finally and definitely came to rest upon Zion [. . .] which he had created for himself (Ps. 78:54).”

<sup>48</sup> Cf. E. J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah. The English Text with Introduction, Exposition, and Notes*, (NICOT 1–3; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965–1978), 476: “On the mountains a standard of assembly will be raised, for the mountains are a most conspicuous and visible spot.”

<sup>49</sup> That v. 3 expresses the presence of YHWH in one or the other way is also perceived by Childs, *Isaiah and the Assyrian Crisis*, 45, as he regards this verse as communicating “a picture of Yahweh’s unruffled self-composure which arises from his sense of absolute sovereignty over the whole world.” See also the more recent commentary of B. S. Childs, *Isaiah*, OTL (Louisville: John Knox, 2001), 138.

<sup>50</sup> J. N. Oswalt, “מכון,” *TWOT* 1:433–34 (434).

<sup>51</sup> Cf. the following selected examples, Wildberger, *Jesaja 13–27*, 691: “Jahwes Sitz, von dem aus er zuschaut, ist natürlich nicht der Zion, sondern sein himmlischer, הִיכָל”; Clements, *Isaiah 1–39*, 165: “from his heavenly dwelling,” and Childs, *Isaiah*, 138: “God views the whole world in calm rest from his heavenly dwelling.” Others, for instance A. Bentzen, *Jesaja 1–39* (København: Gads, 1944), 142, suggests the temple as YHWH’s dwelling place, whereas I. W. Slotki, *Isaiah. Hebrew Text and English Translation with an Introduction and Commentary* (SBBS, 8; London: Soncino, 1949), 86, understands YHWH’s dwelling place as Jerusalem.

<sup>52</sup> For the rendering of שקט, “be quiet,” in 18:4, cf. HALAT, 1514, “sich ruhig verhalten.”

not to be applied in a positive way.<sup>53</sup> Rather, the verb here evokes an atmosphere of tenseness.<sup>54</sup>

The term **נצ**, “glowing,” has the following nuances: “dazzling/glowing” (Isa 18:4),<sup>55</sup> “bright/white” (Cant 5:10; Lam 4:7),<sup>56</sup> and “arid/dry” (Isa 58:11; Jer 4:11). In Jer 4:11, **נצ** is used about a wind coming towards Jerusalem, i.e. a judgement is to be expected (v. 12). Both in Isa 18:4 and Jer 4:11, **נצ** evokes negative associations.<sup>57</sup> In Isa 18:4, **נצ** is understood as an adjective “glowing,” that describes the **חם**, “heat.”

Literally, **עב טל**, “a cloud of dew,” refers to the night mist that vanishes in the morning. The promise of dew is found in contexts of blessings (cf. Gen 27:28), a blessing that brings fertility (Deut 33:13–17, 28) and hope (Mic 5:6 [Eng: 5:7]).<sup>58</sup> The absence of dew is found in contexts of threats and punishments (cf. Gen 27:39). Hosea frequently uses **טל** in describing the relationship between Israel and YHWH.<sup>59</sup> Positively, if Israel will return to her God, YHWH will be like the dew to Israel, “he shall blossom as the lily [..]” (Hos 14:6 [Eng: 14:5]). Negatively, like the quick vanishing of the dew in the morning, so is Israel’s covenant love: “What can I do with you, Ephraim? What can I do with you, Judah? Your love is like the morning cloud, like the early dew that disappears” (Hos 6:4).

“A cloud of dew” is in Isa 18:4 used metaphorically to evoke negative associations along two lines. First, in v. 4a $\alpha$  YHWH is referred to at a distance from the earth, and in this second simile of v. 4 (v. 4b $\beta$ ) YHWH’s distant quietness and gazing is compared to a cloud of dew (that vanishes) in the heat of harvest.<sup>60</sup> Just as the dew goes away in the morning, so will

<sup>53</sup> In contrast to this interpretation of mine, cf. E. Bons, “שקט,” *TbWAT* 8:449–54 (452), who suggests that YHWH’s quietness is not of a negative kind: “Positiv sagt Jes 18,4 Gott von sich aus, er wolle ruhig bleiben . . . und zusehen auf seinem Platz, bevor er eingreift (v. 5).”

<sup>54</sup> Cf. B. Huwiler, *Jeremia und die Völker. Untersuchungen zu den Völkersprüchen Biblischen Theologie* (FAT, 20; Tübingen: Mohr, 1997), 166.

<sup>55</sup> I. Eitan, “A Contribution to Isaiah Exegesis (Notes and Short Studies in Biblical Philology),” *HUCA* 12/13 (1937/38), 55–88 (65), claims that **נצ** means “sun” in this passage, but this seems less likely.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. R. Gradwohl, *Die Farben im Alten Testament. Eine terminologische Studie* (BZAW, 83; Berlin: Alfred Töpelmann, 1963), 7.

<sup>57</sup> Not all scholars interpret these pictures as creating a tense atmosphere, cf. Kissane who sees the heat of the summer’s day and the heavy dews of the night as promoting the growth and maturing of the grape, and “similarly Jahweh promotes the success of Assyria’s conquest of Israel.” Kissane, *Isaiah I*, 199.

<sup>58</sup> In this text it is said that Israel will mediate the blessing that is granted to all nations, cf. A. Weiser, *Das Buch der zwölf kleinen Propheten* (ATD, 24; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1959), 275.

<sup>59</sup> **טל** also occurs in descriptions of various human relationships (Deut 32:2; Ps 133:3; Job 29:19; Prov 19:12).

<sup>60</sup> A different interpretation of these similes is that of Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1–39*, 153–54: “Yahweh is as *constant* as hot sun or as summer cloud—ready, but not to be mobilized by any force or will other than Yahweh’s own” (emphasis added).

the help from YHWH disappear from Judah.<sup>61</sup> Second, just as the cloud of dew literally looks like a veil between the air and the ground, so is it—metaphorically speaking—a drape between YHWH and his people.<sup>62</sup> In both understandings of this second simile of v. 4, the description of YHWH as being at a distance is what comes across to the audience.

In the literature, there are three interrelated suggestions of how to understand YHWH's quietness in this verse. First, YHWH's quietness is seen as a proof of his superiority: YHWH cannot be distracted or dissuaded by any human being, as he is above the pressures that drive earthly powers.<sup>63</sup> Without regard to human plans he will effectuate his fateful plans.<sup>64</sup> Second, YHWH can be seen as stating an example for the audience and the whole world: as long as YHWH is quiet, they should copy his behavior and not enter into coalitions with one another.<sup>65</sup> A third solution is that YHWH states an example for Judah in particular. She shall be quiet because YHWH will act on behalf of her.<sup>66</sup> I find the second and third interpretations most convincing according to how Isaiah 18 as a whole is shaped rhetorically.

---

<sup>61</sup> J.H. Hayes and S.A. Irvine, *Isaiah, The Eighth-century Prophet: His Time and His Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1987), 256: "Yahweh, will keep his hands off and function as an observer."

<sup>62</sup> For the suggestion that "clouds of dew" can be compared with veil, see H. Guthe, *Palästina* (Monographien zur Erdkunde, 21; Bielefeld: Velhagen & Klasing, 1927), 49, who refers to Isa 18:4.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. Childs, *Isaiah and the Assyrian Crisis*, 45: "Yahweh's unruffled self-composure which arises from his sense of absolute sovereignty over the whole world," and W. Eichrodt, *Der Herr der Geschichte. Jesaja 13–23 und 28–39* (BAT, 17/2; Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1967), 61: "unberührt von dem irdischen Getriebe". See also Wildberger, *Jesaja 13–27*, 691: "Ausdruck seiner unanfechtbaren Überlegenheit über das Treiben der irdischen Mächte."

<sup>64</sup> Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1–39*, 153–54: "Yahweh will not be hurried or provoked or pressed to any schedule of combat other than Yahweh's own", and A. Laato, "About Zion I Will Not Be Silent:" *The Book of Isaiah as an Ideological Unity* (ConBOT, 44; Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1998), 72: "That Yhwh is quiet indicates that the human forces attempt to do something which will not be successful." For a similar view, see Childs, *Isaiah*, 138: "Far above the fever of busy diplomatic intrigue, God views the whole world in calm rest from his heavenly dwelling before he acts."

<sup>65</sup> Cf. R.E. Clements, *Isaiah 1–39*, 165: "The message must be understood as a clear warning to the king not to listen to, or join with, the plans of the Ethiopian ambassadors." See also Hayes and Irvine, *Isaiah*, 256, who argue that "Yahweh will take the same posture in this situation that Isaiah recommended to Ahaz in the days of the earlier coalition – unsupportive of the revolt (see Isa 7:3–9). The present plan for revolt is to Yahweh only a flash in the pan, insubstantial and passing, like blazing heat in the light of day and dew in the summertime. Given a little time, they both disappear, the heat with the coming of evening and the dew in the light of the sun."

<sup>66</sup> Cf. Kissane, *The Book of Isaiah I*, 199, Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, 477, G.B. Gray, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Book of Isaiah*, (ICC, 1; Edinburgh: Morrison and Gibb, 1962), 315: "in quietness lies their deliverance (7:4–9; 28:16; 30:15)". See also F. Huber, *Jahwe, Juda*

The idea of not taking any action toward alliances is known also from other texts (see Isa 7:4–9; 28:16; 30:15). If Judah wants help from YHWH, she should follow YHWH's example.

*Summing up:* YHWH's calmness stands in sharp contrast to the eager activity between Judah and Kush as referred to in v. 2, and functions as an exemplary pattern that Judah should follow. YHWH is not relaxed, he watches the earth intensely like "glowing heat" that makes the air vibrate. Further, just as the dew goes away in the morning, so will YHWH's support withdraw. In addition, the similes (together with what is said in v. 3) function as a threat to the audience about a coming danger.<sup>67</sup>

***STROPHE IV–V, vv. 5–6: YOU ARE THE ONES!***

Verses 5 and 6 form the rhetorical climax of Isaiah 18, and when the metaphorical language in v. 5 is unfolded, it becomes clear how what – at a first sight – appears randomly put together all of a sudden falls into place and makes sense:

- |        |   |
|--------|---|
| v. 5α  | For, at harvest time, when the bud has been completed             |
| v. 5αβ | and [the] sour grape[s] [are] ripe, [and] blossom has happened,   |
| v. 5bα | then he will cut off the quivering tendrils with pruning knives,  |
| v. 5bβ | and he will turn aside [and] he will strike away the twigs.       |
| v. 6α  | They will together be left to the birds of prey of the mountains, |
| v. 6αβ | and to the beasts of the earth.                                   |
| v. 6bα | The birds of prey shall summer upon him,                          |
| v. 6bβ | and every beast of the earth shall winter upon him.               |

---

*und die anderen Völker beim Propheten Jesaja* (BZAW, 137; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1976), 132, who states that Judah is to be calm because YHWH will act on behalf of her. The same is argued by S.H. Widyapranawa, *The Lord is Saviour: Faith in National Crisis. A Commentary on the Book of Isaiah 1–39*, (ITC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 106: "But for the moment Judah should remain quiet and put all their trust in the LORD (cf. 30:15)."

<sup>67</sup> Understanding the similes as a warning is also perceived by C.R. Seitz, *Isaiah 1–39* (IBC; Louisville: John Knox, 1993), 148: "God's judgement is to fall "like a cloud of dew in the heat of harvest." For a more positive interpretation of the comparisons, see Clements, *Isaiah 1–39*, 165: "The imagery of a calm and pleasant summer evening," and J. Høgenhaven, *Gott und Volk bei Jesaja. Eine Untersuchung zur Biblischen Theologie* (AthD, 24; Leiden: Brill, 1988), 133: "Das folgende Bild ist dem Rhythmus der Natur und des Ackerbaus entnommen: Wie der Sommer mit seiner Wärme und seinen Tauwolken verhält sich Jahwe ruhig abwartend."

There have been various suggestions as to who this imagery is meant to hit. Although not providing an extensive analysis of Isaiah 18, Aubin in his chapter thirteen seems to indicate that the harsh judgement in 18:5–6 in one or another way is related to the Kushites. Aubin is not alone in suggesting this. Most scholars propose Assyria or Kush to be judged in Isa 18:5–6:<sup>68</sup>

“In this passage, Isaiah bids the ambassadors return home: he says they should report back (presumably to the pharaoh) that if the Kushites engage the enemy, their corpses will be left to the “birds of prey and to the wild animals.”<sup>69</sup>

However, there is another, more plausible solution to who are judged in these verses, and the indication lies in the metaphorical language of v. 5. Although the word vine is not explicitly used in v. 5, the mentioning of several parts of the vine—and stages of its growth (נצה, “blossom,” פרה, “bud,” בסר, “sour grapes,” זלזל, “tendrils” and נטישה, “twigs”)—directs the audience towards the scene of the כרם, “vineyard.” The tendrils will be cut off when the plant is still in the process of growing and attaching itself, and the twigs (presumably with grapes) will be cast away to the birds of prey and the wild beasts.

In addition to its literal meaning, vine is applied many times in the Hebrew Bible metaphorically to YHWH’s people, their destruction, and restoration (Isa 5:1–7; Jer 2:21 6:9; Ezek 15:6–8; 17:6–8; Hos 10:1; 14:8; Pss 80:9–13 and 44:3).<sup>70</sup> Israel is pictured as God’s flourishing grain and blossoming vine (Hos 14:8 [Eng: 14:7]). Besides a collective use of the vine motif as YHWH’s people (cf. Jer 2:21; Ps 80:9–16), the motif of trees as individuals is also applied (cf. Job 15:33; Pss 1:3; 92:13–16; Jer 17:7–8; Ezek 17:1–10; 19:10–14). Positively, the vine, together with the fig, is a sign of peace and prosperity (1 Kgs 5:5 [Eng: 4:25]; Mic 4:4). In ancient Israel, the vine was regarded as a national emblem.<sup>71</sup> The planting of vineyards is a sign of stability and permanent settlement (Isa 37:30 = 2 Kgs 19:29; 36:17; 65:21; Jer 31:5; 32:15; 35:7, 9; Ezek 28:26; Hos 2:17 [Eng: 2:15]; Amos 9:14; Ps 107:37).<sup>72</sup> Negatively, the vine and its fruit can be used

<sup>68</sup> For a survey, see Lavik, *A People Tall and Smooth–Skinned*, 179–84.

<sup>69</sup> Aubin, *Rescue*, 172.

<sup>70</sup> Cf. C.E. Walsh, *The Fruit of the Vine. Viticulture in Ancient Israel* (HSM, 60; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2000), 2: “Images of vines, vineyards, and grape clusters throughout the Bible are used to convey the nature of relationships between Yahweh and his people.” See also O. Borowski, *Agriculture in Iron Age Israel* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1987), 109: “The vine is used many times by the prophets as a symbol for the people of Israel, their destruction, and restoration (Jer 2:21; 6:9; Ezek 15:6; 17:6–8; Hos 10:1; 14:8; and others).”

<sup>71</sup> M. Zohary, *Plants of the Bible. A Complete Handbook to All the Plants with 200 Full-Color Plates Taken in the National Habitat* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 54: “It appeared on mosaic floors, murals, and portals of synagogues, on pottery, furniture, tombs and coins; even in exile, the Israelites still cherished the grapes of Judah, chiseling their shapes on tombstones in foreign lands.”

<sup>72</sup> Planting a vineyard and enjoying its fruit were so important that a man could not participate in war before he enjoyed the fruit of his



to describe the devastation of Israel (Joel 1:7, 12). Strongly connected to the vine motif, is the motif כֶּרֶם, “vineyard.”<sup>73</sup> In the majority of cases, the motif “vineyard” is collectively applied about Israel/Judah, i.e. the vineyard is the people of YHWH (cf. Isa 3:14; 5:7; 18:5; Jer 12:10-12; Ps 80:8-9).<sup>74</sup> In only a few cases, the motif is applied to a nation other than Judah (Isa 16:8 – repeated in Jer 48:32-33 — and Isa 24:13).

Alongside its literal meaning, both individuals and collectives can be portrayed as vineyards in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>75</sup> There seems to be a distinction between the vineyard as the nation and the vineyard as the chosen possession of YHWH. The latter image seems to be the basic one, and is often limited to the remnant (2 Kgs 19:30; Isa 27:2-6; 37:31; Jer 6:9). The metaphorical use of the vineyard emphasizes YHWH's election of his people, and the privileges that go with this election, more than designating the nation as such. Isa 5:7 is clear about the owner's care for his pleasant plant: “the man of Judah is the garden of his delight.”<sup>76</sup>

Isa 18:5 plays on a common well of associations by mentioning how the tendrils and the twigs of a vine will be cut down and hewn away. The confusion which has held the audience tense through the whole speech is resolved by vv. 5-6. Likening the people of YHWH with a vineyard (v. 5) is a well-known and frequently used metaphor in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>77</sup> Suddenly the audience understands the message: the not yet ripe grapes are their own premature coalition plans, and the quivering tendrils are the diplomatic attempts of the fragile Judahites to attach themselves to the firm Kushites. When tendrils and twigs are not only being cut off (v. 5), but also devoured by birds and beasts (v. 6), this twofold act of judgment clearly pronounces a harsh doom over the people of YHWH.<sup>78</sup> Although it is not clear from

---

vineyard, cf. the law in Deut 20:6. The same view is reflected in Deut 28:30.

<sup>73</sup> For a survey of how this term is applied throughout the Hebrew Bible, see H.-P. Müller, “כֶּרֶם,” *TbWAT* 4:334-40.

<sup>74</sup> Cf. H. Fisch, “The Analogy of Nature. A Note on the Structure of Hebrew Bible Imagery,” *JTS.NS* 6 (1955), 161-73 (164): “There is, for instance, the image of Israel as God's vineyard [. . .] which clearly has a more than functional purpose.”

<sup>75</sup> It has long been recognized that the Hebrew Bible applies vegetation metaphors as images for people. In earlier scholarship, see for instance E. König, *Stilistik, Rhetorik, Poetik in Bezug auf die biblische Litteratur* (Leipzig: Dieter, 1900), 100, and *passim*. See also P. von Gemünden, *Vegetationsmetaphorik im Neuen Testament und seiner Umwelt. Eine Bildfelduntersuchung* (NTOA, 18; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993), and Stordalen, *Echoes of Eden*.

<sup>76</sup> I interpret “house of Israel” and “man of Judah” (Isa 5:7) as a synonymous parallelism, rather than seeing the first as a reference to the northern ten tribes. For a similar view, cf. K. Snodgrass, *The Parable of the Wicked Tenants. An Inquiry into Parable Interpretation* (WUNT, 27; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck), 1983), 76.

<sup>77</sup> For an elaboration of how metaphorical speech about vine and vineyards are applied throughout the Hebrew Bible, see Lavik, *A People Tall and Smooth-Skinned*, 157-64.

<sup>78</sup> Cf. Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39*, 154: “The shoots and branches

the text whether or not bird and beast refer to an enemy, a power, or YHWH, it is evident that these motifs function as YHWH's agents in the punishment of Judah. The metaphorical speech from the sphere of viticulture is applied to show the Judahites that they in their diplomatic eagerness risk their relationship with YHWH. However, in between the lines the text opens up the possibility that there is still hope – the vine itself with roots is not said to be cut down. This means there is a possibility that the vine can blossom again in the future.<sup>79</sup>

*Summing Up:* The metaphorical language of vv. 5–6 can be interpreted as follows: Even before the political and military results of an alliance are achieved (before the vine blossom has come to an end, v. 5), YHWH will stop the alliance (the tendrils and twigs will be thrown away and destroyed, vv. 5–6). The calmness of YHWH (v. 4), and his way of judging Judah (vv. 5–6) function to make the people focus on the transcendent power to whom they should cling: YHWH. The audience who presumably thought the Kushites were in trouble as a נִיָּן was cried over them, suddenly understands the judgement to hit themselves.

**STROPHE VI, v. 7: EVEN THE STRONG KUSHITES SHALL HONOR YHWH**

In v. 7 the scene changes to Mount Zion. The Kushites are again in the centre of attention as v. 7 repeats much of v. 2:

- |                |  |
|----------------|--|
| v. 7a $\alpha$ | In that time gifts will be borne along to YHWH Sebaoth |
| v. 7a $\beta$  | [from] a people tall and smooth-skinned,               |
| v. 7a $\gamma$ | and from a people feared from that day and onwards,    |
| v. 7b $\alpha$ | [from] a nation line upon line and down-treading,      |
| v. 7b $\beta$  | whose land rivers cut through,                         |
| v. 7b $\gamma$ | to the place of the name of YHWH Sebaoth - Mount Zion. |

It has been a widespread opinion that v. 7 is added to Isa 18:1-6 at a later stage. Reasons and criteria for regarding v. 7 as a later addition, however, have only occasionally been put forward by those who advocate this view. Some scholars focus on what they experience as a change from poetry (vv. 1–6) to prose (v. 7), while others attend to the contents of v. 7, cf. this verse's terminology "Zion," and "YHWH Sebaoth."<sup>80</sup> The redactor(s) of the

---

are twice eliminated—first by Yahweh's own forceful verbs of harvest, and then by animals that devour until nothing is left."

<sup>79</sup> Cf. K. Nielsen, *There is Hope for a Tree. The Tree as Metaphor in Isaiah* (JSOTSup, 65; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989), where she investigates the Hebrew Bible's imagery of the tree and emphasizes a tree's ability to grow again when the roots are intact in the soil.

<sup>80</sup> According to Wildberger, *Jesaja 13–27*, 695–96, Isaiah of Jerusalem did not know the Deuteronomic terminology. Subsequently,

book of Isaiah, however, regarded at some point v. 7 as an integral part of chapter 18 of Isaiah.<sup>81</sup> Tracing the process of growth is interesting, but due to all the factors that are hidden to the modern interpreter, I have chosen the final form of the text as my point of departure. Although they are few, there are examples of scholars who—like me—consider v. 7 as an integral part of Isa 18.<sup>82</sup>

Together with the repetition of parts of v. 2, v. 7 says that gifts will be brought to YHWH on Mount Zion “[from] a people tall and smooth-skinned [. . .].” The motif **נְשִׂא**, “gift,” appears only 3 times in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>83</sup> In the two occurrences in the book of Psalms, the term is applied about gifts offered as homage either to kings or to the divinity.<sup>84</sup> In Ps 68:30 [Eng: 68:29], **נְשִׂא** are brought to God in the temple in Jerusalem from kings. Only a few sentences further below in the same psalm, Ps 68:32 [Eng: 68:31], the following is said: “Let bronze be brought from Egypt; let Ethiopia hasten to stretch out its hands to God.” Knowing the preceding context (Ps 68:30), the Kushites’ stretching of hands probably means their bringing of gifts to God.<sup>85</sup> Isa 18:7 has an equivalent in Zeph 3:10: “From along the rivers of Kush my worshipers, my dispersed daughter, will bring my offering.”<sup>86</sup> The two texts play on each other, but 18:7 clearly expresses that the people from the area of Kush will bring gifts to

---

v. 7 is added to vv. 1–6 at a later stage. A few pages earlier (*ibid.*, 682), Wildberger argues that the “original” parts of Isa 18 are 18:1, 2a, 2b $\alpha$ , and 4–6a. For a similar view, see J. Jensen, *Isaiah 1–39*, (OTM, 8; Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1984), 164: “Verse 7 is without doubt a later addition and in all probability v 3 and v 6b are also later additions.”

<sup>81</sup> For suggestions about Zion as one of the unifying elements between the various parts of the book of Isaiah, cf. B.G. Webb, “Zion in Transformation. A Literary Approach to Isaiah,” in D.J.A. Clines et al. (eds), *The Bible in Three Dimensions. Essays in Celebration of Forty Years of Biblical Studies in the University of Sheffield* (JSOTSup, 87; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), 65–84, and R.E. Clements, “Zion as Symbol and Political Reality: A Central Isaianic Quest,” in J. Van Ruiten and M. Vervenne (eds.), *Studies in the Book of Isaiah. Festschrift Willem A.M. Beuken* (BETL, 132; Leuven: University Press, 1997), 3–17.

<sup>82</sup> Cf. Seitz, *Isaiah 1–39*, 149, who pursues a “unitary reading”, (see p. 147) of Isa 18 as a whole: “Such an interpretation is further strengthened by the final verse (v. 7), which has not misunderstood the preceding oracle [vv. 1–6] but offers a final comment consistent with it.” See also Childs, *Isaiah*, 139: “Verse 7 is not a scribal gloss, but integral to the editor’s intention in shaping the entire passage as a testimony to God’s future rule over the nations of the world.”

<sup>83</sup> Cf. G. Lisowsky, *Konkordanz zum Hebräischen Alten Testament* (Stuttgart: deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1981), 1426: Isa 18:7; Ps 68:30 [68:29]; 76:12 [76:11].

<sup>84</sup> Cf. Wildberger, *Jesaja 13–27*, 694–95, who also refers to Ps 72:10–11, 15; 45:13 in this connection.

<sup>85</sup> To this text it is observed by Wildberger, *Jesaja 13–27*, 695, that when (what he calls the motif) “Völkerhuldigung” is employed, Kush appears on the scene. Wildberger regards Ps 68:31–33 as dependent on Isa 18:7.

<sup>86</sup> Kissane suggests that Isa 18:7 may have been influenced by Zeph

YHWH, whereas Zeph 3:10 says that “my dispersed daughter” will bring offerings.<sup>87</sup> A similar mentioning of Kush in the context of the remnant of YHWH’s people who will be brought home from afar, is Isa 11:11. In Isa 18:7 the tall and smooth-skinned people from along the rivers of Kush are the deliverers of the  $\Psi$ , and YHWH Sebaoth on Mount Zion is the receiver. This functions to show a connection between this remote people and YHWH.<sup>88</sup> As the preposition “from” is lacking in v. 7a $\beta$  and v. 7b $\alpha$ , it is somewhat unclear whether the people themselves are to be understood as gifts, or if they carry gifts with them to YHWH on Zion.<sup>89</sup> Despite this minor confusion, it is clear that in v. 7 the Kushites represent the nations that will come to Zion in eschatological times.<sup>90</sup> Mount Zion is the place where YHWH manifests himself, and the place where all acceptable offerings must be brought.

The Hebrew Bible shows a wide range of connotations to the motif  $\Psi$ , “Zion,” with various nuances appropriate to differing historical and theological contexts.<sup>91</sup> Subsequently, this entry can only deal with some of these connotations. The word Zion occurs 152 times in the Hebrew Bible, and its connotations varies from text to text.<sup>92</sup> The motif is applied in at least four

---

3:10, cf. *The Book of Isaiah*, 200. Wildberger, *Jesaja 13–27*, 695, J. Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB, 19 (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 311, and M.A. Sweeney, *Zephaniah. A Commentary*, (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 16, argue that Zeph 3:10 is dependent on Isa 18:1, 7. Concerning the book of Zephaniah, it is striking that this short book of three chapters has as many as three occurrences of the term “Kush/Kushi” (1:1; 2:12; 3:10).

<sup>87</sup> For a discussion of whom the “dispersed daughter” in Zeph 3:10 most likely refers to, see E. Ben Zvi, *A Historical–Critical Study of the Book of Zephaniah* (BZAW, 198; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1991), 228–30, with references.

<sup>88</sup> Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39*, 311, questions who the deliverers of the gift brought to YHWH on Zion are: “The scholiast provides no clue as to whether he understood these Nubians to be Gentiles, proselytes, or diaspora Jews.” It is my contention that the deliverers referred to in v. 7 are the same people as was described in v. 2. For this latter view, see for instance Clements, *Isaiah 1–39*, 166. Watts, *Isaiah 1–33*, 246, and Hayes and Irvine, *Isaiah*, 257 claim that the gifts brought to YHWH come from the Assyrians.

<sup>89</sup> Cf. Gray, *Isaiah*, 316: “the text of M makes the tribute consist of the people themselves!”

<sup>90</sup> Cf. Young, *Isaiah*, 478; H.M. Wolf, *Interpreting Isaiah. The Suffering and Glory of the Messiah* (Academic Books; Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1985), 122; Laato, *I Will Not Be Silent*, 7; and Sadler, *Can a Cushite Change His Skin?* 49–53. Not all will consider v. 7 as dealing with eschatological times, cf. J.H. Brangenberg, *A Reexamination of the Date, Authorship, Unity and Function of Isaiah 13–23* (Unpublished PhD Diss.; Ann Arbor: Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary; 1989), 304, who suggests that “[t]he Ethiopians may simply be acknowledging the power of Yahweh and offering thanks for his defeat of their chief rival.” See also Watts, *Isaiah 1–33*, 246, and Seitz, *Isaiah 1–39*, 149.

<sup>91</sup> Cf. the immense selected listing of relevant literature to the Zion material, in E. Otto, “ $\Psi$ ,” *TbWAT* 6:994–1005.

<sup>92</sup> Cf. L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner, *Hebräisches und Aramäisches*

meanings: 1) Literally, Zion refers to a fortress in Jerusalem probably on a ridge in the south-east section of the city during the period before David captured the city from the Jebusites (2 Sam 5:7, 9), and to 2) the hill on which Solomon built the temple, known as the Temple Mount (Ps 78:68–69). Non-literally, 3) Zion refers to the entire temple city of Jerusalem (as the city of YHWH, cf. Pss 132; 137:1; Lam 1:17; 2:6–8; Isa 8:18),<sup>93</sup> and last, (iv) Zion – like Jerusalem – is applied about the people of Israel (Isa 51:16; Zech 2:11). The significance of the motif Zion lies not in its topography, but in its theology:

The term evokes a whole range of concepts having to do with the kingship, might, justice, and faithfulness of YHWH and the security and beatitude of those privileged to lodge in his sacred mountain in humility and faith and to witness his (re)enthronement upon it.<sup>94</sup>

Zion is the residence of YHWH, and Zion is a cosmic center. Those privileged to dwell in Zion are secure as they can trust the power of YHWH to master all assaults whether from raw nature or from the rebellious human heart. The city is seen as a place for a stable lifestyle and of permanent relationships (Ps 107:4–7). Like the Garden of Eden, also Mount Zion is described as the source of life-giving waters, and as a place of paradisiacal abundance (Gen 2:6–14; Pss 36:9 [Eng: 36:8]; 46:5–6 [Eng: 46:4–5]; Zech 14:8; Joel 4:18 [Eng: 3:18]). In contrast to the chaotic waters mentioned in Pss 46:3–4 [Eng: 46:2–3] and 65:7–8 [Eng: 65:6–7], “[...] there is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy dwelling places of the Most High” (Ps 46:5 [Eng: 46:4]). The association of rivers and Kush in connection with Zion makes an interesting connection between Isa 18:7 and Gen 2:10–14 where the paradisiacal abundance of life-giving water flows around Kush.<sup>95</sup> An identification of Eden and Zion is also known from Ezek 28:13–14.<sup>96</sup> This functions to relate Kush to YHWH from the beginning to the end, from Eden to eschatological times.

---

*Lexikon zum Alten Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 1983), 958. For the distribution of these occurrences, see E. Otto, “צִיּוֹן,” *ThWAT* 6:994–1028 (1007). Cf. also F. Stolz, “צִיּוֹן,” *THAT* 2:543–551 (544), who counts 154 occurrences of Zion in the Hebrew Bible, and see also the grammatical study of M. Kartveit, *Rejoice, Dear Zion: Hebrew Construct Phrases With “Daughter” and “Virgin” as Nomen Regens* (BZAW, 447; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2013). For a brief overview of both the Sinai and Zion material in the Hebrew Bible, see Clifford, *The Cosmic Mountain*, 98–181.

<sup>93</sup> In Lamentations Zion and Jerusalem are used interchangeable.

<sup>94</sup> J.D. Levenson, “Zion traditions,” *ABD* 6:1098–1102 (1099). See also Clifford, *The Cosmic Mountain*, 157, who comments upon Isa 2:2–4 by stating: “With YHWH effectively ruling on his mountain, over the nations, there will be no need for men to fight.”

<sup>95</sup> Cf. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*, 131.

<sup>96</sup> Cf. B.S. Childs, *Myth and Reality in the Old Testament* (London: SCM, 1960), 87: “the prophetic description of Zion as a world-mountain receives its full significance. Zion has become Eden.”

Isa 18:7 expresses the centripetal movement from the nations (here represented by Kush) towards Zion.<sup>97</sup> The idea that nations shall come to Zion is known in three ways in the Hebrew Bible: 1) the dispersed people of YHWH return by YHWH's power (Isa 11:11–12; Jer 31:8), 2) the dispersed people of YHWH are transported back to Zion by the nations (Isa 60:4–9; 62:10–12; 66:12, 18–20),<sup>98</sup> 3) the nations come towards Zion and receive restoration together with YHWH's people (Ps 68:32 [Eng: 68:31]). In Isa 18:7, the latter meaning seems to be the most likely. The identification of Zion as YHWH's cosmic mountain is clear in Isa 18:7. That the remote Kushites are welcomed to Zion serves to continue the harsh judgement over Judah as referred to in vv. 5–6, and functions to contrast the two. The Kushites whom the Judahites want to attach themselves to (vv. 1–2) will come to Zion, whereas YHWH's people are metaphorically spoken about as tendrils and twigs that will be cut off, cast away and devoured by the birds and animals (vv. 5–6).

As the motif Kush in v. 7 is applied in a different context from what is the case in vv. 1–2, this repetition functions to develop the motif as the Kushites are no longer seen as attractive coalition partner, but part of the eschatological restoration of the nations that will submit under YHWH at Zion.<sup>99</sup> The reappearance of what E.J. Kissane calls “the obscure terms of the description in 2d–g” in v. 7 indicates in his view that the writer was not able to identify the nation referred to in the beginning of the text.<sup>100</sup> What is rather the case is that this repetition serves to place the attractive and remote Kushites in a close relationship with Zion and YHWH.

The negative message of judgement in vv. 5–6 has now been replaced by a positive description of how the Kushites “in that time” will bring gifts to YHWH Sebaoth on Mount Zion. As the message of v. 7 is spoken out, the audience can no longer be in doubt that the Judahites will be judged by YHWH (vv. 5–6), and that the Kushites will be welcomed by YHWH (v. 7). Theologically, v. 7 underlines the point that YHWH has the authority over all nations of the world.<sup>101</sup> YHWH Sebaoth – the Lord of the hosts, is the ruler of both heavenly and earthly legions. This asserts that no one can compare themselves to the reign of YHWH – also the admired and feared Kushites will have

---

<sup>97</sup> Here, “centripetal” refers to the movement of the nations towards Zion. (“Centrifugal” stands for the opposite movement, *from* Zion towards the nations), cf. Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39*, 311, who applies the term “centripetal” in this meaning in his analysis of Isa 18:7.

<sup>98</sup> G.J. Polan, “Zion, the Glory of the Holy One of Israel: A Literary Analysis of Isaiah 60,” in L. Boadt and M.S. Smith (eds.), *Imagery and Imagination in Biblical Literature: Essays in Honor of Aloysius Fitzgerald, F.C.S.* (CBQ.MS, 32; Washington, DC: The Catholic Biblical Association of America, 2001), 50–71.

<sup>99</sup> An opposite view of how the repetition of parts of v. 2 in v. 7 functions, is pronounced by Jensen, *Isaiah 1–39*, 165: “this is out of harmony with the context of the preceding verses.”

<sup>100</sup> Cf. Kissane, *The Book of Isaiah*, 200.

<sup>101</sup> For a similar view, cf. Wildberger, *Jesaja 13–27*, 695.

to submit themselves under YHWH.<sup>102</sup> That v. 7 is designed in a way where YHWH Sebaoth frames the verse has the function of letting the deity be in the centre of attention, and not human beings or human plans – whatever they ought to be. This stands in sharp contrast to the message of the rest of the chapter where activity between human powers is described.

*Summing Up:* The motif Kush envelops the message of Isaiah 18. The repetition of v. 2 in v. 7 functions to make up the boundaries of the poem, and to form an *inclusio* of Isaiah 18 as a whole. The repetition also serves to create a contrast to the negative message towards the Judahites of vv. 5–6, as it re-introduces the Kushites and includes them in the theme of the centripetal movement of the nations towards Zion. In addition, the repetition of parts of v. 2 in v. 7 functions to give a new role to the Kushites in the future.<sup>103</sup> The depiction of the Kushites as submitting themselves under YHWH at Zion (v. 7) functions to underline the message of v. 4 that the Judahites should trust YHWH and not human powers: Even the attractive potential ally of Judah (vv. 1–2) will have to submit herself under YHWH (v. 7).<sup>104</sup> Judah should take notice (vv. 3–4), and rely on YHWH who is capable of making order out of chaos (Isa 17:12–14).

---

<sup>102</sup> This interpretation of v. 7 is also held by Wildberger, *ibid.* 696–697.

<sup>103</sup> For a relationship between what is said in vv. 5–6 and in v. 7, see Sweeney, *Isaiah 1–39*, 257: “The presentation of this gift ‘at that time’ associates it with YHWH’s ‘trimming of the shoots’ and indicates that it is the result of the Ethiopians’ witness of YHWH’s punishment of Israel.”

<sup>104</sup> Cf. Widyapranawa, *The Lord is Saviour*, 107.

### ARE THE KUSHITES DISPARAGED IN ISAIAH 18?

When reading Isaiah 18 with a special attention to literary devices, one discovers that the text very well can be comprehended as a coherent whole. The constant shift in characters and scenes which causes confusion about who is judged is a deliberate rhetorical strategy which functions to entrap the Judahites:<sup>105</sup>

At first glance there seems to be no connections between vv. 5–6 on the one hand, and vv. 1–2 and v. 7 on the other hand. Verse 2 describes a movement *to* the Kushites, whereas in v. 7 the movement goes *from* the Kushites to YHWH on Mount Zion. As already pointed at, v. 7 develops v. 2 and transforms the portrayal of the Kushites as warriors and politicians (v. 2) into a portrayal of the same Kushites as bringing homage to YHWH on Zion (v. 7).<sup>106</sup> An intensifying effect is created from v. 3 to v. 7 as “all” the nations are mentioned in v. 3, whereas one specific nation (Kush) is mentioned in v. 7. The widening of the perspective in v. 3 prepares for what is explicitly referred to in v. 7 when the nations—here represented by the Kushites—are coming to Zion.<sup>107</sup> Likewise, the “mountain” of v. 3 (and v. 6) prepares for the mentioning of one particular mountain—Zion in v. 7. Allusion to Mount Zion is also seen in v. 4. Here, the motif “YHWH’s dwelling place” draws lines to the explicitly mentioned Mount Zion in v. 7—the place of the name of YHWH Sebaoth. Further, the function of the motif “horn” in 18:3 is twofold. It is a warning signal about a judgement that is forthcoming if Judah will not repent (vv. 5–6). At the same time, it signals (together with the standard) that the nations will approach Jerusalem “in that time” (v. 7). Verse 3 gives associations to Isa 11:12 where the standard is lifted in order to announce the coming of the nations to Zion. Along these lines the horn and standard in 18:3 forecast the events which will come “in that time” (v. 7).<sup>108</sup>

<sup>105</sup> R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1990), 144: “Prophetic poetry is thus very often constructed as a *rhetoric of entrapment*, whether in the sequence of a few lines or in the larger scale of a whole prophecy.” (Alter’s emphasis). A strategy of entrapping the audience to judge themselves is known for instance from 2 Sam 12:1–15.

<sup>106</sup> Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1–39*, 154, does not see this developing portrayal of the Kushites as something positive, he rather perceives it as a weakening: “The Ethiopians are no more ‘swift ambassadors’, but now are reduced to suppliants who come to Jerusalem, not to bargain and negotiate but to submit. The image is of representatives bringing tribute money, the losers placating the winners.” Further, Brueggemann takes v. 7 as irony, cf. p. 159: “They may be ‘smooth and tall’, but now they are defeated and no longer feared near or far.”

<sup>107</sup> This relation between v. 3 and v. 7 is also seen by and F. Buhl, *Jesaja oversat og fortolket* (København: Gyldendalske Boghandel, 1894), 288: “Ethioperne, der nævnes som Repræsentanten for de øvrige Folkeslag v. 3.” See also F. Feldmann, *Das Buch Isaias übersetzt und erklärt* (EHAT, 14; Münster: Aschendorf, 1925), 221, and Wildberger, *Jesaja 13–27*, 694.

<sup>108</sup> Cf. Jenner, “The Big Shofar,” 157–82 (173): “In Isa 18:3 it is announced by blowing upon the shofar and raising the standard that a



At first the audience believes that the message is directed towards the nation mentioned in the beginning: Kush. When the tension builds up (vv. 3–4), the Kushites are still in the back of the mind of the audience as no other nation is mentioned by name. However, when the scene of judgment is pronounced (vv. 5–6) the audience identifies with the metaphorical language, and has no other choice than finding themselves in the middle of the act. Eventually the scene from vv. 3–4 makes sense: When the peoples are warned about war, Judah should take notice. As YHWH is quiet, so should the Judahites be (v. 4). If they do not follow the pattern of YHWH, a disaster will follow (vv. 5–6). The imagery of vv. 5–6 is a clear message of not attaching oneself to anyone—not even the strong Kushites—as YHWH Sebaot is the only alliance partner for the Judahites (v. 7). Subsequently, interpreted with view to its rhetorical design, Isa 18 does not bring a message of judgement over the Kushites, but over the Judahites (v. 5).

### *Summing Up*

The way the Kushites and their land are described in Isaiah 18 (vv. 1–2) is overwhelmingly positive, and this is done in order to entice the audience into a rhetorical trap. By focusing entirely on the Kushites' positive reputation, their position as an attractive coalition partner is exaggerated. Both their look and their position (geographically and militarily) are hinted at as invincible. The command to go (in v. 2b) ridicules the intense diplomatic activity from the Judahites of finding a human alliance partner instead of awaiting help from YHWH (v. 4). The command to go to Kush (v. 2b) is further contradicted by the indirect invitation to emulate the model of YHWH's quietness (v. 4).

Throughout his book, Aubin suggests that biblical scholars (together with historians) for a long time have overlooked the Kushite role.<sup>109</sup> A close reading of Isaiah 18 shows how the motif Kush is deliberately used as part of a rhetorical strategy to judge the Judahites and praise the Kushites. In the judgement scene of Isa 18:5–6 the well-known metaphors of the people of God (vine and grapes) are applied. Why, then, have only a minority of interpreters found it likely that the metaphors are used for the Judahites in this text? One can only speculate about the full reason for this. What is certain, however, is that we all approach a biblical text both from our private prejudices and from a more general context bound horizon of understanding.

### CONCLUSION

This paper does not give a straightforward answer to the driving question of this volume: How plausible is a Kushite role in Sennacherib's retreat? What it does, however, is to show that as a literary motif, Kush is sympathetically described throughout the Hebrew Bible as politically, economically and military strong. As such, the literary analysis of Isaiah 18 adds credibility to Aubin's

---

present will be brought to Mount Zion.”

<sup>109</sup> Aubin, *Rescue*, 136.

claim that the Hebrew Bible is favourable towards the Kushites. Even Isaiah 18, which at first glance seems to be “*closest* to truly unfavourable . . . to Kushites” (his emphasis), according to Aubin,<sup>110</sup> shows itself to present a sympathetic portrayal of Kush and Kushites.

If one reads Isaiah 18 historically, one can argue that it describes an attempt at negotiating an alliance between Judah and Kush. A literary reading shows that the way some scholars have played down the role of the Kushites in this text does not accord with the positive treatment they are given here and throughout the Hebrew Bible. I agree with Aubin who states that the Hebrew Bible “depicts them [the Kushites] in exceptionally generous terms,”<sup>111</sup> but it is my contention that the Kushites are depicted this way not *first and foremost* to mirror their literal greatness in ancient times, but to teach the people of YHWH a lesson. Taking Isaiah 18 as an example, the over-all function of applying the motif Kush (with the associations this word presumably activated in the ancient audience) is to ridicule the Judahites who seek human protection instead of in the ultimate power, YHWH. In addition, by placing Kush at Zion (v. 7), the Judahites become aware that there is a special relationship between *both* Judah and YHWH, *and* Kush and YHWH.<sup>112</sup> The over-all function of the text’s persuasive artistry is to lead the audience where it should be—in a close relationship with YHWH. The way Isaiah 18 is designed rhetorically does not “show the prophet’s skepticism (not the same thing as negativism) toward the capacity of Kushites to cope with the mighty Assyrians.”<sup>113</sup> Rather, it ensnares the audience to believe that the message is directed towards the power which literally frames the message, the Kushites (vv. 1–2 and 7). However, as the dramatic scene in vv. 5–6 unfolds, the audience recognizes the familiar metaphors of vine and grapes and suddenly relates the message of doom to themselves. This rhetoric of entrapment has a two-fold theological aim: First, to persuade the Judahites to put their trust in YHWH only, and not in any human powers, and second, to envisage an eschatological restoration for the nations—here represented by Kush (v. 7). Verse 7 places the Kushites—a representative for the remote peoples—in subordination to YHWH as “the prophet is in no way upset with Kushite Egypt for what it is, only with what it isn’t—that it is not Yahweh.”<sup>114</sup>

The analysis of the rhetoric of Isaiah 18 together with the brief survey of the literary portrayal of Kush in the Hebrew Bible does not *prove* anything historically speaking, but such a literary analysis *adds credibility* to Aubin’s assertion that the Kushites may have played a relevant role in the political affairs of the ancient Hebrews leading up to the crisis in 701. The literary portrayal of Kush and Kushites is favourable throughout the Hebrew Bible,

---

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 171.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>112</sup> Cf. Am 9:7 and Aubin, *Rescue*, 179: “Both peoples have a relationship to Yahweh that is special.”

<sup>113</sup> Aubin, *Rescue*, 172.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 173.

cf. Aubin's chapter thirteen. This shows that the biblical writers *through time* were highly aware of the potent power from the south—whose existence is manifested through considerable archaeological discoveries—and applied this entity as a powerful rhetorical device when they formed their messages to the people of YHWH.