

Isaiah Part 12: Prophecies against Egypt, Babylon, Edom and Arabia

Isaiah 19 to 21

An oracle concerning Egypt (Isaiah 19 v 1 to 17)

“The LORD is riding on a swift cloud and comes to Egypt” (v 1) – Egypt was one of the great powers of the ancient world, and being situated immediately to the south of Israel, it was an empire that Israel constantly had to reckon with. Many times Egypt had been the enemy of Israel, at times Egypt had been a refuge for Israel, and sometimes Egypt offered a tempting but ungodly alliance to Israel. In Isaiah 19, the LORD presents both a prophecy *against* Egypt and a prophecy *for* Egypt. This section falls into four parts:

1. God strikes Egypt by giving them over to civil war, and submission to a “hard master” (v 1 to 4).
2. God strikes Egypt by drying up the Nile river, thus wrecking their economy (v 5 to 10).
3. God strikes Egypt by sending them advisers with “stupid counsel” (v 11 to 15).
4. When God strikes Egypt, the Egyptian people will “tremble with fear” (v 16, 17).

- What judgments against Egypt are described in these verses, under the four headings above?

“The idols of Egypt will tremble at his presence” (v 1) – Egypt was renowned for its worship of many different gods. Remember that in Moses’ time, through the ten plagues, God had said “on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments” (Exodus 12 v 12) – there were about 80 major gods and goddesses in Egypt, clustered about the three great natural forces of Egyptian life: the River Nile; the land; and the cloudless sky, with its implacable, perpetual sun. Here, once again, God’s judgment is against the ‘gods of Egypt’.

“The river will be dry and parched” (v 5) – the Nile was the lifeblood of Egypt’s agriculture and economy: a severe drought would have a devastating effect on the lives of Egyptians.

Egypt, Assyria and Israel are blessed (Isaiah 19 v 18 to 25)

- Notice the repetition of the phrase ‘in that day’ (v 18, 19, 23 and 24), again suggesting that Isaiah is looking ahead to the end-times. Isn’t it amazing that God can say, “Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my inheritance” (v 25)? How do you explain this seemingly sudden ‘turn-around’ from judgment to ‘blessing’? Who is the “saviour and defender” (v 20)?

“The LORD will strike Egypt, striking and healing, and they will return to the LORD” (v 22) – whatever judgments God allowed, his desire was that people would repent and return to him, so they could be healed.

Sign against Egypt and Cush (Ethiopia) (Isaiah 20)

“In the year that the commander in chief, who was sent by Sargon the king of Assyria, came to Ashdod and fought against it and captured it” (v 1) – the conquest of the Philistine city of Ashdod is recorded in secular history (711 BC). The Philistines were near neighbours, and the fall of Ashdod would make Israel think, ‘We’re next. We need protection!’ Isaiah’s sign is a response to Assyria’s victory and threat.

- In what ways did Isaiah’s responsibility to convey God’s message prove demanding and costly? Notice how he sacrificed his pride in his service for God.

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“As my servant Isaiah has walked naked and barefoot for three years as a sign and a portent against Egypt and Cush (Ethiopia)” (v 3) – under God’s command, Isaiah dressed in this poor and humble way for three years. It was a message against Egypt, because the king of Assyria would lead away the Egyptians as prisoners, stripped and humiliated – to Egypt’s shame.

“And we, how shall we escape?” (v 6) – the Lord allowed Judah to be backed into a corner, caught between two mighty empires, Egypt and Assyria, without being able to trust in either. There was no escape: except in the Lord.

Fallen, fallen is Babylon (Isaiah 21 v 1 to 10)

“The oracle concerning the wilderness of the sea” (v 1) – Babylon is referred to as ‘the wilderness of the sea’ because the plain of Babylon was divided by numerous lakes and marshes, giving it the appearance of a ‘sea’.

“Go up, O Elam; lay siege, O Media” (v 2) – Elam and Media are the ancient names for the peoples of Persia (modern day Iran). The Persians under Cyrus the Great captured Babylon in a surprise attack in 539 BC (see Daniel 5), and in this chapter Isaiah prophetically sees the Persian armies marching on Babylon.

- What poetic words, phrases and images does Isaiah use to convey the horror of Babylon’s impending doom? In what ways is this passage a ‘call to arms’? What is the role of the ‘watchman’ (v 6)?

As the people collapse from fear and pain (v 3), the nation prepares for war (v 5). Then the report comes to the watchman: “Fallen, fallen is Babylon” (v 9). This dramatic scene was first fulfilled when the Persians conquered Babylon, but it also has a future application: Revelation 18 v 2 describes the cry of an angel when God judges the ‘world system’: “Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great!” When God strikes ‘Babylon’ during the end-times, the world will be terrified and mourn, but God’s people will rejoice (Revelation 18 v 19, 20).

Oracles concerning Edom and Arabia (Isaiah 21 v 11 to 17)

Dumah was an ancient name for the kingdom of Edom, in the mountainous region of Seir. The Edomites were descended from Esau and settled in land to the south-east of Israel, and were sometimes her enemies.

“Watchman, what time of the night?” (v 11) – using the dramatic image of a night watchman, Isaiah paints a picture of the judgment coming upon Edom.

Verses 13 to 15 portrays refugees from an attack on Arabia: caravans of Dedanites, thirsty and hungry, for “they have fled from the swords... and from the press of battle” (v 15). This attack will come “within a year, according to the years of a hired worker” (v 16), i.e. an exact year, for hired workers diligently wait for the end of the year, when they receive their wages. Dedan and Kedar both refer to Arabian tribes; Kedar was one of the 12 sons of Ishmael (Genesis 25 v 13 to 15).

Prayer – O Lord, help us to listen carefully to the warnings given in these chapters. Help us to remember to put our trust in you, and not to rely on worldly wisdom, wealth or power. Help us, like the watchman standing upon a watchtower, to be watchful, to pray, to stand firm in faith, to be courageous and strong. Help us to trust in you always, in Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.