

ISAIAH: JUDGMENT AND HOPE

18. Isaiah 19-21

The Oracles Concerning Egypt, Ashdod, Babylon and Arabia

Let's turn in our Bibles to [Isaiah 19](#)

[Isaiah 19](#) starts the second half of the second major section of the book of Isaiah in which Isaiah makes a series of pronouncement concerning God's dealings with a number of nations — all of which have some connection with Israel. Some were singled out because the southern kingdom of Judah was looking to those nations to save them, instead of looking to YHWH. God wanted His people to know that they were trusting in nations that couldn't save themselves. Some of those nations are singled out because of the way they had treated the people of God or they threatened the existence of the people of God.

Isaiah begins each of them by saying, *"The oracle concerning..."* Isaiah didn't pronounce these oracles directly to those nations. He said these things about those nations to the southern kingdom of Judah and its capital, Jerusalem so **they** would understand the **justice** of YHWH, understand the **sovereignty** of YHWH, **and** understand **certainty** of YHWH's promises and the future hope concerning His people — all to the end that Judah repent of their idolatry (and the unrighteousness and injustice that always follows idolatry) — and return to YHWH. Ultimately Judah would fail to respond to the revelation of YHWH in these oracles. Jerusalem would be conquered, and its survivors be led into captivity in Babylon.

It would be really easy to want to pass on chapters 13-23. It's easy to feel like you're not making any progress through a book this large — feel like you're walking through waste-deep water — or worse yet, walking under water. But I hope this will help. Remember that we said at the start of our study this book that the overarching theme of Isaiah is ***Judgment and Hope***. God is creating tension for us in these chapters! There's a tension that runs through the book of Isaiah: *How can God fulfill His promises concerning Israel when Israel is so unfaithful? How can God be gracious and faithful to His Covenant with Israel without sacrificing His justice?* That tension should sound familiar to us. It's the same tension that we are faced with. God has revealed Himself as perfect in love and perfect in justice. The Bible says that ALL have sinned and that the wages of sin is

death — separation from God who is life! How can He love us and rescue us from the perfectly just penalty for our sins without compromising His justice? The tension between the judgment of Judah and the hope of Judah — the tension between the judgment we deserve, and the hope of forgiveness — is resolved in the last section of Isaiah which is filled with the good news concerning Jesus. So much so that **Isaiah 40-66** is referred to as *The Fifth Gospel*.

By the way — the book of Romans follows the same structure — creates the same tension. It begins with what's wrong with humanity — declares that we're all guilty — all justly and rightly condemned before God — and that we are powerless to make things right. Then in Romans 4 Paul declares that God answers our hopelessness in the cross of Jesus! In the cross of Jesus God is **both just and justifier**. It is ONLY when we grasp the reality of HOW God resolved that tension that we experience in a life changing way the weight of the glory of the riches of God's love and grace. The utter security and certainty of God's victorious love for us (Romans 8) — that nothing can separate us from God's love — comes **after** the reality that God has answered in the cross of Jesus the tension we could never resolve. We have every reason to present our lives to God as a living sacrifice because the cross and resurrection of Jesus answered the tension we could never resolve.

As we move into **Isaiah 19** we want to set the historical context. Sennacherib of Assyria is threatening the southern kingdom of Judah. His armies have already wiped out Israel and now they're coming back for Judah and Jerusalem. Hezekiah is king over Judah and the challenge is this: Where are they going to look for help? Like the question the psalmist asks

Psalm 121:1 (CSB) I lift my eyes toward the mountains. Where will my help come from?

So — **Chapter 19** opens up with Egypt.

ISAIAH 19

¹ **An oracle concerning Egypt.**

Egypt was the nation that had enslaved the descendants of Abraham. God delivered them from bondage and death in Egypt in order to bring them back into the land He promised to Abraham's descendants. From Exodus forward God constantly reminds Israel of His redeeming, rescuing love

Leviticus 11:45 (ESV) For I am the Lord who brought you up out of the land of Egypt to be your God. You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy."

Exodus 20:2–3 (ESV) "I am the Lord 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.

Behold, the LORD is riding on a swift cloud and comes to Egypt; and the idols of Egypt will tremble at his presence, and the heart of the Egyptians will melt within them

YHWH is going to challenge to the gods of Egypt. That takes us back to the book of Exodus.

*Exodus 12:12 (ESV) For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; **and on all the gods (elohiym) of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the Lord.***

Every one of the plagues that YHWH brought upon Egypt was aimed at the pantheon of Egyptian gods. Each step along the way in setting the Israelites free God was proving to Pharaoh and Egypt **and** the Israelites that He alone is *LORD* — YHWH. He alone is worthy of worship. That is why He so often said to the Israelites: I am YHWH, your God (elohiym).

²And I will stir up Egyptians against Egyptians, and they will fight, each against another and each against his neighbor, city against city, kingdom against kingdom; ³and the spirit of the Egyptians within them will be emptied out, and I will confound their counsel; and they will inquire of the idols and the sorcerers, and the mediums and the necromancers;

YHWH is going to stir up a civil war.

And just as we would expect (and just a God wanted Judah to expect) THAT is exactly what happened in history, later during the rule of Hezekiah.

This civil war involved a total of 12 different factions in Egypt and raged for almost five years. The man who came out on top of this civil war was an Ethiopian named Tirhakah who ruled with an iron fist.

Centuries before Egypt had been a cruel master over Israel (Ex. 1:11–14), now YHWH cripples their political power and hands them over to the ruler that they deserve.

REMEMBER — Isaiah is telling this to Judah and Jerusalem, not Egypt. He says, “I’m going to punish the Egyptians. Here’s how I’m going to do it!” The fulfillment of this prophecy was intended to show the certainty of things not yet fulfilled concerning the future hope of God’s people.

⁵And the waters of the sea will be dried up, and the river will be dry and parched, ⁶and its canals will become foul, and the branches of Egypt’s Nile will diminish and dry up, reeds and rushes will rot away.

We need to remember that in the mind of the Egyptians the Nile was considered to be divine. So with a single blow God strikes their false god — and at the same time strikes down the economic wealth and the physical health of Egypt. He literally dries them both up.

⁷There will be bare places by the Nile, on the brink of the Nile, and all that is sown by the Nile will be parched, will be driven away, and will be no more. ⁸The fishermen will mourn and lament, all who cast a hook in the Nile; and they will languish who spread nets on the water. ⁹The workers in combed flax will be in despair, and the weavers of white cotton.

God destroyed everything that the Egyptians trusted—their political unity, their economy, religion, and wisdom—and made them an easy target for the Assyrians.

¹⁰Those who are the pillars of the land will be crushed, and all who work for pay will be grieved.

This is complete economic collapse!

The minimum wage workers will be unemployable because there is no supply of raw materials.

At the same time the intellectual resources of Egypt collapse.

¹¹The princes of Zoan are utterly foolish; the wisest counselors of Pharaoh give stupid counsel.

Egypt had a reputation in the Ancient Near East for its wisdom. But the wisdom of Egypt was utterly incapable of dealing with the plans of God. Their inability to respond to what God was doing made them look like fools.

How can you say to Pharaoh, “I am a son of the wise, a son of ancient kings”?

¹²Where then are your wise men? Let them tell you that they might know what the Lord of hosts has purposed against Egypt.

Egypt was known for its intellectual resources — possessing tons of information, understanding the ways things work. But Isaiah says: For all their knowledge they didn't understand who God is they didn't understand what God was doing — couldn't understand God's plan.

REMEMBER — Isaiah is speaking this oracle concerning Egypt to Judah and Jerusalem. Every step of the way in the ministry of Isaiah God was on a mission to confound the wisdom of men built on pride and self-sufficiency.

¹³The princes of Zoan have become fools, and the princes of Memphis are deluded; those who are the cornerstones of her tribes have made Egypt stagger.

¹⁴The Lord has mingled within her a spirit of confusion, and they will make Egypt stagger in all its deeds, as a drunken man staggers in his vomit.

On a geopolitical scale everyone watching was going to say — Egypt is walking and talking like a drunk.

¹⁵And there will be nothing for Egypt that head or tail, palm branch or reed, may do.

We would say — From top to bottom — inside out — no matter where they turn — there's nothing they can do

¹⁶In that day

REMEMBER — this phrase can have a near and far reference.

Sometimes it refers to that immediate chronological context. But sometimes it's a time machine that takes us way off the timeline to another day in the yet distant future.

¹⁶In that day the Egyptians will be like women, and tremble with fear before the hand that the Lord of hosts shakes over them.

¹⁷And the land of Judah will become a terror to the Egyptians. Everyone to whom it is mentioned will fear because of the purpose that the Lord of hosts has purposed against them.

DON'T MISS THIS — The Lord has a purpose, and he's moving towards it. And that purpose includes the '**that day**' of **verse 16**. He says **in that day Judah** is going to be so significantly powerful that even Egypt will fear Judah, okay.

We know that **that day is not** the days of Hezekiah. In the chronological moment Isaiah is speaking in Judah and king Hezekiah are weak and looking for help. In fact, Hezekiah is basically the last bastion of goodness as Judah is falling down the stairs towards destruction. So '**this day**' mentioned in **verse 16** is yet future

But notice what it says next

¹⁸ In that day there will be five cities in the land of Egypt that speak the language of Canaan and swear allegiance to the Lord of host. One of those will be called the City of Destruction."

There are some manuscripts that say *City of the Sun* instead of *City of Destruction*. City of the sun is a reference to Heliopolis — one of the major cities in the south end of Egypt's Delta that was dedicated to the worship of the sun god. The archeological remains of that city have been dug up. But notice what it's saying

here. Isaiah is saying that there is coming a day when Egypt will fear Israel and worship the God of Israel! So, this is looking beyond the impending collapse of Egypt during the time frame of the first half of the chapter — and looking forward to a time yet future to us!

Notice verse 19

19 “In that day there will be an altar to the Lord in the midst of the land of Egypt and a pillar to the Lord at its border.”

A pillar was a marker. There is coming a day when the land of Egypt belongs to the Lord. This is looking forward to the time when many nations will turn to the Lord and worship Him.

20 It will be a sign and a witness to the Lord of hosts in the land of Egypt. When they cry to the Lord because of oppressors, he will send them a savior and defender, and deliver them.

This sounds so much like the book of **Judges**. Egypt looks like another one of God’s kids. In fact, it gets stronger here.

Look at verse 21.

21 And the Lord will make himself known to the Egyptians,

That’s the same language of Exodus.

and the Egyptians will know the Lord in that day and worship with sacrifice and offering, and they will make vows to the Lord and perform them.

How amazing is this!! The nation that once worshipped idols — brutally enslaved and killed the people of God — was judged by God in the Exodus — and judged again as described here in the first half of chapter 19 — will one day truly and fully know the Lord as an entire nation!!

22 And the Lord will strike Egypt, striking and healing, and they will return to the Lord, and he will listen to their pleas for mercy and heal them.

In other words, the Lord will lovingly discipline them like a child so they'll constantly return to Him when they stray — just like we've seen the Lord deal with Israel.

But check this out!! Egypt was capable of cruelty. Babylon did horrible things. But when it came to ruthless cruelty and brutality no one matched the Assyrians. And Isaiah saves this for last. He says that Egypt isn't going to be the only stepbrother of Israel — Assyria is going to be one too! The three of them are going to be a family.

²³In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and Assyria will come into Egypt, and Egypt into Assyria, and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians. ²⁴In that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth,

Isaiah envisions a road running through Israel from north to south, connecting Assyria and Egypt.

When we talk about peace in the Middle East — THIS is it!

But notice the language in **verse 25**.

²⁵whom the Lord of hosts has blessed, saying, “Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my inheritance.”

Until this passage in Isaiah, the terms ‘work of my hands’, and ‘my people’, are reserved exclusively for Israel. But here God applies it to Egypt and Assyria along with *Israel, his inheritance*.”

THINK ABOUT THIS — Just how shocked would Isaiah's listeners be when he said EGYPT and ASSYRIA would be worshipping YHWH right along side of Israel?

Here again we are tethered to Genesis 12 —

Genesis 12:2–3 *And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³I will bless those who*

bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

God’s redeeming plans and purposes run through Abraham to redeem the nations!

And when we get to the New Testament, we’re told in Paul’s letter to the Colossians that what God wanted to do through Abraham involves not just the nations of the earth — but the entire universe!

Colossians 1:20 and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

Colossians 1:20 (The Message) Not only that, but all the broken and dislocated pieces of the universe—people and things, animals and atoms—get properly fixed and fit together in vibrant harmonies, all because of his death, his blood that poured down from the cross.

WOW!! How big is God?!!! Who is it that He CAN’T save?!! Who is it that He WONT save?!! DO we pray that big? Do we believe that big? DO we love that Big?

ISAIAH 20

¹In 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—

We know enough about history to pinpoint the year. This is 711 B.C.

The Assyrian king sends General Sargon to Ashdod — which one of the five big cities in Philistia. He captures it. And **in this year** God gives Isaiah instructions

²at that time the Lord spoke by Isaiah the son of Amoz, saying, “Go, and loose the sackcloth from your waist and take off your sandals from your feet,” and he did so, walking naked and barefoot.

QUOTE: Matthew Poole — *God would sometimes have his prophets to add to their word a visible sign, to awaken people's minds to a more serious consideration of the matters proposed to them*

Naked can mean not wearing a single article of clothing. It's the one that's used in **Genesis 2** where we read that Adam and Eve were *naked and unashamed*. But it's also the same word used in **2 Samuel 6** when king David took off his outer garment and was dancing before the ark of the covenant as they brought it back into Jerusalem. David's danced before the ark dressed as the poorest and most destitute would dress. I believe that's why his wife was so disgusted — that the king would look like a pauper. I believe that the point message wasn't *nudity* — it was complete *poverty* and *humiliation*.

That is the way Isaiah dressed whenever he went out to speak for the Lord.

Then the Lord said, "As my servant Isaiah has walked naked and barefoot for three years as a sign and a portent against Egypt and Cush, ⁴so shall the king of Assyria lead away the Egyptian captives and the Cushite exiles, both the young and the old, naked and barefoot, with buttocks uncovered, the nakedness of Egypt.

Isaiah is basically saying — *Don't trust in Egypt because three more years and they're going to be looking just like I do,*

AGAIN — Isaiah is speaking these things not to the nations — but to Judah and Jerusalem to warn them against choosing an ally other than the Lord Himself.

⁵Then they shall be dismayed and ashamed because of Cush their hope and of Egypt their boast.

If you hope in them, trust in them, make them your boast, they'll let you down.

Isaiah 20:6 (ESV) And the inhabitants of this coastland will say in that day, 'Behold, this is what has happened to those in whom we hoped and to whom we fled for help to be delivered from the king of Assyria! And we, how shall we escape?' "

Who is the coastland there? That's the Philistines. The Philistines will say, *even the Egyptians failed us.*

The Philistines experienced that. Judah would still have the choice to trust the Lord .

ISAIAH 21

Turns to a **new oracle** involving Babylon.

¹The oracle concerning the wilderness of the sea.

He's not going to use the name Babylon until later to the chapter. The phrase *the wilderness of the sea* is a weird title. Here's what most historians, archeologists and commentators suggest. Babylon is full of swampland. THINK: The marshland leading to Mount Doom in Mordor. So Isaiah calls it the wilderness of the sea.

As whirlwinds in the Negeb sweep on, it comes from the wilderness, from a terrible land.

The Negeb is the wilderness to the south of Israel. Negeb means, *south*.

²A stern vision is told to me; the traitor betrays, and the destroyer destroys. Go up, O Elam; lay siege, O Media;

This was when Media and Elam were the allies of Babylon. Isaiah has been consistently trying to make a point about alliances. He's basically saying: You thought these were your friends — but they're going to plunder your corpses.

all the sighing she has caused I bring to an end. ³Therefore my loins are filled with anguish; pangs have seized me, like the pangs of a woman in labor;

Again — we find Isaiah physically wrecked because of how horrible the fate of these things are going to be.

DON'T MISS THIS — IT IS STRIKING!! Who is he having compassion on? Babylon!! He is totally crushed by what the Lord has shown is going to happen to the very people who are going to totally destroy Jerusalem and the Temple.

AGAIN — The heart of the prophet is connected to the heart of God who takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked!

I am **bowed down** so that I cannot hear; I am **dismayed** so that I cannot see. **4My heart staggers; horror has appalled me; the twilight I longed for has been turned for me into trembling.** **5They prepare the table, they spread the rugs, they eat, they drink. Arise, O princes; oil the shield!**

6For thus the Lord said to me: “Go, set a watchman; let him announce what he sees. 7When he sees riders, horsemen in pairs, riders on donkeys, riders on camels, let him listen diligently, very diligently.” 8Then he who saw cried out: “Upon a watchtower I stand, O Lord, continually by day, and at my post I am stationed whole nights. 9And behold, here come riders, horsemen in pairs!” And he answered, “Fallen, fallen is Babylon; and all the carved images of her gods he has shattered to the ground.”

This scene has both a near and far fulfillment. We find an angel making the same declaration in Revelation 18:2 when God judges *commercial* Babylon and *spiritual* Babylon:

Revelation 18:2 (ESV) And he called out with a mighty voice, “Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great!

When the Lord strikes *spiritual Babylon* and *commercial Babylon*, the world will be terrified and mourn the same way (Revelation 18:9–19).

10O my threshed and winnowed one, what I have heard from the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, I announce to you.

When he says **'you'** — he's talking to Judah. It seems that Isaiah is looking way down the line — and he knows what Babylon's ultimate purpose is. Babylon is the winnowing fork. They are threshing the field and Israel is the wheat.

Isaiah is seeing what Hezekiah couldn't see when Hezekiah showed the Babylonians all of the wealth of Judah. Hezekiah was trying to set up an alliance with the very people who would thresh them.

What comes next is pretty mystifying to basically everybody,

¹¹The oracle concerning Dumah. One is calling to me from Seir,

Seir is a reference to the land of Edom. Seir means red. So does Edom. Dumah is referenced as being one of the descendants of Ishmael. So this oracle involves in some way the Edomites.

“Watchman, what time of the night? Watchman, what time of the night?”

This may speak to the confusion and darkness striking Edom at the time of their judgment. Harry Bultema (Commentary on Isaiah) wrote of these verses, *“This brief burden has always been a great burden to expositors!”*

One commentator suggest that by painting the picture of someone crying to a watchman in the night Isaiah is communicating that the long night of Assyrian oppression is almost over, and the night of Babylonian rule would follow a brief ‘morning’ of rest.”

TWO THINGS — ¹. Just because we don't understand something in scripture today doesn't mean it wasn't clear to its original audience. We're still in the part of Isaiah where these are the things that came to pass in his own lifetime. What might be lost on us was not necessarily lost on them. ². We should be comfortable and humble enough to say *“I don't know what this means.”* Saying “I don't know” is no threat to the authority of scripture. It's way better than guessing and pretending like our speculation has captured the mind and intent of God of God

The last oracle in the chapter involves Arabia.

Now here's what you need to understand about Arabia. Arabia is not a nation. It's an reference to an entire area filled with nomadic people. This has been true for thousands of years. It's a reference to a Bedouin people

¹³The oracle concerning Arabia. In the thickets in Arabia you will lodge, O caravans of Dedanites. ¹⁴To the thirsty bring water; meet the fugitive with bread, O inhabitants of the land of Tema.

The idea here is that even these Bedouin people become refugees of war. SO this is another act of judgment that's taking place here.

¹⁵For they have fled from the swords, from the drawn sword, from the bent bow, and from the press of battle.

¹⁶For thus the Lord said to me, "Within a year, according to the years of a hired worker, all the glory of Kedar will come to an end.

Kedar is at the far reaches of Arabia.

Again, we're a little bit at a loss as to what this is specifically talking about.

TWO POSSIBILITIES — The most likely one is that Kedar is the offender here, that they have been raiding the Arabians. Isaiah is saying that's not going to last, so don't be afraid of Kedar. More importantly Isaiah doesn't want Judah to be impressed with Kedar. The other possibility is that Kedar, including the Arabians, are all coming under the judgment of the Assyrians.

¹⁷And the remainder of the archers of the mighty men of the sons of Kedar will be few, for the Lord, the God of Israel, has spoken."

THE BIG IDEA HERE is that God is determining the history of people other than Israel. He's calling the shots — He has a plan — He has a purpose for these other nations. He is involved in geopolitical circumstances and history itself.

Look at the landscape of these oracles. We've looked at Edom, we've looked at Arabia, we've looked at Babylon, we've looked at Egypt and Kush.

NEXT WEEK — After looking at all these nations — Isaiah zeroes in on JERUSALEM