

Isaiah 19: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Isaiah chapter 19, an oracle concerning Egypt. 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.

And I will stir up Egyptians against Egyptians, and they will fight, each against another, and each against his neighbour, city against city, kingdom against kingdom.

And 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. And I will give over the Egyptians into the hand of a hard master, and a fierce king will rule over them, declares the Lord God of hosts.

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

There 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. The fishermen will mourn and lament, all who cast a hook in the Nile, and they will languish who spread nets on the water.

[1 : 1 2] The workers in combed flax will be in despair, and the weavers of white cotton. Those who are the pillars of the land will be crushed, and all who work for pay will be grieved.

The princes of Zoan are utterly foolish. The wisest counsellors of Pharaoh give stupid counsel. How can you say to Pharaoh, I am a son of the wise, a son of ancient kings?

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

And there will be nothing for Egypt that head or tail, palm branch or reed may do. In that day the Egyptians will be like women, and tremble with fear before the hand that the Lord of hosts shakes over them.

[2 : 1 0] And 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. 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 hosts.

One of these will be called the city of destruction. 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. 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 saviour and defender, and deliver them. And the Lord will make himself known to the Egyptians, 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. 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 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. In that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the Lord of hosts has blessed, saying, Blessed be Egypt, my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my inheritance.

[3 : 30] Isaiah chapters 18 to 20 concern Cush and Egypt. Chapter 18 addressed Cush, and in chapter 19 we turn to Egypt. As Assyria rose to dominance in the region, Judah was tempted to look south to Egypt for support against the great threat that Assyria posed.

In chapters 30 and 31, this temptation will be dealt with more directly. Although dating this material is difficult, it is probable that the same concern underlies chapters 18 to 20, which also demonstrate the unreliability of Cush and Egypt as nations to rely upon.

Some have suggested that we should connect the opening part of this chapter, with the situation described in the preceding chapter, presumably referring to Cush taking over upper and lower Egypt, and the foundation of the Cushite or Nubian ruled 25th dynasty.

However, much of the material of this chapter has a more figurative character to it. Egypt is, of course, prominent in the story of Israel. In Genesis chapter 12, Abraham had gone down into Egypt during a famine.

Later on in the book of Genesis, Joseph was sent down into Egypt by his brothers in chapter 37. Later, his brothers and family joined him. There they settled in the land of Goshen, came to thrive, and then later, as they were persecuted under pharaohs who did not know Joseph, the Lord delivered them in the Exodus, sending great plagues upon the Egyptians and drowning the pursuing Egyptians in the Red Sea.

[4 : 54] While the northern powers relative to Israel and Judah were places like Assyria, Babylon, and Persia, the Egyptians were the great power to the south, and consequently often needed to be prominent in the consideration of Israel and Judah's foreign policies.

Presumably seeing it as a shrewd political manoeuvre, Solomon had married the daughter of Pharaoh. He had engaged in horse trading for Pharaoh within the region, something that the kings had been told not to do.

However, despite this marriage alliance, Pharaoh had sheltered some of Solomon's enemies, Hadad the Edomite, and Jeroboam the son of Nebat. After Solomon's death, the kingdom divided, in part because Solomon had taken on something of the character of a pharaoh.

His adversary, Jeroboam the son of Nebat, who had taken refuge in Egypt, returned to the land and took away the northern tribes from the rule of the house of David. A few years after the division of the kingdom, Shishak the king of Egypt came up and attacked Jerusalem, plundering the treasures of the temple.

While Egypt was not the same power that it once was during much of the period of the kingdoms, it did play an important role in the destiny of the kingdoms at some critical junctures. Hoshea, the last king of Israel before its fall, had turned to Egypt for aid against the Assyrians.

[6 : 06] The Assyrians' vengeance for this led to the final destruction of the northern kingdom in 722 BC. During the reign of Hezekiah, Judah was also tempted to look to Egypt for aid against the rising Assyrian threat.

Another pivotal event in which Egypt was involved in the history of the southern kingdom came about a century later, when Pharaoh Necho, coming up to engage with the Assyrians, killed King Jeziel, who was the last great hope for the nation.

He later removed King Jehoahaz, whom the people of Judah had set up as a replacement for his father, and put Eliakim, who he renamed Jehoiakim, in his place. He ruled as a vassal under Egypt.

The Babylonians would soon crush the influence of the Egyptians within the region, driving them back within the borders of their land. After the fall of Jerusalem and the assassination of the governor Gedaliah, many Jews fled to Egypt for refuge.

As we read of individual Israelites who fled to Egypt for refuge, people like Jeroboam the son of Nebat, perhaps there were some small established communities of Israelites within the land of Egypt earlier on.

[7 : 08] The Jews who moved down at the time of Jeremiah were not going to thrive in the land of their exile. Later communities of Jewish exiles, however, would. During the 5th and 4th centuries, there was a large Jewish community at Elephantine, who even built their own temple, although they seemed to have been polytheists in their practice, and to have little or no knowledge of the law.

Under Alexander and the Ptolemies, further communities of Jews would be established in Egypt. At one point, over a third of the population of Alexandria was Jewish. They had a temple at Leontopolis, and also translated the scriptures from Hebrew into Greek, in the Septuagint, in the 3rd century.

Estimates of the population of Jews in Egypt by the 1st century AD can be as high as 1 million. Considering the way that Isaiah chapter 19 speaks about the future of Egypt and the intertwining of its destiny with that of Israel, this history is important to consider.

The chapter begins with the announcement of the Lord's advent. He is riding the storm cloud, common theophanic imagery, coming to Egypt to judge the idols. The Lord's war against the false gods should be familiar from the background of the Exodus.

The Egyptians' confidence would have been in their gods, their internal unity, the natural provision of the Nile, and the wisdom of their leaders. In this chapter, the Lord speaks of how he is going to frustrate all of these sources of strength.

[8 : 26] Their idols and false gods will be dismayed. Their warriors will be sapped of courage. The nation would turn against itself. They will be subject to the harsh bondage of another nation. Their river would dry up, and all of the food that it offered and the industry that is supported would be removed with it.

And the counsel of all of their wise men would be frustrated and proven foolish. Egypt was a place of idolatry and superstition, and the Lord is going to judge the necromancers, the mediums, the idols, and the sorcerers.

There is a sort of poetic justice to the way that the Egyptians would be given into the hand of a hard master. They had once been the hard master over Israel, but now they would be subject to harsh rule.

Verses 5 to 10, with the various judgments upon the land, should recall the plagues of the Exodus. The Nile was the great source of Egypt's life. Without the Nile, Egypt would disappear.

It would become entirely desert. Whether in upper Egypt to the south with the Nile Valley, or in the lower Egyptian area of the Nile Delta, Egypt was entirely dependent upon the Nile for its existence.

[9 : 27] There would no longer be any fish for the fishermen. Those working with cotton and flax would no longer have the plants with which to make the clothes that they would sell. The vast fields of grain that were supported by the Nile, which would later make Egypt the breadbasket of Rome, would be parched and barren.

Egypt's life and economy would be utterly devastated. This passage is likely figurative, not a literal description of the Nile drying up, but of the Lord bringing the great and proud kingdom of Egypt down to the ground.

This would be a great caution to those in Judah who attempted to trust in her. Besides the internal unity, the gods, and the superstitions of Egypt, and the natural situation by the Nile, the Egyptians placed great faith in the wisdom of their rulers and their counsellors.

The Lord, however, would frustrate these two, leaving them without any wisdom. The princes of Zoan, the key city in the north, and the wisest counsellors of Pharaoh, would be incapable of giving good advice.

The same would be the case for the princes of Memphis, another key northern city. In a familiar prophetic image, we are told that Egypt would be made drunk. They would stagger and reel under the Lord's judgment.

[10 : 35] No one in Egypt, from the greatest to the least of them, would be capable of responding to the crisis. The chapter ends, in verses 16 to 25, with five in-that-day oracles, the last four of which continue and bring to a higher expression the theme that we have already encountered of the bringing in of the nations after judgment.

We saw this in places like Isaiah chapter 18 verse 7, for instance. At that time, tribute will be brought to the Lord of hosts from a people tall and smooth, from a people feared near and far, a nation mighty and conquering, whose land the rivers divide, to Mount Zion, the place of the name of the Lord of hosts.

The first of the in-that-day statements, however, is a statement of judgment. If Egypt is going to be purified, it will be purified, like Judah, through judgment. Egypt would be struck with terror, a terror caused by the land of Judah.

The Egyptians, of course, had responded to the Israelites in this way during the period of the plagues and the exodus. This prophecy does not seem to have been literally fulfilled during the years that followed Isaiah.

It seems to be looking forward to a more eschatological situation, a situation connected to other such prophecies within the book of Isaiah. There were many cities in the land of Egypt, but the prophecy of verse 18 is that five of these cities would be so associated with Israel as to speak Hebrew.

[11 : 55] One of these five cities is singled out. Many translations read it, the city of destruction, but it's likely that it should be read, the city of the sun, identifying the city as Heliopolis.

What was once a center of worship for the pagan sun god Ra would become a Hebrew-speaking city for the worship of the Lord, just as Abraham had set up altars and pillars in the land of his wanderings in Canaan.

So an altar would be set up in the midst of Egypt and a pillar at its border. Much as Israel had once called out to the Lord in their distress in Egypt, so the Egyptians would now be able to call out to the Lord because of their oppressors, and he would send them a saviour.

The term for saviour here perhaps being a play upon the name Moses. The Lord would deal with the Egyptians as his people. They would worship him with sacrifice and offerings and would make vows to him, and he would strike them and heal them.

Much as Judah, they would return to the Lord through judgment. Isaiah chapter 11 verse 16 read, And there will be a highway from Assyria for the remnant that remains of his people, as there was for Israel when they came up from the land of Egypt.

[12 : 58] Verses 23 to 25 describe a much more remarkable highway, a highway that will lead all the way from Egypt to Assyria, bringing the northern power of Assyria, the southern power of Egypt, and Israel in the centre, together in the common activity of worshipping the Lord.

John Goldingay speculates that perhaps the Lord chose Canaan as the site for his special people precisely because it is so suited for such a highway. It is the place that stands at the junction of Africa, Asia and Europe.

If you are looking for a location from which something can spread out into the rest of the world, the land of Canaan is the ideal place to start. This would be a fulfilment of the promise of the Lord that he would bless all of the nations through Abraham.

The Lord speaks of Egypt and Assyria in language that is similar to that of which he speaks of Israel. Israel, the Lord's firstborn son, would be joined by other sons. All of this fulfils the promise of Isaiah chapter 2 verses 2 to 3.

It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains and shall be lifted up above the hills and all the nations shall flow to it.

[14 : 07] And many people shall come and say, Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.

For out of Zion shall go forth the law and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations and shall decide disputes for many peoples. And they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks.

Nations shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. The Lord would bring judgment upon Egypt, but judgment would not be the final word.

A question to consider. What are some of the former ways in which the Lord blessed Egypt through his people and some of the former indications that God had a good purpose for them as a nation? Amen.