

Isaiah 20: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Isaiah chapter 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. At 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. 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, so 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.

Then they shall be dismayed and ashamed because of Cush their hope, and of Egypt their boast. 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? Isaiah chapters 18 to 20 concern the great powers to Judah's south, Cush and Egypt. In the preceding chapters the two nations were treated separately, Cush in chapter 18, and Egypt in chapter 19.

In chapter 20 they are treated together. Judah was tempted, especially with the rising power of Assyria, which had overthrown the northern kingdom of Israel by this point, to look towards Egypt and Cush as potential sources of aid.

[1 : 2 6] Hoshea, the last king of Israel, had looked to Egyptian forces for aid earlier in the rebellion against Assyria. During much of this period, Egypt was divided under various rulers.

However, after the rise of the Nubian rule 25th dynasty of Egypt, under Kashta, Pianchi and their successors, the Kushites would go on to secure rule over the entirety of Egypt.

Forces from some ruler within Egypt had supported Gaza and Hamath in their rebellion against the Assyrians around 720 BC. However, Sargon II of Assyria had crushed the rebellion and defeated the Egyptian forces supporting them.

Perhaps he didn't retaliate against Egypt at that point, because the forces were from a more limited regional power in a much divided Egypt. Ashdod was a key port on the coastal plain of Palestine, belonging to Philistia.

The Assyrians wanted to control the seaports and the regions around them, as the ports were critical for trade. When an anti-Assyrian faction under Yamani gained power there, ousting an Assyrian-appointed ruler in 713 BC, Ashdod looked to Egypt for support.

[2 : 3 2] They do not seem to have received the support they hoped for. When the Assyrians came to crush the rebellion and Yamani fled, like many others before him, people like Hadad the Edomite and Jeroboam the son of Nebat, he fled for refuge to Egypt.

However, on this occasion, the Egyptians extradited him to the Assyrians in 711 BC, when they were threatened by them. The Nubian 25th dynasty seemed to have a more conciliatory foreign policy towards Assyria during this period.

Nevertheless, a decade later, they would support Judah in their rebellion against the Assyrians. The Assyrians under Esar Haddon invaded Egypt in 674 BC, but were defeated by the Egyptians under Taharqa.

The Egyptians weren't so successful in repelling the invasion of 671 BC, and the Assyrians ended up taking lower Egypt, the northern part of the country, and imposing tribute.

After some Egyptian gains, Ashurbanipal extended Assyrian power down as far as Thebes. By 656 BC, the whole country was united under a vassal of the Assyrian Ashurbanipal, and the 25th dynasty was at an end.

[3 : 39] This is all background for the short 20th chapter of Isaiah, presumably set in 711 BC, the year of the recapture of Ashdod by the Assyrians. The prophet Isaiah was instructed to perform a prophetic sign act.

There are several instances of such sign acts in the books of the prophets. Jeremiah performs a number. So does Ezekiel, and Hosea, in one of the most famous sign acts of all, takes the unfaithful Goma as his wife.

Isaiah is instructed to dress, or rather undress, as if he were a captive taken in war. Isaiah at this time was wearing sackcloth, presumably in mourning for some reason.

But he was instructed to remove the sackcloth and the sandals from his feet, and walk around naked and barefoot. It is not clear whether he was entirely naked, or whether he was merely removing all of his outer garments.

Either way, it would have been a humiliating sight. Egypt had not been directly involved in the rebellion of Ashdod, and they had extradited the rebel Yomani to the Assyrians. Perhaps part of the lesson of Ashdod in this context is that Ashdod was greatly unwise in expecting any aid from the Egyptians.

[4 : 44] This lesson would be particularly important in the years that followed. In the final years of the 8th century, as the Egyptians played a part in fomenting rebellion in the region, the Assyrian Sennacherib would crush the Egyptian expedition at that time.

In the years to come, as we've already seen, the Assyrians would drive back the Egyptians. They would subdue them and reduce Egypt to the status of a vassal kingdom. The people of the coastland, people who had looked to Egypt from Philistia for many years as their greatest source of support, would be dismayed.

There was no help to be found in Egypt and Kursh. Once again, the message of the prophet is that there is no security to be found in such human alliances. Even supposedly great powers would prove utterly insufficient.

Judah would have to learn to depend upon the Lord God of hosts for their support, or else it would not survive at all. A question to consider, what might be the symbolic import of the nakedness of the prophet Isaiah in this prophetic sign act?

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