

Isaiah – Chapters 18-20

Ethiopia and Egypt

Isaiah 19:19-21 – 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 near its border. It will become a sign and a witness to the LORD of hosts in the land of Egypt; for they will cry to the LORD because of oppressors, and He will send them a Savior and a Champion, and He will deliver them. Thus the LORD will make Himself known to Egypt, and the Egyptians will know the LORD in that day. They will even worship with sacrifice and offering, and will make a vow to the LORD and perform it.

CONTEXT

Isaiah 13–23 contains a series of oracles against the nations that surrounded Israel and Judah. These chapters form a deliberate literary unit in which the Holy One of Israel pronounces judgment upon the peoples and powers that have opposed Him and mistreated His people.

So far in this section we have covered Babylon (“Far” East), Assyria (Northeast), Philistia (West), Damascus (North) and Moab (East). Ethiopia and Egypt are the nations that we will discuss and are to the uttermost south at the time of Isaiah. Chapters 21-23 will also have oracles about Edom and Arabia (Southeast) and Tyre (Northwest). By the time the prophecies are concluded, every single point of the compass surrounding Israel will be addressed.

Let’s remember why this section is here. Chapters 11-12 of Isaiah’s prophecies demonstrate that Israel will be fully restored. The Messiah will be King, He will rule in truth, justice, and peace. Nature will be restored. The Nation of Israel will be prominent in the world, and the nations of the world will pay homage to the Messiah and Israel.

HISTORICAL BACKDROP

Cush (Ethiopia/Kush) – Cush refers to the ancient kingdom located south of Egypt along the Nile, in the region of modern-day Sudan and northern Ethiopia. In Isaiah’s day, Cush (often called Ethiopia in English Bibles) was ruled by the 25th Dynasty, a powerful line of Cushite kings who had conquered and were ruling Egypt itself. These kings were tall, dark-skinned warriors known for their military strength and influence. They were actively engaged in regional politics, sending envoys and forming alliances against the rising threat of Assyria. Cush represented a significant southern power that Judah might be tempted to look to for help.

Egypt – Egypt had been a dominant power in the ancient Near East for centuries. By Isaiah’s time it was still a major player, though no longer at its ancient peak. Egypt frequently sought alliances with smaller nations like Judah to counter Assyrian expansion. During the Syro-Ephraimite crisis and the years leading up to Sennacherib’s invasion, Egypt was actively courting Judah and other states to join anti-Assyrian coalitions. For Judah, Egypt represented a tempting but ultimately unreliable source of military and political support. Scripture

Isaiah – Chapters 18-20

Ethiopia and Egypt

repeatedly warns God’s people not to trust in “the arm of flesh” represented by Egypt and its allies.

Both Cush and Egypt appear together in these chapters because they were politically and militarily linked in Isaiah’s day. Their combined influence made them appear strong, yet the Lord would demonstrate that no human alliance can thwart His purposes or protect those who trust in them other than in Him.

EXPOSITION OF ISAIAH 18

Isaiah 18 – The Message to Cush

Chapter 18 opens with a “woe” (a warning) addressed to the land of whirring wings beyond the rivers of Cush. The imagery describes a distant, powerful nation sending swift messengers in papyrus boats down the Nile or across the sea. These envoys are likely seeking alliances with Judah or other nations against the Assyrian threat. The chapter then calls the whole world to watch what the Lord will do. God declares that He is watching quietly from heaven, like still heat or dew before harvest. At the right moment, He will suddenly “prune” the enemy, cutting off shoots and branches like a farmer preparing vines. The defeated forces will be left for birds and beasts.

The chapter does not end in judgment on Cush. Instead, verse 7 presents a striking promise: “In that time tribute will be brought to the Lord of hosts from a people tall and smooth-skinned... to Mount Zion, the place of the name of the Lord of hosts.” The same nation addressed at the beginning will one day bring gifts and honor to the true God in Jerusalem. This is not primarily a chapter of judgment against Cush. It is a message that God does not need human alliances or powerful southern kingdoms to accomplish His purposes. He will act in His own time. And even Cush — a Gentile nation — has a future in the worship of the Holy One of Israel. Some Observations:

- Ethiopia is being warned not to try to help. This scenario has nothing to do with them. It is God who will defeat the enemies. Judah is to observe that none of their allies can help.
 - In 2 Kings 19:9 (Isaiah 37:8-13), Tirhakah, king of Ethiopia, tells Hezekiah not to trust in the Lord.
- The enemy here is left unidentified. Because it is in the context of Isaiah, the conclusion is that this is about Assyria. Is this about the current struggle and the decisive destruction of the Assyrian army?
- However, the aftermath of the Lord’s work leads the Cushite people to bring homage to the Lord of hosts, and they will hear the Lord. There is no record of this happening in 701 BC.
 - Daniel 11:40-43; Jeremiah 46:9-10; Zephaniah 3:8-11

Isaiah – Chapters 18-20

Ethiopia and Egypt

- In these texts along with Isaiah 18, we see that there is a struggle in Ethiopia. During the Day of the Lord, Ethiopia will resist the king who does what he pleases. In the end, the Antichrist wins and Ethiopia will follow at his heels.
- They seem to be fighting for God, but they do, in the end, rebel against the Lord.
- They survive the Day of the Lord, but there are repercussions, they are humbled and become servants of Israel.
- The message to Ethiopia is not judgment but a warning. When it comes to the enemies of God and Israel being attacked, they are to stay out of it.

EXPOSITION OF ISAIAH 19

Isaiah 19 – The Oracle Concerning Egypt

Chapter 19 begins with clear judgment on Egypt. The Lord rides on a swift cloud and comes to Egypt; the idols tremble, and the heart of Egypt melts. Civil war breaks out, Egyptian against Egyptian. The Nile, the source of Egypt's life and wealth, fails in its purpose. Fishing, agriculture, and the entire economy collapse. Egypt's famous wise men, magicians, and counselors, the pride of their civilization, are confounded. God brings confusion in their midst so that their plans come to nothing. The once-proud nation is brought low.

Yet the chapter does not remain in judgment. Beginning in verse 16, the tone shifts dramatically with the repeated phrase "in that day." Egypt will become like frightened women, terrified of the land of Judah because of what the Lord has planned. Then comes one of the most significant prophecies in the Old Testament: 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 near its border. It will be a sign and witness. The Egyptians will cry to the Lord because of oppressors, and He will send them a Savior and Champion who will deliver them. The Lord will make Himself known to Egypt, and the Egyptians will know the Lord. They will worship with sacrifice and offering and make vows to Him.

The chapter closes with an even more astonishing picture: a highway from Egypt to Assyria. These two former enemies will worship together, and Israel will be a blessing in their midst. The Lord declares, "Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my inheritance." The nation that once enslaved God's people and the empire that would later destroy Jerusalem are both brought into a future of worship and blessing alongside Israel. This is not merely historical; it points to the eschatological day when the nations will come to Zion, and the knowledge of the Lord will cover the earth.

Isaiah – Chapters 18-20

Ethiopia and Egypt

EXPOSITION OF ISAIAH 20

Isaiah 20 – Physical Prophecy Concerning Egypt and Ethiopia

Egypt and Cush together in one dramatic, public sign. In the year the Assyrian commander captured Ashdod, the Lord told Isaiah to remove his sackcloth and sandals and walk naked and barefoot for three years. Like Ezekiel laying on his side or Jeremiah walking around with a yoke on his neck, this is a physical prophecy.

Just as Isaiah walked naked and barefoot, so the king of Assyria would lead away the Egyptians and Cushites as captives, young and old, naked and barefoot, with buttocks uncovered, to the shame of Egypt.

The purpose of this humiliating sign is made explicit: it was a warning to those in Judah and to any who interfere with the Lord's dealings with Israel. They were looking to Egypt and Cush for help against Assyria. When the people who trusted in these southern powers saw their supposed allies marched away in shame, they would be dismayed and ashamed. "Behold, such is our expectation, where we fled for help to be delivered from the king of Assyria! And we, how shall we escape?"

Egypt and Cush thought they could defeat the Assyrians, but that would violate God's prophecy, and the glory belongs to the Lord. So, before the Lord defeats the Assyrians, Egypt and Cush are handed over to Assyria.

CORRELATION OF CHAPTERS 18-20

These three chapters work together as a unified message. Chapters 18 and 19 address Cush and Egypt separately, each containing both warning and remarkable future hope. Chapter 18 shows that God does not need Cush's political help and promises that Cush will one day bring tribute to Zion. Chapter 19 pronounces severe judgment on Egypt's pride and false wisdom but then reveals a future in which Egypt will have an altar to the Lord, receive a Savior, and worship alongside even Assyria. Chapter 20 then brings both nations together in a single, humiliating sign. The public debasement of Egypt and Cush serves as a concrete warning to Judah: do not put your trust in these powers. They will be led away captive and ashamed. The judgment is real and visible, yet it is not the final word; the hope held out in chapters 18 and 19 remains.

The historical scenario provides the landscape for the future prophetic eschatological warnings and hope provided to two of the most powerful nations during the 8th century BC.

Together, the chapters teach that the Holy One of Israel is sovereign over every nation. He judges pride, false wisdom, and misplaced trust. He warns His people against looking to human alliances for security. And He has redemptive purposes that extend even to former enemies and distant Gentile nations. The same God who humbles Egypt and Cush will one day draw them to worship at Zion.

Isaiah – Chapters 18-20

Ethiopia and Egypt

TYING THE THREADS TOGETHER

The Messianic Hope – The Savior sent to Egypt, the altar and pillar as signs, the highway of worship connecting former enemies, and the promise that Cush will bring tribute to Zion all point forward to the coming King and His kingdom. The Child born to us, the Son given to us, whose government will rest on His shoulders, will one day reign so that nations come to the light of Zion. The altar in Egypt and the highway to Assyria anticipate the day when the knowledge of the Lord covers the earth and every knee bows to the Messiah.

The Motif of the City – Proud nations and their alliances (Egypt, Cush, their political maneuvering) are brought low. Their wisdom fails, their power is stripped, and they are publicly shamed. In contrast, Zion, the city the Lord has founded, remains the place of refuge and the center to which the nations are drawn. The city of God is exalted and becomes the gathering place for worship from every corner of the earth.

The Holy One of Israel – He is the central figure. His holiness demands judgment on pride, idolatry, and false trusts. His sovereignty means no nation, however powerful, can frustrate His plans. His faithfulness guarantees that He will both judge the wicked and preserve a remnant. And His grace extends beyond Israel to include Gentile nations in future worship. The same Lord who sends confusion upon Egypt's wise men will send a Savior to deliver them. The Holy One who prunes the enemy will also receive tribute from Cush and establish an altar in the heart of Egypt.