

Isaiah 19-20, The Burden of Egypt

Overview

The oracle falls into three parts. The second (19:16-25) consists of five paragraphs introduced with “in that day.” The third is set off with a separate historical notice (20:1).

The first and third describe the Lord's judgment on Egypt, while the second describes Egypt's conversion to the Lord along with Assyria. Each of these three conveys an important lesson for us.

- The first judgment section describes the **internal** disruption of Egyptian life, and reminds us that the counsels of man are powerless compared with the Lord's purposes.
- The last judgment section looks at Egypt's **external** relations, both with her allies and with Assyria, who conquered her. We see the futility of trusting in the arm of flesh.
- The central section is a remarkable declaration of God's purpose to bring the Gentiles to himself. It gives a picture of the process of conversion.

The overall structure of salvation surrounded by judgment reminds us of the burden of Moab (ch. 15-16). There, the threat of judgment surrounded an invitation to Moab (16:1-5) to send her tribute to the Messianic king and seek his protection. Sadly, Moab, though related by the flesh to Israel, rejected this invitation because of her pride (16:6) and idolatry (16:12). Egypt, though unrelated, will accept it.

Text

19:1 The burden of Egypt.--The standard title.

19:1b-15, Judgment on Egypt

This section is chiasmic. The correspondence between matching sections is marked not only thematically but also by how the Lord is described.

	Reference to the Lord		
Egypt is confused	LORD	1b	14-15
Human counsel fails before the Lord's purposes	LORD of Hosts	2-4	11-13
The economy collapses	(none)	5-10	

In this section, we read nothing of external enemies or the threat of captivity. The judgment takes the form of internal disruption of the society before the Lord.

1, Egypt is Confused

The first step in their judgment is their confusion before the Lord's approach.

Behold, the LORD rideth upon a swift cloud, and shall come into Egypt:--The Lord arrives in

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judgment like a thunderstorm, riding on a cloud. Such an image would be particularly threatening to the Egyptians, for whom rain is a rare and unfamiliar occurrence (Zech 14:18).

The Canaanite god Baal was a thunderstorm deity. The OT frequently mocks him by depicting the Lord as the true God of the thunderstorm. Psa 104:3 is a good example:

[he] maketh the clouds his chariot: who walketh upon the wings of the wind:

Compare also Ps 29, and Ps 18:9-15.

and the idols of Egypt shall be moved at his presence, and the heart of Egypt shall melt in the midst of it.--His sudden appearance terrifies both the idols and the people.

2-4, Failure of Human Counsel

The next step reports the internal turmoil and indecision that result from the judgment.

2 And I will set the Egyptians against the Egyptians: and they shall fight every one against his brother, and every one against his neighbour; city against city, and kingdom against kingdom.-- Internal strife is a common feature of divine judgment.

Gideon against the Midianites: Jdg 7:22 And the three hundred blew the trumpets, and **the LORD set every man's sword against his fellow**, even throughout all the host:

Jehoshaphat against the Moabites: 2Ch 20:23 For the children of Ammon and Moab stood up against the inhabitants of mount Seir, utterly to slay and destroy *them*: and when they had made an end of the inhabitants of Seir, every one helped to destroy another.

The history of the world shows us that left to themselves, people are no better than animals in their constant envy and strife. The “works of the flesh” include “hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, envyings, [and] murders” (Gal 5:20-21). When we studied our Savior's role as Prince of Peace (9:6), we noted that he brings not only peace with God, but also peace among men.

Herodotus 2.147 records that after the Ethiopian dynasty (760-656 BC, reflected in ch. 18), twelve local kings sought to rule in confederacy, but squabbled among themselves.

3 And the spirit of Egypt shall fail in the midst thereof; and I will destroy the counsel thereof: and they shall seek to the idols, and to the charmers, and to them that have familiar spirits, and to the wizards.--The theme of counsel, of wise planning, pervades vv. 1-15. As pagans, the Egyptians relied on the occult for guidance, but it will fail them in the presence of the true God.

4 And the Egyptians will I give over into the hand of a cruel lord; and a fierce king shall rule over them, saith the Lord, the LORD of hosts.--When a nation is unstable internally, it is at risk of a totalitarian leader. The reference is probably to Psammeticus (Psamtik 1), 664-610 BC, who put down his rival kings and ruled for 54 years. His son was Pharaoh Necho, who killed Josiah king of Judah. There may be a more distant reference to the antichrist.

5-10, Drying of the Nile

The center of the chiasm is both longer and more devastating than what we have read so far.

5 And the waters shall fail from the sea, and the river shall be wasted and dried up.--This now goes beyond past history.

The Nile is the nation's life-blood. It will be dried up, and Isaiah describes all the aspects of economic life that fail as a result

6 And they shall turn the rivers far away; and the brooks of defence shall be emptied and dried up:--First, its eastern Pelusiac branch defended Egypt from armies marching along the coastal route.

the reeds and flags shall wither. 7 The paper reeds by the brooks, by the mouth of the brooks, and every thing sown by the brooks, shall wither, be driven away, and be no more.--Next, the plants that the Nile waters wither and die, leading to famine, for all Egyptian agriculture depends on the river.

8 The fishers also shall mourn, and all they that cast angle into the brooks shall lament, and they that spread nets upon the waters shall languish.--The river not only waters the crops but provides fish, but they will no longer be available.

9 Moreover they that work in fine flax, and they that weave networks [or “cotton”], shall be confounded.--Flax production requires rotting the stems in water so that the pulp can be washed away, leaving the fiber behind. This is impossible without a source of water.

10 And they shall be broken in the purposes thereof, all that make sluices and ponds for fish.--The vocabulary is obscure, but the verse probably describes both the “pillars of society,” the rich, and those who work for hire as being together frustrated. ESV: “Those who are the pillars of the land will be crushed, and all who work for pay will be grieved.”

This event is apparently part of the phenomenon pictured in 11:15, enabling people to move freely among Egypt, Israel, and Assyria.

Isa 11:15-16 And the LORD shall utterly destroy the tongue of the Egyptian sea [the Red Sea]; and with his mighty wind shall he shake his hand over the river, and shall smite it in the seven streams, and make *men* go over dryshod. 16 And there shall be an highway for the remnant of his people, which shall be left, from Assyria; like as it was to Israel in the day that he came up out of the land of Egypt.

But here, Isaiah focuses on the impact of such an event on the society. Every aspect of economic life is brought to a halt.

11-13, Failure of Human Counsel

Now we return to the failure of human counsel in the face of the divine judgment, first mentioned in v.3.

11 Surely the princes of Zoan are fools, the counsel of the wise counsellors of Pharaoh is become brutish: how say ye unto Pharaoh, I am the son of the wise, the son of ancient kings? 12 Where are they? where are thy wise men? and let them tell thee now, and let them know what the LORD of hosts hath purposed upon Egypt. 13 The princes of Zoan are become fools, the princes of Noph are deceived; they have also seduced Egypt, even they that are the stay of the tribes thereof.--Note the chiasm, the folly of Pharaoh's counselors surrounding the purpose (better, “counsel,” from the same root) of the Lord of hosts (v. 12b). Man's counsel is completely ineffective when confronted with the

Lord's purposes.

Here, as in vv. 2-4, the Lord takes his military title, "Lord of Hosts."

14-15, Egypt is Confused

Finally, we return to the theme of complete confusion that we saw in v. 1:

14 The LORD hath mingled a perverse [confused] spirit in the midst thereof: and they have caused Egypt to err in every work thereof, as a drunken man staggereth in his vomit.--In the face of the Lord's judgment, Egypt is no more competent than a drunk rolling in the gutter.

15 Neither shall there be any work for Egypt, which the head or tail, branch or rush, may do.--These terms represent all of society (as in 9:14). "Head and tail" represent the entire animal. "Branch" (the lofty palm frond) and "rush" (growing in the marsh) represent the highest and lowest plants. The prophet is describing a devastation of the land that has touched the entire society.

How timely this prophecy is for us today. When our economy shuts down, it is because God has arrived upon his swift cloud to show that the counsels of men are worthless. The Federal Reserve and the Dept of Treasury are no more able to solve such a problem than Egypt could solve a failure of the Nile. The sovereign Lord brings both of these disasters to show people their impotence and draw them to himself. The only solution to America's problems is to repent and turn to the Lord for mercy.

And that is just what Egypt will do, according to vv. 16-25.

16-25, "In That Day" Egypt comes to the Lord

Now we turn from judgment to blessing. Note the contrast between the first paragraph (16-17, virtually the same picture of judgment as the previous section) and the last (v. 25, Egypt on a par with Israel). This contrast suggests that the five paragraphs trace a progression, and in fact we find here a remarkably general outline of the spiritual trajectory, not only of Egypt, but of any sinner who comes to the Lord. This section contrasts with Moab's rejection of the invitation to seek refuge with Messiah in the face of judgment (16:1-5).

16-17, Judgment

Vv. 16-17 are a good example of a transitional paragraph: "in that day" marks it as introducing the central section, but its theme of judgment rather than blessing recalls vv. 1-15. Within the present section, it describes the starting point of coming to the Lord.

16 In that day shall Egypt be like unto women: and it shall be afraid and fear because of the shaking of the hand of the LORD of hosts, which he shaketh over it.--These verses echo the confusion of vv. 1, 14-15.

17 And the land of Judah shall be a terror unto Egypt, every one that maketh mention thereof [feminine, agreeing with "land"] shall be afraid in himself, because of the counsel of the LORD of hosts, which he hath determined against it [Egypt].--Vv. 2-4; 11-13 focused on "counsel." Here, "counsel" and "determined" are both forms of this word, which is also translated "purposed" in 12b.

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Throughout its history, Judah feared Egypt and Mesopotamia. The day will come when the tables will be turned. Egypt will be terrified of the king who rules from Jerusalem, because she hears God's counsel against her, recounted in the first and third sections of this oracle.

Egypt's salvation begins with fear. Modern evangelism starts with "God loves you," but the biblical pattern of salvation always begins with an awareness of the Lord's terrible judgment against our sin. Not until someone is "afraid in himself because of the counsel of the Lord of hosts ... against [him]" (v. 17) can one become a member of God's people (v. 25).

18, Decision

18 In that day shall five cities in the land of Egypt speak the language of Canaan, and swear to the LORD of hosts; one shall be called, The city of destruction.--The verse contains three verbs of speaking: "speak," "swear," and "called." The first two are active, while the third is passive.

The first two describe Egypt's willing subjection to the Lord. These verbs are active, not passive. One must choose to learn another language, and to call on the Lord.

1. They will adopt Canaan's language. Learning to speak someone's language is a sign of respect and subjection to them.
2. They will swear by the Lord. The form of a biblical oath is, "May God do <something bad> to me, if I do not perform <the promised action>." Thus to swear by a deity is to recognize his authority and power over the one who is taking the oath..

In the final clause, one city does not speak, but is spoken of. People call its name "destruction."

This contrast in the verbs suggests that we should see the numbers "five" and "one" as contrasting as well. Egypt had far more than six cities; Herodotus (2.177) says there were 20,000. If the verse accounts only for six of them, what happened to the other 19,994? Probably, we are to understand the numbers as giving a proportion. For every one that is destroyed, five will turn to the Lord (Calvin).

Thus understood, the verse reports the decision that Egypt will make in the face of the judgment of vv. 1-15, summarized in vv. 16-17. Most of them will repent and turn to the Lord. The next step after fearing God's judgment is turning to him.

19-22, Knowing and Growing in the Lord

The third paragraph pictures the Egyptians in an intimate spiritual life with the Lord. Such a life has two components: offering sacred service to God, and growing through the discipline he sends us. vv. 19-22 alternate between these components. This is the longest of the "in that day" paragraphs, emphasizing its importance.

19 In that day shall there be an altar to the LORD in the midst of the land of Egypt, and a pillar at the border thereof to the LORD. 20 And it [the altar, masculine] shall be for a sign and for a witness unto the LORD of hosts in the land of Egypt:--The first feature of a vital spiritual life is offering sacred service to God. The notion of the altar as a sign and witness recalls the altar constructed by Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh on the east bank of Jordan in Josh 22 to show that though they lived outside of the land of promise, their devotion was still to the Lord.

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Jos 22:34 And the children of Reuben and the children of Gad called the altar Ed [witness]: for it shall be a witness between us that the LORD is God.

More generally, the altar and pillar recall the patriarchs, who erected such structures to “call upon the name of the Lord” (Gen 12:8; 21:33; 26:25). Similarly, the Egyptians want to testify that they too accept the Lord as their God.

for they shall cry unto the LORD because of the oppressors, and he shall send them a saviour, and a great one, and he shall deliver them.--The second feature of a spiritual life is growth, stimulated by suffering and then seeing God's deliverance. If v. 19-20a recalls Josh 22, this half-verse recalls the entire book of Judges, with its cycles of oppression and deliverance. Various historical deliverers have been proposed, all of which may be understood as adumbrating the ultimate “saviour,” the promised Messiah.

21 And the LORD shall be known to Egypt, and the Egyptians shall know the LORD in that day, and shall do sacrifice and oblation; yea, they shall vow a vow unto the LORD, and perform it.--Now we return to the first aspect of spirituality, offering sacred service.

22 And the LORD shall smite Egypt: he shall smite and heal it: and they shall return even to the LORD, and he shall be intreated of them, and shall heal them.--Once again, the second aspect of spirituality is growth through discipline that leads us to call on the Lord in our daily lives.

23, Assyria joins Egypt

23 In that day shall there be a highway out of Egypt to Assyria, and the Assyrian shall come into Egypt, and the Egyptian into Assyria, and the Egyptians shall serve [the Lord] with the Assyrians.--The first three paragraphs show Egypt's turning to the Lord. Now Assyria joins Egypt in serving the Lord.

In ancient history, Egypt and Mesopotamia were adversaries, struggling for control of the Levant. Now Egypt will reach out to Assyria, they will visit one another, and together serve the Lord. This relation is an example of how peace with God brings peace among men, as we discussed when we studied 9:6. Ultimately, as believers, we are close to one another because the Lord has drawn us all close to himself:

1 Jo 1:3 That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship *is* with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ.

24-25, Promotion of the Gentiles

24 In that day shall Israel be the third with Egypt and with Assyria, even a blessing in the midst of the land: 25 Whom the LORD of hosts shall bless, saying, Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel mine inheritance.--Now the Lord acknowledges them as his people, on a par with Israel. This declaration is remarkable. All three titles are routinely used throughout the OT in reference to Israel.

- God's people: Ex 5:1; 6:7; 7:16; 8:1, 20, 21; 9:1, 13; 10:3, 4; Deut 7:6; 14:2; 2 Sam 7:24; 1 Ki 8:51; Ps 100:3; Is 47:6; Jer 7:23; 11:4; 24:7; 30:22; 32:28; Ezek 11:20; 36:28; 37:23, 27; Hos 2:23; Zech 8:8;

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- The work of his hands: Job 10:3; 14:15; 34:19; Ps 28:5; 138:8; Isa 29:22-23; 45:11(?); 60:21(?); 64:8
- God's inheritance: Ex 34:9; Deut 4:20; 9:26, 29; 32:9; 1 Sa 10:1; 2 Sa 20:19; 21:3; 1 Ki 8:51; Psa 74:2; 78:71; 79:13; 95:7; Isa 47:6

But now two of them are applied to gentiles. They are not pictured as subject nations, but as fully enjoying their status as “my people.”

The order of the terms maximizes the shock value of the prediction. The name of the nation comes last. In each case the hearer expects Israel to be named, but it is not until the last clause: “Blessed be my people, Egypt; the work of my hands, Assyria; mine inheritance, Israel.”

The Jews could not bring themselves to acknowledge this prophecy. Their LXX renders this verse,

Whom the Lord Sabaoth has blessed, saying, “Blessed be my people that is in Egypt, and that is among the Assyrians, and Israel mine inheritance.”

And the Aramaic translation (the Targum) renders it,

Whom the Lord of hosts hath blessed, saying, “Blessed be my people whom I have brought out of Egypt; and because they sinned before me, I carried them captive into Assyria; but when they repent, they are called my people, and Israel mine inheritance.”

Both are inaccurate. The three titles, “Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel mine inheritance,” are completely parallel. This verse is perhaps the closest that the OT comes to revealing the mystery of which Paul speaks in Eph 3:6,

That the Gentiles should be fellowheirs, and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel

In the burden of Moab, we heard the Lord weeping over the judgment awaiting Moab, and her refusal to turn to him. Now he leads Egypt and Assyria into parity with Israel. These prophecies remind us that the heart of God desires that rebels turn to him. We need to beware of the kind of pride that led the Jews to twist this verse. Too often we are complacent in our salvation and condescending toward the lost, when we ought to be burdened for them and constantly exercised to reach out to them.

20:1-6, Judgment on Egypt and its Allies

Now we return to judgment. This time the judgment goes beyond Egypt to include those nations of the Levant that looked to Egypt for defense against Assyria. Chronologically, this paragraph, with the first, precedes the central one. The outer two have been fulfilled, while the central one is yet future.

20:1 In the year that Tartan came unto Ashdod, (when Sargon the king of Assyria sent him,) and fought against Ashdod, and took it;--Ashdod was one of the five Philistine cities, along the coast of Canaan. Egypt sought to encourage rebellion among the cities of Palestine in its perennial contest with Mesopotamia. Examples:

2 Kings 17:4 And the king of Assyria found conspiracy in Hoshea [king of Samaria]: for he had sent messengers to **So king of Egypt**, and brought no present to the king of Assyria, as *he had done* year by year: therefore the king of Assyria shut him up, and bound him in prison.

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Rabshakeh to Hezekiah: Isa 36:6 Lo, thou trustest in the staff of this broken reed, on Egypt; whereon if a man lean, it will go into his hand, and pierce it: so *is* Pharaoh king of Egypt to all that trust in him.

In this case, the Assyrian annals help fill in the details (ANET pp. 285-286). Sargon set up a puppet king, Ahamiti, in Ashdod. But when Shabako became Pharaoh in 714, he began to foment rebellion. Apparently under his protection, Yamani took the throne. Sargon's forces took the city, forcing Yamani to take refuge in Egypt, but under continued pressure from Assyria, Egypt was forced to send Yamani, bound in fetters, to Assyria for punishment.

Thus the fall of Ashdod, under Egyptian protection, shows the collapse of Egyptian power in the southern Levant.

2 At the same time spake the LORD by Isaiah the son of Amoz, saying, Go and loose the sackcloth from off thy loins, and put off thy shoe from thy foot. And he did so, walking naked and barefoot. 3 And the LORD said, Like as my servant Isaiah hath walked naked and barefoot three years for a sign and wonder upon Egypt and upon Ethiopia; 4 So shall the king of Assyria lead away the Egyptians prisoners, and the Ethiopians captives, young and old, naked and barefoot, even with *their* buttocks uncovered, to the shame of Egypt.--Isaiah is to walk naked and barefoot to illustrate the coming captivity of Egypt and Ethiopia.

Isaiah may have retained a loincloth. "Naked" here need not mean bare-skinned, but that he is without his outer garment. Cf. 2 Sam 6:14, 20, where Michal accuses David of uncovering himself when in fact he was wearing a linen undergarment.

But inscriptions from the ancient world give clear evidence that defeated foes were often led into captivity completely naked.¹ Even in our day, the Abu Ghraib experience shows how conquerors used nakedness to humble and demean their adversaries. This is the fate that awaits Egypt.

5 And they shall be afraid and ashamed of Ethiopia their expectation, and of Egypt their glory.--As the great powers of the Nile march off into captivity, those who had looked to them for security will be ashamed. Just as Samaria looked to Syria for help against Assyria, so Judah and Philistia were tempted to look to Egypt. The history of Ashdod was a specific example of this misplaced trust. Egypt was unable to protect Yamani in his bid to overthrow the Assyrian puppet king Ahimiti. It will be unable to protect anyone who trusts in it.

6 And the inhabitant of this isle shall say in that day, Behold, such *is* our expectation, whither we flee for help to be delivered from the king of Assyria: and how shall we escape?--"Isle" here does not mean island, but coastland, and refers to the Levant. Those who have looked to Egypt for deliverance will be completely disappointed.

¹ p. 210. fig. 10.12. "An Agade stele showing prisoners of war." Harriet Crawford. *Sumer and the Sumerians*. Cambridge, United Kingdom. Cambridge University Press. 1991, 2004).
<http://www.bibleorigins.net/UrukNakedMenOfferingHarvest.html> . See also the Narmer palette, and the Sar-e Pol-e Zahab reliefs (http://www.livius.org/sao-sd/sar-e_pol-e_zahab/sar-e_pol-e_zahab.html).