

ISAIAH

ISAIAH 19:1-15, JUDGMENT ON EGYPT

Egypt has a long and storied history, biblical and extrabiblical. It may be the most examined and academically studied nation in the world, particularly in terms of its ancient past. The role it played in the formation of Israel is detailed in the book of Exodus. Many theologians consider Egypt to be a type of the world.

This chapter also has short-term and long-term implications for understanding it. Theologians who deny a literal Tribulation and a literal Kingdom, have to say that beginning in verse 16, which is introduced by the eschatological term "in that day," must have been added to the chapter long after Isaiah wrote the first 15 verses. The first 15 verses of the book are about judgment on Egypt and the last 8 verses reveal the restoration of the nation with verses 16-17 serving as a bridge between the two. The first part is a type of the second part as well; we cannot ignore the long-term implications of the third part of this chapter which reveals an end-times national salvation for Egypt. Some theologians believe the entire chapter refers to end times events [Michael Rydelnik and James Spencer, "Isaiah" in *The Moody Bible Commentary*, 1032].

One of the perpetual problems Israel had before the captivity of both kingdoms, was their propensity to seek out and enter into alliances with pagan nations. That was an act forbidden by God; they were to rely on Him for the protection. At certain times, they wanted to rely on Egypt. Part of the purpose of this chapter was to discourage any alliances of that sort between Judah and Egypt. After all, if God was going to destroy that nation, why should the Israelites enter into an alliance with that same pagan nation?

Whatever the short-term prophetic elements that are present in this chapter, they are a type of the destruction that will fall upon Egypt in the future. Many of these prophecies are reminiscent of the Exodus judgments on Egypt, and the Tribulation judgments are also reminders of the Exodus judgments.

Isaiah 19:1 'The oracle concerning Egypt. Behold, the LORD is riding on a swift cloud and is about to come to Egypt; The idols of Egypt will tremble at His presence, And the heart of the Egyptians will melt within them.

It is a terrifying thing when God visits judgment on a nation and its people. This may happen in various ways. God may supernaturally intervene in time and space to impose an act of judgment on a nation such as He did during the Exodus, and which He will do again during the Tribulation. The slaying of Sennacherib's army in Judah by the angel of the Lord is another example. He may also raise up pagan leaders who unwittingly do His will. For example, God used Assyria to impose temporal discipline on Israel, and He used Babylon to impose temporal discipline on Judah. Both of those nations were, in turn, destroyed by other pagan nations God used to judge them; Babylon enforced God's judgment on Assyria, and Medo-Persia chastised Babylon on behalf of the Lord. He may bring about what we refer to as "natural disasters" as judgment on a nation. However it happens, it is extremely frightening for those who are experiencing it.

Idols are impotent and can do nothing, but the demons behind them have power which they can and do exercise, but only to the extent they are allowed to do so by God. When God acts, even the demons may become frightened. James revealed that the demons believe in a monotheistic God and the thought frightens them (James 2:19), probably because they know the power that He possesses to judge them. For example, in Matthew 8:29, the demons were afraid that the Lord was going to order their torment before the appointed time. When God's judgment falls and the people realize their idols can do nothing to help them, fear develops deep within them and they feel helpless as they realize their spirituality is unable to comfort them. We also know that it is a terrifying thing to "fall into the hands of the living God" (Heb. 10:31).

Just as God judged Egypt's idols at the time of the Exodus, they will be judged again in the future both in temporal terms and in eschatological terms far into the future.

Exodus 12:12 ¹²...and against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments—I am the LORD [during the Exodus].

Jeremiah 46:25 ²⁵The LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, says, "Behold, I am going to punish Amon of Thebes, and Pharaoh, and Egypt along with her gods and her kings, even Pharaoh and those who trust in him [at the hands of King Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon].

Ezekiel 30:13 ¹³Thus says the Lord GOD, "I will also destroy the idols And make the images cease from Memphis.... [at the hands of King Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon].

Theologians argue over what king conquered Egypt and caused these conditions. Constable summarized these positions. "The fulfillment may have been the Ethiopian Pharaoh Piankhi (715 B.C.), Pharaoh Psammetichus (607 B.C.), one of the Assyrian kings (Sargon II, Sennacherib, Esarhaddon in 671, or Ashurbanipal in 668 B.C.), or the Persian Artaxerxes III Ochus (343 B.C.) [this does not fit the time period] [Thomas L. Constable, *Thomas Constable's Notes on the Bible, vol. IV: Isaiah-Daniel, 4: 59*].

However, the next verse suggests a civil war is being revealed. In the end, it really doesn't matter. It happened at the Exodus, it happened in the past, and it will happen again "in that day" which, in this chapter, is a reference to the end times. The text, however, supports the concept of civil discord within the nation itself.

God is going to sow such discord within Egypt that the nation will turn on itself.

Isaiah 19:2–4 ²"So I will incite [סִדֵּד] Egyptians against Egyptians; And they will each fight against his brother and each against his neighbor, City against city and kingdom against kingdom. ³"Then the spirit of the Egyptians will be demoralized [בִּקְקָה] within them; And I will confound [בְּלֹעַ] their strategy [עֲצָדָה], So that they will resort to idols and ghosts of the dead And to mediums and spiritists. ⁴"Moreover, I will deliver [אֶסְבֵּר] the Egyptians into the hand of a cruel master, And a mighty king will rule over them," declares the Lord GOD of hosts.

Historically, this may have been fulfilled in the aftermath of the overthrow of the Cushite dynasty in Egypt. There was a civil war among the twelve regions the nation split into after

the Cushites were removed. An evil king would arise out of that to rule the nation for a time. Keil and Delitzsch cited the historical details of the time period.

"The prophecy does not relate to a foreign conqueror, ... but to a native despot.... v. 2 relates to the national revolution which broke out in Sais, and resulted in the overthrow of the Ethiopian rule, and to the federal dodekarchy [apparently a reference to the division of the nation into twelve "kingdoms"] to which the rising of the nation led. 'Kingdom against kingdom:' this exactly suits those twelve small kingdoms into which Egypt was split up after the overthrow of the Ethiopian dynasty in the year 695, until Psammetichus, the dodekarch of Sais, succeeded in the year 670 in comprehending these twelve states once more under a single monarchy. This very Psammetichus (and the royal house of Psammetichus generally) is the hard ruler, the reckless despot" [C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament: Isaiah*, vol. 7, 7:232].

This is certainly a historically plausible scenario, but I wouldn't get dogmatic about it. Other theologians who are aware of this episode relate other periods of national discord and infighting. Young believes this is more of a general observation about conditions in a land that has been in opposition to God for millennia. "... [M]ore likely he is presenting a general picture of a period of disorders caused by the judgment of God. His intention is not so much to depict one particular epoch of civil war as it is to show that when God acts in judgment, the nation will lose its unity" [Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah: A Commentary*, vol. 2, 2:16]. In modern terms, we could say that when people are faced with mass disorder and destruction, it becomes a situation of every man for himself.

Oswalt also detailed the discord within the nation that occurred throughout Egypt's history [John N. Oswalt, *The New International Commentary: The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1-39,367-368*].

Incite, הִתְעוֹרֵר, means to stir up, to provoke, to incite, to stimulate. It means to rouse up, to spur on in the context of the Lord's actions. How God actually accomplishes this is never revealed to us. He doesn't force people and nations to do His will, but He uses that which they are predisposed to do to accomplish His purposes. He also sees to it that rulers who are predisposed to do His will are put in the places they need to be at the time they need to be there in order to unknowingly accomplish the will of the God in whom they do not believe. This verb represents an intense action with an active voice; God was bringing this situation about.

"Demoralized" is not the best translation of בָּקַעַ, meaning to empty, to lay waste, to destroy completely, to damage irreparably. The spirit of the Egyptians will be emptied from them; it will be obliterated. In English, demoralized means to cause someone to lose confidence or hope, but that is a far weaker state than this word indicates. Demoralized doesn't reveal the extent of the destruction their spirits will experience. We could say they will be crushed in spirit with no hope. "Emptied" of spirit (ESV, YLT) or "drained of spirit" (TANAKH) are better interpretations.

Egypt was noted as a nation of wise men, but God is going to "confound their strategy." Their wisdom is going to disappear, and the advice from the wise men of the land will be worthless. Literally, this is saying that God will swallow up their advice and counsel. All the

famed wisdom of the Egyptians will be brought to naught by God. They will have no idea what to do, and all the advice they get will be worthless. The result is they turn to the occult for answers.

Confound, *בָּלַע*, means to swallow up, swallow down, engulf implying that what is swallowed is consumed and no longer visible hence it is as though destroyed.

Strategy, *עֲצָה*, means advice or counsel based on a plan or a scheme; it refers to something that provides direction or advice as to a decision or a course of action.

Many people assume that the “cruel master and a mighty king” must be a foreign king, but the text does not say that. Since the context is a civil war, this king could well be an Egyptian king. The text does not say either way, and, as noted above, some theologians do believe it is referring to an Egyptian. Deliver, *דָּבַר*, means to hand over; to surrender someone or something to another, especially to an authority. This is also a verb expressing intense action with an active voice; God is handing the people over to this cruel king.

It is the natural yearning of the fallen human heart to believe in some sort of god, but since the knowledge of the true God has been rejected, unbelievers substitute gods of their own making who can do nothing for them in times of distress. Nevertheless, they don't stop trying. They resort to occult practices to try and determine their future, but it will be a futile activity. This will also take place during the Tribulation. People will not repent of their sorceries (Rev. 9:21), Babylon will be the Tribulation agent of sorcery (Rev. 18:23), and the sorcerers operating during that time will be consigned to the lake of fire (Rev. 21:8).

The pagan gods of Egypt will be unable to save the people and their nation, and the nation itself will be destroyed. The description of this destruction is reminiscent of the Exodus judgments which produced the same results seen here without necessarily being the result of the supernatural judgments God imposed on Egypt at that earlier time.

Once again, we have this short-term/long-term juxtaposition, type/antitype, in the book of Isaiah.

Isaiah 19:5–10 ⁵The waters from the sea will dry up, And the river will be parched and dry. ⁶The canals will emit a stench, The streams of Egypt [מְצוֹר] will thin out and dry up; The reeds and rushes will rot away. ⁷The bulrushes by the Nile, by the edge of the Nile And all the sown fields by the Nile Will become dry, be driven away, and be no more. ⁸And the fishermen will lament, And all those who cast a line into the Nile will mourn, And those who spread nets on the waters will pine away. ⁹Moreover, the manufacturers of linen made from combed flax And the weavers of white cloth will be utterly dejected. ¹⁰And the pillars of Egypt will be crushed; All the hired laborers will be grieved in soul.

The sea here is a reference to the waters of the River Nile. During flood stage it had the appearance of sea rather than of a river. Whenever something happens to the Nile, it is impossible for life to continue on in the same way it does when the River is normally operating. This describes a serious drought up and down the Nile River Valley including the irrigation canals and the delta on the shore of the Mediterranean Sea. The only place

in Egypt that is not desert is the Nile River Valley; it is no exaggeration to say that it is the lifeblood of the nation. As to be expected, agriculture will be devastated by this drought, fishing will no longer be possible, and the linen industry will be destroyed. As a result, the economy will be destroyed. This suggests that Egypt exists only by the grace of God, because as the Nile goes, so goes Egypt and God controls the Nile.

It is noteworthy that the singular for Egypt, מִצְרַיִם, was used rather than the usual מִצְרַיִם which is a dual noun. This is quite unusual. The singular is only used 5 times in the Old Testament while the dual form is used 681 times. The dual vowel means it represents two of something or duality which must be a reference to Upper and Lower Egypt considered to be one nation. The use of the singular is most likely intended to refer to Lower Egypt where the various delta rivers and canals were located.

The terms "pillars of Egypt" and "hired laborers" indicates that no part of Egyptian society will be spared the impact of God's judgment. The "pillars of Egypt" were "the highest castes, who were the direct supporters of the state edifice" [C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament: Isaiah, 7:234*]. From the greatest of them to the least of them, the Egyptians will face God's temporal wrath.

Others believe the pillars is a reference to all that undergirds Egyptian society, the foundation of national life in Egypt. This would include the pagan, spiritual aspects of Egyptian life. Just as God overtly defeated Egypt's gods in the Exodus judgments, He would defeat them again, more covertly, but just as decisively when the people figure out their gods are incapable of saving them and preserving their society as they knew it.

In the next verses, Egypt's vaunted wisdom is called into question. It is, in fact, derided by God and rendered null and void.

Isaiah 19:11 ¹¹The princes [שָׂרֵי] of Zoan are mere fools [אֲוִילִים]; The advice of Pharaoh's wisest advisers [יוֹעֲצֵי] has become stupid [בְּעֵר]. How can you men say to Pharaoh, "I am a son of the wise, a son of ancient kings"?

Zoan, also known as Tanis-Zoan, was a city in the Nile River delta on the Tanitic branch of the River north of Goshen and just south of the coast. It was one of the oldest cities in Egypt; it already existed at the time of Abraham. It was an important royal store city in the northeast delta region. Today the Egyptian city of San stands on that place. During the 21st to late 22nd dynasties, ca. 1085-715 B.C. the city was the capital of Pharaohs. During the Nubian 25th dynasty (ca. 715-664 B.C.), which encompasses the time of Isaiah's ministry, it was used as an occasional royal residence in the north with Memphis, located further to the south, as the primary center of government. It was an important city in the area until Alexander the Great built Alexandria.

Kings and presidents always rely on a cadre of advisors to assist them in their leadership duties. That was the practice then and it is still the practice today.

Prince, שָׂר, means a representative of the king, a royal official, or a commander; It represents the position and the authority of a ruler or a leader. It is not a reference to the sons of Pharaoh as we would ordinarily define the concept of a prince. In Zephaniah 1:8

a definite distinction is made between princes and the sons of the king. Many people are referred to as princes in the Bible: kings, leaders of various levels over various entities, leading priests, tribal chiefs. It is also applied to supernatural beings: the Lord, the archangel Michael, and Satan.

This word is set alongside and is used as a synonym to the word advisors, יוֹעֵצ, meaning an advisor or a counselor. It refers to a person who speaks and urges certain directions or actions or thought implying the advice given is considered wise and valuable. These advisors/counselors were high-ranking members of the decision-making council of elders surrounding Pharaoh.

In the same way, the words “fool” and “stupid” are set in parallel with one another and also used as synonyms.

Fool, אָוִיל, means a fool, an idiot, or foolish; it refers to a person who lacks good judgment.

“The picture which emerges from the biblical material, is quite simple: folly is the opposite of wisdom, and a fool is the opposite of a wise person. Both wisdom and folly are depicted as philosophies or perspectives on life. The religious person chooses wisdom, whereas the nonreligious person opts for folly. Wisdom leads to victory; folly to defeat. Wisdom belongs to those who fear God, and the ‘fear’ of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Prov. 1:7). Wisdom is the essence of life. The foolish person is the one who is thoughtless, self-centered, and obviously indifferent to God” [s.v. “Fool, Foolishness, and Folly,” *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, 585].

This is certainly an apt description of unbelieving pagans, their culture/society, and their governmental structure. Egypt seems to be set apart in the Bible as the prototype of this secular humanist, stupid and foolish, societal structure.

Stupid, בְּעֵר, means to be stupid or brutish; it refers to being or becoming unintelligent or marked by a lack of intellectual acuity. In this context, it has spiritual connotations. It denotes being deluded, that is, stupid for worshiping idols, being without common religious sense, and therefore led astray. It refers to those who do not fear the Lord and who do not desire to assimilate His wisdom into their worldview.

Jeremiah used these two words to describe the stupidity of idol worship.

Jeremiah 10:8, 14 ⁸But they are altogether stupid [בְּעֵר] and foolish [בְּסוּל] *In their discipline of delusion—their idol is wood! ...* ¹⁴Every man is stupid [בְּעֵר], devoid of knowledge ...

Foolish, בְּסוּל, means to be foolish or not wise, lacking in good sense or judgment. It refers to having a complete lack of understanding and so be stupid as to correct action.

In terms of understanding the Bible, these two words have definite spiritual connotations attached to them. They are important words in terms of understanding the human condition as it has existed since the Fall; they must not be restricted to the Egyptians that Isaiah was talking about in this pericope. Fallen people today are still foolish and still stupid

when it comes to spiritual matters. They have the knowledge of God, but they reject it (Rom. 1:18-32). When the Bible refers to someone as a fool, it is a very serious characterization of their state of mind in relation to God. Foolishness is not restricted to unbelievers either. Believers can fall away into unbiblical foolishness and stupidity as well.

Clearly, these princes and advisors thought that as sons of Egypt, i.e., sons of the wise and sons of the ancient kings, they possessed, by virtue of their birthright and exalted position in the royal court as counselors to Pharaoh, a seemingly automatic endowment of wisdom. The only way they could say they were still sons of the wise was by means of denying the reality that was surrounding them. They didn't even know it was coming, and they could not prevent, stop, or change the things that were happening to them once they started. Whatever wisdom they thought they possessed was utterly worthless to them in the face of the judgment poured out on them by the only true living God.

“[P]rinces of Zoan and Memphis are princes of the chief cities of the land, and of the supposed primeval pedigree, probably priest-princes, since the wisdom of the Egyptian priest was of world-wide renown [according to Herodotus ii. 77, 260], and the oldest kings of Egypt sprang from the priestly caste.... These magnates of Egypt, with their wisdom, would be turned into fools by the history of Egypt of the immediate future; and (this is the meaning of the sarcastic 'how can ye say') they would no longer trust themselves to boast of their hereditary priestly wisdom, or their royal descent, when giving counsel to Pharaoh. They were the corner-stone of ... the castes of Egypt; but instead of supporting and defending their people, it is now very evident that they only led them astray” [C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament: Isaiah*, vol. 7, 7:234-235].

It is not an idle boast about the wisdom of the Egyptians. “The Egyptian wisdom literature, probably growing out of the highly organized court life, is some of the earliest and best preserved known to us. The same is true of their reflections on the nature and meaning of life” [John N. Oswalt, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1-39*, 370].

God, through the prophet, taunts the nation about her impotent wise men.

Isaiah 19:12 ¹²Well then, where are your wise men? Please let them tell you, And let them understand what the LORD of hosts Has purposed against Egypt.

The wise men of Egypt cannot reveal God's plans nor can they prevent them from taking place. They are helpless before the might of the Creator God. Interestingly, the Egyptians did once have a man, a man of God, who could tell them what their future had in store for them. His name was, of course, Joseph. Egypt did not embrace the God of Israel then, they won't embrace Him in the midst of the judgment He had in store for them at the time, but some of them will turn to Him when the final Tribulation judgment falls upon Egypt just as it falls on the rest of the world. The latter half of the chapter addresses the issue of some individual Egyptian's faith in Yahweh.

The question, “Where are your wise men,” is a question of doubt and ridicule. The Egyptian men existed, that's not the issue, but their wisdom was certainly nowhere to be found which made it seem as though they were missing in action, so to speak. Worthless

wise men are worse than no wise men. If there are no wise men, then people are not seeking wisdom from them, but wise men with no answers, or worse, with false advice and directives, are dangerous to the king and the nation that relies on them. We will see that God rendered these men worthless in terms of their wise counsel to Pharaoh.

This will not be the last time the issue of incompetent, even fraudulent, pagan wise men is revealed in the Bible. King Nebuchadnezzar dealt with such wise men in the book of Daniel.

This situation has implications for history. As Solomon wrote, "There is nothing new under the sun" (Eccl. 1:9). "In the nature of the case, inasmuch as they were steeped in polytheism and idolatry, the Egyptian 'wise men' were not true wise men at all, for they had no knowledge of true wisdom. Isaiah's words are applicable to all times. The counsellors and statesmen who try to solve the problems of the world apart from the wisdom of God show themselves but fools, following a path that leads to destruction" [Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah: A Commentary*, vol. 2, 2:28]. In terms of application, all the people who think they are wise and who think they can solve the world's problems using secular humanist reasoning and methods, are simply leading the world right down the path to judgment that will ultimately be the culmination of history as we know it. Then He who possesses true wisdom will assume His throne and rule His kingdom in wisdom, truth, and righteousness.

Some theologians question whether or not the Egyptians should have known anything about the Jewish God, but that is a specious argument. They had the revelation of God that Joseph revealed to them, and they had the revelation Moses gave them and that God personally provided them through signs, wonders, and miracles during the Exodus that should have been recorded and passed from generation to generation. Rather than turn to God; however, they most likely tried to destroy any memory of that part of their history. Pagans don't like to record any embarrassing history. They also had Israel right next to them; certainly, they knew of Yahweh and the worship of Him in Israel. He was not unknown to them as an entity. Only their pagan hardened hearts kept them from investigating Him and coming to faith. That situation is no different today. God is known to the unbelieving, pagan world, but they "suppress the truth in unrighteousness" (Rom. 1:18).

The wise men are condemned once again for their foolishness.

Isaiah 19:13 ¹³The princes of Zoan have acted foolishly [זָאֵן], The princes of Memphis are deluded [מִצְרַיִם]; Those who are the cornerstone [פְּנִינָה] of her tribes Have led Egypt astray [הָפְסוּ].

The city that was also used as a capital city, Memphis, is introduced here. Memphis was the first capital of the unified nation, and it remained an important city until Islam conquered it. It was particularly noted for its religious activity with temples built there to honor and worship various pagan entities, particularly Ptah, a creator-god, his wife, Sekhmet, and their son, Nefertem. Apis, the bull god, was also worshiped there.

The princes, the counsellors and advisors attending the royal court, are called out by God for their foolishness.

Foolishness, **יָצֹל**, means to be foolish, to act foolishly; it refers to behaving in a way that shows a lack of wisdom or understanding good judgment. It depicts an action, behavior, and attitude that are against what is considered wise, prudent, and upright. In spiritual terms, it "involves both an ignorance of God's ways and an active insensibility and opposition to the known righteous behavior which God desires of his people for their own good" [s.v. "יָצֹל," Harris, Archer, Jr., Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 357].

Deluded, **נִשְׂאָה**, means to be deceived, to be misguided; it refers to being led in the wrong direction by someone. It also has the sense of giving oneself false hopes. "The pride of humankind's heart is thus able to cause persons to deceive themselves, refusing to recognize their limitations" [Willem A. VanGemeren, gen. ed., s.v. "נִשְׂאָה," *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, vol. 3, 3:183].

These men occupy very important, influential positions in Egyptian society. They can at least influence the king to set public policy, if not set it themselves.

Cornerstone, **פִּנְקֵה**, means a corner or a cornerstone; it refers to the head of a tribe or clan. It is used here in the figurative sense of the princes who are leaders, not only among the respective political or tribal subdivisions, but in the Egyptian governmental system as part of Pharaoh's court.

Their worthless advice has led the people of Egypt astray. Their leadership has failed them, and they have wandered away from the path they should have trod.

Astray, **תָּצַה**, means to err, to wander about, to stagger, to go astray; it refers to wandering from a proper belief or course of action. It is most frequently used of someone erring or being misled in a moral or a religious sense.

The picture here is one of high-ranking men, the leadership counsel of Egypt, who think they are wise, but they are stupid fools in the spiritual sense with the result that they have deceived themselves into guiding their nation and their people into disaster. These princes have caused themselves to be foolish and deluded with the result that they have led the people astray and right into a disaster.

This is, in part and in addition to their pagan inclinations that naturally cloud the unsaved mind of mankind, the work of the Lord who gave the Egyptian leadership a spirit of distortion. This is a spirit of judgment.

Isaiah 19:14 ¹⁴The LORD has mixed within her a spirit of distortion [עֲוִיּוֹת]; They have led Egypt astray in all that it does, As a drunken man staggers in his vomit.

Distortion, **עֲוִיּוֹת**, means distorting, warping, confusion, dizziness; it refers to a mental state characterized by a lack of clear and orderly thought and behavior.

This foolish, deluded, and distorted state renders their advice faulty and incorrect resulting in a nation of people who are led astray. It renders them so senseless that they are staggering around in their own filth as though they are extremely intoxicated.

As the result of God's judgment, everything in Egypt comes to a halt. Normal life cannot continue as before.

Isaiah 19:15 ¹⁵There will be no work for Egypt Which *its* head or tail, *its* palm branch or bulrush, may do.