

Unexpected Worshipers

Isaiah 18-20

Pastor Jason Van Bommel

An Oracle Concerning Cush

18 *Ah, land of whirring wings
that is beyond the rivers of Cush,
2 which sends ambassadors by the sea,
in vessels of papyrus on the waters!
Go, you swift messengers,
to a nation tall and smooth,
to a people feared near and far,
a nation mighty and conquering,
whose land the rivers divide.*

3 *All you inhabitants of the world,
you who dwell on the earth,
when a signal is raised on the mountains, look!
When a trumpet is blown, hear!*

4 *For thus the LORD said to me:
“I will quietly look from my dwelling
like clear heat in sunshine,
like a cloud of dew in the heat of harvest.”*

5 *For before the harvest, when the blossom is over,
and the flower becomes a ripening grape,
he cuts off the shoots with pruning hooks,
and the spreading branches he lops off and clears away.*

6 *They shall all of them be left
to the birds of prey of the mountains
and to the beasts of the earth.*

*And the birds of prey will summer on them,
and all the beasts of the earth will winter on them.*

7 *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.

An Oracle Concerning Egypt

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.*

² *And I will stir up Egyptians against Egyptians,
 and they will fight, each against another
 and each against his neighbor,
 city against city, kingdom against kingdom;*

³ *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;*

⁴ *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.*

⁵ *And the waters of the sea will be dried up,
 and the river will be dry and parched,*

⁶ *and its canals will become foul,
 and the branches of Egypt's Nile will diminish and dry up,
 reeds and rushes will rot away.*

⁷ *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.*

- ⁸ The fishermen will mourn and lament,
 all who cast a hook in the Nile;
 and they will languish
 who spread nets on the water.
- ⁹ The workers in combed flax will be in despair,
 and the weavers of white cotton.
- ¹⁰ Those who are the pillars of the land will be crushed,
 and all who work for pay will be grieved.
- ¹¹ The princes of Zoan are utterly foolish;
 the wisest counselors of Pharaoh give stupid counsel.
 How can you say to Pharaoh,
 “I am a son of the wise,
 a son of ancient kings”?
- ¹² Where then are your wise men?
 Let them tell you
 that they might know what the LORD of hosts has purposed against Egypt.
- ¹³ 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.
- ¹⁴ 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.
- ¹⁵ And there will be nothing for Egypt
 that head or tail, palm branch or reed, may do.

Egypt, Assyria, Israel Blessed

¹⁶ In that day the Egyptians will be like women, and tremble with fear before the hand that the LORD of hosts shakes over them. ¹⁷ 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.

¹⁸ 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.

19 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. 20 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 savior and defender, and deliver them. 21 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. 22 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.

23 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.

24 In that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, 25 whom the LORD of hosts has blessed, saying, “Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my inheritance.”

A Sign Against Egypt and Cush

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— 2 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.*

3 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, 4 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. 5 Then they shall be dismayed and ashamed because of Cush their hope and of Egypt their boast. 6 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 18-20, ESV

This past week, violence suddenly erupted in Sudan, plunging this country into a chaotic and bloody conflict between its two leading military leaders. Hundreds of people have been killed and thousands have been wounded. Sudan suffered for decades under the harsh leadership of Omar al-Bashir, the former dictator, who was deposed and handed over to

the International Criminal Court (ICC) for war crimes in 2019. Over the past three years, Sudan has experienced religious freedom and Christianity was again openly recognized and allowed. Now, as the country has been struggling to transition to democracy, these two military leaders have declared war on each other.

Sudan is a land that has become close to my heart over the past five years and close to our hearts as a church, as we have been serving a number of pastors and church leaders from Sudan and South Sudan through Reaching Africa's Unreached. Why am I talking about Sudan? Because it is the modern country that was Cush in biblical times. Sitting just south of Egypt on the Upper Nile, Cush was an ancient kingdom of fierce warriors that at the time of Isaiah's prophecy dominated Egypt to her north. We have prophecies regarding Egypt and Cush together – Ch. 18 is for Cush, 19 is for Egypt, and 20 is for both together - because, during this time, they were functioning as one kingdom, Egypt being under Cushite rule. Throughout their history, they were closely intertwined, Egypt sometimes enslaving people from Cush, and Cush sometimes dominating Egypt.

1. Egypt & Cush will be Severely Judged by God

Those who are proud of their own might will be brought low.

You may have heard that Cush is the land of Ethiopia, and it was basically the same area that became the ancient kingdom of Ethiopia, but you shouldn't confuse that with modern-day Ethiopia. Verses 1-2 gives us a good reference for where this land was -

*Ah, land of whirring wings
that is beyond the rivers of Cush,
2 which sends ambassadors by the sea,
in vessels of papyrus on the waters!
Go, you swift messengers,
to a nation tall and smooth,
to a people feared near and far,
a nation mighty and conquering,
whose land the rivers divide. – Isaiah 18:1-2*

Verse 1 refers to “the rivers of Cush” and verse 2 calls Cushites those “whose land the rivers divide.” If you head south on the Nile River from Egypt, the Nile splits into two

rivers, the White Nile and the Blue Nile, at Khartoum, the capital city of Sudan. The White Nile continues south into South Sudan and Uganda until you reach its source at Lake Victoria. The Blue Nile goes to the southeast into modern-day Ethiopia. Truly, the land of Cush, of modern-day Sudan and South Sudan is a land that rivers divide.

While Egyptians were close-by and well-known to the Israelites, the Cushites were a people who lived much farther away and were much more mysterious - tall and dark and smooth-skinned, mighty enough to conquer mighty Egypt. These people would have been known and feared by relatively short and very hairy Hebrews. The Egyptians themselves were a mighty world power, already by Isaiah's day one of the oldest and most legendary of the kingdoms of the world.

Remembers that God's people were facing a menacing threat to the north of them, the rising might of Assyria. One of the constant temptations for God's people in the Old Testament was to look to Egypt for help. King Solomon had entered into a marriage alliance with Egypt by marrying a daughter of Pharaoh. That was some 250 years before Isaiah. Then, some 150 years after Isaiah, the remnant that was left in Judah after they were conquered by Babylon decided the best course of action was to flee to Egypt, and they took the prophet Jeremiah with them.

So, God's people had a bad habit of looking to Egypt for help, and they were probably in awe of the Cushites who were so tall and such fierce warriors that they were able to conquer the Egyptians. But God has a strong and sobering word for both Cush and Egypt. In verse 3, God summons all the world to pay attention before He passes sentence on Cush –

*“I will quietly look from my dwelling
like clear heat in sunshine,
like a cloud of dew in the heat of harvest.”*

*⁵ For before the harvest, when the blossom is over,
and the flower becomes a ripening grape,
he cuts off the shoots with pruning hooks,
and the spreading branches he lops off and clears away.*

*⁶ They shall all of them be left
to the birds of prey of the mountains
and to the beasts of the earth.*

*And the birds of prey will summer on them,
and all the beasts of the earth will winter on them.*

People pay attention to fierce warriors and mighty armies, but God works His will in the world quietly and steadily, much like the heat and the dew, which are unheard and almost unseen but very powerful. God doesn't here name who will conquer the Cushites, but in His oracle concerning Egypt, God announces that Egyptians will fight against each other and then be given over to a foreign ruler –

*² And I will stir up Egyptians against Egyptians,
and they will fight, each against another
and each against his neighbor,
city against city, kingdom against kingdom;
³ 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;
⁴ 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. – 19:2-4*

It took a number of attacks over a series of years, but the Assyrian Empire eventually did conquer Egypt and Cush. They were subdued, just as God had promised through Isaiah. God says that when this conquest comes, there will be nothing Egypt can do. Neither might nor education nor religion will save them –

*¹³ 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.
¹⁴ 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.
¹⁵ And there will be nothing for Egypt
that head or tail, palm branch or reed, may do.*

“head or tail, palm branch or reed” is a way of speaking of the rich and powerful or the poor and ordinary. Everyone is helpless before the conquest that’s coming.

2. The Egyptians & Cushites Will Worship the LORD **God’s gospel grace extends even to the most unlikely.**

But then, an amazing turn of events happens for both Cush and Egypt. In 18:7, we hear about Cush –

7 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.

And then, in chapter 19, we see the dramatic change coming for Egypt starting in verse 16 –

16 In that day the Egyptians will be like women, and tremble with fear before the hand that the LORD of hosts shakes over them. 17 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.

18 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.

19 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. 20 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 savior and defender, and deliver them. 21 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. 22 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.

For Egypt, the change of heart and attitude begins with a trembling fear of the LORD of Hosts and of the land of Judah. Why would the Egyptians be trembling in fear of Judah and Judah's god, YaHWeH? Well, if you look at a map of the Assyrian Empire, you'll see a massive empire, the greatest the world had ever seen to that point, stretching from present-day Kuwait and Iraq up to Turkey and down to Egypt. The present-day nations of Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and more are all in this massive empire. And yet, right in the middle of the empire, is a little island of unconquered land, little Judah with its capital in Jerusalem. Mighty Egypt could not resist Assyria, but little Judah could. How?

In the ancient world, people thought of wars as contests between the gods, and the Assyrian army met with absolute disaster when it tried to conquer Judah. 185,000 Assyrian troops were killed in one night by one angel from the LORD, according to Isaiah 38:36. That's a stunning power Egypt and Cush cannot explain.

Hundreds of years after Isaiah's prophecy and the Assyrian conquest of Cush and Egypt. We find a royal official from the ancient kingdom of Ethiopia, which has arisen in the land of Cush, ruled by a powerful Queen name Candace. Thos royal official from her court has been visiting Jerusalem and offering tribute in the Temple of the LORD. We read about him in Acts 8:26-40.

In Acts 8, the LORD send Philip to go and meet this court official from the Cushite Ethiopian Queen Candace, and Philip finds him reading from the scroll of Isaiah the prophet – very interesting! Could he have been interested in Isaiah because Isaiah had prophesied that his people would bring tribute to the LORD? From Isaiah, Philip shares the Gospel with this Ethiopian court official, and he becomes a baptized believer in Jesus Christ. Today, the Coptic Church in Ethiopia traces its lineage back to this encounter in Acts 8.

What's more, both Egypt and Cush become vital centers for God's people. Even before Jesus came, Alexandria, Egypt was a major center for biblical scholarship among God's people. The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, which was the Bible of the early church, was made in Alexandria, Egypt. Soon, Alexandria became one of the most important and vital centers of Christianity, people taking the Gospel back to Egypt from

the Day of Pentecost in Jerusalem. In fact, today, the oldest continuously worshipping Christian community in the world is the Coptic Christian church in Egypt and in Ethiopia, and Cush/Sudan held out as a Christian enclave for hundreds and hundreds of years after the surrounding areas came under Muslim control. Today, the Gospel is advancing back into Cush through the efforts of many, including some of the men we trained in Uganda.

3. Don't Trust in Egypt & Cush – Evangelize Them!

What should we do regarding the powerful in this world?

What does all of this stuff from so long ago and on the other side of the world have to do with us? Well, the same savior and defender the LORD sent to Egypt is the One He has sent to us. Their Savior is our Savior, and their God is our God. Our brothers and sisters in Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia are more truly family to us, more closely bonded to us, than out non-Christian neighbors and friends. We need a global vision for what God is doing.

But here's a couple more things we need to see –

1. God is always at work in the world, even though it may be quiet, like heat or dew. He is accomplishing His purposes. His work doesn't grab the headlines or dominate the cable news talk shows. But He is at work, and we need to see that, trust in Him, and get in line with what He's doing in the world.
2. We still live in a world full of Cushes and Egypts. Cush represents military might, fierce warriors with a widespread reputation for supremacy in battle. Egypt was, in so many ways, the most advanced civilization, with beautiful architecture and extensive libraries. Our world still celebrates and looks to the powerful and the elite. And God's people can still be tempted to live in fear and awe of men and not in the fear of the LORD.
3. Instead of fearing or worshiping Cush and Egypt, we need to evangelize them. We need to so firmly trust in the LORD that we show ourselves to be distinct, unconquered by what rules the world around us. And then, we need to be clear and bold and loving in bearing witness to the hope within us that comes from the Lord Jesus Christ.

In other words, the more things change, the more they stay the same. Don't look to the world for help or stand in awe of its power. Fear God and evangelize the world. Take Jesus to Cush and Egypt.