

## Isaiah 20-21

### Prophecies concerning Egypt, Cush, Babylon, Dumah (Edom) and Arabia

We're nearing the end of Isaiah's prophecies against the nations (Isaiah 13-23). In the midst of the Assyrian threat, Judah considered reaching out to the surrounding nations for support. Isaiah's prophecies sent a message to the leaders of Judah that their only protector and defender would be Yahweh Himself.

Chapter 21 give us a peek into the tension that arose in the region when Babylon begins its attack against Assyria. It seems that some were oblivious to the turmoil that would be stirred up in the surrounding nations. Only Isaiah really understood what was really unfolding. He would respond with God's heart, while most others would either tremble with fear, or simply go on with life as if nothing were happening.

English Standard (ESV)	Passion Notes	Passion Translation (TPT)
<p>Isaiah 20:1 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— <sup>2</sup> 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.</p> <p><sup>3</sup> 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, <sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> Then they shall be dismayed and ashamed because of Cush their hope and of Egypt their boast. <sup>6</sup> 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?’”</p>	<p><b>a</b> 20:1 Sargon means “sun prince.” He was the father of Sennacherib.</p> <p><b>b</b> 20:1 Ashdod means “stronghold, fortress,” or “oppressor.”</p> <p><b>c</b> 20:2 Or “sackcloth,” a coarse, durable fabric used mainly to make sacks for carrying goods on the backs of animals but sometimes worn during fasts or by prophets.</p> <p><b>d</b> 20:2 This is the only symbolic action recorded about Isaiah. He became a walking parable. Scholars are divided over whether Isaiah was completely or partially nude. See 2 Sam. 6:20; Mic. 1:8.</p> <p><b>e</b> 20:3 Isaiah's three-year ministry of walking about in loincloth is a type of the ministry of Jesus, who did as he was told by his Father (John 5:19).</p>	<p><b>A Prophecy concerning Egypt and Cush</b></p> <p>Isaiah 20:1 In the year that the Assyrian king Sargon <b>a</b> sent his supreme commander to attack Ashdod, he came and captured it. <b>b</b> <sup>2</sup> At that time the Lord Yahweh said to Isaiah, the son of Amoz, “Take off your clothes <b>c</b> and sandals.” Isaiah did as he was told and walked about naked and barefoot. <b>d</b></p> <p><sup>3</sup> Then the Lord Yahweh said, “Just as my servant Isaiah has walked naked and barefoot for three years <b>e</b> as a prophetic sign and a wonder as a warning of what is coming to Egypt and Cush, <sup>4</sup> so will the king of Assyria lead away the captives of Egypt and Cush, both young and old. They will be stripped and barefoot, with buttocks bared, to publicly humiliate Egypt. <sup>5</sup> And those who put their hope in ‘glorious Cush’ and ‘mighty Egypt,’ will be shattered and totally ashamed.”</p> <p><sup>6</sup> When that day comes, those who live on the coastal region of Philistia will say, “Oh no! If this is what happened to those we hoped would come and rescue us from the Assyrian king, what chance do we have of escape?”</p>

English Standard (ESV)	Passion Translation (TPT)	Passion Translation (TPT)
<p><sup>1</sup> The oracle concerning the wilderness of the sea. As whirlwinds in the Negeb sweep on, it comes from the wilderness, from a terrible land.</p> <p><sup>2</sup> A stern vision is told to me; the traitor betrays, and the destroyer destroys. Go up, O Elam; lay siege, O Media; all the sighing she has caused I bring to an end.</p> <p><sup>3</sup> Therefore my loins are filled with anguish; pangs have seized me, like the pangs of a woman in labor; I am bowed down so that I cannot hear; I am dismayed so that I cannot see. <sup>4</sup> My heart staggers; horror has appalled me; the twilight I longed for has been turned for me into trembling. <sup>5</sup> They prepare the table, they spread the rugs, they eat, they drink. Arise, O princes; oil the shield!</p> <p><sup>6</sup> For thus the Lord said to me: “Go, set a watchman; let him announce what he sees. <sup>7</sup> When he sees riders, horsemen in pairs, riders on donkeys, riders on camels, let him listen diligently, very diligently.” <sup>8</sup> Then he who saw cried out: “Upon a watchtower I stand, O Lord, continually by day, and at my post I am stationed whole nights. <sup>9</sup> And behold, here come riders, horsemen in pairs!” And he answered, “Fallen, fallen is Babylon; and all the carved images of her gods he has shattered to the ground.” <sup>10</sup> O my threshed and winnowed one, what I have heard from the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, I announce to you.</p> <p><sup>11</sup> The oracle concerning Dumah. One is calling to me from Seir, “Watchman, what time of the night? Watchman, what time of the night?” <sup>12</sup> The watchman says: “Morning comes, and also the night. If you will inquire, inquire; come back again.”</p>	<p><b>a</b> 21:1 That is, by the Persian Gulf.</p> <p><b>b</b> 21:1 Or “disaster.”</p> <p><b>c</b> 21:2 Elam (“hidden, concealed”) is the modern-day coastal area of Iran. Media (“middle-land”) is the north-central region of Iran. Both regions made up a major portion of the Persian empire, which destroyed Babylon in 539.</p> <p><b>d</b> 21:2 It is as though God is commanding Babylon’s enemies to betray and destroy her. This prophecy was given to Isaiah two hundred years before it took place.</p> <p><b>e</b> 21:3 Or “too anguished to hear, too frightened to see.”</p> <p><b>f</b> 21:4 The wording of vv. 3–4 seems to indicate that Isaiah is brought into a state of prophetic ecstasy as he shook under the intensity of the weight of the prophetic utterance. See Scott, <i>Vestus Testamentum</i> 2, 1952, 278–282.</p> <p><b>g</b> 21:5 It’s as though Isaiah sees prophetically into the room where Belshazzar is feasting, and Belshazzar has no clue his fall is imminent (Dan. 5).</p> <p><b>h</b> 21:5 Or “Oil your shields.”</p> <p><b>i</b> 21:8 Or “He cried out, ‘A lion!’” See Rev. 5:5.</p> <p><b>j</b> 21:8 The New Testament ministry of a “watchman” is an intercessor “It is important that every church and every city has intercessors to stand on this watchtower day after day.</p> <p><b>k</b> 21:11 Dumah is a location in northern Arabia and is a poetic term for Edom, an ancient kingdom situated south of the Dead Sea. Dumah means “stillness (of death)” and was the land of Esau’s descendants. See also Gen. 32:3; Num. 24:18. The Hebrew root word for Edom is “Adam.”</p> <p><b>l</b> 21:11 Or “Seir,” a mountain in Edom. This is another name for the land inhabited by the Edomites. Seir means “hairy goat, faun, satyr” and is found thirty-nine times in the Old Testament.</p> <p><b>m</b> 21:12 Or “Morning (a new day) is coming, but so is night (judgment).”</p> <p><b>n</b> 21:12 Or “Turn (repent), then come back and ask again.</p>	<p><b>A Prophecy concerning Babylon</b></p> <p><sup>1</sup> Here is a prophecy concerning Babylon, the Desert by the Sea: <b>a</b> As whirlwinds rushing in from the southland, an invader <b>b</b> comes in from the desert, from a land to be feared.</p> <p><sup>2</sup> A terrifying revelation has been given to me: The betrayer betrays; the destroyer destroys. Arise, you Elamites! <b>c</b> Lay siege you Medes! <b>d</b> I will put an end to all the grief she brought to the nations. <sup>3</sup> There’s a churning deep inside me, like labor pains of a woman about to give birth. I’m too anguished by what I hear and too frightened by what I see. <b>e</b> <sup>4</sup> My mind is reeling; I’m filled with panic. I longed for twilight, but now I tremble through the night. <b>f</b> <sup>5</sup> I see them prepare the table and spread their rugs, then they eat and they drink. <b>g</b> Get up, you military officers! Anoint your shields <b>h</b> for battle!</p> <p><sup>6</sup> For this is what the Lord said to me: “Go post a sentry and have him report what he sees. <sup>7</sup> When he sees them come with chariots and advancing warriors riding on horses, donkeys, and camels, let him be alert—extremely alert!” <sup>8</sup> Then the sentry cries out, <b>i</b> “I continually stand on this watchtower day after day for you, O Lord. I’m stationed at my post throughout the night. <b>j</b> <sup>9</sup> Look! Someone’s coming! It’s a man in a chariot with a team of horses. “He shouts out, ‘Fallen, fallen, Babylon has fallen! All the idols of their gods lie shattered on the ground!’” <sup>10</sup> My people, lying crushed on the threshing floor, I declare to you what I have heard from the God of Israel, Yahweh, the Commander of Angel Armies.</p> <p><b>A Prophecy concerning Dumah (Edom)</b></p> <p><sup>11</sup> Here is a prophecy about Dumah: <b>k</b> Someone keeps calling me from the land of Edom, <b>l</b> saying, “Watchman, how much longer is the night? Watchman, how much longer is the night?” <sup>12</sup> The watchman answers, “Morning comes, but a dark night endures. <b>m</b> If you want to ask again, <b>n</b> then come back and ask.</p>

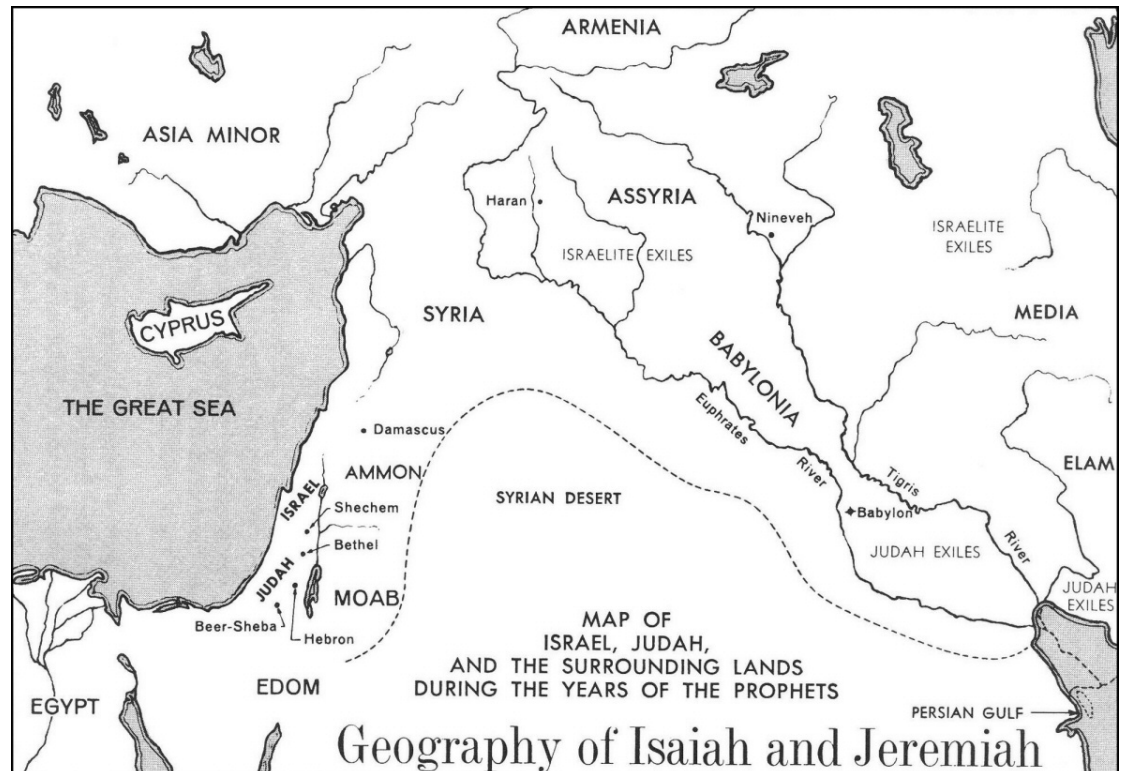
English Standard (ESV)	Passion Translation (TPT)	Passion Translation (TPT)
<p><sup>13</sup> The oracle concerning Arabia. In the thickets in Arabia you will lodge, O caravans of Dedanites. <sup>14</sup> To the thirsty bring water; meet the fugitive with bread, O inhabitants of the land of Tema. <sup>15</sup> For they have fled from the swords, from the drawn sword, from the bent bow, and from the press of battle.</p> <p><sup>16</sup> For thus the Lord said to me, “Within a year, according to the years of a hired worker, all the glory of Kedar will come to an end. <sup>17</sup> And the remainder of the archers of the mighty men of the sons of Kedar will be few, for the LORD, the God of Israel, has spoken.”</p>	<p>o 21:13 That is, they will be forced off the beaten path to hide from the invading Assyrians. The Dedanites were merchants who shipped their goods to Tyre (Phoenicia). Arabia, or “the land of Arabs,” means “sterility, darkened, intermixed, stranger, barren, or wild.” Arabia is mentioned six times in the Old Testament. See also Gal. 1:17.</p> <p>p 21:14 Tema was a descendant of Abraham (1 Chron. 1:28–30). Tema (modern-day Tayma) is also a city in northern Saudi Arabia. Tema means “sunny, good fortune, prosperity.”</p> <p>q 21:16 Or “Within one year according to the years of a hired worker.”</p> <p>r 21:16 Kedar, a son of Ishmael, means “dark skinned.” Kedar’s descendants settled in the Arabian desert. Kedar is likely a metonymy for northern Arabia.</p>	<p><b>A Prophecy Concerning Arabia</b></p> <p><sup>13</sup> A prophecy concerning Arabia: You caravans from Dedan, you will camp among the thickets in the desert land of Arabia. o <sup>14</sup> People of Tema, p come and bring water to the thirsty and bread for the fugitives. <sup>15</sup> For they have fled from the battle, from the drawn swords, from the bent bows, and from the weight of warfare.</p> <p><sup>16</sup> This is what the Sovereign God said to me: “Within exactly one year, q all the splendor of Kedar r will end. <sup>17</sup> And all the weapons left of Kedar’s warriors will be few, for the Lord Yahweh, the God of Israel, has spoken.”</p>

## BIBLE KNOWLEDGE COMMENTARY

John A. Martin

### EGYPT’S INABILITY TO HELP ISRAEL (20:1-6)

- **20:1.** Isaiah interposed a narrative section here to drive home what had been said in chapter 18 against Cush and in 19:1-17 against Egypt. Some in Judah wanted to form an alliance with these two nations to help stave off the Assyrian threat. Chapter 20 shows the foolishness of such a course of action. In 711 B.C. Ashdod, a Philistine city, was captured by the commander-in-chief of the Assyrian king Sargon II (722-705). The capture of Ashdod was to signal to the Judahites that they could not count on foreign alliances to protect them, for the Assyrians believed their advances could not be stopped.
- **20:2-6.** For three years Isaiah did not wear his outer garment of sackcloth (also the attire of Elijah, 2 Kings 1:8), or his sandals. (He was not completely naked.) This object lesson was to show how the Egyptians and Cushites would be treated by the victorious Assyrian forces. When those nations (Egypt and



Cush) would fall to the Assyrians (Isa. 20:4), the Judahites who thought an alliance with those countries would help them would be afraid and ashamed (v. 5). People would realize that if Egypt and Cush had fallen to Assyria, then they had no chance for escape (v. 6). Judah, then, should trust in the LORD for protection rather than in the foreign alliance they were contemplating.

### THE DESERT (21:1-10)

Many interpreters assume that since Elam (v. 2), Media (v. 2), and Babylon (v. 9) are mentioned, Isaiah must have been referring to the fall of Babylon to the Medo-Persian Empire in 539 B.C. However, passages referring to the fall of Babylon in 539 indicate that it was something about which Israel was to rejoice (because it soon resulted in the return of the Jews to their homeland), whereas this fall of Babylon was terrifying, something to be feared. “The Desert by the Sea” (v. 1) most likely refers to the area around the gulf known today as the Persian Gulf, that is, territory near Babylon.

As already mentioned, in Isaiah’s previous oracles (chaps. 13-20) he wrote of the Assyrian incursion into other countries in the ancient world and the effects it had on the Syro-Palestine [Vol. 1, p. 1068] region. In 722 B.C. a Chaldean prince from the Persian Gulf region, named Marduk-apal-iddina (called Merodach-Baladan in 39:1), revolted against Assyria, captured Babylon, and was crowned king of Babylon. Elam, a nation northeast of Babylon, supported his revolt. Not till 710 B.C. was Sargon able to evict Marduk-apal-iddina from Babylon. After the death of Sargon in 705 Marduk-apal-iddina along with Elamite troops revolted against Sennacherib. In 702 Sennacherib finally defeated him (and Elam) and devastated his home area around the Persian Gulf. Undoubtedly Isaiah was prophesying about this situation. Hezekiah, king of Judah, and other members of his royal court felt that Marduk-apal-iddina would be able to break the strength of the Assyrian Empire. But Isaiah was warning them that this would not happen.

- **21:1.** In this oracle (see comments on 13:1) Isaiah pictured an invasion of the Desert by the Sea (i.e., Babylon by the Persian Gulf) as being like an approaching desert storm. The invader was probably Marduk-apal-iddina (Merodach-Baladan) who arose suddenly from the desert regions to revolt against Assyria.
- **21:2.** God gave Isaiah a vision about the Babylonian uprising against Assyria. The prophet heard the battle cry for Elam and Media (north of Elam) to attack Babylon and free it from Assyria. I refers to the invader in the vision (see comments on v. 1); he said he would stop the groaning ... caused by the traitor, the Assyrian Empire which had caused most nations in the region to “groan” under the devastation caused by her conquests. Apparently Marduk-apal-iddina felt that he would be able to stop the Assyrian advance and thereby liberate the entire region.
- **21:3-5.** Isaiah now contrasted his feelings with the actions of those around him. Because of this prophecy he was about to utter he was in pain like that of a woman in labor, a simile often used by the prophets (see comments on 13:8 and cf. 26:17). Bewildered, he trembled and was in a state of horror (cf. 15:5-7; 22:4). By contrast, the people around him were living as if nothing was happening. They continued in a festive attitude (21:5a) not realizing the implications of what was happening. Perhaps Isaiah had in mind the feasting which would be done when Marduk-apal-iddina’s (Merodach-Baladan’s) men came to Jerusalem (chap. 39). Isaiah realized that Babylon under Marduk-apal-iddina’s control could not change what God had ordained. So rather than eating they should have prepared for battle, implied by the words oil the shields. Shields made of animal skins needed to be rubbed with olive oil to prevent their cracking.
- **21:6-10a.** God told Isaiah to have someone be on the lookout for the battle between Babylon and Assyria. The watchman was to look for anyone who would come his way to report on the battle (vv. 6-7). The watchman looked day after day till finally someone came with the message that Babylon had fallen and its gods lay shattered on the ground (v. 9). The emotional impact of this message on the people of Judah, who were hoping Babylon’s revolt would be successful, would be stunning. They had hoped that the alliance Hezekiah made with Babylon would break the Assyrian domination. But it was not to be. Sennacherib pushed Marduk-apal-iddina out of Babylon and as stated earlier (see comments on chap. 13), the Assyrian king eventually destroyed the city in 689 B.C.

Babylon's fall seemed like the last straw. Now no one could stop the Assyrian Empire. So Judah felt crushed emotionally like grain on the threshing floor (cf. Jer. 51:33).

- **21:10b.** Isaiah reiterated that his message was from God. He was only telling what he had heard from the LORD Almighty (cf. comments on 1:9). Judah must not rely on the Babylonians to save them. This man from the Desert by the Sea (Marduk-apal-iddina) would not be successful.

### **EDOM (21:11-12)**

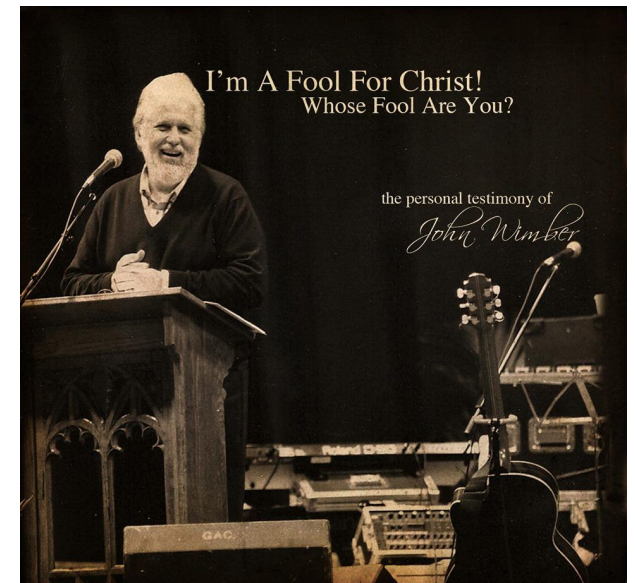
- **21:11-12.** This brief oracle (see comments on 13:1) seems to be against Edom because of the reference to Seir (21:11). Seir is an alternate name for Edom because the mountains of Seir were given as a possession to Esau and his descendants (Josh. 24:4). The name Dumah may be a wordplay on "Edom" since Dumah means silence or stillness (cf. NIV marg.) and the watchman in the oracle saw no activity. More likely, however, Dumah is a transliteration of Udumu or Udumai, [Vol. 1, p. 1069] the Akkadian designation for Edom. Both Tiglath-Pileser (in 734) and Sargon (in 711) mentioned taking tribute from Udumu. Was there any chance Edom's political situation would change? The answer was no, not immediately. Even though morning was coming, another night would follow. It did not look as if the situation would change soon.

### **ARABIA (21:13-17)**

- **21:13-17.** The Assyrian threat is the background of this oracle (see comments on 13:1) too. The Dedanites (21:13) were a tribe from southern Arabia. Tema (v. 14; cf. Job 6:19; Jer. 25:23) was a well-known oasis in northwestern Arabia, and Kedar (Isa. 21:16-17; cf. 42:11) was in northern Arabia. This oracle discusses the difficult times the people of Arabia would soon experience at the hands of the Assyrians. Within one year Kedar's pomp would end (Kedar was known for its tents, Ps. 120:5; Song 1:5; also cf. Jer. 49:28-29, which were a beautiful black). The warriors of Kedar would experience a great defeat (Isa. 21:16-17). The Arabians would be fugitives, running for their lives from the sword. The oracle would be fulfilled, for the LORD, the God of Israel, had spoken (v. 17). In 715 Sargon II wrote that he had defeated a number of Arabian tribes and had them deported to Samaria.

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

1. In Chapter 20, verses 2-6, Isaiah went without his outer garment or shoes for three years! What did this accomplish? Has God ever asked you to do something that seemed really foolish? How did people respond?
2. John Wimber's (the Vineyard) life was changed when he saw a man walking down the street with a sandwich board that said, "I'm a fool for Christ..." on the front and on the back it said, "...whose fool are you?" When it comes to taking risks with your pride, what do most people feel they have to lose by not being obedient?
3. As we move closer to the end of the age, we will likely see people begin to trust a lot of things other



than trusting in God. What are some things you see people putting their trust in that seems like utter foolishness to you? How would you approach trying to help someone move their trust away from something foolish and towards trusting in Jesus?

4. How can you protect yourself from becoming lethargic in your relationship with Jesus? When you see Christian friends of yours act oblivious to the dangers of following the drift of the culture away from righteousness, what could you do to help them “wake up?”
5. When it comes to being stirred up, spiritually, what works for you? What tends to get your attention in a way that causes you to move away from “the world” and towards a deeper relationship with Jesus?