

Isaiah 20

Oracle about **Babylon**
(13:1-14:27)

Oracle about **Babylon**
(21:1-10)

Oracle about **Philistia**
(14:28-32)

Oracle about **Dumah**
(21:11-12)

Oracle about **Moab**
(15-16)

Isaiah's Sign Act
(20)

Oracle about **Qedar**
(21:13-17)

Oracle about **Damascus**
(17-18)

Oracle about **Valley of Vision**
(22)

Oracle about **Egypt**
(19)

Oracle about **Tyre**
(23)

Isaiah 20 — Overview

20:1-2: The Sign-Act Commanded

- Isaiah walks naked and barefoot for three years

20:3-6: The Sign Interpreted

- Egypt and Cush will be led away captive by Assyria
- Those who trusted in them will be dismayed

Isaiah 20:1-2 — The Sign-Act Commanded

¹ In the year that the commander in chief¹, 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 naked² and barefoot.

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1. Hebrew: *Tartan* — an Assyrian military title
 2. 'naked' here may mean stripped down to a loincloth or undergarment, emphasizing shame and vulnerability

Historical Context — Sargon II, Ashdod, and the Failed Rebellion (711 BC)

Isaiah 20 opens with a precise historical marker: "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" (v. 1).

This event occurred in 711 BC, during the reign of Sargon II of Assyria (722-705 BC). Ashdod, one of the five major Philistine cities, had rebelled against Assyrian rule, likely with the encouragement and promise of support from Egypt and Cush (the region south of Egypt, modern-day Sudan/Ethiopia).

The Broader Political Context

The late 8th century BC was a period of intense geopolitical maneuvering in the ancient Near East. The Assyrian Empire was at the height of its power, having already conquered the northern kingdom of Israel (Samaria) in 722 BC. Small kingdoms and city-states in the region—including Judah, the Philistine cities, and others—faced a critical choice: submit to Assyrian dominance or resist.

Resistance seemed feasible only with the backing of a major power. Egypt, to the south, appeared to be that power. Throughout this period, Egypt actively encouraged rebellion against Assyria, offering promises of military support to anyone willing to challenge Assyrian hegemony.

The Rebellion of Ashdod

Ashdod's rebellion against Assyria was part of a broader anti-Assyrian coalition. The city expelled its pro-Assyrian king and installed a rebel leader, hoping that Egypt would come to their aid. Other cities and kingdoms in the region—potentially including Judah—were tempted to join this coalition.

Sargon's response was swift and decisive. He sent his *Tartan* (commander in chief) to crush the rebellion. Ashdod was besieged, captured, and its territory turned into an Assyrian province. The rebellion failed completely—and critically, Egypt never came to help.

Extra-Biblical Evidence

This event is one of the most historically verified episodes in the book of Isaiah. Sargon II's own annals record the conquest of Ashdod:

"Azuri, king of Ashdod, plotted in his heart not to pay tribute and sent messages to the kings of his neighborhood hostile to Assyria. On account of the evil he had done, I put an end to his rule over the people of his land and made Ahimetu, his favorite brother, king over them. But these Hittites, always planning treachery, hated his rule and elevated Iadna, who had no claim to the throne, to be king over them... I besieged and captured the cities of Ashdod, Gath, and Asdudimmu. I counted as spoil his gods, his wife, his sons, his daughters, his property... and the inhabitants of those cities."

Archaeological excavations at Ashdod have uncovered destruction layers consistent with this conquest, as well as Assyrian-style pottery and inscriptions dating to the period following Sargon's campaign.

The Prophetic Significance for Judah

Isaiah 20 is not primarily about Ashdod—it's about Judah. The capture of Ashdod serves as the historical backdrop for Isaiah's prophetic sign-act. The implicit warning is clear: *Do not trust in Egypt. Do not join anti-Assyrian coalitions based on Egyptian promises. Egypt will not save you—they will be led away captive themselves.*

This message echoes throughout Isaiah's oracles during this period:

Isaiah 30:1-3, 7 — "Ah, stubborn children, declares the LORD, who carry out a plan, but not mine, and who make an alliance, but not of my Spirit, that they may add sin to sin; who set out to go down to Egypt, without asking for my direction, to take refuge in the protection of Pharaoh and to seek shelter in the shadow of Egypt! Therefore shall the protection of Pharaoh turn to your shame, and the shelter in the shadow of Egypt to your humiliation... Egypt's help is worthless and empty; therefore I have called her 'Rahab who sits still!'"

Isaiah 31:1-3 — "Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help and rely on horses, who trust in chariots because they are many and in horsemen because they are very strong, but do not look to the Holy One of Israel or consult the LORD!... The Egyptians are man, and not God, and their horses are flesh, and not spirit. When the LORD stretches out his hand, the helper will stumble, and he who is helped will fall, and they will all perish together."

The fall of Ashdod demonstrated the futility of trusting Egypt. Isaiah's three-year sign-act (20:3) was a living, ongoing visual sermon to Judah: *This is what will happen to Egypt and Cush. If you trust in them, you will share in their shame.*

Isaiah 20:3-6 — The Sign Interpreted

³ Then the **LORD** said, "As my servant Isaiah has walked naked and barefoot for three years¹ 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?'"

1. some suggest this means 'for a period of three years' rather than literally every day for 1,095 days, though the text leaves this open

The Suffering Prophet — Bearing Shame on Behalf of His People

Isaiah's command to walk "naked and barefoot for three years" (v. 3) is one of the most extreme prophetic sign-acts in Scripture—a sustained, multi-year embodiment of judgment and shame. The word "naked" likely refers to being stripped to a loincloth, similar to how captives were paraded by conquering armies. To walk in this condition, year after year, was to bear the visible mark of shame and vulnerability.

Isaiah as a Type of the Suffering Servant

Isaiah's sign-act prefigures the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 52-53 in several ways:

- **Willing Obedience:** Isaiah obeys immediately: "and he did so" (v. 2). The Servant likewise "opened not his mouth" (53:7) and became "obedient to the point of death" (Phil. 2:8).
- **Bearing Shame for Others:** Isaiah's nakedness is not his own judgment—it's a sign of what will happen to Egypt and Cush. He wears their shame so Judah might see and repent. Christ "endured the cross, despising the shame" (Heb. 12:2) and bore our shame that we might be clothed in his righteousness.
- **Extended Suffering:** Isaiah's three-year sign mirrors the prolonged public humiliation of the Servant, whose suffering culminates in the cross.
- **A Sign to the Nations:** Isaiah's act concerns the nations—Egypt, Cush, and all who trust human power over God. The Servant's suffering is likewise for the nations: "he shall sprinkle many nations" (52:15); "he shall bear their iniquities" (53:11).

Christ: The Ultimate Fulfillment

The New Testament identifies Jesus as the fulfillment of Isaiah's Suffering Servant (Matt. 8:17; Acts 8:32-35; 1 Pet. 2:22-25). Jesus walked the path of shame—mocked, stripped, paraded publicly, and crucified naked—so that those who trust in him might be clothed with the righteousness of God. Where Isaiah's nakedness was a sign pointing forward, Christ's nakedness on the cross was the reality: the judgment we deserved, borne in our place.

Isaiah's three-year sign-act was a living sermon: suffering and shame are intrinsic to prophetic ministry. This pattern reaches its fullest expression in Christ, who became "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). In Isaiah 20, we see a prophet willing to be humiliated for truth. In Isaiah 53, the Servant bears ultimate humiliation for redemption. In the Gospels, we see fulfillment: Jesus Christ, "despised and rejected" that we might be accepted, "numbered with the transgressors" (53:12) that we might be numbered with the righteous.