

Isaiah 21:11

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

The burden of Dumah. He calleth to me out of Seir,
Watchman, what of the night? Watchman, what of the night?

Analysis

The burden of Dumah. He calleth to me out of Seir, Woe, watchman, what of the night? Watchman, what of the night?' Dumah refers to Edom (Seir is Edom's mountainous region). The oracle is brief and enigmatic. Someone from Edom calls to the watchman asking about the night—when will it end? What is its status? The doubled question emphasizes urgency and anxiety. 'Night' symbolizes judgment, darkness, suffering. Edom asks Israel's prophet for insight about how long their dark time will last. This demonstrates that even pagan nations recognized Israel's prophets had genuine revelation. The question models appropriate human response to divine judgment: seeking information from those with revealed knowledge rather than speculation. Yet the answer (verse 12) proves ambiguous, suggesting some questions lack clear answers—divine mysteries remain even for inquirers.

Historical Context

Edom, descended from Esau, maintained complex relationship with Israel—sometimes ally, often enemy. By Isaiah's time, Edom faced threats from growing empires. The name Dumah means 'silence,' possibly wordplay on Edom's fate—silence of death/judgment. Historically, Edom was eventually destroyed (Obadiah), though timing relative to this oracle is unclear. The brief oracle's enigmatic nature suggests prophetic reserve—not all inquiries receive clear answers. God reveals what He purposes to reveal; some questions remain mysterious. Church history shows similar patterns: believers experiencing suffering ask 'how long?'

(Revelation 6:10), yet specific answers aren't always given. Faith must trust God's wisdom and timing even when detailed explanations are withheld. The oracle models this: seeking divine insight is right; demanding complete clarity isn't always granted.

Related Passages

John 15:13 — Greatest form of love

1 John 4:8 — God is love

Study Questions

1. What does Edom seeking Israel's prophet teach about pagan recognition of genuine revelation?
2. How does the 'night' metaphor capture the experience of divine judgment?
3. Why does God sometimes withhold clear answers even to legitimate questions about suffering's duration?

Interlinear Text

מִשְׁאָלָה דָּמָה אֵלִי קָרָא מְשֻׁעָרָה שָׁמֶר מִהְהָרָה
The burden of Dumah H413 He calleth to me out of Seir Watchman H4100
H4853 H1746 H7121 H8165 H8104

מַלְיל: מַה שֶּׁמֶן מַה שֶּׁמֶן מַלְיל:
what of the night Watchman H4100 what of the night
H3915 H8104 H3915

Additional Cross-References

Genesis 25:14 (Parallel theme): And Mishma, and Dumah, and Massa,

Amos 1:6 (Parallel theme): Thus saith the LORD; For three transgressions of Gaza, and for four, I will not turn away the punishment thereof; because they carried away captive the whole captivity, to deliver them up to Edom;

Joel 3:19 (Parallel theme): Egypt shall be a desolation, and Edom shall be a desolate wilderness, for the violence against the children of Judah, because they have shed innocent blood in their land.

Isaiah 21:6 (Parallel theme): For thus hath the Lord said unto me, Go, set a watchman, let him declare what he seeth.

Psalms 137:7 (Parallel theme): Remember, O LORD, the children of Edom in the day of Jerusalem; who said, Rase it, rase it, even to the foundation thereof.

Jeremiah 37:17 (Parallel theme): Then Zedekiah the king sent, and took him out: and the king asked him secretly in his house, and said, Is there any word from the LORD? And Jeremiah said, There is: for, said he, thou shalt be delivered into the hand of the king of Babylon.

1 Chronicles 1:30 (Parallel theme): Mishma, and Dumah, Massa, Hadad, and Tema,

Genesis 32:3 (Parallel theme): And Jacob sent messengers before him to Esau his brother unto the land of Seir, the country of Edom.

Deuteronomy 2:5 (Parallel theme): Meddle not with them; for I will not give you of their land, no, not so much as a foot breadth; because I have given mount Seir unto Esau for a possession.

Numbers 24:18 (Parallel theme): And Edom shall be a possession, Seir also shall be a possession for his enemies; and Israel shall do valiantly.