

Isaiah 65: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Isaiah chapter 65 I was ready to be sought by those who did not ask for me. I was ready to be found by those who did not seek me. I said, Here I am, here I am, to a nation that was not called by my name.

I spread out my hands all the day to a rebellious people, who walk in a way that is not good, following their own devices. A people who provoke me to my face continually, sacrificing in gardens and making offerings on bricks, who sit in tombs and spend the night in secret places, who eat pig's flesh, and broth of tainted meat is in their vessels, who say, Keep to yourself, do not come near me, for I am too holy for you.

These are a smoke in my nostrils, a fire that burns all the day. Behold, it is written before me, I will not keep silent, but I will repay. I will indeed repay into their lap both your iniquities and your father's iniquities together, says the Lord, because they made offerings on the mountains and insulted me on the hills.

I will measure into their lap payment for their former deeds. Thus says the Lord, As the new wine is found in the cluster, and they say, Do not destroy it, for there is a blessing in it.

So I will do for my servants' sake, and not destroy them all. I will bring forth offspring from Jacob, and from Judah possessors of my mountains. My chosen shall possess it, and my servants shall dwell there.

[1 : 2 5] Sharon shall become a pasture for flocks, and the valley of Acre a place for herds to lie down, for my people who have sought me. But you who forsake the Lord, who forget my holy mountain, who set a table for fortune, and fill cups of mixed wine for destiny, I will destine you to the sword, and all of you shall bow down to the slaughter.

Because when I called, you did not answer. When I spoke, you did not listen. But you did what was evil in my eyes, and chose what I did not delight in.

Therefore thus says the Lord God, Behold, my servants shall eat, but you shall be hungry. Behold, my servants shall drink, but you shall be thirsty. Behold, my servants shall rejoice, but you shall be put to shame.

Behold, my servants shall sing for gladness of heart, but you shall cry out for pain of heart, and shall wail for breaking of spirit. You shall leave your name to my chosen for a curse, and the Lord God will put you to death.

But his servants he will call by another name, so that he who blesses himself in the land shall bless himself by the God of truth. And he who takes an oath in the land shall swear by the God of truth, because the former troubles are forgotten and are hidden from my eyes.

[2 : 4 0] For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth, and the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in that which I create. For behold, I create Jerusalem to be a joy, and her people to be a gladness.

I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and be glad in my people. No more shall be heard in it the sound of weeping and the cry of distress. No more shall there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not fill out his days.

For the young man shall die a hundred years old, and the sinner a hundred years old shall be accursed. They shall build houses and inhabit them. They shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.

They shall not build and another inhabit. They shall not plant and another eat. For like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands.

They shall not labor in vain or bear children for calamity, for they shall be the offspring of the blessed of the Lord, and their descendants with them. Before they call, I will answer. While they are yet speaking, I will hear.

[3 : 45] The wolf and the lamb shall graze together. The lion shall eat straw like the ox, and dush shall be the serpent's food. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain, says the Lord.

In chapter 65, we enter the final straight of the book of Isaiah, and as the book nears its conclusion, some of the greater structures of the book are completed. Chapters 56 to 66 form the section that ends the book of Isaiah, and in chapters 65 and 66, we return to various of the themes with which this section began.

This forms an inclusio, or a set of bookends, around the section, and provides closure both for the concluding section and for the book in general. The opening verses of the section, in chapter 56 verses 1 to 8, concerned foreigners and their inclusion in the worship and life of the people.

This theme reappears in chapter 66 verses 18 to 24, at the very end of the section and of the book. John Goldengate sees a correspondence between chapter 56 verse 9 to 59 verse 8, and chapter 65 verse 1 to 66 verse 17, both of which concern issues in the life of Jerusalem and Judah.

The chiasmic structure for which Goldengate argues seems accurate to me, but we should generally beware of resting too much upon such structures, especially when they involve very broad themes covering large and uneven stretches of the text, without highly distinctive common details, constellations of terminology, or other unusual and manifest shared features, or internal ordering.

[5 : 16] While such structures can often bring things into a clearer focus, they also shouldn't be made into a straitjacket for the text. Even where structures are evident, texts will often fit them inexactly, breaking with them at certain junctures.

Anthony Tomasino makes a case for a close relationship between chapters 63 to 66, and chapter 1 verse 1 to chapter 2 verse 4, a relationship seen in the vocabulary, themes, and structure of these chapters, as themes are presented in the same order.

This, he maintains, is strong evidence for the literary unity of the entire book. Brother Charles presents a number of intertextual parallels between chapters 65 and 66 and chapter 40, and then also with those chapters and chapter 1 verse 1 to 2 verse 4.

While such arguments for the literary unity of Isaiah are not the same thing as arguments for single authorship, they definitely don't hurt that case. These chapters must also be read in terms of that which immediately precedes them, the prayer of the prophet and the people, the prayer that the Lord would rend the heavens and come down, redeeming his people.

In these two chapters we have the Lord's answer to that prayer. The people had wondered why the Lord hid his face from them, perhaps some reason that the Lord had forsaken them and that seeking him was futile.

[6 : 33] Yet in his response to the lament of the prophet and the people, the Lord dispels any illusion that the alienation was established from his side of the relationship. The Lord had not rendered himself inaccessible to his people.

He was always there to be found, if only they would seek him. However, despite frequent overtures to his wayward people, the people had stubbornly refused to respond or to call upon his name.

Indeed, as he had first called Moses from the midst of the burning bush, he had called out to his people, a people that never responded by seeking him. The Lord's calls to his people were not merely occasional, but persistent and patient.

All the day he spread out his hands to them, despite their rebellion. Had they but answered, they would not have been turned away by him. Instead of heeding and responding to the Lord's summons, they had walked in their own ways and according to their own thoughts.

If the rejection of the Lord's invitation and summons were not enough, they had constantly provoked him to anger with their abominations, engaging in idolatrous pagan and occult practices and pursuing uncleanness.

[7 : 38] The exact nature of certain of these practices is unclear, and the archaeological evidence that we have tends to be sketchy. The practices mentioned might relate, as Gary Smith argues, to the worship of the dead and Chthonic deities, but we should be careful of going beyond the limited understanding that we have.

Their practices and rituals seem to involve a direct and intentional upending of the purity code, richly engaging in certain forms of uncleanness, as if to obtain a sort of inverted holiness by which they would be set apart from others, drawn into closer connection with forces of death and the underworld, perhaps in hope of enjoying demonic empowerment.

It should not surprise us that this was such an abomination to the Lord, provoking his indignation against the high-handed rebellion of such a people. In response to such egregious sin, the Lord would not be silent.

He would bring judgment upon their heads, a full measure of his indignation. Their fathers had sinned, and their sins had not only continued in, but extended and exacerbated the fathers' sins.

In the Lord's justice, the judgment for this continued tradition of occult and idolatrous practice would come upon them all at once. The response of the Lord to the wicked of the land continues in verses 8-16, but now a silver lining to the dark storm cloud of approaching judgment appears.

[8 : 57] In his judgment upon Israel, the Lord is going to make a distinction between the idolaters and those committing abominations, and those that he terms his servants. The Lord gives the image of people harvesting grapes late in the season.

While most of the clusters of the grapes will be soured and shriveled, there will still be some with good grapes left in them, and they will be spared. So will the Lord deal with his people, sparing his servants.

He will bring forth seed from Jacob and Judah, by which he will repopulate the land, giving his servants possession of it, giving rich pasture land to those who turned to him. To those who forsook him, however, and gave themselves to occult practices, seeking pagan gods of destiny and fortune, he had appointed a bitter destiny and a grim fortune.

They would be devoted to sword and to slaughter, falling to their enemies, because they had rejected his voice in the day of salvation, and had pursued wickedness instead. Their fate would directly and sharply contrast with that of his faithful servants.

They would be hungry with thirst and be dismayed, while the Lord's servants would feast, drink, and rejoice in their vindication. The songs of the righteous would be answered by the bitter wailing of the wicked.

[10 : 06] In places such as the call of Abraham, we see the multifaceted importance of blessing. The righteous will be blessed. They will become the mediators of blessing to others, who are connected with them and blessed on account of them.

They will also be remembered as people refer to them in their blessings, wishing that others enjoy their positive fate. However, the wicked here are told that they will suffer the opposite of this.

Their destiny will be so devastating that it will be recalled in curses for generations to come. The faithful servants of the Lord will be called by a new name, a sign, as we see in various places in Scripture, of the Lord's special concern for and commitment to their positive destiny.

When the Lord's faithfulness and steadfast love for his servants has been so demonstrated, the Lord's name will be invoked in people's blessings, in expression of people's absolute confidence in his promise and his goodness.

The Lord promises nothing less than a new world for his people, a cosmic transformation that is so comprehensive and so manifold that their former woes and trials would not come to mind again, no shadow of them lying over their present joys.

[11 : 14] In these concluding verses, we also return to elements of earlier eschatological prophecies in the book. Turning their backs upon their past sorrows, now to be forgotten, the people are invited to enter into the joy of the Lord's new world.

Jerusalem is set like a great jewel at the heart of this radiant new world, a token of the Lord's delight. Called to rejoice in the new Jerusalem that the Lord is establishing, the people themselves are sharing in and being the object of the Lord's own delight.

The old world that they are leaving behind was one mired in death, sickness and sorrow, with constant reminders of the frailty and mortality and weakness of man. That world laboured under the curse and the judgment of futility declared upon the unfaithful in the covenant.

Earlier in chapter 25 verse 8, for instance, we had a vision of the defeat of death. Death is still spoken of as a presence within the new world that the Lord is creating for his people here.

Yet the visitation of death will no longer be so untimely. The days of people's lives will no longer be so haunted by death's presence or weakened by his clutches. This rich, symbolic portrayal of a world made new need not be taken as a vision of the final kingdom, but as a poetic representation of the world of that kingdom within the terms of the present age, perhaps as a reality that is held out to be enjoyed in anticipatory forms within it.

[12 : 48] The curses of the covenant contained a devastating judgment of futility, going all the way back to the curses that were given in chapter 3 of Genesis. Some of these curses are described in Deuteronomy chapter 28 verses 30 to 34.

Your sons and your daughters shall be given to another people, while your eyes look on and fail with longing for them all day long, but you shall be helpless. A nation that you have not known shall eat up the fruit of your ground and of all your labours, and you shall be only oppressed and crushed continually, so that you are driven mad by the sight that your eyes see.

There are few things more bitter than seeing the sacrifices of one's life, all of your effort and labour rewarded with emptiness, denied any harvest, or given into the hands of your enemies.

Likewise, to fail to bring forth children, or only to bring forth children for them to suffer the devastation of evil days, is one of the cruelest of fates. The Lord here promises that his servants will not suffer under such a curse of futility any longer.

The great curses of futility serve to frustrate the growth of people in their wickedness, and in this respect could be seen as a merciful act of the Lord, preventing evil from thriving.

- [14 : 24] Yet these judgments of futility, the bringing forth of thorns and thistles from the land, was never the Lord's ultimate gracious intent. His purpose was that his people, as they pursued righteousness, would be strengthened in their path.

Here he promises to answer his people even before they cease speaking. In the concluding verse, we return to the vision of the restored creation that we saw in chapter 11 verses 6 to 9.

The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together, and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

The nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain, for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.

The world under the shadow of death is a world of predators, whether animals preying upon other animals or kingdoms preying upon other kingdoms. The Lord here promises an end to this order, one in which predators are no longer wild, but are tamed creatures, subject to the rule of the Lord and his people, in an order that centres upon the Lord's holy mountain.

- [15 : 37] Naturally, we should see this as a vision of a return to Edenic conditions. The greatest vicious predator of all, of course, is the serpent, who was also subject to a curse in Genesis chapter 3 verses 14 to 15.

The Lord God said to the serpent, While the Lord is going to reverse the judgment upon the womb, the curse of futile labour given to Adam, and greatly ease the judgment of death, the curse upon the wicked serpent will be strengthened, as the Lord protects his people from all who would seek their harm, and most especially Satan himself.

A question to consider, where in the New Testament do we see imagery from and statements of this chapter taken up and developed? A question to consider,