

## An Exegesis of Isaiah 65:17-25

This essay provides a short introduction to, and exegesis of, Isaiah 65:17-25. This well-known passage (often labelled “New Heavens and a New Earth”) forms part of a highly significant conclusion to both Trito-Isaiah and the book of Isaiah as a whole. Its centrality to Isaiah’s message is testified to by Westermann’s assertion that it “forms part of the nucleus of Trito-Isaiah’s proclamation” (1969, 411). Isaiah 65:17-25 reveals the radical transformation that God will bring about, resulting in a restored relationship between God and His people, who will live in shalom in the fullest sense of the word. The passage has important links to other Old Testament books, intricate connections to other parts of Isaiah, and is used to dramatic effect by John in describing his Revelation. After a brief introduction, I explore some structural and contextual considerations followed by a systematic exegesis. The essay concludes by reviewing use of this passage in Revelation and asking what relevance it has for Christians today.

### **Introduction**

Chapter 65 is the penultimate chapter of Trito-Isaiah. The origin and dating of this material, however, are subject to considerable dispute. Whilst a few scholars (e.g. Motyer, Knight) maintain that all of Isaiah was written by a single author, the vast majority agree that it is the work of multiple authors: Duhm in 1892 was the first to propose three distinct sections which were written by different historical figures, and the tendency nowadays is to recognise *at least* three authors, e.g. Goldingay identifies four distinct ‘voices’.<sup>1</sup> In a further complication, Duhm’s third section (“Trito-Isaiah”) has itself been identified as the work of multiple authors by, for example, Paul Hanson. Apparently different literary styles, and material that may have been added at a later stage, seem to support the contention that Trito-Isaiah was not an individual effort.<sup>2</sup> The lack of specific historical references in Trito-Isaiah also makes it very difficult to date the book’s composition or redaction.

### **Structural Considerations**

Grace Emmerson (1996, 15) has described Trito-Isaiah as “a bewildering medley of denunciation and promise, warning and hope, lament and confidence,” and she is not alone in regarding its eleven chapters as being a “miscellany of prophecies” (Ridderbos 1985, 38). However, the placing of these prophecies (and subsequent redaction) must have been deliberate, even if there are competing explanations for their location and structure. Goldingay (2001, 14) argues that Trito-Isaiah is chiasmic in its entirety, a suggestion that would have 65:1-66:16 mirroring 56:9-59:8 – an arrangement that is not immediately obvious. Repeated claims (e.g. by Lieberich) have been made that chapters 65 and 66, together with chapter 1, form an *inclusio* around all the Isaianic material. Whilst there are considerable literary parallels between the beginning and end of Isaiah, we should not automatically conclude that all of these sections were written at the same time, i.e. after the book of Isaiah was completed in its initial form. Moreover, the parallels between the start and end of Isaiah are strongest between chapters 1 and 66 – leading Tomasino (1996) to conclude that chapter 65 was actually inserted at a later date. One further popular (but unproven) suggestion, which will inevitably influence how we read this passage, is that 65:17-25 is God’s response to the prayer of 63:7-64:12 (so Steck, Carr, Schramm and Ellis).

---

<sup>1</sup> These four voices are those of the Ambassador, the Poet, the Preacher and the Disciple. Goldingay attributes Trito-Isaiah to the Preacher, “a bringer of good news, a binder up of the broken-hearted” (2001, 4), who was “in effect a disciple of the Poet (and the Ambassador)” (2001, 5).

<sup>2</sup> Goldingay finds it helpful to describe the Preacher as a ‘voice’ or particular style of writing or particular message, rather than a solitary individual. Consequently he accepts that “there was probably more than one Preacher: that is, chapters 56-66 may contain more than one prophet’s words” (2001, 5). Childs agrees that Isaiah must be the product of more than one author, since this is more credible than “portraying the eighth-century prophet [i.e. the author of Proto-Isaiah] as a clairvoyant of the future” (2001, 3-4). Investigation of different textual origins and the application of form criticism have tended to fragment and atomise the book of Isaiah, and recent scholarship has consequently tried to emphasise how these different authors have produced a *unified* work that has considerable continuity of themes, images and theology.

## Context

The reader of this, as with any biblical passage, would benefit from an understanding of its historical, social and literary setting. In this instance, however, difficulty dating the passage makes the first two contexts problematic. Those arguing for a single author of Isaiah date this passage in the eighth-century BC but most scholars would opt for a post-exilic dating, i.e. some time after 538BC. Volz is seemingly alone in dating the work as late as the third-century BC, with most commentators settling for a date between 538 and 500BC. The social setting is that of Palestine, specifically the city of Jerusalem, where the author(s) was/were based. Mauser (1982, 185) argues that the passage's negative imagery derives from the Babylonian capture of Jerusalem in 587BC, and several commentators (e.g. Westermann) note that the positive imagery of shalom and fulfilled life on the New Earth is, significantly, rooted in the context of contemporary (Jewish) history. Hanson has gone much further than other exegetes in identifying a background in Trito-Isaiah of warring Jewish parties: a "pattern... of increasing inner-community conflict and worsening social and economic conditions" (1995, 186).

The *literary* context of this passage is also important. Isaiah 65:17-25 is part of a larger unit, chapters 65 and 66, that is a salvation-judgement oracle, and provides detail of what that salvation may look like. It is a point of some debate whether we interpret those details literally or at a metaphorical and symbolic level. Most commentators consider the genre to be eschatological (but arguably with features of apocalyptic), although notably Watts demurs and locates the picture of harmony in the medium term: "this is not an eschatological picture of the distant future. It portrays the goal of Yahweh's plans as they are fulfilled in these chapters. Jerusalem is being rebuilt and made ready for the pilgrims who come throughout the following centuries" (1987, 354). Yet this interpretation fails to appreciate the Isaianic use of Jerusalem as a picture of all God's people and tries unsuccessfully to locate in history what is a deliberately eschatological image that is removed from any chronological setting.

With these structural and contextual points in mind, below we exegete Isaiah 65:17-25 (based on the NIV translation).

### v.17

"Behold, I will create  
new heavens and a new earth.  
The former things will not be remembered,  
nor will they come to mind.

Westermann and others are correct to say that verse 17 (together with verse 25) has a different focus, and perhaps a different style, to the rest of this section: the scope here is cosmic and the genre approaches apocalyptic. Yahweh announces an imminent act of creation, a "radical transformation" (Goldingay) and "final restoration" (Jones) that can be understood as Paradise regained (we will note parallels with Genesis later).<sup>3</sup> This creation will see the *transformation* of the Earth and the heavens rather than their destruction, and these entities stand for the physical human world and the 'spiritual' or 'metaphysical' realm of God, the angels and so on. Together they represent all things, and so the picture we are given is one of *total* transformation, of far greater magnitude than that brought about by, say, the Flood.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Knight (1985, 97) and Childs (2001, 537) are right, of course, to point out that God's creative activity is an *ongoing* process; His continual sustaining of the universe is itself creative.

<sup>4</sup> Other passages of Scripture refer to the heavens and the earth in this sense of encompassing everything, e.g. Isaiah 13:13, 24:21 and 51:6. There was also an understanding within Judaism that these would not last for ever, e.g. Genesis 8:22 "As long as the earth endures..." seems conditional, and Psalms 102:25-26 says "In the beginning you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you remain." In earlier parts of Isaiah, there is an awareness of the temporariness of the earth and the heavens, even if their transformation had not yet been understood, e.g. "All the stars of the heavens will be dissolved and the sky rolled up like a scroll" (34:4) and "Lift up your eyes to the heavens, look at the earth beneath; the heavens will vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment" (51:6).

Whybray (1975, 275) summarises this passage by claiming that it is “dominated” by 17ab – God is *about to* create, creating literary tension and a grandness of vision that was unprecedented in Judaism. The word used for creation is the same root as in Genesis 1:1, and the result will be a transformation so complete that “former things will not be remembered,” although we may conclude that this is hyperbolic prophetic speech rather than a literal indication that citizens of the new earth would not be able to recall that which had gone before. Alternatively, as Ridderbos (1985, 571) suggests, it may be the former *troubles* that will not be remembered. The parallelism in 17cd is intended to emphasise the extent of the transformation in 17ab, and elsewhere in Isaiah we see this phrase “former things” used to contrast against a past era (41:22, 43:9, 43:18, 46:9, 48:3 and, especially, 42:9).

### **vv.18-19**

But be glad and rejoice forever  
in what I will create,  
for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight  
and its people a joy.  
I will rejoice over Jerusalem  
and take delight in my people;  
the sound of weeping and of crying  
will be heard in it no more.

The shift from a cosmic perspective to a national, or Jerusalemite one is confusing. Westermann (1969, 408-410) saw this shift as proof that the original text was vv.18-24 and that verses 17 and 25 were later additions. Whilst this possibility cannot be ruled out, our primary concern here is the final form of the text, which may well have been the product of more than one author and subject to different layers of redaction. In its final form, this passage can be understood as operating on more than one level. An example of such a multifaceted understanding is Mauser’s balanced argument that the picture is both historical and non-earthly: it is “located somewhere between a historically identifiable ground of hope and a vision of hope drained of all earthly analogy” (1982, 183). Oswalt (1998, 656) also finds multiple perspectives present but argues that these relate to (i) the ‘new creation’ that is the manifestation of the kingdom of God in the lives of Christians; (ii) the millennial kingdom of Revelation 20; and (iii) the new heaven and earth that come after the first heaven and earth, as alluded to in 2 Peter 3:13 and Revelation 21:1.

Whilst Oswalt’s threefold interpretation is helpful, we should not rush to a specifically New Testament understanding of Isaiah. Rather, we should appreciate that the prophet was speaking of Jerusalem as symbolic and paradigmatic of God’s faithful people – note the parallelism of God’s rejoicing over Jerusalem and taking delight in his people in both v.18 and v.19.<sup>5</sup> Isaiah speaks of a future he can scarcely comprehend and so it is inevitable that he draws on reference points that are familiar both to him and to his readers. But we should not doubt that these points of reference stand for the centre of what will be “a cosmic paradise, one vast sanctuary” (Webb 1996, 244).

### **vv.20-23**

Never again will there be in it  
an infant who lives but a few days,  
or an old man who does not live out his years;  
he who dies at a hundred  
will be thought a mere youth;  
he who fails to reach a hundred  
will be considered accursed.  
They will build houses and dwell in them;  
they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit.  
No longer will they build houses and others live in them,  
or plant and others eat.  
For as the days of a tree,

---

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Psalm 48:1-2, “Great is the Lord, and most worthy of praise, in the city of our God, his holy mountain. It is beautiful in its loftiness, the joy of the whole earth.”

so will be the days of my people;  
my chosen ones will long enjoy  
the works of their hands.  
They will not toil in vain  
or bear children doomed to misfortune;  
for they will be a people blessed by the Lord,  
they and their descendants with them.

These four verses are among the most poignant in the whole Bible, depicting a place so harmonious and fulfilling that, were it not located in a divine promise one would regard it as an impossible utopia. The human lifespan is restored to a full length; people will benefit from their own labour, rather than having it exploited by others; the meaninglessness and despair of losing children will be gone. Some of the language here clearly refers back to Deuteronomy 28:30, which describes curses for disobedience to God: "You will build a house, but you will not live in it. You will plant a vineyard, but you will not even begin to enjoy its fruit." But the curse will be lifted, and life will instead be characterised by security, productivity, purpose and, in a word, shalom. These are not achieved through human endeavour but are a blessing from God (v.23). One enduring image here is that of the tree, which stands for longevity, stability, the setting down of roots, closeness to land, and productivity through God's blessing. It is interesting to note that man's fulfilment will not be found in leisure, nor in the exploitation of others, but in honest labour.

It is difficult to know how to interpret the verses here relating to death: do the people have a finite number of years to "live out" (v.20)? Who are those who will fail to reach a hundred – or is this a figure of speech? Motyer and Ridderbos both strongly argue that death does not remain, for in their interpretation this is a purified and sinless new creation, and death has itself been defeated. Other commentators, often arguing from a millennial perspective, suggest that defeated evil will actually be allowed to continue, e.g. Childs (2001, 546) albeit in a much restrained form (Vine 1971, 215).

#### **v.24**

Before they call I will answer;  
while they are still speaking I will hear.

Whilst the previous four verses speak of mankind in harmony with both nature and amongst itself, this verse speaks of a perfect harmony with God. Motyer (1993, 531 and 1999, 399) explains this in terms of an actual "oneness," whereby man so closely identifies with God that God anticipates people's needs, and their wills match God's own. If sin is understood as rebellion, separation and division from God, this concept of a new oneness is a helpful one.

This verse has possible resonances with other Isaianic passages, and Childs (2001, 544) has argued that, in general, 65:17-24 has an affinity with chapter 1, with verse 24 reflecting a change in God's stance of 1:15, "I will not listen." A more obvious link to Proto-Isaiah is that made by Ridderbos (1985, 572), who observes that the prophet there speaks to Jerusalemites thus: "How gracious he will be when you cry for help! As soon as he hears, he will answer you" (30:19). These parallels suggest that a belief in a peaceful and blessed future for the people of God developed between the eighth- and fifth-centuries BC into an eschatological understanding that removed God's ultimate answering from the normal progression of human chronology.

#### **v.25**

The wolf and the lamb will feed together,  
and the lion will eat straw like the ox,  
but dust will be the serpent's food.  
They will neither harm nor destroy  
on all my holy mountain,"  
says the Lord.

The picture of harmony, or shalom, continues with two direct contrasts: the predatory wolf and the vulnerable lamb will no longer be enemies, indeed they will live side by side; and the ferocious lion will eat like the docile ox. Again, it is possible to interpret this figuratively instead of literally: forces of nature will no longer be in opposition. This part of verse 25 is a conscious and condensed repetition of 11:6-9:

*The wolf will live with the lamb,  
the leopard will lie down with the goat,  
the calf and the lion and the yearling together;  
and a little child will lead them.  
The cow will feed with the bear,  
their young will lie down together,  
and the lion will eat straw like the ox.  
The infant will play near the hole of the cobra,  
and the young child put his hand into the viper's nest.  
They will neither harm nor destroy  
on all my holy mountain,  
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD  
as the waters cover the sea. [emphasis added]*

On this near word-perfect quoting of Proto-Isaiah, two important points can be made. Firstly, the context of chapter 11 is messianic, and although we do not find in chapter 65 an explicit reference to the awaited messiah, this reference to chapter 11 (which begins “A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse”) would almost certainly have been understood by its original readers/listeners as having messianic significance. Thus, the picture of eschatological creation of new heavens and a new earth is not divorced from the expectation of a messiah.

Secondly, the insertion of the phrase “but dust will be the serpent’s food” is highly significant. Indeed, its significance seems to have been underplayed, not least because Westermann (1969, 407), Whybray (1975, 279) and others have understood it as being a gloss added at a later stage. This is not a satisfactory conclusion: Trito-Isaiah could instead be seen to be developing the point made in Proto-Isaiah, from a new eschatological perspective. Moreover, it would be grievously wrong to dismiss any part of scripture as a ‘mere’ gloss if we consider how scripture is edited, shaped and presented: these too can be prophetic functions, and we should be most concerned with the final form of scripture that we have received. Even if verses 17 and 25 were proven to be later additions, such changes are a part of the process by which God has spoken to His people, throughout the ages and in different historical situations.

The reference to Genesis 3:14 is unmistakable here:

So the Lord God said to the serpent, “Because you have done this,  
Cursed are you above all the livestock and all the wild animals!  
You will crawl on your belly and you will eat dust  
all the days of your life.”

In the previous verses of our Isaianic passage, the work of the serpent has been shown to be overturned; here, the *curse* on the serpent is shown to be everlasting, and this will be “on all my holy mountain,” i.e. everywhere that has been newly created (symbolised by Jerusalem).<sup>6</sup>

### **Conclusion**

By way of a conclusion, we briefly consider specifically Christian aspects of this passage: how did it inform the writing of the New Testament, and what implications does it have for Christians today?

---

<sup>6</sup> The theme of Jerusalem as a holy mountain is present in both Proto- and Trito-Isaiah, 11:9, 27:13, 56:7, 57:13, 65:11, 66:20 – Watts (1987, 355) translates the term “mount of my holiness” to convey the emphasis that the Hebrew places on the holiness being God’s (rather than the mountain’s).

Together with Psalms, Isaiah is the most frequently cited book in the New Testament. Its theological depth and the breadth of its vision have led to it being called the “Romans of the Old Testament.” Its strongest links are with Revelation, which also speaks of the new age to come and, indeed, specifically about the New Jerusalem of 65:18. As Mauser (1982, 182) notes, “The language sounding the highest hope in the New Testament is woven in the fabric of the Isaianic oracle,” with Revelation 21:1-4 being a clear development of Isaiah 65:17-25:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”<sup>7</sup>

This passage, says Mauser, “uses the older themes in a way far surpassing even the relative transcending of history in Isaiah 65” (1982, 183). To an extent, this passage in Revelation serves as its own exegesis on Isaiah 65: there will be *no* death and nothing that causes pain, and the creation of new heavens and a new earth means that an entire “order of things has passed away” (v.4), that is to emphasise the *totality* of what has happened and the *extent* of its transformation. At the centre of God’s new creation will be the new Jerusalem – and in the midst of that Holy City will be God Himself, a fact that is repeated several times in emphasis. John’s vision confirms our interpretation of Trito-Isaiah’s use of “Jerusalem” to be a reference to the people of God, as he applies the same term here in what is very clearly a universal context (while Isaiah 65 was less obviously so).

As Christians today we are living in the hope and expectation of God creating new heavens and a new earth. The troubles, persecution, futility and suffering that afflict God’s people will be for a time only; they are not ‘normal’ experiences and will not last. “This is a significant promise for a world like our own characterized by grief, premature death, frustration in work, and broken relationship between humanity and God” (Goldingay 2001, 369). It is also a promise that Christians should be prepared to work towards effecting, since it is a revelation of God’s ultimate design for humanity. That design is not just harmony with God but with all of creation, including other people – and thus we must take great care not to take this “vision of God’s new heaven and new earth out of its social justice equation” (Hanson 1995, 246) by over-spiritualising or decommunalising it.

**Christopher Ducker**  
May 2007

---

<sup>7</sup> The other main New Testament reference to the coming of the new heaven and earth is found in the gospels – Matthew 24:35 (parr. Luke 21:33, Mark 13:31) has Jesus declaring that “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away,” which testifies to His divinity and ‘otherliness’ and to the impermanence of this world. See also Matthew 5:18, which implies that heaven and earth will disappear at a future point (though Luke 16:17 has a different emphasis).

## Bibliography

- Carr (1996) Carr, David M., 'Reading Isaiah from Beginning (Isaiah 1) to End (Isaiah 65-66): Multiple Modern Possibilities' in Melugin, Roy F. and Sweeney, Marvin A. (eds.), *New Visions of Isaiah*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996, pp.188-218
- Childs (2001) Childs, Brevard S., *Isaiah: A Commentary*, OTL, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001
- Ellis &Ellis (1985) Ellis, Charles H. and Ellis, Norma R., *The Wells of Salvation: Meditations on the Prophecy of Isaiah*, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1985
- Emmerson (1996) Emmerson, Grace I., *Isaiah 56-66*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996
- Goldingay (2001) Goldingay, John, *Isaiah*, NIBC, Peabody: Hendrickson, 2001
- Hacking (1994) Hacking, Philip, *Isaiah: Crossway Bible Guide*, Nottingham: Crossway Books, 1994
- Hanson (1995) Hanson, Paul D., *Isaiah 40-66*, Louisville: John Knox Press, 1995
- Herbert (1975) Herbert, Arthur S., *The Book of the Prophet Isaiah: Chapters 40-66*, Cambridge: CUP, 1975
- Jones (1964) Jones, Douglas Rawlinson, *Isaiah 56-66 and Joel: Introduction and Commentary*, London: SCM Press, 1964
- Knight (1985) Knight, George A. F., *The New Israel: A Commentary on the Book of Isaiah 56-66*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985
- Mauser (1982) Mauser, Ulrich, "Isaiah 65:17-25," *Interpretation* 36:2, 1982, pp.181-186
- McConville (2002) McConville, Gordon, *Exploring the Old Testament, Vol.4: Prophets*, London: SPCK, 2002
- Motyer (1993) Motyer, Alec, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, Leicester: IVP, 1993
- Motyer (1999) Motyer, Alec, *Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, Leicester: IVP, 1999
- Oswalt (1998) Oswalt, John N., *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 40-66*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998
- Ridderbos (1985) Ridderbos, Jan, *Isaiah*, Trans. John Vriend, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985
- Schramm (1995) Schramm, Brooks, *The Opponents of Third Isaiah: Reconstructing the Cultic History of the Restoration*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995
- Tomasino (1996) Tomasino, Anthony J, 'Isaiah 1.1-2.4 and 63-66, and the Composition of the Isaianic Corpus' in Philip R. Davies (ed.), *The Prophets: A Sheffield Reader*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996, pp.147-163
- Vine (1971) Vine, William E., *Isaiah: Prophecies, Promises, Warnings*, Edinburgh: Lamplighter, 1971
- Watts (1987) Watts, John D. W., *Isaiah 34-66*, Word Biblical Commentary, Waco: Word Books, 1987
- Watts (1989) Watts, John D. W., *Isaiah*, Dallas: Word Publishing, 1989
- Webb (1996) Webb, Barry, *The Message of Isaiah: On Eagles' Wings*, Leicester: Inter-varsity Press, 1996
- Westermann (1969) Westermann, Claus, *Isaiah 40-66: A Commentary*, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1969
- Whybray (1975) Whybray, Raymond N., *Isaiah 40-66*, New Century Bible Commentary, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975