

**"The Glory of the Lord" and the "Judgment":
An Exposition of Isaiah 66:15-24**

**OBST 633: Isaiah
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Synthesis and Outline of Isaiah 66:15-24

Summary: The Lord will display His glory to all of the nations of the earth and call as many as will respond to worship and serve Him from all of the nations, but He will judge those who rebel against Him.

Outline:

- I. The Lord will judge in an overwhelming display of power all of those who tried to make their own path for righteousness and for life instead of following God's plan for righteousness and for life. (66:15-17)
 - A. The prophet gives a description of God's fury by comparing it to fire, indicating the totally consuming nature of God's judgment (66:15-16)
 - B. The reason for God's judgment is because people have elected to follow their own means of worship and purification and have neglected God's instruction. (66:17)
- II. God will call people from all nations to join with Him and be a part of His people. They will worship Him in the same way that the Israelites were intended to worship Him. (66:18-23)
 - A. The glory of the Lord will be shown by a sign to all of the nations. (66:18-19)
 - B. The sign will be communicated by messengers. (66:19)
 - i. The messengers will come from all of the nations
 - ii. The messengers will go back to all of the nations with their message
 - iii. The messengers will even bring Israelites back to God through their message
 - C. God will give Gentiles from the nations positions that were previously reserved only for Jewish people. (v. 21)
 - D. God promises a final state of affairs after His judgment and His glory are revealed that will be permanent from that point onward. (v. 22-23)
- III. God gives a graphic warning of the severity of His judgment on those who rebel. (v. 24)
 - A. The righteous will observe God's judgment of the wicked (v. 24a)
 - B. The rebellious will experience the full measure of God's judgment personally. (v. 24b)

Exposition of the Text

Introduction

The last few chapters of Isaiah weave the two main themes of the book of Isaiah together, the glory of God's plan of salvation and the horror of God's planned judgment. In Isaiah 65:17, the prophet introduces the idea that God will create new heavens and a new earth and will wipe away those things that have been undesirable in life on this earth. The message of Isaiah 66:15-24 brings this promise to its climax by speaking of God's final plan for all people. His glory will be displayed in all of the nations, while His judgment will be rendered for all those who pick their own plans and paths instead of God's way. This passage gives one of the most graphic understandings of God's judgment and yet outlines a worldwide missionary effort to proclaim the glory of the Lord to all of the nations of the earth by people from all of the nations in the midst of it. Additionally, this passage leaves some controversy as the closing passage of Isaiah. For readers through the centuries, it seems to end abruptly and out of tone with the rest of the book in a picture of judgment rather than hope.¹

The Lord Will Come in Fire (66:15-17)

There is an ongoing debate on how chapter 66 of Isaiah should be divided for better understanding and the first two verses of this passage help fuel the debate. Verse fifteen introduces a picture of God's judgment and seems to create a break with the preceding picture of rejoicing and comfort, yet verses fifteen and sixteen are written in a poetic style that abruptly ends at verse seventeen, which leads some scholars to conclude that they better belong with the preceding verses. Edwin Webster gives good reason to include these two verses with the closing section of Isaiah by identifying a chiastic structure within this section.² This view gives a fitting explanation for the

1 Ronald E. Clements, 2002, "Isaiah: a book without an ending?," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, no. 97: 109-126, *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed June 22, 2009), 109.

2 Edwin C. Webster, 1986. "A rhetorical study of Isaiah 66," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, no. 34: 93-108, *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed June 22, 2009), 100-101.

seemingly unfitting end of both this chapter and the book of Isaiah in verse 24 with a pronouncement of judgment, since 66:24 would then be the closing end of the chiasm. This problem will be examined in greater detail later as part of the analysis of verse twenty-four.

Verses fifteen and sixteen describe God's wrath and judgment as a fire and follow a recurring theme throughout Isaiah. Anthony Tomasino sees a parallel between these verses and the first chapter of Isaiah in fact. Isaiah 1:28-31 warns that the rebellious and those who have chosen their own way and their "own gardens" will become tinder and will "burn together" with none to quench them. This proves a perfect preview of the warning here in Isaiah 66:14-17, where Isaiah states that the Lord will come in fire against all those who "sanctify and purify themselves to go into the gardens" saying that they will "come to and end together."³ The fire speaks specifically of God's judgment, but does not necessarily imply that the judgment will be a physical fire. Erickson points out a common understanding regarding judgment language in the Bible that uses the motif of fire cannot always be taken to mean that the judgment itself will be delivered with fire.⁴ The focus of this pronouncement of judgment is not on the manner of its execution as much as it is on the identification of those to be judged. Verse seventeen creates a coda for Isaiah's original charge in chapter one against those who design their own way and refuse to obey God and follow His way. These people have become totally self-sufficient in their own minds and think that they can purify and sanctify themselves and this is their chief mistake. This is the charge that is made earlier in this chapter in verses three and four as well. The sin of Israel and all of those in the world who will face this final judgment is the decision to play God and rule in His stead. This is the sin of Lucifer and the original sin in the garden as well.

3 Anthony J. Tomasino, 1993, "Isaiah 1:1-2:4 and 63-66, and the Composition of the Isaianic Corpus," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, no. 57: 81-98, *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed June 22, 2009), 93.

4 Millard J. Erickson, 1985, "Principles, permanence, and future divine judgment : a case study in theological method," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 28, no. 3: 317-325, *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed June 22, 2009), 323-324.

The Glory of the Lord Goes to All of the Nations (66:18-23)

This is the very heart of the passage and in many ways reflects to overarching theme of the book of Isaiah as a whole. God's glory will be revealed to all of the nations of the world. The first real puzzle to unravel in this passage is a rather obscure reference in verse nineteen that God will set a “sign” or a “signal” among the nations. The word used for sign here is the Hebrew word *'owth* which is used in Isaiah several times. Most notably in scholarly circles, it is used in chapters seven through nine of Isaiah referring to the child that is given as a sign to Ahaz. The most relevant use of *'owth* in Isaiah for this discussion comes in chapter 55. In brief, the chapter speaks of the Davidic covenant and a leader who will call the nations to come to God for His glory (Isaiah 55:3-5). The end of chapter 55 includes a promise that God's word will go forth and lastly that it will “be to the Lord for a name, for an everlasting sign (*'owth*) [that] shall not be cut off.” The interpretation of this and how it might shed light on the nature of the sign promised in 66:19 is impossible to determine with any clarity from the perspective of Isaiah's day and time, but will be examined in detail as it relates to the theological implications of this passage later in this study. The sign is in some way central to the method by which God will display His glory as it is stated to be given for this specific reason.⁵ This sign is to be carried by a group of messengers and the main issue is trying to determine who is doing what in this section of Scripture. A straightforward reading of the text is that the messengers are from the people of the nations that have come to be judged(66:15-17) and to see God's glory(66:18-19a) and that those who are not judged are sent forth as the witnesses(66:19b), but the repeated use of the English word “they” leaves for some a vagueness of identity for the messengers that are sent out in verse 19, which gives room for some disagreement. It is the assertion of this writer that the messengers are Gentiles who have come to believe in the Lord, but a fuller examination is needed to confirm or deny this opinion.

5 José Severino Croatto, 2005, "The 'nations' in the salvific oracles of Isaiah," *Vetus Testamentum* 55: 143-161, *Old Testament Abstracts*, EBSCOhost (accessed June 26, 2009), 154.

The Messengers of the Lord's Glory(66:18-21)

Severino writes that the nation passages like this one have been misused and misunderstood to communicate God's plan of salvation for the nations where it isn't intended to be. He asserts that this passage is strictly focused on the calling of the Jewish people from among the nations⁶, which is undoubtedly a minority view which needs further examination. The crux of his argument in this respect is centered on the word “send” (*salah*) as it is used of the messengers in verse nineteen. Severino claims that this verb can mean “to send to call / to send for” in its intensive form and cites its use in Genesis 19:29 as proof of this.⁷ This is not good exegesis however, as the passage describing Lot is translated as an expulsion of Lot from Sodom and Gomorrah and does not correspond to Severino's desired interpretation. Additionally, an extensive search of the Brown, Driver, Briggs Hebrew Lexicon and other available language tools failed to turn up any corroborating evidence for this viewpoint. Severino does not offer any source for his translation of the verb in this manner, so its validity could not be determined further. He does not give enough evidence to overturn the majority reading of this passage or the assertions of this writer that the messengers who are sent out are those who escaped judgment in the previous verses and are Gentiles rather than Jews. The passage itself offers more evidence for this viewpoint, most notably in verse twenty-one where God states he will take some of them as “priests and Levites.” This statement is pointless if it is describing Jewish people as God has already taken “priests and Levites” from among the Israelite nation.

Verse twenty gives a further confirmation of the identity of the messengers as members of the nations and not as Jews. This is a picture of the nations bringing the Jews back to Jerusalem for God's glory. Severino also disputes this picture as he is intent to disprove any idea of the nations of the earth as being included in God's people. In this instance, the argument is that the statements of verse twenty

6 Ibid., 153-154.

7 Ibid., 154.

are directed toward Jews since the Jews are called “brethren”⁸ but this only accents the idea that the “they” mentioned in this passage is someone other than the Jewish people. The more interesting note in Isaiah 66:20 is the various modes of transportation that are mentioned. The people will be brought back using a vast array of transportation methods from horses and mule to chariots and even litters. This is an instance of repetition to prove a point to the nation of Israel. God will bring them back to their home in Jerusalem by every means necessary. In fact, they will be brought back as an offering for the Lord (*YHWH*) that is compared to the types of offerings that the Israelites themselves bring before the Lord (*YHWH*). The repeated use of the divine name *YHWH* in this entire passage and in this case particularly, intimates that the nations will come to know God in the same way that the Israelites have known Him through the Mosaic covenant.⁹ This meaning is further augmented by the statement that God will take some of them, meaning people from the nations, to serve as priests and Levites; thus including them within the most intimate circles of fellowship and service for His people.¹⁰

New Heavens and a New Earth (66:22-23)

The final part of this passage that deals with the Lord's glory is a promise of new heavens and a new earth. This promise must be understood in light of the earlier reference in 65:17ff to the creation of new heavens and a new earth for that is where the nature of the new heavens and new earth are described. The description is a fantastic one that would make any reader desire to experience such a place. These new heavens and earth should be contrasted however with a couple of other mentions from Isaiah. In Isaiah 1:2, the heavens and the earth are called upon as witnesses of the rebellion of God's chosen people, Israel. This is why 65:17 states that the former things will be remembered no

⁸ Ibid., 156.

⁹ Edwin C. Webster, 1986, "A rhetorical study of Isaiah 66," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, no. 34: 93-108, *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed June 22, 2009), 103.

¹⁰ Roger D. Aus, 1977, "God's plan and God's power : Isaiah 66 and the restraining factors of 2 Thess 2:6-7," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 96, no. 4: 537-553, *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed June 22, 2009), 540.

more. The new heavens and earth do not act as witnesses against the people of God any longer. Now they are a place of safety and refuge for those who have chosen to follow God's ways. Another mention of heavens and earth occurs in 66:1-2, where God speaks of the fact that He has made the current heavens and earth before condemning those who take His creation and try to make their own way to God or indeed their own god out of it. This is the beginning of the judgment that is pronounced in 66:15-17 that was discussed earlier. The creation of new heavens and a new earth indicates that God is opening a new chapter in His relationship with His creation and particularly the people that are in it. Those who are left after the judgment of the rebellious are His own people, who follow after His own way. This is confirmed by 66:23, where God states that the people will come from “new moon to new moon and from Sabbath to Sabbath” to worship Him. This phrase shows a reverence for God's order and plan. Isaiah is indicating that even though God has made new heavens and a new earth, the means by which His people worship and serve Him have not changed. The Sabbath was one of the focal point of Jewish worship and the covenant with the Lord (*YHWH*). Isaiah's mention of the Sabbath here is a reminder that all will acknowledge that God's way is the right way and that God's way has never changed from the beginning. Even in a new order of nature, the timeless and unchangeable nature of God shines through.

God's Warning to the Rebellious (66:24)

This is considered by many to be one of the most difficult verses in the book of Isaiah, because it causes controversy on several levels at once. For many, it doesn't seem to be a fitting ending for the book as a whole, even causing the Masoretes to end the book with a notation requiring verse twenty-three to be repeated after it.¹¹ This rather abrupt and uncharacteristic ending has been one of the reasons that scholars have felt that the book of Isaiah as it stands today in the canon is not the same

¹¹ John W. Olley, 1999, ""No Peace" in a Book of Consolation : A Framework for the Book of Isaiah?," *Vetus testamentum* 49, no. 3: 351-370, *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed June 22, 2009), 353.

book that Isaiah originally composed.¹² For the time being, the focus is on the meaning of the passage, leaving the possible theological implications to be handled in the wrap up of this study.

Verse twenty-four is a final statement concerning the group of people that have been described in the previous two verses who are worshiping God and the group of rebellious people that were described in 66:15-17. An earlier parallel between that passage and the end of Isaiah chapter one was noted previously and another parallel exists with this final statement of judgment. The word “quench” here in verse twenty four is used in Isaiah 1:31 which reads, “And the strong shall become tinder, and his work a spark, and both of them shall burn together, with none to quench them.” This means that the book of Isaiah ends in much the same manner that it began. These verses demonstrate that God's judgment is final and irreversible and that nothing can stop His judgment from occurring or being completed. There is a theological argument that stirs over whether this verse implies eternal punishment that will be dealt with separately. Isaiah's message to Israel is much more focused on the severity of judgment and the finality of it. The question remains of whether or not this is a fitting end to the book of Isaiah.¹³

The Hebrew text of Isaiah and translations based on that text will include the twenty-third verse repeated to end on a good note, but it is the position of this writer that God ended Isaiah the way He intended to end it; with a word of warning. Isaiah's message was primarily one of hope and inclusion and restoration and ultimately salvation the way God intended it to be, but that message is incomplete without the hard reality that those who reject God will meet a different fate than the one He desires for them. It may not be pretty or appealing, but it is certainly true.

Theological Significance

This passage is a centerpiece in a couple of theological issues that are hotly debated today.

12 Ronald E. Clements, 2002, "Isaiah: a book without an ending?," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, no. 97: 109-126, *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed June 22, 2009), 110-111.

13 *Ibid.*, 109.

The primary issue is the eternal fate of those who face God's judgment. Many take this passage to mean that God's punishment is eternal and never ending based on 66:24. In fact, Jesus quotes this statement in the gospel of Mark when speaking of hell and this gives firm ground for those who interpret literally to feel confident regarding this doctrine of eternal suffering. The passage does not stand alone in this, but is also bolstered by many of Jesus' sayings regarding an unquenchable fire that build on this imagery from Isaiah. It is impossible to say that it can only be read to support eternal suffering for those who are judged due to the nature of the way that Isaiah wrote and the imagery that he used. For those reasons, some have concluded that this passage merely points to the severity of the judgment of God. This writer's opinion is still in the camp of eternal punishment, but caution is advised to leave room for the ultimate answer to be out of the reach of mankind. God's purpose and plan will be accomplished and He will be right in how He judges as Scripture has said.

But judgment isn't the only focus of this passage. The promise here of people from among the nations who share in the Lord's glory and witness to it among the nations was quickly latched on to by the New Testament writers and the early church as an indication that God was fulfilling this vision in their lifetime. From the perspective of time, the church is still fulfilling this Scripture today as well. The sign of God's glory, Jesus Christ, is being shown to all the nations. This is the putting together of Isaiah's message in 55:10-13 that God's word would go forth and that it would be a name for the Lord and an everlasting sign that would not be cut off.

Application

Isaiah 66:15-24 summarizes the twin themes of Isaiah individually and two of the dominant themes in Scripture: the glory of God and the righteous judgment of God. For believers, this passage should sound as a clarion call to spread the news of God's glory as He has desired it to be done so that as many people as possible can be spared from the fire of His judgment. No believer should be comfortable with the thought that their inaction or failure to be a witness to the nations of the world

might result in a punishment like the one Isaiah has described and Christ has confirmed in His ministry. According to the New Testament, God has already appointed priests for Himself from among the nations, just as Isaiah spoke of in 66:21. All that awaits now is the telling of His glory and the day when He makes all things new. In the meantime, there is much work to be done and a sign to speak of to all the world.

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