

## 14<sup>th</sup> Sunday C 1<sup>st</sup> Reading

### Reading 1

[Is 66:10-14c](#)

Thus says the LORD:

Rejoice with Jerusalem and be glad because of her,

all you who love her;

exult, exult with her,

all you who were mourning over her!

Oh, that you may suck fully

of the milk of her comfort,

that you may nurse with delight

at her abundant breasts!

For thus says the LORD:

Lo, I will spread prosperity over Jerusalem like a river,

and the wealth of the nations like an overflowing torrent.

As nurslings, you shall be carried in her arms,

and fondled in her lap;

as a mother comforts her child,

so will I comfort you;

in Jerusalem you shall find your comfort.

When you see this, your heart shall rejoice

and your bodies flourish like the grass;

the LORD's power shall be known to his servants.

## Jerome Biblical Commentary

(b) JERUSALEM, PURIFIED AND JOYFUL (66:1-16). The mood and even the vocabulary of the preceding poem continue in this new section. The same eschatological war is being fought, but now it becomes clearer that the sides do not divide between Jew and Gentile but between the good and the evil, the elect and the damned. The Church of apostolic days, living in the final age of the world and inaugurated by Christ's death and resurrection, frequently quoted this chapter to settle internal quarrels with Judaizing groups and to argue against those Jews who rejected Christianity (J. Dupont, *Les Actes des Apôtres* [BJ 2nd ed.; Paris, 1958] 82, n. e).

**1-2.** The prophetic crusade against formalism in worship is taken up again (Am 5:21-25; Hos 6:6; Mi 6:6-8). The Prophet is not rejecting the Temple—a conclusion reached by Stephen (Acts 7:48-50)—for it is God's footstool (cf. Mt 5:34; 23:16-22). **3-6.** Four pairs of participles open this section, and most translators turn them into a series of comparisons: [CCD](#); [LXX](#); [Vg](#); [RSV](#); [AV](#). As such, this verse shouts the fiercest condemnation of temple worship in the entire Bible. Scholars like Muilenburg, Dhorme, and Kessler remain closer to the [MT](#): "he who slaughters an ox also kills a man." God condemns the formalistic attitude that temple liturgy (slaughtering an ox) can blind him to moral faults (killing a man). The language is symbolic, drawing as it does upon pre-exilic conditions (→ 65 above). **6.** *a sound*: In Hebrew, *qôl* means "voice." God proclaims the messianic era (Ps 28; Is 40:3; Jl 4:16).

**69 7-9.** These lines, announcing the wondrous birth of the messianic people, continues a long biblical tradition (Mi 4:8-10; 5:1-2; Zeph 3:14-20; Is 7:14; 54:1; 62:4) and, in turn, will influence future writers (2 Esdras 9-10; *T. Joseph* 19:8-11; *IQH* 3:9-10). In this tradition are to be included Lk 1-2 and Ap 12:3-5 (see Laurentin, *op. cit.*, 155-59). God is always the source of life, most especially in the messianic age.**10-14.** This stanza sings with the ecstatic joy of Dt-Is; the poet is continually crying out “rejoice!” to messianic Jerusalem. All children of God nurse at the breast of Jerusalem—an image that beautifully portrays universal peace, contentment, and love. Imperceptibly, the image changes and God takes the place of Jerusalem—fondling, comforting, and nursing his children (cf. 1 Pt 2:2 and the early baptismal liturgy).**12. prosperity:** In Hebrew, *šālôm* (44:28).**15-16.** The poem ends with booming thunder and crackling fire, constant biblical symbols of divine victory, with many parallels in other ancient Near Eastern literature: Is 10:17-18; Ps 97:1-5; Ex 19-18; chariots and clouds in Ps 18:10; Hab 3:8; 2 Kgs 2:11; “slain by the Lord” in Zeph 2:12; Jer 25:33. The symbols continue into the *NT*: Thes 1:8; Ap 18:21-24; 19:17-21.

**70 (C) FINALE TO THE PROPHECY OF ISAIAH (66:17-24).** The opening verses (17-21) are snagged with many textual problems. Many scholars transfer v. 17 to vv. 3-6. Devotees follow a priest or priestess into a sacred grove for some kind of secret idolatrous rite involving forbidden food (Lv 11:29). Writing under the influence of Ez, the author of this prose section (18-21) sees the glory of the Lord appearing before all nations (Ez 3:23; 11:22-23; 43:1-9). The “sign” may be the Jewish Diaspora, spread through the world and always protected by God. We glimpse a triumphal procession converging upon Jerusalem from all directions: Tarshish in southern Spain (Ez 27:12; Gn 19:4; Is 60:9); Put and Lud in Africa (Ez 27:10; Gn 10:6, 13); “Mosoch” (?); Tubal near the Black Sea; and Javan, in the Ionian Islands (Ez 27:13, 19) frequently signifies Greece.**21.** Scholars line up on both sides, arguing whether or not Tr-Is foresees Gentiles functioning as priests (60:10; 61:5).**22-24. the new heavens and the new earth:** The joy (2 Pt 3:13; Ap 21:1) will be accepted by God as a perpetual act of worship (Gn 2:1-3; 2 Cor 5:1-10). The final verse is terrifying. “They” (“all mankind,” v. 23) “shall go out” of Jerusalem to the surrounding Hinnom Valley (Gehenna), where human sacrifice was once practiced (Jer 7:31) and which eventually became the city’s refuse heap. This proximity of the greatest sorrow and the greatest horror is typical of the eschatological battle, even as announced by Christ at the end of his ministry (Mt 25:31-46). Many texts are inspired by these lines (Jdt 16:17; Dn 12:2; Mk 9:48; see J. Chaine, *VDBS* 3, 572-73; Feuillet, *VDBS* 4, 719). The rabbis directed that when this chapter was read in the synagogue, part of v. 23 would be repeated after v. 24 (cf. Mal 3:24). To hear the stern warning in good time is the best preparation for the great glory promised in the Book of Isaiah.

## Haydock's Catholic Commentary

**Ver. 1. House.** This is a prophecy that the temple should be cast off. (Challoner) --- Isaias alludes to the return of the captives, as to a figure of the Church. They had flattered themselves with the idea of building a magnificent temple. God regards it not, as long as they follow their own wills and cherish pride. (Calmet) --- He is pleased with the piety of his servants, which may be exhibited any where, though the temple is the most proper place. See Acts vii., and xiv. After the gospel, the sacrifices of the law became unlawful. (Worthington)

**Ver. 3. He.** Septuagint, "the wicked who." (Haydock) --- Ox. This is a prophecy, that the sacrifices which were offered in the old law, should be abolished in the new; and that he

offering of them should be a crime. (Challoner) --- Without the proper dispositions, sacrifice only displeases God. (Calmet) --- *Brain*, or *slay*. (Haydock) --- *Incense*. To offer it in the way of a sacrifice; (Challoner) or to remind God of his people. The expression is popular, but energetic, Leviticus ii. 2, 9., and vi. 15. --- *Ways*, to please themselves, and to bind me. But I will not have a divided heart, chap. i. 11., and lviii. 3. (Calmet)

**Ver. 4.** *Mockeries*. I will turn their mockeries upon themselves; and will cause them to be mocked by their enemies. (Challoner)

**Ver. 5.** *Brethren*, the Idumeans, &c., or the Jews, who would not believe in Christ.

**Ver. 6.** *Lord*, who is about to quit the temple, and to abandon the Jews to their internal dissensions, and to the arms of the Romans. Many prodigies announced this judgment. (Calmet) --- One Jesus cried for seven years and five months, "Woe to the temple," &c. At last he cried, "Woe to myself;" when he was shot dead. (Josephus, Jewish Wars vii. 12.) (Tacitus, Hist. v.) --- Angels were heard crying in the temple, "Let us go hence." (Josephus) --- There was *contradiction in the city*, Psalm liv. (St. Jerome) (Worthington)

**Ver. 7.** *Before*, &c. This relates to the conversion of the Gentiles, who were born as it were all on a sudden to the Church of God. (Challoner) --- Sion furnished the first preachers of the Gospel. (Haydock)

**Ver. 8.** *Day*. Shall a whole nation be born at once? Twelve fishermen effect the most surprising change in the manners of the world.

**Ver. 9.** *God*. His grace converts the nations. (Calmet)

**Ver. 10.** *For her*. Ye shall be comforted, (Haydock) when the captives return, and the gospel is propagated.

**Ver. 12.** *You*. St. Paul fed the weak with milk, 1 Corinthians iii. 2., and Hebrews v. 12., and 1 Peter ii. 2.

**Ver. 14.** *Herb*, in baptism and the resurrection. --- *Enemies*, the Chaldeans, infidel Jews, and all the reprobate, ver 15. How many miracles were wrought by Christian preachers! Persecutors have come to an untimely end. (Calmet) --- Before judgment, the world shall be consumed. (Worthington)

**Ver. 16.** *Many. Few are chosen*. (Haydock) --- All the wicked shall perish eternally. (Menochius)

**Ver. 17.** *Within* the court, or gardens, where they purified themselves, foolishly supposing that this would remove their crimes, as the pagans did. (St. Jerome) (Tertullian, Bapt. v.) --- Instead of *gate*, St. Jerome wrote *unam*, "one," moon or Hecate, which is obviously derived from Hebrew *Achat*, chap. lvii. 8., and lxxv. 11. Chaldean, Syriac, &c., "gardens, one after another with those who eat," &c. --- *Mouse*, or "field-rat," (Bochart) all declared unclean; (Leviticus xi. 7, 29.; Calmet) or, "the dor-mouse," (St. Jerome) which was looked upon as a delicacy by the Romans. (Varro iii. 15.; Pliny, [Natural History?] xxxvi. 1.)

**Ver. 18.** *Gather them*, thoughts, &c. All is personified in poetry. The Gentiles shall witness my judgments. (Calmet)

**Ver. 19.** *Sign*; the cross, which Christ left to enlighten us, (Ezechiel ix.; St. Jerome; Worthington) or the gospel, with the power of working miracles. Some Jews shall be saved, and shall preach to others, as God's servants. --- *Sea*. Hebrew, "Tharsis, to Phul *in Thebais*, Lud, (*Ethiopiens.*; Bochart) *who were expert archers.*" Septuagint, "Mosoch." --- *Italy*. Hebrew,

"Thubal;" denoting Italy, Spain, Iberia, &c. --- Greece. Hebrew, "Javan;" who peopled Ionia and the Archipelago. *Islands*, near Asia, (Calmet) and all distant places. (Parkhurst, p. 4.) (Haydock) --- Men of all nations shall be converted, and brought by angels to the Church. (St. Jerome) (Worthington)

**Ver. 20.** *Brethren*, as the converts may justly be styled. (Calmet) --- *Coaches*, (*carrucis*.) Hebrew *circaroth*, (Haydock) "dromedaries," (Bochart) "with songs of praise." (Chaldean, &c.) The precise import is unknown. Truth shall shew its sweet force. --- *Offering*; the first-fruits, brought by all with great solemnity, Deuteronomy xxvi. 4., and 2 Thessalonians ii. 12. (Calmet)

**Ver. 21.** *Of them*, Gentiles; (ver. 19.) some of whom alone will be properly priests, though all enjoy the title in a figurative sense, 1 Peter ii. 9. The Jews strive in vain to elude this text. (Calmet) --- Under the law, one family alone enjoyed this honour: but Christ chooses the most deserving pastors. (Worthington)

**Ver. 22.** *Name*. The faith and morals of Christianity shall subsist for ever, like the gospel, which is termed *the new heavens*, chap. lxxv. 17., and Matthew xvi. 18.

**Ver. 23.** *Sabbath*. Grotius explains this of the Gentiles, who should come to Jerusalem. But this was never realized before the propagation of the gospel. The Jews came thrice a-year. Christians shall attend the sacred mysteries every week, Exodus xiii. 14., and Malachias i. 11.

**Ver. 24.** *Men*; rebellious Jews and persecutors, who perish miserably. --- *Flesh*. Josephus (Jewish Wars vi. 16.) describes the horrors of the last siege of Jerusalem. The prophet may allude to the fires kept up in the vale of Hinnon; (chap. xxx. 33.) and our Saviour applies this text to the damned, Mark ix. 43. All shall condemn them. (Calmet)

*Accedat lacrymis odium, dignusque puteris*

*Ut mala cum tuleris plurima, plura feras.* (Ovid in Ibin.)

## Daily Bible Study Series

Isaiah 66:1–6

<sup>1</sup>Thus says the Lord:

“Heaven is my throne

and the earth is my footstool;

what is the house which you would build for me,

and what is the place of my rest?

<sup>2</sup>All these things my hand has made,

and so all these things are mine,

says the Lord.

But this is the man to whom I will look,

he that is humble and contrite in spirit,

and trembles at my word.

<sup>3</sup>“He who slaughters an ox is like him who kills a man;  
he who sacrifices a lamb, like him who breaks a dog’s neck;  
he who presents a cereal offering, like him who offers swine’s blood  
he who makes a memorial offering of frankincense, like him who  
blesses an idol.

These have chosen their own ways,  
and their soul delights in their abominations;

<sup>4</sup>I also will choose affliction for them,  
and bring their fears upon them;  
because, when I called, no one answered,  
when I spoke they did not listen;  
but they did what was evil in my eyes,  
and chose that in which I did not delight.”

<sup>5</sup>Hear the word of the Lord,  
you who tremble at his word:  
“Your brethren who hate you  
and cast you out for my name’s sake  
have said, ‘Let the Lord be glorified,  
that we may see your joy’;  
but it is they who shall be put to shame.

<sup>6</sup>“Hark, an uproar from the city!  
A voice from the temple!  
The voice of the Lord,  
rendering recompense to his enemies!”

The Temple never looms large in Isaianic tradition, but here in the *fifth* oracle in the final series (vv. 1–4) we find expressed genuine opposition to the institution. God demands a humble and contrite spirit, to which we might add, from chapter 1, justice, rather than a stone building and elaborate rituals. The harsh tone of this passage suggests that it reflects a period of internal argument within a Jewish community, probably in Jerusalem during the years leading up to the rebuilding of the Temple in 515 B.C. We know there was opposition to the Temple for other reasons at that time (Hag. 1:1–11), and that it took the threat of capital punishment to get it built (Ezra 6:6–12). But it seems that from an early time, and certainly from the Exile on, there were some who believed that God dwells among his people even when there is no temple at Jerusalem (cf. Exod. 25:8; 29:45), and that spiritual realities are more important than ritual (eg Ps. 51; 1 Sam. 15:22–23; Jer. 31:31–34). Synagogues or

something like them probably existed in Babylon (Ezek. 14:1), and by A.D. 70, when the Second Temple was destroyed by the Romans, Judaism had the inner spiritual strength to survive without it. Indeed Judaism in all its rich diversity has existed for far longer without a temple than with one, and Jewish prayers for the rebuilding of the Temple express more than hope for a new building on the site of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. The New Testament represents a similar shift in emphasis—eg:

For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, “I will live in them and move among them...” (2 Cor. 6:16).

In the final apocalyptic vision of the New Jerusalem, there is no temple; “for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb” (Rev. 21:22).

“Heaven” and “earth” were summoned as witnesses in chapter 1, and have been adduced as evidence of the power and glory of their Creator more than once since then (eg 40:12; 42:5; 45:18; 48:13). Here they are, in his eyes, mere sticks of furniture (v. 1): how then could he require anything built by mere mortals? The language is reminiscent of Psalm 132, although the subject is quite different. “All these things” (v. 2) is usually taken to refer to heaven and earth, and “came to be” (RSV, “are mine”) is an allusion to Genesis 1 (eg “and it was so”). But possibly the author is thinking of the stones of the Temple just mentioned, and contrasting them with the “living stones” of a spiritual house—cf:

Come to him, to that living stone, rejected by men but in God’s sight chosen and precious; and like living stones be yourselves built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

(1 Pet. 2:4–5)

Psalm 51:16–19 makes the connection too.

The three virtues listed in verse 2 nicely sum up Isaianic moral teaching. Humility was demanded from the beginning in those vitriolic attacks on the arrogance of affluent Jerusalem with which the early chapters were filled (eg 2:12–19; 3:16; 5:11–12). The contrite spirit of those who acknowledge their failures and throw themselves on God’s mercy, is similarly called for in prophecies against hardness of heart and inveterate sin (eg 6:9–10; 30:1–5). Appeals for receptivity and obedience to the prophet’s words have taken up long sections of the Babylonian chapters (eg 41:1; 42:18; 44:1; 48:1; 49:1). Micah’s list is different but closely related: “to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God” (Mic. 6:8).

Verse 3 contains an astonishingly bitter attack on temple ritual: four normally acceptable rites (Lev. chs. 1–3) are bracketed with murder and other ritually unclean practices which are evil in God’s eyes. The word “like” in each clause (RSV) is not in the Hebrew, and the New English Bible suggests that all eight acts are equally included in the summary at the end of the verse: “all these are the chosen practices of men who revel in their own loathsome rites”. Verse 4 seems to mean that God plans to apply these very practices—slaughter, sacrifice, *etc*—to their perpetrators. It is certainly a very gruesome prophecy, composed by someone quite out of sympathy with the temple rituals, as the first Isaiah was (1:15–17).

The *sixth* prophecy (vv. 5–6) is in two parts. The first part is addressed to those whose virtues are recommended in verse 2, and announces judgment on “the brethren who hate you”. This seems to be further evidence of internal rivalry, possibly between the pro-Temple party who seek God’s glory in a new building (Hag. 1:8; 2:3, 7, 9), and an anti-Temple party who describe themselves as “humble and contrite in spirit” (v. 2). Others see here an early

example of anti-Samaritan polemic since hostility between the Jews and the Samaritans, especially on the question of the Temple, is mentioned already in Nehemiah (ch. 4). Verse 6 would then be a further prophecy against the Samaritans. The form of the prophecy is reminiscent of the opening of Amos:

The Lord roars from Zion,  
and utters his voice from Jerusalem.

(Amos 1:2; cf. Joel 3:16)

In Hebrew the same word for “sound, voice” is repeated three times at the beginning of each clause (see NEB):

That *roar* from the city,  
that *uproar* from the temple,  
is the *sound* of the Lord dealing retribution to his foes.

But here too, surely the prophecy could be directed at those who have chosen their own ways (v. 4), devoting their energies to ritual instead of justice and humility. Jeremiah’s ‘Temple Sermon’ expresses this well:

Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, burn incense to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, “We are delivered!”—only to go on doing all these abominations? Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes?

(Jer. 7:9–11; cf. Matt. 21:13)

Formal worship can lead to judgment and shame, as well as joy and glory.

### REJOICE WITH JERUSALEM

Isaiah 66:7–17

<sup>7</sup>“Before she was in labour  
she gave birth;

before her pain came upon her  
she was delivered of a son.

<sup>8</sup>Who has heard such a thing?

Who has seen such things?

Shall a land be born in one day?

Shall a nation be brought forth in one moment?

For as soon as Zion was in labour

she brought forth her sons.

<sup>9</sup>Shall I bring to the birth and not cause to bring forth?

says the Lord;  
shall I, who cause to bring forth, shut the womb?  
says your God.

<sup>10</sup>“Rejoice with Jerusalem, and be glad for her.  
all you who love her;  
rejoice with her in joy,  
all you who mourn over her;

<sup>11</sup>that you may suck and be satisfied with her consoling breasts;  
that you may drink deeply with delight  
from the abundance of her glory.”

<sup>12</sup>For thus says the Lord:

“Behold, I will extend prosperity to her like a river,  
and the wealth of the nations like an overflowing stream;  
and you shall suck, you shall be carried upon her hip,  
and dandled upon her knees.

<sup>13</sup>As one whom his mother comforts,  
so I will comfort you;  
you shall be comforted in Jerusalem.

<sup>14</sup>You shall see, and your heart shall rejoice;  
your bones shall flourish like the grass;  
and it shall be known that the hand of the Lord is with his servants,  
and his indignation is against his enemies.

<sup>15</sup>“For behold, the Lord will come in fire,  
and his chariots like the storm-wind,  
to render his anger in fury,  
and his rebuke with flames of fire.

<sup>16</sup>For by fire will the Lord execute judgment,  
and by his sword, upon all flesh;  
and those slain by the Lord shall be many.

<sup>17</sup>“Those who sanctify and purify themselves to go into the gardens, following one in the midst, eating swine’s flesh and the abomination and mice, shall come to an end together, says the Lord.”

The little group of oracles in these verses may be taken as a *seventh* prophecy in the long

series that concludes the book.

The images of a mother giving birth to a son (vv. 7–9), feeding him at her breast (vv. 10–11) and dandling him on her knee (vv. 12–14), follow on from earlier passages where they are applied to Zion (49:15–16; 54:1; 65:23) and to God as mother of Israel (42:14; 46:3; also Deut. 32:18). Here, with God's help (v. 9), Zion is the jubilant mother, and a rejuvenated nation her son. The birth is miraculous: the curse of Eve (Gen. 3:16), ameliorated in 65:23, is now removed altogether (v. 7), or at least reduced to a momentary pang (v. 8). Many would say that the rebirth of Israel in 1948, out of the ashes of the holocaust, was nothing short of a miracle. God's hand was at work in these events as in all history: what he began with the decree of Cyrus in 538 B.C. (2 Chron. 36:22–23; Isa. 44:28; 45:1–2), and continued with the United Nations resolution in 1948, he will finish one day (v. 9).

The colourful hymn of thanksgiving in verses 10–16 consists of a call to join in the celebrations (vv. 10–11) and a prophecy of salvation introduced by the formula, "For thus says the Lord..." (vv. 12–14). The initial part recalls some of the celebrated Zion-hymns like Psalms 46, 48, 122 and Isaiah 12, which express, wistfully and movingly, Israel's love of Zion. The transformation from mourning to joy is reminiscent of Psalm 126:5–6, but perhaps also of the near contemporary Zechariah (8:19):

Thus says the Lord of hosts: The fast of the fourth month, and the fast of the fifth, and the fast of the seventh, and the fast of the tenth, shall be to the house of Judah seasons of joy and gladness, and cheerful feasts; therefore love truth and peace.

Verse 11 has a moving tenderness in it, expressing delight both at the new found peace and security of the children of Zion (Ps. 131:2), and at their prosperity and exquisite contentment (eg ch. 12; 25:6–9). The phrase translated "abundance of her glory" (RSV, v. 11) occurs only here and perhaps should be taken as another detail of the mother imagery: NEB has "delighting in her plentiful milk".

The prophecy of salvation is in two parts, as so often, combining beautiful pictures of hope for the righteous, with bitter, vengeful images of judgment for the wicked. First, in v. 12, "prosperity" (Hebrew, *shalom*) is compared to a great, slow-moving river like the Nile or the Euphrates, and to a rushing torrent (RSV "stream"), like those that carry the melted snow of Mount Hermon headlong down the wadis. "The wealth of the nations" echoes 61:6.

At first sight the mother imagery in verses 12 and 13 seems to describe Zion's care for her children, as in verses 7–11. But there is no word for "her" ("her hip...her knees") in the Hebrew text of verse 12, and the following verse suggests that here again God himself is being compared to a confident, experienced mother, caring for her children. "Comfort", which occurs three times in verse 13, is of course a key word right from the start of the Babylonian chapters (40:1; 49:13).

"You shall see" (v. 14; without an object as in 53:11) means "your eyes will be opened, you will have a vision". The word for "grass" here is not the one used in 40:6–7 ("All flesh is grass"), but the word for new growth such as the first plants that appeared on the earth at creation (Gen. 1:11–12), and the green pastures of Psalm 23 (v. 2).

The tragic corollary of this fine picture of new life and growth is the destruction of the wicked. "The hand of the Lord", that is, his powerful protection, is over his servants, but his indignation is against his enemies (v. 14). This is the "wrath" of the Day of the Lord (eg Isa. 26:20; Ezek. 21:31; Nahum. 1:6; Zeph. 3:8). Fire, flames, "whirlwind" (NEB), chariots, sword, corpses, all traditional elements in the description, are included (vv. 15–16), and so is the

universal dimension of divine judgment: it will be executed “upon all flesh” (v. 16). “Those slain by the Lord will be many” implies that they will be in the majority on the battlefield: only the few will be saved. The fire of God’s judgment is a recurring Isaianic theme from chapter 6, where it brings forgiveness (v. 7) as well as doom (v. 13), to the eternal Hell-fire at the end of this final chapter (v. 24).

Verse 17 lists some of those to be slain by the Lord, and again, as in verse 3, they include people guilty of ritual crimes, such as taking part in pagan rites and eating unclean food, rather than moral or social evils. “Gardens” were mentioned in 1:29, where more details are given, and in 65:3. The enigmatic phrase “following one in the midst” is possibly elucidated by Ezek. 8:7–13: the New English Bible has “one after another in a magic ring”.

“Come to an end” is etymologically associated with the word for “whirlwind” (NEB) in verse 15, and gives the whole prophecy an air of spectacular finality. We are dealing here with matters of ultimate responsibility before God.

### A NEW HEAVEN AND A NEW EARTH

Isaiah 66:18–24

<sup>18</sup>“For I know their works and their thoughts, and I am coming to gather all nations and tongues; and they shall come and shall see my glory, <sup>19</sup>and I will set a sign among them. And from them I will send survivors to the nations, to Tarshish, Put, and Lud, who draw the bow, to Tubal and Javan, to the coastlands afar off, that have not heard my fame or seen my glory; and they shall declare my glory among the nations. <sup>20</sup>And they shall bring all your brethren from all the nations as an offering to the Lord, upon horses, and in chariots, and in litters, and upon mules, and upon dromedaries, to my holy mountain Jerusalem, says the Lord, just as the Israelites bring their cereal offering in a clean vessel to the house of the Lord. <sup>21</sup>And some of them also I will take for priests and for Levites, says the Lord.

<sup>22</sup>“For as the new heavens and the new earth  
which I will make  
shall remain before me, says the Lord;  
so shall your descendants and your name remain.

<sup>23</sup>From new moon to new moon,  
and from sabbath to sabbath,  
all flesh shall come to worship before me,  
says the Lord.

<sup>24</sup>“And they shall go forth and look on the dead bodies of the men that have rebelled against me; for their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh.”

The final prophecy begins with the characteristically Isaianic “I am...” (eg 46:9; 51:12, 15). It also embraces the whole world, which is another Isaianic characteristic (eg 11:9; ch. 24; 49:1). But it goes farther than previous prophecies in two remarkable respects. The “survivors” (v. 19) are explicitly commissioned to “declare my glory among the nations”—to

those “that have not heard my fame or seen my glory”—and priests and Levites are to be recruited from among the nations (v. 21). This must be the final *coup de grâce* to the exclusivist ambitions of the Temple establishment, attacked so violently and so consistently throughout the Book of Isaiah (see commentary on 65:1–7).

The Hebrew is difficult, perhaps because of the sheer originality and unexpectedness of the passage which the minds of scribes could not cope with. As it stands, the Hebrew text of verse 18 begins with an independent pronoun, “I” or “I am...”, but has no verb or predicate to go with it. “Their works and their thoughts” (v. 18) similarly stands alone in the sentence, and Hebrew has “it is coming” not “I am coming” (RSV). Most English versions follow the ancient Greek tradition, inserting a word for “know” and changing the verb to first person singular (RSV, NEB). This effect transmutes verse 18 into a prophecy spoken by the Lord himself. Perhaps we should put more emphasis on that opening pronoun: four times the phrase “says the Lord” is repeated in this short section (vv. 20–23), and the purpose of this final word of God is to establish an everlasting covenant, like the covenant with Noah (see v. 22), or with Israel (Deut. 5:1–21), in which God is the proposer and initiator: thus “I for my part...” (cf. the emphasis in Exod. 20:2).

The promised sign or “miracle” (v. 19) is not explained. It could be astronomical like Isaiah’s miracle (38:7–8), or like the star in the east which led the wise men to Bethlehem (Matt. 2:1–12), or like one of the traditional phenomena that were expected to herald the coming of a New Age (eg 24:23; Joel 2:30–31; Mark 13:24–27). But could it not rather be the new heaven and the new earth of verse 22, which, like the rainbow in Genesis chapter 9, will be an everlasting sign of God’s promise to his people?

Some of the “survivors” are to be sent out into the world like apostles (v. 19). The names of the “coastlands afar off” are not all known for certain: another indication perhaps of the constant reinterpretation and reworking of such arresting texts in the centuries after they were originally written. *Tarshish* is well known to have been a Phoenician colony in Spain (2:16). *Tubal* was on the shores of the Black Sea and *Javan* (the Hebrew form of the Greek name “Ionia”) could include both mainland Greece and Greek colonies in Ionia and Asia Minor. *Put* and *Lud* “who draw the bow” were apparently in North Africa (Gen. 10:6, 13; Jer. 46:9; Ezek. 30:5). But the Hebrew text has the Assyrian name “Pul” (*ie* Tiglath Pileser; 2 Kings 15:19), not *Put*, and there is another “Lud”, grouped with Assyria in Genesis 10:22. Instead of “draw the bow” some experts prefer to read “Meshek” (NEB), another region of Asia Minor, often grouped with *Javan* and *Tubal* (eg Ezek. 27:13). No doubt this variety reflects the desire of later generations to relate their own knowledge of the world, and their own role in it as God’s people, to the text of scripture. Isaiah 49:12 has had a similar history.

The return of the exiles in verse 20 recalls 49:22, 60:4–5 and other passages. But here they are brought to Jerusalem as an “offering to the Lord” from the nations, a quite revolutionary notion of Gentile sacrifice compared without comment to Israelite sacrifice. In verses 20–21 technical cultic language is uniquely applied to Gentile activity, taking the hospitable words of 56:1–8 one stage farther. The mode of transport is also new and rather exotic: horses, chariots, and mules are familiar enough (eg Josh. 11:4; 2 Sam. 18:9; Ezek. 39:20); but “litters” (NEB “wagons”) are mentioned only once in the Bible apart from this passage (Num. 7:3, “covered wagons”); and “dromedaries” only mentioned here alone.

Verses 22–23 read like a new covenant or promise, like the words of God to Noah (Gen. 9:12–16), or to Abraham and his descendants for ever (Gen. 15:5). “The new heavens and the new earth which I will make” will be a sign, like the rainbow in the sky after the Flood, that the promise is everlasting. The prophet adds to the patriarchal promise of descendants, the

promise that their name, their reputation for justice and faith, will endure for ever as well. The climax of this new promise is that “all flesh” will come to worship at Jerusalem, and those despised festivals, sabbaths, new moons and other appointed feasts (ch. 1:11–15) will be transformed into universal expressions of humility and obedience to God (66:1–2). Only Zechariah 14:16 and perhaps Malachi 1:11 in the Old Testament go as far as this in their vision of a New Age.

But, alas, there is the last verse of Isaiah. It is so ugly and savage that it has long been the custom in synagogue worship to repeat verse 23 again after it. We have had occasion to comment on the darker side of God’s justice more than once (at 49:25–26 or 51:22–23, *eg*), and here we can but repeat that the more colourful the pictures of salvation for those who are saved on the Day of Judgment, the more colourful, it seems to Old Testament thinking, must be the images of doom and destruction for those who are rejected. This is one of the few Old Testament texts in which the medieval notion of Hell-fire could find scriptural authority. It is already quoted in Mark 9:48. But already also, in 26:19 (like this verse belonging to the final stages of Isaianic tradition), we found belief in the resurrection of the dead. With that beautiful verse rather than Isaiah 66:24 in mind, and with it Ezekiel’s vision of new life in the valley of dry bones (Ezek. 37:1–14) and Daniel’s fully-fledged doctrine of hope beyond the grave (Dan. 12:2–3), we take our leave of Isaianic prophecy, sure in the faith that a promise which outlives “the new heavens and the new earth” will transcend death as well (26:19):

O dwellers in the dust,  
    awake and sing for joy!  
For thy dew is a dew of light,  
    and on the land of the shades thou wilt let it fall.

#### FURTHER READING

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(See also Further Reading, vol. 1)

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