

Sabbath in the Book of Isaiah

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ABSTRACT—The Sabbath is an important theological concept in the book of Isaiah. The significance attached to the Sabbath does not only find expression in the prediction of its observance in the renewed conditions following the captivity, but also in the fact that continual possession of the promised land would depend upon proper Sabbath-keeping. The final verses connect Sabbath-keeping with eschatology by implying that Sabbath will be observed in the “new heavens and new earth.” Through contextual analysis, however, it is suggested that the eschatology in this text is best understood in a postexilic sense (i.e., an extended period following the return from captivity) rather than in an apocalyptic sense. Further, the creation of “new heavens and new earth” is to be understood as a highly poetic expression anchoring the redemption and restoration of Judah from the Babylonian captivity. Sabbath-keeping sums up righteousness. Keywords: Captivity, Creation, Restoration, Sabbath-keeping

I. Introduction

The book of Isaiah contains several references to the Sabbath. While the opening indictment oracle excoriates the people of Judah for improper Sabbath-keeping (Isa 1:13), the aftermath oracles indicate that Sabbath-keeping will be an integral part of the restoration following the impending judgment (Isa 56:1-6; 58:1-14). In fact, Sabbath-keeping bears an eschatological significance, for when God creates the “new heavens and new earth,” the Lord will be worshipped on the Sabbath (Isa 66:23). The connection between

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Sabbath-keeping and eschatology in Isa 66:22-23 has been an issue of interest especially to Seventh-day Adventists, even though other questions are often raised on the meanings of the Sabbath passages in the book. This article undertakes a theological survey of the concept of the Sabbath in Isaiah, seeking to clarify meanings of the relevant passages.

II. Isaiah 1:13-14

Isa 1 briefly locates the historical setting of the book (v. 1) and introduces a poignant diatribe against Judah (v. 2), especially its leadership (v. 10). The situation of Judah is vividly pictured:

Listen, O heavens, and hear, O earth; For the LORD speaks, Sons I have reared and brought up, But they have revolted against Me. An ox knows its owner, And a donkey its master's manger, *But* Israel does not know, My people do not understand. Alas, sinful nation, People weighed down with iniquity, Offspring of evildoers, Sons who act corruptly! They have abandoned the LORD, They have despised the Holy One of Israel, They have turned away from Him (vv. 2-4; NAS).

This numbing corruption (vv. 5-6) will soon lead to Judah's desolation through captivity (vv. 7-8). Due to the atrocities of Judah, the Lord declares that He has no pleasure in their sacrifices, new moons, Sabbath, and other sacred convocations, and will not listen to their prayers (vv. 11-15):

Bring your worthless offerings no longer, Incense is an abomination to Me. New moon and Sabbath, the calling of assemblies—I cannot endure iniquity and the solemn assembly. I hate your new moon *festivals* and your appointed feasts, They have become a burden to Me. I am weary of bearing *them* (vv. 13-14; NAS).

The invective against the sacrificial system and feast days including the Sabbath in Isa 1:13 has been interpreted by some to mean the abrogation of the cult (Muilenburg, 1957, p. 172; Leupold, 1971, p. 62; Roth, 1988, p. 335; Kaiser, 1983, p. 30). However, a careful reading of the passages above reveals that the Lord is not

against the cult per se (cf. Hayes and Irvine, 1987, p. 77). What the Lord detests, however, is formalistic ritualism devoid of true fear of Him (Hasel and Murdoch, 1982, p. 47; Watts, 1985, p. 20; Ridderbos, 1985, p. 45). According to C. J. H. Wright, Isa 1:13 indicates that the Sabbath could be “abused, if it regressed into formal ritualism when emptied of a true relationship with God” (1992, p. 5:852). Verses 15-17 show that the people of Judah were guilty of blood-thirstiness, evil, injustice, and oppression of the poor. If this situation were reversed, the cult would be in perfect harmony with the Lord’s purpose (vv. 18-20). But seeing how deep Judah had sunk into iniquity, a reversal of the horrible situation appeared far-fetched, so that their punishment through captivity became inevitable (cf. 6:11-13).

In sum, the displeasure of the Lord against Sabbath-keeping and the whole worship system in Isa 1:13-14 is incurred because of the attitude of the people of Judah, not because these ordinances were no longer to be observed. Isa 1:13-14 does not abrogate Sabbath-keeping. If these verses meant an abrogation of the Sabbath, then they would equally mean an annulment of worship gatherings (v. 12) and prayer (v. 15). It is interesting to note, as we shall see later, that the Lord expects the continuity of Sabbath-keeping after the captivity and beyond.

III. Isaiah 56:2-6

Isa 56 opens with a call for justice and righteousness in light of the salvation that is close at hand (v. 1). Verse 2 follows with a pronouncement of blessings on those who refrain from “profaning the Sabbath,” as Sabbath-keeping encapsulates justice and righteousness. Verse 3 somewhat strangely introduces foreigners and eunuchs. Allaying the possible fear of their exclusion from the community, the Lord states that both foreigners and eunuchs will be accepted on equal footing with other Israelites on the basis of their observance of the Sabbath and righteous living. Thus, by observing the Sabbath and holding fast the covenant, the eunuch will be given a memorial and an everlasting name surpassing that of children (vv. 4-5; cf. “sabbaths” in v. 4) and the foreigner will be brought to the holy mountain (i.e., the “house of prayer for all nations,” v. 7). The proposed structure of vv. 2-7 below indicates that Sabbath-keeping is the focus of this section.

- A Blessings for Sabbath-keeping (v. 2)
 - B The foreigner will join the Lord's community (v. 3)
 - C The eunuch will be given everlasting name (v. 4)
 - C¹ Blessings for Sabbath-keeping: the eunuch (v. 5)
 - B¹ Blessings for Sabbath-keeping: the foreigner (vv. 6-7)

The references to Sabbath-keeping, foreigners, and eunuchs in 56:2-6 have perplexed many scholars (Alexander, 1978, p. 334; Muilenburg, 1957, p. 655). Those who argue for a post-exilic dating of chapters 56-66 suggest that Isa 56:2-6 reflects the exilic/post-exilic emphasis on the Sabbath (Westermann, 1969, p. 310; McKenzie, 1967, p. 151; Leupold, 1971, p. 264; Watts, 1985, p. 248). They also argue that the “foreigners” in this text are those who might have joined the returning exiles (Willis, 1980, p. 435), while “eunuchs” are those Jews who were castrated in order to serve in the Babylonian and Persian courts (Kelley, 1971, p. 352). On the contrary, since Isaiah already predicts that foreigners will join the Lord's people (44:5; 45:14,23; 55:5; cf. Ezek 47:22), it is not necessary to maintain that Isa 56 is post-exilic text. In fact, in Isa 56 there is the expectation of future gathering of the Lord's people (v. 8), suggesting that this chapter is not a reflection of what has already happened, but a prediction of future happenings. Again, the inclusion of foreigners and eunuchs in worship is seen by some to contradict Deut 23:1-4 which otherwise excludes these groups (Westermann, 1969, p. 313). Yet, the emasculated males in Deut 23:1 are not necessarily eunuchs (cf. Willis, 1980, p. 436). Further, the foreigners in Deut 23:3 are specified, namely Ammonites and Moabites; even so these near-brothers of Israel could join the assembly of the Lord after the tenth generation (v. 3). It is also to be noted that the participation of sojourners in Sabbath-keeping is part of fourth commandment (Exod 20:10; Deut 5:14).

On the contrary, Isa 56 is to be understood as a prediction of the restoration of Judah following the exile (Youngblood, 1993, p. 143; Miscall, 1993, p. 129; Roth, 1988, p. 157; McCann, 1988, p. 250; Nichol, 1980, p. 332; Willis, 1980, p. 435; Bultema, 1981, p. 557). This makes the universalistic tone of Sabbath-keeping particularly interesting. Sabbath-keeping—which is equated with covenantal faithfulness (vv. 4-6; cf. Exod 31:13,17; Ezek 20:12,20)—plays an integral role in the future restoration of Judah. In effect, this passage highlights the significance of Sabbath-keeping following the restoration from captivity (cf. 54:1-17), because it sums up religiosity

and fear of the Lord (cf. Westermann, 1969, p. 310; Grogan, 1986, p. 315; Oswalt, 1986, p. 608; Whybray, 1975, p. 197). It bears mention also that in Isa 56; Sabbath-keeping is linked with salvation (vv. 1-2). Similarly, it has been noted that “in Isaiah 56 and 58 God calls Israel to a Sabbath reform. Revealing the glories of the future gathering of the Gentiles into His fold (Isa 56:8), He associates the success of this mission of salvation with keeping the Sabbath holy (Isa 56:1, 2, 6, 7)” ([Damsteegt], 2005, p. 295).

IV. Isaiah 58:12-14

Isa 58 deals with two main issues: fasting and Sabbath-keeping. It begins by calling attention to Judah’s rebellion, which has caused a breach between them and the Lord (v. 2). Why do the people fast and yet the Lord does not listen to them (v. 3)? It is because they do not fast with the right purpose: they fast to find their own desire, in contention and strife, while exploiting others (vv. 3-4). True fasting is not just taking a day to humble oneself or spreading sackcloth and ashes (v. 5) (Watts, 1995, p. 608). On the contrary, true fasting is the loosening of the chains of injustice, setting the oppressed free, sharing one’s food with the hungry, sheltering the poor, and clothing the naked (vv. 6-7). If the people do this, bountiful blessings will come their way and the Lord will continually grant their requests and guide them (vv. 8-11). Verse 12 continues this blessing: the people shall rebuild ancient ruins, implying restoration following the captivity (cf. 44:23-28).

The juxtaposition of true fasting (vv. 3-12) and Sabbath-keeping (vv. 13-14) implies that the two are related. That Sabbath-keeping bears concatenation with true fasting is highlighted by the fact that the blessing accruing from proper Sabbath-keeping in v. 14 (“heights of the earth” and “heritage of Jacob”) recalls that accruing from true fasting in v. 12 (“rebuild the ancient ruins,” “repairer of the breach;” cf. vv. 8-11), both verses pointing to the re-inheritance of the land after the captivity. As is true fasting, Sabbath-keeping is introduced as a precondition of divine blessings:

If you will withdraw your foot from the Sabbath
by *not* doing your pleasure on My holy day,
But call the Sabbath a **delight**, the holy of the LORD honored, and
you honor it

by not doing your ways
by not finding your pleasure
 and *by not* speaking a word
 Then you will take **delight** in the LORD,
 and I will make you ride on the heights of the earth;
 and I will feed you *with* the heritage of Jacob your father
 (vv. 13-14; my translation)

Verses 13-14 present a profound statement on Sabbath-keeping. In these verses the Sabbath is referred to five times: “Sabbath” (2x), “holy [day]” (2x), and “it” (1x). At the center is the idea of “honoring” the Sabbath day. This is indicated not only by the repetition of the word “honor,” but also by the first clause of v. 13 “if you will withdraw your foot from the Sabbath.” Further, three negative clauses serve to define “honor:” the Sabbath day is honored when the people desist from (a) doing their “ways,” (b) finding/doing their “pleasure,” and (c) speaking “word” (i.e., ‘talking talk’). In v. 13, calling the Sabbath “delight” and calling it “honored” are a synonymous parallelism, so that in this context to honor something is to delight oneself in it. By honoring the Sabbath, therefore, the people delight themselves in the Lord, and vice versa. The reward for proper Sabbath-keeping is prosperity (riding on “the heights of the earth”) and continual possession of the land (feeding on “the heritage of Jacob”). In Isa 56-58, therefore, Sabbath-keeping sums up righteousness (Young, 1972, p. 390; Shead, 2000, p. 748), so that just as righteousness exalts a nation (Prov 14:34), Sabbath-keeping—the epitome of righteousness—will exalt Judah (Isa 58:8-12,14).

A few comments may be made on some lexical items in vv. 13-14. In the context of this chapter, to “withdraw your foot” implies cessation from routine schedules and undertakings that amount to profaning the Sabbath. The meaning of the verb *hāp aš* and its nominal form *hēp eš* revolves around “pleasure, desire, and delight.” The Lord does not take pleasure in merely formalistic worship (1:11). The Lord’s pleasure is his favorable disposition toward the people (Isa 62:4; cf. 58:14) or toward accomplishing his good purposes (44:28; 46:10; 48:14; 53:10; 55:11). While the Lord does not take pleasure in idolatry (65:12), Judah finds pleasure in idolatry (66:3-4). Although such nuances should not be transported directly into Isa 58, it appears that in vv. 3,13 Judah’s *hēp eš* is the distortion of the Lord’s ideal for fasting and Sabbath observance (cf. 1:11). In relation to the Sabbath, such distortion may include preoccupation with

secular, personal gain and the execution thereof, while engaging in outward but empty worship (cf. 1:13-15). Some would even translate *hēp eš* in this text as “matter, business, affair” (Hasel and Murdoch [1982, p. 47]; *HALOT*, p. 1:340; cf. Eccl 3:1,17; 8:6; Isa 53:10).

Close to the semantic field of *hāp aš/hēp eš* is *ānag/ōneg*. In Isaiah the verb *ānag* means “delight oneself in” (55:2; 57:4) or “be satisfied” (66:11). The noun *ōneg* is used in the sense of “luxury” (13:22), and the adjective *ānōg* in the sense of “delicate” (47:1). While these lexemes cover the same semantic field, in Isa 58 *ānag/ōneg* is more positive than *hāp aš/hēp eš*, as seems highlighted by the parallel usage of *hēp eš* with *ānag* in v. 13. The people turned to their own desire (*hēp eš*) because they did not perceive Sabbath-keeping a delight (*ōneg*). In the context of Isa 58, *ānag/ōneg* seems to include the idea of worship (cf. Job 22:26; 27:10): one cannot delight in the Lord without finding delight in the Sabbath.

The verb *kābēd* means “honor.” Parents are to be honored (Exod 20:12). To honor God means to glorify him (Isa 24:15; 25:3; 26:15; 43:20) or fear him (25:3; 29:13). God is also honored with sacrifices (43:23), but he rejects the honor that is conveyed only by the lips without the heart (29:13). Because the Sabbath is the Lord’s holy day, honoring the Sabbath is the concrete way of honoring or worshipping the Lord.

In Isaiah the word *derek* (“way”) is used for both the Lord and Judah. Judah’s “way” is evil (3:12; 8:11; 57:17-18; 62:10) and thus opposed to the Lord’s (30:21; 55:8-9). To keep the commandments is to walk in the Lord’s way (40:3). While the Lord’s way is righteousness (58:2; 64:5), Judah’s way is characterized by self-seeking pleasure (56:11) and evil thoughts concretized in idolatry (65:2; cf. 62:10). In fact, 66:3 states that to choose one’s own way is to delight in one’s abomination. The contrast in Isa 58 between Judah’s *derek* (“your way”) with the Lord’s *derek* (“my way”) suggests that Judah’s ways are a willful digression from the Lord’s commandment relating to the Sabbath. In context, therefore, *derek* may be a hypernym to *hēp eš* and *dābār*.

The noun *dābār* “word” has a wider semantic range. It can mean dispute (Exod 18:16,22,26), conversation (1 Sam 19:7; Jer 38:24,27), report (Josh 14:7; 1 Sam 13:30-33), event (Exod 12:24; 1 Kgs 13:33-34), or plan/proposal (Gen 41:37; 2 Sam 17:4; 2 Chron 30:4; Esth 2:22). In Isa 8:10 to “speak a word” means to devise a plan or proposal (cf. 59:13). The construction in 8:10 (*dabb^erū dābār* “speak

a word”) is basically the same as the one in 58:13 (*dabbēr dābār* “speaking a word”). In the context of the Sabbath day, “speaking a word” may mean engaging in conversation related to secular undertakings (e.g., negotiating business plans or proposals).

Isa 58:2 shows that while Judah delights (*hāp as*) in pretense to know the ways (*derek*) of the Lord or delight (*hāp as*) in his nearness, they fast just to find their own pleasure (*hēp es*) and even oppress others during fasting (v. 3). Verses 13-14 then state that if they are truly to delight (*ānag*) in the Lord (v. 14), the people must call the Sabbath a delight (*ōneg*) and honor (*kābēd*) it as such, which then would mean not engaging in secular business (*hēp es*) or negotiating proposals/plans (*dābār*) thereof—both of which are their own ways (*derek*)—for these are incompatible with the Lord’s ways and pleasure that they pretend to seek (v. 2). In sum, Isa 58 suggests that Judah would delight in the Lord only when they truly honored the Sabbath.

Like Isa 56, chap. 58 is a prediction of the restoration of Judah following the captivity (cf. 54:1-17) (cf. Miscall, 1993, p. 146; Leupold, 1971, p. 283; Grogan, 1986, p. 322; Youngblood, 1993, p. 161; Nichol, 1980, p. 307). This is brought to view in 58:12, 14, which allude to the rebuilding of Judah and the re-inheritance of the Promised Land. The connection between Sabbath-keeping and the restoration of Judah from captivity is particularly important, because improper keeping of the Sabbath—the embodiment of righteousness—was a major factor leading to the Babylonian captivity (Jer 17:21-27; 2 Chron 36:21): “But if you do not listen to Me to keep the Sabbath day holy by not carrying a load and coming in through the gates of Jerusalem on the Sabbath day, then I shall kindle a fire in its gates, and it will devour the palaces of Jerusalem and not be quenched” (Jer 17:27). Clearly in Isa 58, “True godliness shows itself in a concern for justice and a love of the Sabbath” (VanGemeren, 1989, p. 510).

V. Isaiah 66:23

Isa 66 contains a particularly interesting reference to Sabbath-keeping, as it bears an eschatological import. The chapter begins with the Lord proclaiming that the heaven and the earth are his throne and footstool respectively (v. 1), adding that he esteems the “humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at My word” (v. 2). However,

because the people of Judah have ‘chosen’ waywardness and take delight in sacrifices of abomination (v. 3), the Lord will ‘choose’ as punishment that which they dread (v. 4). Accordingly, the city and the temple will be destroyed (v. 6), a punishment primarily directed at those who oppress the righteous (v. 5). The impending judgment is certain (vv. 6-9, 14d-16, 24), and Judah deserves it because of the abominations (vv. 2-4, 17-18a; cf. 65:3-5). Despite the desolating judgment, there is hope for restoration; this is a comforting message to the righteous (vv. 5, 10-14c, 18b-23) who are bidden to stop mourning and rejoice for Jerusalem (vv. 10-14c). The birth imagery of vv. 7-9 and the call to rejoice for Jerusalem in vv. 10-14 intimate that the Lord will recreate the city. The restoration of Judah after the captivity is further indicated by the references to “survivors” of Israel, some of whom will serve as missionaries to ‘gather’ their Israelite brothers from various nations (vv. 19-20; cf. 40:5). The Lord will also appoint Priests and Levites (v. 21).

In Isa 65:17, the Lord graphically images the restoration of Judah following the captivity as the creation of “new heavens and new earth.” Isa 66:22 harks back to 65:17, stating that just as the “new heavens and new earth” will endure, so will be the name and descendants of Judah, particularly those who will return from captivity. In 66:22, however, the focus is on the continuity of the covenantal promise of progeny, not on the newness of the creation. Then follows the Sabbath-keeping reference in v. 23:

‘And it shall be from new moon to new moon
And from Sabbath to Sabbath,
All mankind will come to bow down before Me,’ says the LORD
(NAU).

And when “all flesh” come to worship the Lord, they will see the corpses of the wicked people burning in an ‘unquenching’ fire and with undying worms (v. 24; 1:31; 5:25; 65:1-7, 11-12, 15; 66:17; Jer 7). As in Isa 56, the tenor of Sabbath-keeping in 66:23 is universal (cf. v. 12). Although the reference to the creation of “new heavens and new earth” in 66:22 is only likened to the enduring progeny of the exiles who will return, the subsequent reference to Sabbath-keeping by “all flesh” in v. 23 implies that this universal worship will take place after the creation of the “new heavens and new earth.” In other words, v. 23 adds an eschatological dimension to Sabbath-keeping.

The idea that the Sabbath will be observed ‘in the new heavens and new earth’ is generally held by Adventists. The question that is often left unanswered, however, is whether the “new moon” will also be celebrated ‘in the new heavens and new earth.’ Some would explain that in v. 23, the phrase “from new moon to new moon” is simply another expression for ‘monthly.’ But in the same way, “from Sabbath to Sabbath” may be another way of expressing “weekly.” The Hebrew word *ḥōdeš* means both “month” and “new moon,” but there are two different words for “Sabbath” (*šabbāt*) and “week” (*šābū^a*). Because it is used with *šabbāt*—rather than *šābū^a*—*ḥōdeš* in this text is best understood to refer to the “new moon” festival (Num 10:10; 28:9-15; Hos 2:11; Amos 8:5). Moreover, the enveloping function of Isa 1 and Isa 66 suggests that in both chapters Sabbath and new moon are literal, with the aftermath prophecy of 66:23 reversing the diatribe in 1:13-15. Even if these phrases are translated ‘monthly’ and ‘weekly’ respectively the idea of v. 23 remains intact: the Lord will be worshipped on monthly (new moon) and weekly (Sabbath) basis. In any case, then, the reference to “new moon” in v. 23 poses a difficulty to the eschatological Sabbath-observance view.

But what does Isaiah mean by the ‘creation’ of “new heavens and new earth”? Is this to be understood in the sense of 2 Pet 3:13 or Rev 21:1? What is the eschatological locus of this creation: apocalyptic or post-exilic? In an article published in the *Journal of Asia Adventist Studies* 4.2 (2008), this author strongly argued that Isaianic eschatology is best construed in a postexilic rather than apocalyptic sense and that the creation of the “new heavens and new earth” constitutes a poetic expression of the return of the exiles from captivity to rebuild and settle in Judah under renewed conditions. The arguments raised in the 2008 article (which see) need not be repeated in the present study. Only a few points are mentioned here. First, in Isaiah the key creation term *bārā* is not always used in a literal, ex nihilo sense. For example, the redemption of Israel from captivity is considered creation (Isa 43:1-7,15). Interestingly, their redemption is intricately connected to the creation of heaven and earth (Isa 44:24-45:25). This future redemption of Judah from Babylonia finds expression in the creation of “new things” (Isa 48:7-20). Also instructive is Isa 51:16 where the promised deliverance of Judah from captivity is expressed metaphorically as ‘replanting the heavens and reestablishing the earth.’ Moreover, the heaven-earth merism in Isaiah often assumes a figurative nuance (1:2; 13:13; 44:23; 45:8; 49:13).

Second, by way of deliberate parallelism, the creation of “new heavens and new earth” in 65:17 is semantically and structurally equivalent to, hence defined by, the creation of “Jerusalem and her people” in v. 18. Since the creation of “new heavens and new earth” is the same as the creation of “Jerusalem and her people,” creation in this context is best understood in a figurative sense, namely the redemption and restoration of Judah from captivity (cf. 43:3-7; 48:7; 35:10; 48:6-7; 51:11-16; 52:9; 62:1). Consequently, a literal cosmological creation on a universal scale is not in view. In fact, the rebuilding of Jerusalem is the focal point of this creative activity (cf. 44:24-28; 54:11; 62:10; 65:18-25). Third, the eschatology of Isa 65-66 is to be taken in a postexilic sense (i.e., an extended period following the return from captivity), since these chapters demonstrably concern the future restoration of Judah from the Babylonian captivity (65:9-10, 17-25; 66:18-20). Throughout chaps. 56-66 the primary concern is the restoration of Judah, not the conditions of the eternal state (cf. 56:8-9; 57:14; 58:12, 14; 60:1-2, 9-10, 13-14, 17, 21; 61:4, 7, 9; 61:4; 62:4, 10, 12). It is this promised redemption from captivity and restoration to the land of Israel that is elegantly pictured as the creation of “new heavens and new earth” in 65:17-18; 66:22 (cf. 60:1-2, 9-10, 13-14, 17, 21; 61:4, 7, 9). In the previous article, it was concluded thus:

In sum, analyses of the literary context of Isa 65-66, the relevant linguistic features of 65:17-18, the clause structure of 65:16-19 (with its explicit parallelism), the overall structure of Isaiah, and comparison with other texts in Isaiah (e.g., 35:10; 48:6-7; 51:11-16; 52:9; 58:12, 14; 61:1, 4; 62:4, 10, 12; 66:19-20) lead to the conclusion that the creation of ‘new heavens and new earth’ (65:17; 66:22), paralleled by the creation of ‘Jerusalem and her people’ (v. 18), is a hyperbolic expression of the future deliverance and restoration of Judah after the captivity. Isa 65:17 and 66:22 should not, therefore, be read directly into or through such NT texts as 2 Pet 3:13 and Rev 21:1-2, the linguistic parallels notwithstanding (Bediako, 2008, p. 20).

If the foregoing conclusion is correct—that the “new heavens and new earth” in Isa 65:17; 66:23 are not to be equated with those in say Rev 21—then the question as to whether or not the Sabbath will be kept after the second coming of Christ is not that which Isa 66:23

answers. Isa 66:23 simply states that upon Judah's restoration from captivity—signified by new creation—the celebration of the new moon and the Sabbath, which respectively epitomize joy (Num 10:10; 28:9-15; Hos 2:11; Amos 8:5) and righteousness (Isa 56:2-6; 58:13-14), will resume. Isaiah clearly describes the ideal situation that would prevail after the return from captivity, if only Judah would delight in the Lord (cf. Isa 58:6-14). Thus understood, 66:23 reverses the Lord's displeasure with the improper observance of the new moons and the Sabbath seen in 1:13-15, the two passages forming an envelope to the whole book.

VI. Conclusion

The concept of the Sabbath appears four times in the book of Isaiah (1:13-15; 56:2-6; 58:13-14; 66:23). A close reading of the passages leads to several interesting, but theologically significant, conclusions. First, 1:13-15 indicates that merely formalistic Sabbath-keeping is detestable to the Lord; by keeping the Sabbath without the requisite spiritual renewal, the people of Judah were inviting cursers upon themselves instead of blessings. Second, while Isa 1 contains an invective against improper Sabbath-keeping, in Isa 56 Sabbath-keeping sums up religiosity and fear of the Lord. It also takes on a universalistic tone, where foreigners are expected to join the covenant community in keeping the Sabbath. Third, as does Isa 56, Isa 58 reveals that Sabbath-keeping epitomizes righteousness, so that proper Sabbath-keeping will have to characterize the aftermath of the exile. That Sabbath-keeping encapsulates covenantal faithfulness explains why Judah's prosperity and continual inheritance of the land are contingent upon proper Sabbath-keeping (58:12-14). In this regard, Sabbath-keeping plays an integral role in the future restoration and mission of God's people (58:12-14; cf. 56:2-7; 66:18-24). Finally, the universal significance of the Sabbath in Isa 56 reaches its climax in the 'eschatological' text of Isa 66, where "all flesh" will worship the Lord on the Sabbath day and the new moon. This might suggest that the Sabbath will be observed in the "new heavens and new earth" (vv. 22-23). As argued elsewhere and in this study, however, the eschatology presented in Isa 65-66 is not apocalyptic eschatology at par with say Rev 21, but rather a postexilic eschatology (i.e., an extended period of time following the return from the Babylonian captivity). Further, the creation of "new heavens and new earth" is not

to be understood literally after the pattern of Gen 1. The creation of “new heavens and new earth” (65:17; 66:22)—which semantically equates the creation of “Jerusalem and her people” (65:18)—is a highly poetic expression of the certainty of the redemption of Judah from the Babylonian captivity and their restoration to “the heritage of Jacob” (58:14). It follows, then, that Isa 66:23 simply states that in the renewed conditions following the exile, Sabbath worship will resume with its meaning and purpose. In other words, the text does not necessarily mean that Sabbath will be observed in the “new heavens and new earth” (Rev 21:1).

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