

Isaiah 66:23

“All Flesh Observing the Sabbath”

“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.”

There are disputes over how to read the details of Isaiah 65:17-66:24, although surveying these prophetic words, Bible readers should deduce how it is guaranteed that there will be a New Heavens and a New Earth in the future. Pre-millennialists will argue that following the Second Coming of the Messiah, the Messianic Kingdom will exist on Earth for a thousand years, to then be followed by the Eternal State. It would seem that Isaiah 65:17-66:24 has some overlapping details, requiring readers to factor in additional information from the Tanach and Apostolic Scriptures, in order to sort through what this all involves. Of notable importance for Messianic readers of Isaiah, would be the thrust of Isaiah 66:8, which is commonly associated with the creation of the State of Israel in 1948:

“Who has heard such a thing? Who has seen such things? Can a land be born in one day? Can a nation be brought forth all at once? As soon as Zion travailed, she also brought forth her sons.”

Generally speaking, pre-millennial interpreters will recognize how a Millennial condition is represented by the statement of Isaiah 66:23, which affects a restored Kingdom of Israel and the sovereign reign of Israel’s Messiah over Planet Earth from Jerusalem. The inclusion of righteous persons from the nations at large, within the restoration process of Israel’s Kingdom, and their being afforded a significant place of honor, precedes statements being issued about the institution of the Sabbath:

“I will set a sign among them and will send survivors from them to the nations: Tarshish, Put, Lud, Meshech, Rosh, Tubal and Javan, to the distant coastlands that have neither heard My fame nor seen My glory. And they will declare My glory among the nations [v’*higidu et-kevodî b’goyim*, וְהִגִּידוּ אֵת כְּבוֹדִי בְּגוֹיִם]. Then they shall bring all your brethren from all the nations as a grain offering to the LORD, on horses, in chariots, in litters, on mules and on camels, to My holy mountain Jerusalem,” says the LORD, ‘just as the sons of Israel bring their grain offering in a clean vessel to the house of the LORD. I will also take some of them for priests and for Levites,’ says the LORD” (Isaiah 66:19-21).

It is somewhat shocking to Bible readers to witness how the God of Israel will indeed take people from among the nations, “And from them likewise I will take some to be levitical priests” (NJPS). This is how serious it is for the Lord to see that not just Israel proper, but people from the world at large, **have a welcome place in His plan of redemption.**

Of course, God’s fealty to His promises and covenant made to the physical seed of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob by no means gets left out! The Lord asserts that just as the future New Heavens and New Earth that will come to pass will be firm and steadfast, “So your offspring and your name will endure” (66:22). God will indeed restore Israel to a rightful place of prominence. The word of Isaiah 66:22 is properly compared to the promises issued to David in Psalm 89:28-37:

“My lovingkindness I will keep for him forever, and My covenant shall be confirmed to him. So I will establish his descendants forever and his throne as the days of heaven. If his sons forsake My law and do not walk in My judgments, if they violate My statutes and do not keep My commandments, then I will punish their transgression with the rod and their iniquity with stripes. But I will not break off My lovingkindness from him, nor deal falsely in My faithfulness. My covenant I will not violate, nor will I alter the utterance of My lips. Once I have sworn by My holiness; I will not lie to David. His descendants shall endure forever and his throne as the sun before Me. It shall be established forever like the moon, and the witness in the sky is faithful.’ Selah” (Psalm 89:28-37).

There are a variety of key perspectives, many useful, although a few notably negative, to the decree *v’hayah midei-chodesh b’chodsho u’midei Shabbat b’Shabbato yavo kol-basar l’hishtachavot l’fanai, amar ADONAI* (וְהָיָה מִדֵּי־חֹדֶשׁ בְּחֹדְשׁוֹ וּמִדֵּי שַׁבָּת בְּשַׁבְּתוֹ יָבוֹא כָּל־בָּשָׂר לְהִשְׁתַּחֲוֹת לִפְנֵי אֲדֹנָי יְהוִה), “From new moon to new moon, and from sabbath to sabbath, all flesh shall come to worship before me, says the LORD” (66:23, NRSV).

Isaiah 66:23 Sabbath and Rest in the Tanach

In reading v. 23, it is quite common to see examiners emphasize the inclusive nature of the worship which is to be witnessed, as *kol-basar* (כָּל-בָּשָׂר), most literally rendered as “all flesh” (RSV/NRSV/ESV, NJPS),¹ will come before Israel’s God. Barry G. Webb states, “the redeemed of the entire human race will offer unending worship to their creator.”² John D.W. Watts makes the extrapolation, “Zion’s congregation [represents] all humankind....The world needed a forum where persons of every race could be assured of a place in God’s plan. Jerusalem is that place.”³ These are surely sentiments to be appreciated.

One view which is definitely dismissive of the details present in, “And it will come to pass, that from one New Moon to another, and from one *Shabbat* to another, all flesh will come to bow down before Me” (TLV), is that of Derek Kidner. He claims, making a reference to traditional interpretations of Colossians 2:16, that “*New moon* and *Sabbath* have ceased to be binding on the Christian (cf. Col. 2:16), and it is implausible to suggest that these ‘shadows’ will be reinstated. They stand here for their substance, the joyful dedicating of all life to the Creator.”⁴ So, even while the institution of the seventh-day Sabbath or *Shabbat* is most certainly specified in Isaiah’s prophecy, this is only taken as a metaphor of some kind of communion between God and His own.

The view of Geoffrey W. Grogan is a bit ambiguous in terms of the Sabbath, as it expresses the thought that the worship of God is portrayed in terms of the cultic system of Ancient Israel:

“God here makes the greatest and most comprehensive of all his promises: the guarantee of his pledges to his people. He further affirms that the wider vision of the worship of all mankind will also find its fulfillment. This is expressed in terms of the old God-given Jewish system of special days and Sabbaths for worship.”⁵

A theological meaning for the placement of the Sabbath in Isaiah 66:23, is offered by J.A. Motyer—notably avoiding the whole issue of *Shabbat* as an institution—and instead focusing readers on how “the emphasis throughout chapters 56-66 on the Sabbath arose from the fact that this is the commandment which more than any other necessitates the submission of the practical planning of life to the Lord’s timetable, a searching test of practical holiness (58:13-14)...Only a true commitment of heart and no mere conformist motive can accomplish this.”⁶

Noting the presence of the New Moon and Sabbath in Isaiah 66:23, Christopher R. Seitz connects this not only to a global adherence of these Torah institutions, but also the anticipated adherence to the Feast of Tabernacles. He even makes light of Isaiah 45:23 and an anticipation of all bowing before Israel’s God:

“vv.22-23, which precede the solemn concluding coda (v. 24), continue to refer to New Moon and Sabbath, just as Zechariah refers to strict observance by all peoples of the Feast of Tabernacles {having referenced Zechariah 8:20-23; 16:16-21}. The reference to ‘all mankind bowing down before me’ (v. 23) may pick up the solemn word of 45:23, ‘By myself I have sworn...a word that will not be revoked: before me every knee will bow.’ As many have recently noted, a further reference to this key text can be seen in Phil 2:10.”⁷

While Messianic readers might be keen to focus on the anticipated, worldwide observance of the seventh-day Sabbath or *Shabbat* in Isaiah 66:23, the connection with Isaiah 45:23 should be well taken: “I have sworn by Myself, the word has gone forth from My mouth in righteousness and will not turn back, that to Me every knee will bow, every tongue will swear *allegiance*.”

¹ The TNIV has “all people”; the New Jerusalem Bible has “all humanity.”

² Webb, 251.

³ Watts, pp 943, 944.

⁴ Derek Kidner, “Isaiah,” in *NBCR*, 625.

⁵ Geoffrey.W. Grogan, “Isaiah,” in Frank E. Gaebelien, ed. et. al., *Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 6:353.

⁶ Motyer, *Isaiah*, 543.

⁷ Seitz, in *NIB*, 6:549.

Messianic Sabbath Helper

Being able to balance the required recognition that God will restore the *zera* (זרע) or “offspring” of Israel (66:22), with an inclusive plan of welcoming in many from the nations at large of Planet Earth, is imperative for a proper application. Benjamin D. Sommer fairly indicates in *The Jewish Study Bible*, “The distinction between Judeans and non-Judeans is not mentioned here; the worshippers of the LORD in v. 23 include *all flesh*, not just Israelites; and *the men who rebelled* against God in v. 24 include Israelites, as the preceding two chs make clear. Thus the book ends on a highly universal note.”⁸ John N. Oswalt goes a little further, in emphasizing how the promise of God in Isaiah 66:23 is not just given to Israel proper, but to the “all flesh” who will worship before Him. While emphasizing how Israel proper must be separate to in order maintain its fidelity to the One True God and not assimilate, such separateness in history is not to be an end to itself:

“To whom are the promises given? Just to the people of Israel? Hardly. They are given to those of all flesh who worship him from month to month and Sabbath to Sabbath. This is the ultimate end of Israel’s religion, so that everyone should have the opportunity of joining Israel in worshipping the one God (cf. Zech. 14:16-21). Israel is not to be separate so that it can revel in its separateness, but so that its faith can survive to be declared. When separation becomes an end to itself, it has become just a more arcane form of idolatry. But if Israel had allowed itself to be absorbed into the pagan religions around it, as it was constantly in danger of doing, there would have been no faith to declare.”⁹

There has been some Messianic Jewish discussion on how to approach the statement of Isaiah 66:23, “‘Every month on *Rosh-Hodesh* and every week on *Shabbat*, everyone living will come to worship in my presence,’ says *ADONAI*” (CJB). In his short book *The Irrevocable Calling: Israel’s Role as a Light to the Nations*, Daniel C. Juster rightly lauds the institution of the seventh-day Sabbath, as representing a condition of rest which is to be experienced by all human beings:

“Israel’s calling as priests to the nations...teaches us that Sabbath rest is a sign of the will of God for all peoples. It is God’s intention that all be liberated from the bondage of slavery, both literally (externally) and spiritually (internally) from the soul bondage that destroys our peace and happiness. The Sabbath is a foreshadowing of the Age to Come and the universal Promised Land where all will live in the peace and rest of God...The Sabbath foreshadows that one day all nations will enter into God’s rest. Sabbath observance is an intercessory action for the sake of all nations, releasing the power of God to move history toward this goal.”¹⁰

Following this remark, one might expect a Messianic Jewish leader to praise the efforts of people in today’s Messianic movement to keep *Shabbat* as a holy time, where individuals and families can rest, be refreshed, and fellowship in new and special ways. Instead—and notably failing to recognize the egalitarian and inclusive nature of the Sabbath as seen in the Pentateuch (Exodus 20:8-11; Deuteronomy 5:12-15), where the Sabbath was to be kept by far more than just native Israelites—Juster only emphasizes the worldwide Sabbath observance as something to be reserved for the future Millennium:

“Although the Ten Commandments are mostly universal in application...the commandments are in the form of a covenant given to Israel...The Sabbath is specifically a covenant sign given to the Nation of Israel within this covenant document. While there is no hint that Gentiles during this age have such a covenant responsibility, the Sabbath day will become universal in the Millennium (e.g. Isaiah 66:23), there is no commandment that the Gentiles during this age have such a covenant responsibility.”¹¹

⁸ Sommer, in *The Jewish Study Bible*, 916.

⁹ Oswalt, *Isaiah 40-66*, 691.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 692 goes on to reflect a more symbolic approach to what is represented by the presence of the New Moon and Sabbath, mainly as continual cycles of time, whereby people can seek the presence of the Lord.

¹⁰ Daniel C. Juster, *The Irrevocable Calling: Israel’s Role as a Light to the Nations* (Clarksville, MD: Lederer, 2007), 18.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

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Relegating a universal observance of the seventh-day Sabbath almost exclusively to the future Millennium betrays a lack of comprehension for the theological construct of realized eschatology, where the substance of future realities can already be experienced to a wide degree by God's people in the present. God's people should be living the life of the world to come now, as its power has already broken into the present evil age via the work of the Messiah (cf. Galatians 1:4).

There are clear examples of this, where Tanach prophecies which involve a restoration of physical Israel to the Holy Land, and a reestablishment of Israel's Kingdom, have already begun to be fulfilled in the work of the Messiah and the spiritual experience of the Body of Messiah. James the Just said that the Tabernacle of David was in the process of being restored, via the salvation of the nations (Acts 15:15-18).¹² The New Covenant of Jeremiah 31:31-34 (cf. Hebrews 8:8-12) does indeed involve more than just a supernatural transcription of God's Instruction onto the hearts and minds of His people, as the wider themes of Jeremiah ch. 31 involve a regathering of scattered Israel to the Promised Land.¹³ Yet, Believers faithful to the Scriptures affirm that the core realities of these prophecies can be experienced today by those individually transformed by God's Spirit, with a greater corporate fulfillment on the agenda of the future. **All of God's people today can also observe the seventh-day Sabbath, in anticipation of the future Millennium when it will unambiguously be expected of all.**¹⁴

¹² Consult the relevant sections of *Acts 15 for the Practical Messianic* by J.K. McKee.

¹³ Consult the article "What is the New Covenant?", appearing in *The New Testament Validates Torah* by J.K. McKee.

¹⁴ The statement of Isaiah 66:24 which ends the Book of Isaiah, "Then they will go forth and look on the corpses of the men who have transgressed against Me. For their worm will not die and their fire will not be quenched; and they will be an abhorrence to all mankind," has been addressed in the publication *Why Hell Must Be Eternal*.