

Inclusivity in Third Isaiah

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The texts of Isa 56-66 (“Third Isaiah”) preoccupy themselves both with early apocalyptic and with priestly, temple-centered concerns. For many, this particular combination of interests will seem anomalous. Temple priests, many assume, are advocates of the status quo, not visionaries heralding an imminent overthrow of mundane existence. The late eschatological texts of Third Isaiah revolve around ritual and worship, ceremonial purity, and adherence to priestly torah. They assume the centrality of worship at Jerusalem’s shrine atop Zion (Isa 56:5, 7; 57:13; 60:1-3, 4-9, 10:14; 62:1, 6, 9, 11; 64:10-12; 65:11, 19, 25; 66:6, 8, 10, 13, 20, 23).

Perhaps the most radical eschatological expectation in the priestly texts of Third Isaiah is the end-time vision of nations gathering to the temple in Isa 66, which speaks of God making priests and Levites out of foreigners (Isa 66:21). The ambiguous syntax of Isa 66:21 may refer merely to the ordination of returning lay Israelites: “Out of those who return, I will make priests and Levites.” More likely, however, is the entirely radical understanding in which God opens the priesthood to all nations: “I’ll even take some of the foreigners [וגַם־מֵהֵם] and make them priests and Levites.”

The rhetoric of the Hebrew appears to take pains to convince the reader that God will take priests *even* from them,” that is, even from foreigners. What is more, Isa 56:4-7 prepares for this apocalyptic suspension of clerical boundaries by applying to foreigners language limited to Levites in Numbers 18. The combination of the verbs לָוָה and שָׁרַת occurs only in Num 18:2 and Isa 56:6. The former verb looks like a wordplay in Isa 56:6, suggesting that the foreigners are “Leviting” themselves.

The verb שָׁרַת in Isa 56:6 signals worship of the Lord and calls to mind acts of temple service (as in Isa 60:7; 61:6). Tellingly, the Dead Sea Scrolls at 1QIsa^a omit this verb, probably due to consternation at any implication that Gentiles might serve as temple priests. Third Isaiah appears to presuppose and react against Numbers 18. Isaiah’s clerical inclusivity diametrically opposes the priestly exclusivity of Num 18:7 (a pre-exilic Zadokite text of the Holiness School, later echoed in Ezek 44:8).

Third Isaiah is priestly literature, but literature that appears to stand in tension with alternative priestly views held by Zadokite clerics (eg Num 18:7, Ezek 44:8). There is even evidence, at Isa 66:5, that the Isaian stance on issues such as priestly inclusivity provoked opposition from “brothers,” perhaps brother priests – the Zadokites. At some point, these brothers came to “hate” and “exclude” the Isaiah group. Isaiah 66:5 appears to quote a rival group taunting the Isaiah group for their hopes for awe, for a coming apocalyptic manifestation of divine presence. The group’s rivals scoff: “Let the LORD manifest His Presence, So that we may look upon your joy” (Isa 66:5 NJPS, cf NJB, NABre). For the expectation of awe at issue, see eg Isa 59:19, 60:13, 66:18.

The identification of the Isaiah group as “tremblers” (חֲרָדִים) in 66:5 now comes into focus. The Aaronides felt awe before God and proclaimed an apocalyptic message of dread at God’s coming manifestation. As Joseph Blenkinsopp has discerned, the book of Ezra reveals more information about the “trembler” group (Ezra 9:4; 10:3). They appear as Ezra’s supporters and colleagues in his reforms of post-exilic Judah. Like him, they orient themselves on the Priestly Torah and the Temple’s sacrificial regimen. In reforming post-exilic society, the group encourages separation from idolatry and making a reparation offering (זָשָׁן; Ezra 10:18, cf Isa 53:10).

Isa 66:18b-21 does not fit hierarchical Zadokite theology, but neither does it fit with Levitical thinking. We have a clear idea of how Levitical thinking of the Persian era looked, thanks to the inclusion in the scriptural canon of the book of Malachi. The Levite authors of Malachi certainly proffered no newly inclusive vision of the priesthood in the manner of Isa 66. Rather, they upheld God’s carefully defined covenant with Levi (Mal 2:4; cf Deut 18:5, 33:8-11; Jer 33:17-22). The altar priests of Malachi’s time (mid-05c) seemed to him in violation of this priestly covenant, so he proclaims them in an accursed state (Mal 2:9).

Isaiah 66 appears specifically to engage Jer 33’s presentation of the covenant with Levi.¹ That the vocabulary used by Third Isaiah of “ministering” (שָׁרַת) and of Levites (לֵוִים) is central to Jer 33:20-21, to Levi’s covenant, can be no coincidence. In an apocalyptic suspension of the very foundation of the Levites’ priestly house, the Isaian authors overturn the Levitical covenant’s permanence and exclusivity (Jer 33:20-21).

Isa 66:21 uses the terms “priests” and “Levites” found in Jer 33:21 in a different way. “Priests” is an individual subject in Isa 66:21; priests *and* Levites serve God as distinctive groups. If Third Isaiah were speaking of “Levitical priests” (cf NJPS), the Hebrew would be לַכַּהֲנָיִם הַלְוִיִּם, as in Jer 33:18.² In Jer 33:21, by contrast, the “priests” who “minister” (שָׁרַת) are merely Levi’s descendants in general (לֵוִים).

All are enfranchised. Just as David will always have a descendant on the throne, descendants of Levi will always be God’s priests.³ As the NET translates, “David will by all means always have a descendant to occupy his throne as King and the Levites will by all means always have priests who will minister before me.”

Conclusions. This brief examination of Third Isaiah and its interactions with preceding texts suggests several conclusions. Late priestly prophecy in Third Isaiah is aware of earlier priestly literature in Numbers 18 and Jeremiah 33. Third Isaiah directly alludes to this literature, essentially citing it, and, from a radically eschatological perspective, overturns its claims about clerical exclusivity.

¹Leuchter **Polemics** 77-79 argues compellingly for dating Jer 33:19-22 to the Josianic period, when the prophet Jeremiah found himself highly supportive of both king and priests.

²A double datival goal marked by two lameds, as here, is Biblically attested elsewhere in Mic 1:6. Note that some Hebrew manuscripts and the Peshitta read “priests and Levites” in Isa 66:21 (with *waw*); cf the LXX and Vulgate (also cf 2 Chr 5:5 LXX).

³The noun “priests” is here parallel to “a son” earlier in the verse and is not appositional. Leuchter correctly observes that the phrase “the Levites, the priests” never occurs in the Levitical literature of the Hebrew Bible or, for that matter, anywhere in Scripture, but understands Jer 33:21 to be using the very phrase as an example of Seidel’s law (**Polemics** 78).

Since Third Isaiah overturns both the Zadokite exclusivist position (Num 18) and the Levitical exclusivist position (Jer 33), its priestly authors must represent a third Yahwistic priestly house within Israelite religion. For convenience, I suggest labeling this third priestly house “Aaronide.”

Discussion

Bruce Brooks: It is widely noted that this passage is unique, going (in 66:21) beyond other passages which predict an inclusive “Jerusalem.” But what is its extent? I would agree with those⁴ who see a second segment beginning at 66:18b, between “[17b] they shall come to an end altogether, saith YHWH, [18a] for I know their works and their thoughts” and “[18b] The time cometh that I will gather all nations and tongues, and they shall come, and shall see my glory.” I think this is reinforced by the parallel between the preceding section, which ends at 66:14-17b by condemning offenders, and the end of this one, which in 66:24 heightens that condemnation.

Stephen Cook: I agree with Bruce that a new subunit of Isaiah text (66:18b-21) begins at v18b. In fact, there appear to be several closing units appended to Isa 66:1-4, including, alongside my passage, 66:15-18a and 66:22-23 (plus v24). Besides the backward nod to 66:17, I would note that v24 also helps draw the entirety of Isaiah’s book together. Specifically, it reuses Isa 14:11, part of an earlier Isaian prophecy increasingly understood within the Hebrew Bible as a description of the fall of archetypal evil down to the bottom of the bottomless pit (Isa 14:15).

Bruce Brooks: What is the structure of Isa 66? I argue above for an integral 66B. As for 66A, I find convincing Jones’ parallel between it and Isa 65:

65:8-10	~	66:1-2
65:11-12a	~	66:3-4a
65:12bc	~	66:4bc
65:13-16	~	66:5
65:17	~	66:7-9
65:18-20	~	66:10-11
65:20-25	~	66:12-14

Isa 65 itself seems to *twice* traverse an accusation/response (AR) pattern:⁵

65A (v1-7)	Denunciation of false worship
(v8-12)	The righteous shall inherit the land
65B (v13-16)	“Behold, my servants shall eat, but ye shall be hungry”
(v17-25)	“Behold, I create new heavens and a new earth”

In sum, Isa 66A was meant to update the preceding chapter (in the process echoing other early Isaiah passages), and 66B was meant to further update 66A (and, again, all of Isaiah). Third Isaiah thus ends with four successive updates: 65A, 65B, 66A, 66B, all of them linked by textual echoes to earlier portions of Isaiah.

⁴For the segment 18b-24, see Paul (2012) 625. For Isa 17-24, Muilenburg (1956) 769, Seitz (2001) 547, Blenkinsopp (2003) 308. For 18-24: Jones (1962) 535, Westermann (1966) 423.

⁵For these four main divisions, see Blenkinsopp (2003) 266-290. The AR pattern is also common in the Psalms, one large-scale example being Psalm 22:1-21 (A) and 22-31 (R).

The harsh 66:24 is protested by some,⁶ and is mitigated in Rabbinic tradition by repeating v23 after v24.⁷ But 66A (1-14a promising; 14b-18a punitive) is matched in 66B (v18b-23 promising, v24 punitive), which suggests that v24 belongs where it is.

Stephen Cook. Bruce helpfully adds to the discussion some possibilities for analyzing the structure of Isaiah’s ending chapters. I find it plausible that 66:1-14 was assembled as a mirror of 65:8-25. Certainly the echo of 65:12bc in 66:4bc is explicit. In a different way, 66:13 mirrors 65:25 – both texts explicitly allude to very early texts of Isaiah (12:1 and 11:6-7, respectively), binding the book with an envelope structure. The mirroring of Isa 65 ends in 66:14, and 66:15-18a goes in a new direction, prophesying the divine warrior’s victory over all rebels. (As Bruce points out, this is matched in v24). As vv18b-21 begin, poetry shifts to prose and expansions of earlier Isaiah themes emerge. Missioners bring Yahwism to the nations (v19) and some from the nations become YHWH’s priests (v21).

Keith Yoder: Stephen brings to our attention these Isaiah passages:

- 56:3 “let not the son of the foreigner בְּרֵהֲנֹכַר who-has-joined-himself הַנְּלִיָּהוּ to YHWH”
- 56:6 “and the sons of the foreigner who-have-joined-themselves הַנְּלִיָּהוּ to YHWH”
- 66:21 “and from-them מֵהֵם I will take some as priests, לְכַהֲנִים, as Levites לְלווִיִּם, says YHWH”

The referent of the phrase “from-them” in 66:21 seems ambiguous. “Them” most likely refers back to “all the nations and tongues כְּלֵהָגוּיִם וְהַלְשָׁנוֹת” which YHWH will gather to “behold my glory” in 66:18, as he will set a sign “among-them בְּרֵהֵם” and then he will send survivors “from-them מֵהֵם” to the nations to “declare my glory” in 66:20. Alternatively, it could refer to “all-your-brothers כָּל־אֶחָיִכֶם” whom these “survivors” will carry back to “Jerusalem my Holy Mountain” in 66:20. However, the preceding “among-them” and “from-them” seem to chain link all the “them” repetitions back to the survivors of “all the nations and tongues” of 66:18.

Stephen finds further confirmation in a wordplay with “Levites” in the foreigners who “join-themselves” to YHWH in 56:6, where the Niphal plural participle הַנְּלִיָּהוּ nicely foreshadows the later plural noun לְלווִיִּם in 66:21. Intentionality is suggested by the author’s change from the singular verb form in “the son of the foreigner who has-joined- himself הַנְּלִיָּהוּ” in 56:3 to the better matching plural participle in “the sons of the foreigner who-have-joined-themselves הַנְּלִיָּהוּ” in 56:6.

Similar wordplay between the same two words is found in their first canonical occurrence together in Gen 29:34, a passage surely familiar to Third Isaiah’s readers:

And she [Leah] conceived again and bore a son and said, “This time my husband will join-himself יָלוּהָ to me, for I have borne him three sons.” Therefore his name was called Levi לֵוִי.

As the reward for their holy work of bringing back the “brothers” to Jerusalem in 66:19-20, these Gentiles will be elevated to the position of “priests and Levites” in the House of YHWH.

⁶So Duhm (1902) 446, Westermann (1969) 429. For rejoinders, see Torrey (1928) 475, Jones (1962) 535, McKenzie (1968) 209f, Blenkinsopp (2003) 317.

⁷Muilenburg (1956) 773, Blenkinsopp (2003) 309 [in brackets], Paul (2012) 633.

This investiture of Gentiles as “priests and Levites” as reward for their holy work of bringing the “brothers” back to Jerusalem in 66:19-20 appears to be an epitome of Third Isaiah’s last-days gathering in of the survivors of the “nations” to Israel. Temple, Torah, and Sabbath are not ended. Third Isaiah envisions, rather, the assimilation of a righteous remnant of the Gentiles into Israel, with its Temple and Sabbath. Isaiah’s Gentile ascension to the priesthood may also connect thematically with the designation in Psalm 110 of David (and his sons?) as priests in the order of Melchizedek, which is itself a startling expansion of the priesthood beyond the descendants of Aaron and Levi. Isaiah 56-66, now expanding beyond Psalm 110, predicts an even more drastic addition to the priesthood in the last days, from the righteous Gentiles who have done YHWH’s sacred work of restoration.

Stephen Cook: I would like to thank Keith for his observations, which helpfully enlarge upon my study. I appreciate his critical, thoughtful reading of my piece.

Bruce Brooks: Besides the acceptance of Gentiles as Levites, in our passage, are they not also promoted from proselyte status, which was probably nothing new, to the role of bringing in the distant Israelites? I think the writer is here envisioning not the Return of the Babylonian exiles, but the later ingathering of *all* the Diaspora Jews.

Stephen Cook: I agree with Bruce that our text honors the gathering foreign nations for bringing home the exiles of Zion. Again we have a concluding backward nod to earlier sections of Isaiah’s book (viz Isa 43:5-7, 49:22-23; 60:4), a book now viewed holistically.

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