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Covenant, Particularity, and Inclusion: An Analysis of Isaiah 56:1-8 and Its Implications For Modern Jewish and Christian Communities

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COVENANT, PARTICULARITY, AND INCLUSION:
AN ANALYSIS OF ISAIAH 56:1-8 AND ITS IMPLICATIONS
FOR MODERN JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

by

ALISON HARTKE

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

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In Partial Fulfillment of

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THESIS ADVISER: DR. MARK A. THRONTVEIT
SECOND READER: DR. KATHRYN SCHIFFERDECKER

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This thesis may be duplicated.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

KJV	King James Version
NIV	New International Version
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
TNK	Jewish Publication Society's Tanakh Translation
v.	Verse
vv.	Verses

A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

Throughout this paper, out of respect for our Jewish colleagues, I will refer to the Hebrew name “יהוה” as “Adonai” or “the Lord” in my own writing. All references to this name in quoted texts (examples: YHWH, Yahweh, Jehovah, etc.) will remain as they are written within that text.

INTRODUCTION

Isaiah 56:1-8 is a text that is given little attention in the Christian tradition, aside from verse 7b, which promises “my house will be called a house of prayer for all peoples.” It is no wonder that, in this pluralistic world in which we live, we might yearn for a day when all nations, all religions, all peoples of different ethnic and economic and social backgrounds might worship together. This text, which was written in the aftermath of the Israelites’ return from exile, speaks out of a similar pluralistic context, and deals with many of the same issues surrounding identity, particularity, and inclusion that we face today. For Christians and Jews, for whom this text is among the sacred scriptures read in our own houses of prayer, the story of Israel’s return, and subsequent attempts to restore and break through boundaries, contains important lessons.

Isaiah 56:1-8 is a product of its context; an example of a restoration community that tries to put itself back together after years in a foreign land. It addresses the issue of identity by encouraging the Israelite community to hold to the covenant that sustained them through great hardship, and it reworks the understanding of that covenant to better fit a new situation. It gives us a look at what it means to live with an eye to the future, but with both feet planted in today, acting for justice and living into the kind of life the Lord desires. It teaches us how to accept the convert, how to speak with love and assurance to the outsider, and assures us of a day when we will all be brought into the Lord’s house together. This text speaks hope into a place of dissent, and ends with a word of unity: “A

declaration of the Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel: I will gather still more besides those already gathered.”

This paper will address these issues, from the historical background of Isaiah 56:1-8, to a translation and close reading of the text, to the implications of that reading for our modern-day faith communities. Both Christian and Jewish perspectives on the text and on its relevance will be discussed, in the hopes that we might learn from each other how best to let scripture break into our lives. After an in-depth analysis of the text it will become clear that Isaiah 56:1-8 argues for both maintenance of distinct boundaries surrounding covenantal identity, and the expansion of those boundaries to include groups of people who were previously kept out. Based on that reading, arguments will be made concerning Jewish identity and the acceptance of converts, and Christian identity and the acceptance of people of differing sexualities and gender identities. Through this analysis, we seek to better understand not only the world in which the original text was written, but also the world in which the text might come alive today.

PART 1
HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In order to understand how and why Israel's theology and practices changed over time, it is necessary to get a sense of the bigger picture, a sense of what the community looked like before the exile, and a grip on the catalysts for change within the exile itself. Pre-exilic Israel, during the period of kingship from Saul to the destruction of the Temple in 586 BCE, can generally be identified as a community based upon covenantal practices performed in specific locations. Israel during the exile, on the other hand, becomes a community focused on keeping as many of the previous practices as could be carried out in a strange land among hostile forces. During the exile, Sabbath becomes a major locus for a people who could no longer sacrifice in the Temple. Foreigners, who had been protected by the Torah and spoken for by the early prophets, become a threat. The practice of creating eunuchs, which was alien to the people of Israel, becomes an everyday occurrence that turns brothers and sons into outsiders no longer welcome in the community. How do these changes come about? The voice of Isaiah speaks into this context, and in order to understand the time and place, we must also understand more about the voice that is speaking.

The Author of Isaiah 56:1-8 and The Nature of the Conflict

While the historical and stylistic differences between Isaiah chapters 1-33 and chapters 40-66 have long been documented and have led scholars to refer to the two sections as

Proto- and Deutero-Isaiah, the separation between chapters 40-55 and chapters 56-66 continues to be debated. The separation of Trito-Isaiah, as chapters 56-66 have come to be known, from Deutero-Isaiah was first suggested by Bernhard Duhm in 1892. Appealing to intratextual historical references and writing style, “Duhm maintained that chapters 56-66 were the work of a later prophet living in Jerusalem shortly before the time of Nehemiah and roughly contemporary with Malachi, that is, about 450 B.C.”¹ In the last hundred years of research, there has been no consensus concerning whether or not Trito-Isaiah should be recognized as separate from Deutero-Isaiah, but for the most part scholars agree that Trito-Isaiah deals with issues facing the returned exiles some time after Cyrus the Great first conquered Babylon in 538 BCE and allowed their return to Jerusalem.

Even while most scholars do recognize that Trito-Isaiah was writing in a different time and place than the pre-exilic Proto-Isaiah or the exilic Deutero-Isaiah, there remains one major dispute about Trito-Isaiah’s context regarding the polemic nature of parts of the text which “[defend] the cause of a righteous group and [pronounce] judgment on the ways of its unrighteous adversaries.”² Some scholars, led by Paul Hanson in his work *The Dawn of Apocalyptic*, believe that Trito-Isaiah illustrates a tension between the Levitical priesthood and the Zadokite priesthood (those descended from Zadok in the time of Solomon³) over the composition and actions of the ideal community. Others, like Brooks Schramm, argue that the conflict was not between Levitical and Zadokite priests, but was

¹ Elizabeth Achtemeier, *The Community and Message of Isaiah 56-66: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Pub. House, 1982), 12.

² *Ibid.*, 17.

³ See 1 Samuel 2:27-36; 1 Kings 2:35.

instead an argument by the “Yahweh-alone party” of returnees against “the traditional cult of Israel and Judah, a cult that was characterized by a form of worship, that is, the worship of YHWH along with other deities.”⁴ Still another possibility is that the words of Trito-Isaiah are spoken from the point of view of faithful returned exiles against the “people of the land” who had settled in the area since the Israelites were driven out, and who now believed themselves to be the rightful owners.⁵

Attempting to unravel the protagonists and antagonists within Trito-Isaiah is a worthy task, not only for those who wish to try to understand Israelite history, but also for those who want to understand the Isaianic text. If the conflict was really between Levitical and Zadokite priestly classes, then we must take into account the fact that contemporaneous writings like Ezek. 40-48 and sections of the Pentateuch attributed to the Priestly writer show a priesthood that was confined only to Zadokites, and a community that disallowed temple entry to foreigners and the uncircumcised.⁶ That kind of community would seem to be antithetical to what is said in Isaiah 56:1-8, and thus suggests that Trito-Isaiah was probably written by Levitical priests and prophets who saw the Zadokite’s exclusivism as unnecessary and contrary to Deuteronomic law.⁷ Achtemeier, a supporter of Hanson, believes that despite this conflict over the ideal community, “the Levitical-reform-Deuteronomic-prophetic group and the priestly-

⁴ Brooks Schramm, *The Opponents of Third Isaiah: Reconstructing the Cultic History of the Restoration* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 178.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 56-57.

⁶ Achtemeier, *The Community and Message of Isaiah 56-66: A Theological Commentary*, 18.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 20-25.

exclusivistic-Zadokite party”⁸ eventually joined forces in the face of the return from exile, and in Trito-Isaiah we see not only the compromises made, but also the lingering disagreements that characterized the rise of a new age for Israel.

Schramm believes that the conflict between Levitical and Zadokite priests shown in Hanson’s work is a false dichotomy, and that what Hanson is really doing is contrasting “prophetic theology/religion” against “priestly theology/religion.”⁹ In other words, “Schramm argues that Hanson’s approach represents the latest incarnation of a discredited anticlerical strand of Protestant biblical scholarship tracing back to Wellhausen, which sets allegedly authentic prophetic preaching against allegedly corrupt priestly legalism.”¹⁰ Instead of using these priestly or prophetic distinctions to explain the apparent conflict between Trito-Isaiah and other contemporaneous texts, Schramm and others believe that the major conflict is between monotheistic worshipers of the “Yahweh-alone party” and those who preferred more syncretistic worship of Adonai alongside the gods of other nations. If this is true, then the conflict in which Trito-Isaiah is embroiled is “not evidence of a social and ideological rift in the Persian era; rather, they represent disagreements on specific, albeit important, issues within a single group.”¹¹ Therefore, when we find disagreements between the texts of Ezekiel and Trito-

⁸ Ibid., 25.

⁹ Schramm, *The Opponents of Third Isaiah: Reconstructing the Cultic History of the Restoration*, 174-177.

¹⁰ Steven S. Tuell, “The Priesthood of the ‘Foreigner’: Evidence of Competing Polities in Ezekiel 44:1-14 and Isaiah 56:1-8,” in *Constituting the Community: Studies on the Polity of Ancient Israel in Honor of S. Dean McBride, Jr.*, ed. S. Dean McBride and John T. Strong and Steven Shawn Tuell (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 186.

¹¹ Benjamin D. Sommer, *A Prophet Reads Scripture: Allusion in Isaiah 40-66* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 150.

Isaiah, or Ezra-Nehemiah and Trito-Isaiah, we must keep in mind that we are intentionally magnifying the incongruities at the expense of a holistic picture of the Israelite renewal community.

One other alternative that is worth mentioning briefly, because it concerns views of the foreigner, is the possibility that the conflict in Trito-Isaiah was between the returned Israelite exiles and the “people of the land” who had filled in the vacuum left by deportations. It is logical that the returned Israelites would have come into conflict with those who had taken over the land, as well as the few who had remained behind in Judah after the Babylonian attacks, since much about the theology and practices of Israel had changed while in exile. Ezra and Nehemiah, who were writing in or near the same time as Trito-Isaiah,

present a schematic and stereotyped picture of the peoples involved in the exile and return. Those who return from exile are called בני הגולה “exiles,” and those whom they encounter in Judah are called עם הארץ “the people of the land.” in Ezra-Nehemiah the term עם הארץ is a decidedly pejorative technical term... Originally, the term may have referred to the “state supporting upper class,” but in Ezra-Nehemiah [“the people of the land”] and its various plural forms refer to the exact opposite of the state-supporting upper class, namely “the hostile foreign people and pagans.”¹²

However, because Trito-Isaiah has a fairly positive view of the foreigner (בן-הנכר), it seems unlikely that Trito-Isaiah is referring to this kind of conflict.

In the end, though each of these arguments has its strong points, scholars now argue that attempting to simplify the conflict in Trito-Isaiah by creating rivalries like Levitical versus Zadokite priests or returnees versus “the people of the land” is overly simplistic and does not take all the facts into consideration. Instead, “a majority view thus

¹² Schramm, *The Opponents of Third Isaiah: Reconstructing the Cultic History of the Restoration*, 58-59.

tends to interpret the polemics among more general and more traditional lines, such as the opposition between worshipers of Yahweh alone and adherents of more syncretistic forms of cult.”¹³ Throughout the rest of this paper, we will continue with the knowledge that while there may have been priestly conflicts and arguments over possession of land, the overarching problem for Trito-Isaiah appears to have been the problem that plagued Israel since its outset—their tendency to follow after other gods and other practices contrary to the Lord’s covenant with Israel.

When we begin to look more specifically at Isaiah 56:1-8, it becomes obvious that although there are no references to syncretistic practices which Trito-Isaiah may be opposing, the author is putting forward a singular understanding of what it means to be the community of Israel. Creating one understanding of what it means to be an Israelite would have been essential to the restoration community, and we see conflicting concepts about membership and identity in other contemporaneous prophetic writings. This is an example of debate and experimentation within the restoration community, and should not be broken down into oversimplified terms or false dichotomies.

The Community Prior to Exile

One of the most striking things about the book of Isaiah is the breadth of time that it covers: from the periods of kingship in the divided realms of Israel and Judah, through the destruction of the Temple, to the return of the exiles to Jerusalem. Achtemeier records the history found in Isaiah this way:

¹³ Christophe Nihan, “Ethnicity and Identity in Isaiah 56-66,” in *Judah and the Judeans in the Achaemenid Period: Negotiating Identity in an International Context*, ed. Oded Lipschitz and Gary N. Knoppers and Manfred Oeming (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 69-70.

In Isaiah 1-33, Judah and Israel are still in existence as separate kingdoms, and their rulers are referred to by name (Uzziah, Ahaz, Hezekiah, Pekah). Assyria is the dominant power on the world scene. Various events of the eighth century B.C., such as the death of Uzziah, the Syro-Ephraimitic crisis, the fall of the northern kingdom, the siege of Ashdod, and the invasion of Sennacherib are clearly referred to. In Isaiah 40-[55], on the other hand, Assyria has fallen, and its successor Babylon is about to fall. Cyrus the Great, king of Persia, is twice mentioned by name. The Jews are in exile in Babylonia, and Jerusalem with its temple, and Judah lie in ruins. ...[In chapters 56-66] [t]he setting is Jerusalem, some of the exiles have returned from Babylonia, and the book portrays the miserable conditions, the difficulties, and the quarrels taking place in the postexilic Jerusalem community...the mood has shifted from the excited expectation of the exiles to that of the returnees' bitter disappointments.¹⁴

In framing the context of Isaiah 56:1-8, we must understand that it takes place against the backdrop of Israelite subjugation first to Assyria and then to Babylon, the destruction of the most sacred location in the two kingdoms, and the hailing of Cyrus as the Messiah who would throw off the yoke of the Israelites' oppression. Now, the third section of Isaiah, known as Trito-Isaiah, stands amidst the rubble of the homeland, wondering how restoration is possible, and asking for words of guidance from the Lord.

It is important to note three themes in pre-exilic Israel that will help us to understand the context and content of Isaiah 56:1-8: the style and location of Israelite worship practices, the treatment of the foreigner, and the treatment of eunuchs.

First, we must remember that prior to the destruction of the Temple, Israelite religion revolved around sacrifice and acts of worship in specific places, with the most notable location among them being Jerusalem. The centrality of Jerusalem began when King David conquered the city circa 1000 BCE while expanding his kingdom southward. After this victory, he found it expedient to base his court in Jerusalem, and eventually

¹⁴ Achtemeier, *The Community and Message of Isaiah 56-66: A Theological Commentary*, 12-13.

moved the Ark of the Covenant to a more permanent home there.¹⁵ From then on, and with increasing vigor after the death of King Solomon, the northerners of Israel and the southerners of Judah disagreed over whether Jerusalem must be the only legitimate place for sacrifice. King Josiah's Deuteronomic reforms in the latter part of the 7th century BCE made sure that his subjects would find the book of Deuteronomy, a scroll that favored the idea that worship and sacrifice must happen only in Jerusalem, to be a norming part of the Torah. Deut. 16 includes injunctions to celebrate the major festivals of Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkot only "at the place that the Lord your God will choose as a dwelling for his name,"¹⁶ which Josiah believed to be the Temple in Jerusalem. Because previously recognized parts of the Torah demanded that all the males of Israel must come before the Lord at least three times per year,¹⁷ Jerusalem was, up until the destruction of the Temple, the singular divinely designated location for the creation of community and acts of worship that characterized the Israelite religion.

Secondly, in analyzing the treatment of foreigners, we must remember that the rights and wellbeing of the foreigner, or "alien among you," were protected in Torah law, and rulings for fair treatment are found within and among lists of religious and social laws.¹⁸ In Numbers 15:14-16, foreigners who take up permanent residence in the land are allowed to make sacrifices to the Lord just as native Israelites do, and not only were they allowed to be part of sacrificial worship, they are also held to the same societal laws and

¹⁵ See 1 Chronicles 15; 2 Samuel 6.

¹⁶ Deut. 16:6. See also 16:11, 16:15.

¹⁷ Exodus 23:14-17.

¹⁸ See Exod. 22:21; Lev. 19:34.

laws of assembly, for “you and the alien shall be alike before the Lord.”¹⁹ Unfortunately, Israel did not appear to follow these decrees closely, for many of the pre-exilic prophets spoke out against wrongs done to the widow, the orphan and the alien. Jeremiah, in his proclamation of the Lord’s word of judgment to Israel, repeats the commandments regarding the widow, orphan and alien, and promises that if Israel should begin to “truly act justly one with another” in this manner, the Lord would continue to dwell in the land.²⁰ In the last words of Jeremiah, however, written in the final years of Jerusalem before the fall, a negative view of foreigners seems to have crept in. The final chapters of Jeremiah “sees the role of these strangers as sources of spiritual decay.... In Jeremiah the foreigner is associated with abuses of worship.” Indeed, “one of the major abuses of worship is the presence of strangers in the Temple of YHWH (Jer. 51:51).”²¹ This shows that although foreigners may have been treated justly and accepted at least marginally in Israel prior to the exile, a negative view quickly followed the Assyrian and Babylonian invasions leading up to the destruction of the Temple.

Thirdly, we must understand that Israel’s experience with the creation of eunuchs prior to the exile was limited. Deuteronomy 23:1 declares that “No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord,” which leads us to believe that the creation of eunuchs within Israelite society was rare, if not nonexistent. Joseph Blenkinsopp agrees with this view, saying, “As far as we know, castration was not practiced in Israel, either for court and harem officials or as a judicial

¹⁹ Numbers 15:15.

²⁰ Jeremiah 7:5-7.

²¹ Shawn W. Flynn, “A House of Prayer for All Peoples!--the Unique Place of the Foreigner in the Temple Theology of Trito-Isaiah,” *Theoforum* 37, no. 1 (2006): 12.

punishment... and it is even less likely that cultic self-mutilation was practiced.”²² While neighboring nations certainly kept up the practice, Israel itself probably did not, since the sterilization of a man by making him a eunuch meant that he could no longer be part of the Israelite community according to Deuteronomic law.

The Community in Exile

Along with the destruction of the Temple in 586 BCE and the beginning of the exile came other cataclysmic changes for Israel. With no central place of worship, customs and gatherings had to adapt, and sacrifice became entirely impossible. Westermann points out that “Since there could be no sacrifices, the main emphasis was necessarily put on the oral element of worship: we have every reason for believing that one, at least, of the roots of the synagogue service is to be found in the exile.”²³ Indeed, observance of the Sabbath came to the forefront of Israelite worship practices, at least in part because it was something that could be practiced regardless of location. Ezekiel is one of the exilic prophets who speaks highly of Sabbath observance, including it in a list of divine laws in chapter 20, but naming the Sabbath as the crowning sign of the covenant between Adonai and Israel. In the latter part of Ezekiel, which concerns a program for restoration, “the prophet innovates the priestly duty of seeing that the Sabbath is kept holy (44:24).”²⁴ For the Israelites without a homeland and without a Temple, the Sabbath became what Abraham Heschel would famously call “a sanctuary in

²² Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 56-66: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 137.

²³ Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), 5-6.

²⁴ Michael J. Graetz and et al., “Sabbath,” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, 2nd ed. ed., vol. 17 (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), 617.

time.” Though we must keep in mind that at the time of Trito-Isaiah’s writing, “the temple is still in ruins (63.18-19), Jerusalem is still an unwalled city (58.12; 60.10), and the rest of the country has not yet recovered from the effects of the Babylonian devastation (61.4; 64.10-11),”²⁵ there is still a move towards preparation for the day when the Temple will be rebuilt. This is why we see references to Temple worship in Isaiah 56:5, 7-8, because although the Israelites returning from exile are still standing on rubble, their hearts are turned toward the day when the Lord will once again have a dwelling place among his people.

Attitudes toward foreigners during the exile continued much as they were seen in the final chapters of Jeremiah; the exilic prophets continued to condemn the inclusion of foreigners in Israel’s worship rather than focusing on the laws protecting foreigners found in the Torah. Ezekiel speaks of foreigners in much the same way as Jeremiah, saying “You have brought sons of foreigners, uncircumcised of heart and uncircumcised of flesh, to be in my sanctuary to profane it.”²⁶ While Ezekiel may have been protesting against the polluting aspects of the foreigner, rather than disallowing them entry to the Temple, it is clear that “like Jeremiah, the author identifies the source of the problem as the foreigner.”²⁷ To be clear, the question of inclusivity of foreigners was not something the exilic prophets condemned because of any personal agenda or prejudice, but rather, the ability to understand that what Israel had done wrong was “a matter of life and death. Israel had been rejected by her God and sent into Babylonian exile for her sins against

²⁵ Joseph Blenkinsopp, “Second Isaiah--Prophet of Universalism,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, no. 41 (1988): 92.

²⁶ Ezekiel 44:7

²⁷ Flynn, “A House of Prayer for All Peoples’--the Unique Place of the Foreigner in the Temple Theology of Trito-Isaiah,” 14-15.

him. The question, therefore, among the exiles was how to regain Yahweh's favor, how to insure that he would never again bring his judgments upon his people."²⁸ In condemning the inclusion of foreigners into the community of Israel, the exilic prophets merely sought a way to return to the Lord who had turned away from them.

In exile, Israel also had to deal with the reality that many of their young men would be castrated and turned into eunuchs at the hands of the Babylonians. We know from Babylonian documents of the time that the court "employed many eunuchs, harvesting them from among the boys of all their subject peoples. Biblical literature also attests to the use of young men from Judah as eunuchs in Babylonian courts (see 2 Kings 20:18; 24:12,15)."²⁹ In the Isaiah corpus itself, we see a prophetic word in chapter 39 that foretells the castration of the male members of the royal family, which raises the following question: "If, in fact, the royal line is cut off—if, indeed, all Israel has become 'barren'—how will there be a future? Especially if those who were made eunuchs to serve the court of Babylon are cut off from the assembly of God's people by God's own law?"³⁰ These are the issues facing the Israelites in exile, and the questions which Isaiah 56:1-8 may help to answer.

²⁸ Achtemeier, *The Community and Message of Isaiah 56-66: A Theological Commentary*, 19.

²⁹ Jacob L. Wright and Michael Chan, "King and Eunuch: Isaiah 56:1-8 in Light of Honorific Royal Burial Practices," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 131, no. 1 (2012): 116-117.

³⁰ Frederick J. Gaiser, "A New Word on Homosexuality? Isaiah 56:1-8 as Case Study," *Word & World* 14, no. 3 (1994): 286-287.

PART 2

TRANSLATION AND CLOSE READING

Translation of Isaiah 56:1-8

- 1 Thus said the Lord: Promote justice and practice righteousness,
because my salvation is drawing near, and my deliverance is to be
revealed.
- 2 Happy is the person who does this, the human who holds fast to it,
who keeps the Sabbath without profaning it, and who keeps his hand from
doing any evil.
- 3 Do not let the foreigner who has joined himself to the Lord say, “Surely the Lord
will separate me from his people,”
and do not let the eunuch say, “I am just a dry tree.”
- 4 Rather, thus said the Lord: to the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths and who have
chosen that in which I delight
—that is, holding fast to my covenant—
- 5 I will give to them, in my house and within my walls, a place and a name better
than sons and daughters;
I will give them an everlasting name that will not be cut off.
- 6 As for the foreigners who are joining themselves to the Lord by ministering to
him, by loving the name of the Lord, and by being his servants;
all who keep the Sabbath without profaning it—that is, holding fast to my
covenant—
- 7 I will bring them to my holy mountain and I will make them joyful in my house of
prayer. Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices shall be acceptable on my altar.
Therefore my house will be called a house of prayer for all peoples.
- 8 A declaration of the Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel:
“I will gather still more besides those already gathered.”

Pericope Parameters and Structure of the Passage

As has been noted above, Isaiah 56 has more recently been accepted as the beginning of a third section of the corpus, referred to as Trito-Isaiah. These first eight verses can be identified as being separate from 55:12-13 by nature of the wording used. There are, in fact, “three terms distinguishing motifs in 56:1-8 are not found in the preceding section 40-55:” שבת (sabbath), נכר (foreigner), and סרײס (eunuch).¹ Similarly, “56:1-8 is separated from what follows it in 56:9ff by a striking change in tone and an absence of repeated or similar vocabulary. The instructive and promise-oriented language of 56:1-8 gives way to harsh words of condemnation and judgment in 56:9-12.”² Because of these differences in theme and tone, many scholars believe that these beginning verses, as well as the closing verses of the book in 66:18-24, were added to the body of Trito-Isaiah at a later date.³ Nevertheless, it has become clear that vv. 1-8 were themselves written at the same time, and not stitched together retroactively. This position is strengthened by the discovery that there are key terms and phrases in vv. 1-2 that are repeated in vv. 3-8, such as “holding fast,” and “keeping Sabbath from being profaned.”⁴

A chiasmic structure has been used by several authorities to explain the patterns found in this pericope, and seen especially in vv. 3-7. Cristophe Nihan notes that “While v. 3 reports the complaints of the foreigner and the eunuch respectively, the divine

¹ Gregory J. Polan, *In the Ways of Justice toward Salvation: A Rhetorical Analysis of Isaiah 56-59* (New York: Peter Lang, 1986), 23.

² Ibid.

³ Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66: A Commentary*, 305.

⁴ Nihan, “Ethnicity and Identity in Isaiah 56-66,” 74.

response to these complaints...deals with them in reverse order.”⁵ This breaks up the passage so that vv. 1-2 provide an introduction, v. 3 voices the laments to be addressed, vv. 4-5 refer specifically to the eunuchs, vv. 6-7 refer specifically to the foreigners, and v. 8 concludes with a message to all.

In the same vein, but with a slightly different organization, Gregory Polan shows that

The introduction of two individuals in v. 3 (the foreigner and eunuch) begins a pattern leading into vv. 4-7 with a message directly related to them. The repetition of the words for the foreigner and eunuch in the plural at vv. 4b, 6a sets up a chiasmic structuring of the verses:

- (A) בן-הנכר (v. 3a)
- (B) הסרים (v. 3c)
- (B) לסריסים (v. 4b)
- (A) ובני הנכר (v. 6a)⁶

Polan’s structure shows more clearly the move from singular to plural that happens for both the foreigner and the eunuch between their introduction in v. 3 and their specific considerations in vv. 4-5 and 6-7. Polan believes that this change signifies that this text is addressed to a wider audience than one specific eunuch or foreigner, but instead includes all foreigners and eunuchs, and continues to reach out even more widely: “The words of the foreigner and eunuch speaking of exclusion from the community become words of acceptance when the word of God intervenes to unite eunuchs, foreigners, and all (כל, v. 6c) as his people.”⁷

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Polan, *In the Ways of Justice toward Salvation: A Rhetorical Analysis of Isaiah 56-59*, 53-54.

⁷ Ibid., 67.

Another way of thinking about the structure, which incorporates the move from singular to plural, and the reverse ordering of foreigner and eunuch, while also making the prophetic oracle phrasing paramount, is the following:

- A) Thus said the Lord - כה אמר יהוה (vv. 1-2)
- B) Lament of the foreigner - אליאמר בן־הנכר (v. 3a)
- C) Lament of the eunuch - אליאמר הסריס (v. 3b)
- X) Rather, thus says the Lord - כִּי־כֹה אָמַר יְהוָה (v. 4a)
- C) Reassurance for the eunuchs - לסריסים (vv. 4b-5)
- B) Reassurance for the foreigners - ובני הנכר (vv. 6-7)
- A) A declaration of the Lord God - נאם אדני יהוה (v. 8)

Close Reading and Analysis

Verse 1

The first words spoken in Trito-Isaiah, כה אמר יהוה, are commonly known in prophetic writing as the divine messenger formula. It immediately alerts the reader to the fact that the next words will be the Lord's words, and those words will most likely be either words of hope or of condemnation. In this case, the messenger formula found here is known more particularly as a salvation oracle, and throughout the rest of the text Trito-Isaiah reiterates and builds upon the salvation promised in Deutero-Isaiah; that is, the return of the Israelites to their homeland, and the return of the Lord to dwell with and among his people.⁸ This prophetic formula is used again in v. 4, and in a slightly different format in v. 8, both of which will be discussed below.

⁸ Achtemeier, *The Community and Message of Isaiah 56-66: A Theological Commentary*, 33.

Claus Westermann is possibly the only authority who disagrees with the classification of vv. 1, 4 and 8 as containing the messenger formula. He believes that they are not really prophetic words at all, but “merely wear the garb of them.” Because vv. 3-8 seem to be bringing about a new state of being in which eunuchs and foreigners are allowed into the community of Israel, and even into the Temple, which was previously outlawed, Westermann believes that the use of the messenger formula here is a case of “A decision in the realm of sacral law [being] given its sanction by means of a word from God”⁹: “Sanction is conferred on a decision taken purely on the basis of sacral law by dressing it up as a divine oracle.”¹⁰ The other missing element that is usually found in a salvation oracle is the phrase “fear not” (אל־תִּירָא), which typically comes before a message of deliverance.

One sign that v. 1, at least, really does deserve the category of messenger formula and prophetic oracle is the use of the double imperative immediately following, which, while relatively rare, does correspond to other prophetic writings. Indeed, the use of a double imperative here, at the beginning of Trito-Isaiah, “is consistent with the other two major sections of the material, appearing also at 1:2 and 40:1. Proto-, Deutero-, and Trito-Isaiah, thus, all begin with a double imperative.”¹¹ Jill Middlemas points out that double imperatives follow closely the divine messenger formula found in Amos 1:3, Hag. 1:2, Zech. 1:3, and Oba. 1:1. In these cases, she notes, “the divine double imperative is used

⁹ Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66: A Commentary*, 305.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 312.

¹¹ Jill Middlemas, “Trito-Isaiah's Intra- and Internationalization: Identity Markers in the Second Temple Period,” in *Judah and the Judeans in the Achaemenid Period: Negotiating Identity in an International Context*, ed. Oded Lipschitz and Gary N. Knoppers and Manfred Oeming (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 111.

either to announce judgment on recalcitrant foreign nations or to call the community of Israel to a different understanding of activity it should carry out with respect to its deity.”¹² If the latter is the case, and if, as Westermann says, new “sacral laws” are being put into effect in the following verses, perhaps it is not so strange that the messenger formula and the double imperative should begin the unit.

There is a cause and effect relationship that ties together the two major clauses of v. 1. The fulcrum of the transition between the two is the conjunction *כִּי*, which “is not to be understood in a conditional but rather in a causative sense. The community is commanded to keep justice and practice righteousness because (i.e., in light of the fact that) ‘my salvation and my righteousness are about to be revealed.’”¹³ That the break happens at the *athnak* further emphasizes this causal relation. The prophetic word is inspiring action, calling the people not only to expect a miracle, but to prepare for it, to prepare for a deliverance not seen since the exodus from Egypt.

A moment on the word *צדק*, which is translated as “righteousness” in v. 1a and “deliverance” in v. 1b: Achtemeier explains this difference expertly by pointing out that “‘Righteousness’ is, in the Bible, always the fulfillment of the demands of a relationship, and in his deliverance of his chosen people, Yahweh fulfills his covenant with them.”¹⁴

Verse 2

The first word of v. 2, *אשרי*, is translated in the KJV and NIV as “blessed,” and in the NRSV and TNK as “happy.” The root of this word, *אָשַׁר*, means “fortune,” and may

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Schramm, *The Opponents of Third Isaiah: Reconstructing the Cultic History of the Restoration*, 119.

¹⁴ Achtemeier, *The Community and Message of Isaiah 56-66: A Theological Commentary*, 32.

therefore be translated in this case as “fortunate.” The decision to translate the word in agreement with the NRSV and TNK as “happy” rather than “fortunate” comes in connection with the imperatives in v. 1. If the Lord’s people are to act in accordance with those imperatives, they will not be fortunate, because fortune relies on chance, rather than obedient action. The decision against translating the word as “blessed,” stands because the word used more commonly for this concept is בָּרַךְ, which is used in other places in Trito-Isaiah.¹⁵ If the author had meant “blessed,” surely that would have been the word he would have used.

In v. 2, we see a more concrete explanation of the imperatives given in v. 1a. Here, the Lord’s people not only hold fast to the articles of v. 1a, they do it by keeping the Sabbath and avoiding doing evil. Of all the commandments Trito-Isaiah could have referenced in v. 2, the one which stands out as being named concretely is the observation of the Sabbath. This goes to show that, as with other exilic and post-exilic writers, Trito-Isaiah puts emphasis upon Sabbath observance “because such observance has become...a mark of the faithful Jew living among the heathen after the fall of Judah (cf. Exod. 31:12-17P; Jer. 17:19-27; Ezek. 20:12, 20).”¹⁶

Verse 3

In v. 3, two new characters are added who had not previously been mentioned: the foreigner and the eunuch. Additionally, because there seem to be no connecting terms or themes, v. 3 can be read as somewhat separate from the first two verses. If vv. 1-2 act as an introduction to the pericope, v. 3 lays out the problems to be addressed throughout v.

¹⁵ See Isa. 61:9; 65:16; 65:23; 66:3, and 66:12.

¹⁶ Achtemeier, *The Community and Message of Isaiah 56-66: A Theological Commentary*, 34.

4-7, before the conclusion in v. 8. Because of the separation and addition of new characters, “there is insufficient reason to read the opening ו as a connective element; rather the arguments favor it as an emphatic ו distinguishing the two main persons (the foreigner and the eunuch) to whom the message is addressed.”¹⁷

One of the biggest questions that this text raises is the exact meaning of the phrase “foreigner who has joined himself to the Lord.” The word לָוִי, which at its root means “to join” or “to attach,” is used in several instances where gentiles become part of Israel,¹⁸ and so has often been translated as “proselyte.” This definition suggests that the people who are joined to Israel are not the general populace of the land, which is to say; they are not simply “the gentiles.” Rather, they may be specific gentiles who have converted to the practices and beliefs of Judaism, but who are not Jews by blood and by birth, and therefore may have faced some question about whether they might be allowed to participate fully in particular aspects of the community. It is possible that the niphil use here in Isaiah 56:3 is a “technical use” of the niphil participle of לָוִי, as in Esther 9:27,¹⁹ where the word is “proselyte” in the Septuagint. While Blenkinsopp as well as others agree that the phrase “who have joined themselves to the Lord” should be understood as “proselyte,” Middlemas suggests that this argument has led to a false conclusion, namely, “that Trito-Isaiah does not create a universal vision, but concentrates instead only on the

¹⁷ Polan, *In the Ways of Justice toward Salvation: A Rhetorical Analysis of Isaiah 56-59*, 65.

¹⁸ See Isa. 14:1 and Zech. 2:10-11.

¹⁹ Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, “Between Ezra and Isaiah: Exclusion, Transformation, and Inclusion of the ‘Foreigner’ in Post-Exilic Biblical Theology,” in *Ethnicity and the Bible*, ed. Mark G. Brett (Leiden; New York: E.J. Brill, 1996), 139.

role of proselytes and the community.”²⁰ Rather, she says, “proselytism, in this sense, is an issue common to all persons [see “the person” and “the one” in v. 2a], rather than to foreigners and eunuchs alone. So, the issue is not proselytism *per se*, but rather the nature of the community desired by the deity and envisioned by the prophet.” While it may be the case that the word לִוְיִת refers to proselytes (that is, converts) in vv. 3 and 6, that does not mean that this text as a whole may *only ever* refer to proselytes, especially if we take into account the wording of v. 2. If, as both Proto- and Deutero-Isaiah suggest, all nations are to be brought to Israel, then all peoples, all those who follow the directions of vv. 1-2, will necessarily be proselytes in divinely ordained time to come.

The phrase “do not say” is used here twice, once for the foreigner and once for the eunuch, as a dialectical tool to show the problems faced by each group, and to set up an argument which the word of the Lord will contradict in the next verse. This ‘do not say’ admonition is used in multiple places in the Hebrew Scriptures, most notably in wisdom literature, and is made up of several parts: “a) the sage addresses a disciple or a layman; b) he commences with the formula ‘do not say’ which actually means ‘do not think/believe that...’; c) then the sage quotes an erroneous opinion, usually coined in personal terms...; d) then the sage responds, usually introducing his argument with ‘for’ (כִּי).”²¹ This is almost exactly what happens in v. 3, including the כִּי which begins v. 4. However, this is the only place where this admonition is used within an oracle headed by the divine messenger formula. “From a form-critical point of view the discussion formula

²⁰ Middlemas, “Trito-Isaiah’s Intra- and Internationalization: Identity Markers in the Second Temple Period,” 113.

²¹ Alexander Rofe, “The Wisdom Formula ‘Do Not Say...’ and the Angel in Qohelet 5.5,” in *Reading from Right to Left: Essays on the Hebrew Bible in Honour of David J. A. Clines*, ed. David J. A. Clines and J. Cheryl Exum and H. G. M. Williamson (London; New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003), 366.

in Isa. 56:3-7 has lost its original purpose: it no longer serves as a theoretical refutation of an erroneous assumption; here it introduces the words ‘Thus said the Lord,’ which by their very authority resolve the problem.”²² Despite having lost the original purpose, the passing on of wisdom, this formula still acts to teach those who might believe themselves to be outside the realm of the Lord’s care that this is not the case. There is a convenient double meaning that comes out of the translation of this “do not say” formula, which is that although the admonition is given in the third person, and so urges the eunuch or the foreigner himself not to say, it can also be read in English as if the surrounding community should not let the eunuch or the foreigner believe that the thing is true. Though this second person reading is not accurate in terms of the literal Hebrew, because the text itself is spoken to the community we can assume that that community now has the responsibility to remind the foreigner or eunuch of these words, and therefore the meaning amounts to about the same thing.

Verse 4

The ׀ that functions as the end of the ‘do not say’ admonition in v. 3 also acts at the beginning of v. 4 as the creation of a refutation or diametric opposite of the earlier laments. It acts adversatively, as that particular conjunction tends to do when following a negative clause such as the admonitions seen in v. 3. While both the TNK and NRSV translate v. 4a as “For thus says the Lord,” such a translation is not nearly strong enough to show this refutation. Because “the ׀ functions climactically to introduce the Lord’s message, correcting the words of the eunuch and foreigner and offering them both a word

²² Ibid., 369.

of exhortation and promise”²³ instead of their own words of despair, translating the כִּי in v. 4a as “rather” gives a better sense of the strength of the negation.

The phrase “holding fast to my covenant,” preceded by a ו, appears at the end of both vv. 4 and 6. Most translations, including the NRSV and TNK, assume that the ו is coordinative, or conjunctive, translating it as “and.” However, “the repetition of the expression at the end of both instructions to the eunuchs and foreigners may be a sign that it functions as a summary statement of what precedes,” and may instead be a “vav explicativum;” “a concluding statement which brings a preceding list to its resolution.”²⁴ Polan believes that this is the case, since the occurrences of the phrase fit the necessary requirements for a vav explicativum, and judges that the phrase should therefore be translated similarly to a relative clause; “*that is*, holding fast to my covenant.” This interpretation is strengthened by the placement of the atnak before the final two words.

Verse 5

The largest historical problem put forward by vv. 1-8 comes here in v. 5, since there has been no consensus regarding the exact meaning of the phrase “יָד וְשֵׁם.” This can be translated literally into English as “a hand and a name,” and some have made the connection between the use of the word “hand” here and in 2 Samuel 18:18, where Absalom erects a monument (טָ) to his own memory since he was preparing to die childless. John Skinner suspects that v. 5 is a parallel case, and asserts, “There seems no reason to doubt that the promise is to be understood literally.... [T]heir memory shall be perpetuated by a monument erected within the Temple walls; and such a memorial,

²³ Polan, *In the Ways of Justice toward Salvation: A Rhetorical Analysis of Isaiah 56-59*, 66.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 69-70.

testifying to the esteem of the whole community, is better (and more enduring) than sons and daughters.²⁵ This interpretation has been dominant in today's Jewish faith, and one can make a connection between the phrase and the Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum in modern-day Jerusalem. Wright and Chan make a thorough argument for this possibility, tying this verse and the one in 1 Sam. 18 to the creation of memorial steles in the Ancient Near East.²⁶ Their analysis understands v. 5 to be the only promise to eunuchs, as opposed to those who see v. 7b as a promise to both foreigners and eunuchs regarding their ability to worship in the Temple.²⁷ Wright and Chan cite the eunuch's cry ("I am just a dry tree") in v. 3, saying "the eunuchs in Isa 56:3-5 are not concerned with entrance into the community or even participation in the cult... What troubles this group is instead the perennial problem posed by their impotence." "The eunuchs themselves do not enter the temple; rather, the deity grants them a monument there."²⁸

There are two obstacles to understanding the verse in such a literal manner. First of all, it is more than likely that the phrase "יד ושם" is a hendiadys,²⁹ and could therefore be expressed more accurately not as a literal monument, but as "a name like a monument," or "a monumental name." Secondly, we must note that in writings of the same period, including Ezek. 43:7-9, the creation and placement of memorial steles

²⁵ John Skinner, *The Book of the Prophet Isaiah*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: University Press, 1896), 149.

²⁶ Wright and Chan, "King and Eunuch: Isaiah 56:1-8 in Light of Honorific Royal Burial Practices," 119.

²⁷ See Achtemeier, Childs, Middlemas.

²⁸ Wright and Chan, "King and Eunuch: Isaiah 56:1-8 in Light of Honorific Royal Burial Practices," 101.

²⁹ See Westermann p. 314, Childs p. 458.

within the Temple precincts is forbidden.³⁰ This restriction also aligns with the fight against syncretism that shadows Israelite religion from its conception, for although depictions of plants and heavenly beings were allowed near the Ark and in the Temple,³¹ idols (including animal and human forms) were being constantly thrown out and destroyed. Brevard Childs comes to the conclusion, therefore, that “It does not seem likely that a memorial is meant in the sense of Absalom’s stele.” Instead, he notes, “the term *yad* can also signify a ‘place’ (Num. 2:17) or a ‘share’ (2 Sam. 19:44), which would match nicely the larger context of chapter 56.”³² In this case, he would translate the phrase as “a place and a name,” insinuating that the eunuchs now have a position and a seat within both the Israelite community and, for purposes of worship, within the Temple.

Verse 6

Verse 6 begins the Lord’s address to the foreigners in light of their anxiety in v. 3. It is worth mentioning that in v. 6a the form of the word for “joining” is “הגלויים” rather than “הגלוה,” which is used in v. 3a. While v. 3a can easily be translated in the past tense as “the foreigner who has joined himself to the Lord,” v. 6a is an absolute participle, and therefore the tense is ambiguous. “הגלויים” could then, in this case, refer either to those who have already joined themselves to the Lord, or it could refer in a present tense to those who are currently joining themselves.

Though the language used in v. 6a (“to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants”) has been noted to be similar to the language used to

³⁰ Tuell, “The Priesthood of the ‘Foreigner’: Evidence of Competing Polities in Ezekiel 44:1-14 and Isaiah 56:1-8,” 193.

³¹ See Exod. 25:17-22; 1 Kings 6:23-36.

³² Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 458.

describe priests working in the Temple,³³ Polan points out that variations on the word servant (עַבָד) are also found in Trito-Isaiah (65:8-9; 65:13-15; 66:14) to refer simply to “the people who have been faithful to God’s command and inherit his promises.”³⁴ It is possible, then, that Trito-Isaiah is not, in fact, attempting to upset any regulations against foreigners being part of the priesthood, but instead, simply allows foreigners to become part of the community of Israel in the same way as native Israelite laypeople.

Verse 7

The term “לרצון” in the latter part of v. 7a is translated here as “acceptable,” in order to add credence to this acceptance not only of foreigners in the Temple, but also of foreigners as part of sacrificial life. Westermann notes that the term “לרצון” as a whole is a sacrificial one, and points out that the acceptance of a foreigner’s sacrifice “makes them members of the community in full standing... The acceptance of foreigners’ sacrifice means that, properly speaking, they cease to be foreigners.”³⁵ This perfectly sets up the conclusion delivered in v. 7b: “their sacrifices shall be acceptable *because* God’s house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations.”³⁶

³³ See Tuell p.194-195; Sommer p.147.

³⁴ Polan, *In the Ways of Justice toward Salvation: A Rhetorical Analysis of Isaiah 56-59*, 72-73.

³⁵ Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66: A Commentary*, 315.

³⁶ Joachim Schaper, “Inner-Biblical Exegesis of Divine Oracles in Ezekiel 44 and Isaiah 56,” in *Recht Und Ethik Im Alten Testament: Beitrage Des Symposiums "Das Alte Testament Und Die Kultur Der Moderne" Anlässlich Des 100. Geburtstags Gerhard Von Rads (1901-1971) Heidelberg, 18.-21. Oktober 2001*, ed. Gerhard von Rad and Bernard M. Levinson and Eckart Otto (Munster: Lit Verlag, 2004), 133.

Verse 8

Verse 8 begins with another form of the divine messenger formula, usually translated again as “Thus said the Lord God” as in the NRSV, however, the terms are slightly different, and can be better rendered as “A declaration by the Lord God” or “Thus declared the Lord God.” Polan notes that the usual placement of *נאם אדני יהוה* in the divine messenger formula

is at the very end of a verse...while here it is at the beginning of v. 8 and it is immediately followed by a colon which even lengthens the description of the speaker...portraying him as the one who gathers. This departure from the usual manner of concluding draws attention both to God’s message of assurance and to the Lord God who will bring his words to fulfillment.³⁷

Adding to this focus on the nature of the Lord as one who gathers, and his actions as such, it is significant that the root for “to gather,” “קבץ,” is found in only five verses in Trito-Isaiah; here in 56:8, in reference to exiles in 60:4, in reference to sacrificial animals in 60:7, in reference to gathered foods in 62:9, and at the end of the corpus when all nations gather to Jerusalem in 66:18. When the term is used to refer to people, Middlemas notes, “its referents include both exiles and the nations. As a closing statement for the general call in vv. 1-2 and the open invitation to the eunuchs and foreigners in vv. 3-7, it must refer to a wide range of people.”³⁸ Westermann also comments on this term, and the way it is used to refer to a continuous activity on the part of the Lord, which is shown

first by the verb *qibbes* (gather), and then by the drafting of the two clauses v. 8a and b—God, who gathers the dispersed, is to go on to gather others besides. Instead of the expectation of the one great miracle that is to change everything [as

³⁷ Polan, *In the Ways of Justice toward Salvation: A Rhetorical Analysis of Isaiah 56-59*, 45.

³⁸ Middlemas, “Trito-Isaiah’s Intra- and Internationalization: Identity Markers in the Second Temple Period,” 114.

in the Exodus], what we now have is the looking for a gradual bringing in of individuals...The opening of the community to eunuchs and foreigners, too, is made in the context of the promise that Yahweh is to gather the dispersed of Israel—he “gathers” Israel also from those who hitherto have not been able to belong to her.³⁹

³⁹ Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66: A Commentary*, 315.

PART 3
VISIONS OF A NEW COMMUNITY

While we have already briefly examined the identity of the foreigner and the eunuch within Isaiah 56:1-8, much more can be revealed regarding who these people were, what their interaction with the Israelite community was like, and what Trito-Isaiah hoped for this community as a whole. Similarly, while both Sabbath and covenant have been referenced in the text, more must be said to clarify the importance of each concept to the Israelite community, and to specify which, or what kind, of covenant is meant. To whom does Trito-Isaiah refer when he speaks of a house of prayer for *all* people? Did he intend to abrogate part of Torah, and was his vision ever carried out? These exegetical questions help to bridge the gap for us between page and practice, between ancient text and living word.

Foreigners and Eunuchs

The foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, as we have already begun to understand them, are the ones who have in effect joined themselves to Israel by taking on Israelite practices; the one who has “become a proselyte by accepting the symbols of Jewish nationality,” but now perhaps “has reason to fear that his qualifications will be disallowed.”¹ This fear is not altogether unfounded, especially in light of the message of other post-exilic prophets. Chapters 9 and 10 of Ezra show not only the renunciation of

¹ Skinner, *The Book of the Prophet Isaiah*, 148.

marriages between Israelites and gentiles, but also the forced rejection and driving out of all foreign wives and children from the community. In Ezekiel 44, the Lord tells the Israelites, using the same divine messenger formula found in Isaiah 56, that foreigners are no longer allowed in the temple or in the sanctuary. When placing Isaiah 56:1-8 up against Ezekiel 44, the most striking difference is the subject of the verb “to bring.” In Ezek. 44:7 “the chief abomination of the people of Israel...took place ‘when you brought (בהביאכם) the בני נכר [‘foreigner’], uncircumcised of heart and flesh, to be in my sanctuary, to defile my temple.’ But in Isa. 56:7 it is YHWH who says, “I will bring them (והביאותים) to my holy mountain.”² The difference here is an act of the Lord versus a unilateral act by the people. While it may have been wrong in Ezekiel’s context for the people of Israel to bring foreigners into the sanctuary, the Lord himself brings the foreigner into his house in v. 7a of Trito-Isaiah’s oracle.

It is worth noting the difference in treatment of the foreigner in Numbers, Ezekiel and Trito-Isaiah, for in Numbers 15:14-16 the only requirement for foreigners who want to sacrifice to the Lord and participate in the assembly is that they wish to do so, and that they are permanent residents of the land. In Trito-Isaiah, the requirement is that they are foreigners who have chosen to “join themselves to the Lord,” and follow the stipulations of vv. 1-2. In Ezekiel, the whole matter is out of the question. “Isa. 56:3-8 accepts proselytes under certain conditions, while it would appear that the very concept of

² Tuell, “The Priesthood of the ‘Foreigner’: Evidence of Competing Polities in Ezekiel 44:1-14 and Isaiah 56:1-8,” 198.

proselytism is an impossibility for Ezekiel.”³ Skinner sums this up by pointing out that this fear of exclusion on the part of the foreigner

is hardly to be explained by the law of Deut. 23:3-8; for the regulations there laid down apply only to Moabites, Ammonites, Egyptians and Edomites; and the general tendency of the legislation is in favor of the religious rights of proselytes. It is more likely that the immediate cause of apprehension was some manifestation of an exclusive and intolerant spirit amongst the leaders of new Jerusalem.⁴

Whether the foreigner’s fear is that they will be cast out of the community, or whether they will not be allowed to participate in the activity of the new Temple, they have good reason for concern based on the reactions of the other post-exilic prophetic voices.

So, then, what is Trito-Isaiah saying, in regards to inclusion in the priestly ranks of the Temple? Benjamin Sommer argues that “[Isaiah 56:4-7] does not attribute priestly roles to the eunuchs or the foreigners (since they are not said to approach the altar). It merely stresses that their presence and their offerings are welcome on the holy mountain.”⁵ In other words, foreigners are welcome to offer sacrifice in the same manner as other Israelites, but are not allowed so far as the ranks of the priests. Roy Wells disagrees with this analysis and says instead that “In the light of the liturgical functions implied in [v. 6], there is no specific statement that the sacrifices are carried out by cultic personnel on behalf of the aliens [in v. 7]....[T]his scene is entirely consistent with the law concerning sacrificial animals offered by aliens in the Holiness Code (Lev. 22:18-20,

³ Schramm, *The Opponents of Third Isaiah: Reconstructing the Cultic History of the Restoration*, 122.

⁴ Skinner, *The Book of the Prophet Isaiah*, 148.

⁵ Sommer, *A Prophet Reads Scripture: Allusion in Isaiah 40-66*, 147.

24-25).”⁶ However, making an argument from absence based on the lack of priests in Isaiah 56:1-8 is fairly weak, especially given the fact that the Holiness Code in Leviticus which Wells cites is a speech instructing the priests to accept offerings from both Israelites and foreigners. Given what we know about sacrificial offerings prior to the exile, and what we read in Isaiah 56:1-8, there does not seem to be a reason to assume that foreigners would be taking over the role of priests, with the exception of the possibility of priestly language used in v. 6a, as has been noted above. The most likely position seems to be that Trito-Isaiah is not advocating for the acceptance of foreigners into the priestly class, but is rather moving against other post-exilic voices like Ezekiel’s, in the hope that foreigners may once again be allowed to offer sacrifices in the temple like other Israelites-by-blood.

As regards the ability of eunuchs to enter into the new Temple and possibly the priesthood, we must first make a distinction between the two passages that Isaiah 56:1-8 may be said to abrogate. The first is Deut. 23:1, which will be examined at length in following sections. The second is Lev. 21:16-21:

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to Aaron and say: No one of your offspring throughout their generations who has a blemish may approach to offer the food of his God. For no one who has a blemish shall draw near, one who is blind or lame, or one who has a mutilated face or a limb too long, or one who has a broken foot or a broken hand, or a hunchback, or a dwarf, or a man with a blemish in his eyes or an itching disease or scabs or crushed testicles. No descendant of Aaron the priest who has a blemish shall come near to offer the Lord’s offerings by fire; since he has a blemish, he shall not come near to offer the food of his God.

This passage, which deals with the requirements for membership in the priesthood, specifically those of Aaron’s line, is only relevant for Isaiah 56:1-8 if we understand

⁶ Roy D. Wells, Jr., “‘Isaiah’ as an Exponent of Torah: Isaiah 56.1-8,” in *New Visions of Isaiah*, ed. Roy F. Melugin and Marvin A. Sweeney (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 148.

Trito-Isaiah to be arguing for inclusion of eunuchs as priests. There seems to be no reason to understand the passage in this way, primarily because there is no current understanding of the phrase “יד ושם” that would suggest any connection to the priesthood, as the terms used in v. 6a might. Instead, it seems more likely that, as in the case of the “foreigners joined to the Lord,” Trito-Isaiah is advocating for the eunuch’s ability to enter into and offer sacrifices in the new Temple. Trito-Isaiah says only that the Lord has promised the eunuchs a place within the Temple and an everlasting name within the community.

Having thus understood the essential features of the foreigner, and the arguments for and against inclusion of foreigners and eunuchs in the priesthood, we turn now to the experience of the eunuch in the foreign empire. As it turns out, there is some confusion about the references to eunuchs in Greek texts, which give us much of our information about the eunuch’s experience, especially in Persian courts:

[I]n many cases those whom the Greek texts call eunuchs were nothing other than the holders of high court positions in the king’s entourage. It is in fact fairly likely that, as in the Assyrian court, the word had become a court title that did not refer to any particular physical characteristics... The Greek vocabulary itself remains uncertain: which Persian word does *eunuch* indicate? It turns out that sometimes copyists confused *oinokhoos* “cupbearer” with *eunoukhos* “eunuch,” as in the case of Nehemiah.⁷

Nehemiah, a post-exilic writer who has often been referred to as a eunuch, gives us a great example of this kind of confusion. However, there are cases in which we know with a greater amount of certainty that one who is referred to as a eunuch in the court actually did suffer the procedure that would render someone unable to procreate.

Eunuchs were created and placed in positions of power by many of the empires of the near east, most notably the Persian Empire, precisely because cutting off a eunuch’s

⁷ Pierre Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander: A History of the Persian Empire* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2002), 276.

ability to procreate, especially after removing him from his home country, severed any ties he might have to family and community. “Eunuchs were free of any entanglements relating to family solidarity. This situation made them entirely dependent on a powerful master, toward whom they would be fully disposed to manifest unlimited devotion and loyalty.”⁸ Wright and Chan point out that when the Lord promises the eunuchs a place and a name within the Temple and community, then, “YHWH's promise to his faithful eunuchs turns a major symbol of royal power on its head by transferring absolute devotion to the empire, which eunuchs both symbolize and physically embody, to fidelity to YHWH.”⁹ In effect, the Lord displaces the Assyrian, Babylonian or Persian master by inspiring and requiring the eunuch's loyalty, and then rewards the eunuch with a place within the Israelite family as a whole.

Additionally, because the eunuch was a foreigner in a foreign land, as well as someone who could not start a family, the eunuch may have become as much an outsider in Persian society as he was once he returned to Israelite society after the exile, despite his powerful position.¹⁰ Eunuchs were “often stigmatized and represented as being morally and sexually distorted... The book of Esther, which also depicts eunuchs in treacherous roles, seems to participate in this negative assumption about eunuchs (see Esth. 2:21-23).”¹¹ It is possible that Trito-Isaiah was writing with this negative stereotype in mind, and attempts to challenge it: “By addressing the eunuchs' lament,

⁸ Ibid., 270.

⁹ Wright and Chan, “King and Eunuch: Isaiah 56:1-8 in Light of Honorific Royal Burial Practices,” 119.

¹⁰ Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander: A History of the Persian Empire*, 270.

¹¹ Wright and Chan, “King and Eunuch: Isaiah 56:1-8 in Light of Honorific Royal Burial Practices,” 117.

Trito-Isaiah elevates [the eunuch's] status, demonstrating not only to the eunuchs but also to his fellow Jews that YHWH has a deep concern for the eunuchs and their plight."¹²

But what is it that the eunuch's lament requests? As has been mentioned in the close reading of v. 5, Wright and Chan are of the opinion that, based on the cry "I am just a dry tree" in v. 3, the problem is the eunuch's "incapacity to produce progeny and through them to participate with all other Israelites in the future salvation and deliverance of the nation."¹³ If this is the case, the only issue at stake is the eunuch's ability to have children who may eventually participate as full members of Israelite society, and the Lord's promise to them is to be given in the future, rather than a promise of community inclusion that the eunuch can experience in the present.

Westermann offers an answer which affects the eunuch both in the present and in the future by connecting his lament to Israel's great forefather: "This lament points in the same direction as Abraham's in Gen. 15:2: life without posterity is life without blessing."¹⁴ Furthermore, "Because blessing cannot be bestowed upon a man who is unable to have issue, he may not take part in worship." In response to this cry from the eunuch, that he is without children, without blessing, without a home to call his own, the Lord promises him not only immortality through a name that will function as children do for other Israelites, but also a place to worship in the community where he now lives. Blenkinsopp points out, building on this line of thought, that "Since competence to participate in and, of course, support the cult [as seen in v. 5], also determined civic

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 102.

¹⁴ Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66: A Commentary*, 313.

status, including title to real estate (cf. Ezek. 11.14-17),”¹⁵ eunuchs may, through Tristram’s oracle, be given the right to participate as a full member of the community, and even to own land. Additionally, that phrase “in my house and within my walls,” implies “membership in good standing in the Jerusalem cult community (‘in my house’), with which civic status—that is, status ‘within the walls,’ meaning, in the city—was at that time inseparably united.”¹⁶

C. E. Hammock breaks down the bias against the eunuch, and follows

Westermann’s lead in tying him to Abraham:

In the ancient Judean purity ranking of individuals, the eunuch ranked near the bottom, above only the non-Judean...Purity, however, is not the issue being addressed in relation to the eunuch of Isaiah 56:1-8. Purity functions as a religious ideological barrier, but it is not the real reason for his exclusion. What Isaiah 56:1-8 is addressing is the historical prejudice against childlessness and the definition of the childless as disloyal to the community, and one would also suspect the same motive underlying the laws against homosexuality. Isaiah 56:1-8 makes purity irrelevant. By declaring the observance of Sabbath and ethical behavior as the only requirements to be a Judean, this passage nullifies purity as a marker of community membership...Even so, this does not resolve the problem of his childlessness...The promise made to the eunuch is cast in the framework of the traditional hope for children with the assumption that a person’s name will survive in the community through offspring. The name that the eunuch receives will function in the same way as children. For the eunuch a life without offspring is a life without blessing (this is the same issue for Abraham in Genesis 15:2).¹⁷

In response to the prospect of a solitary life without blessing, the Lord acts for the eunuchs who cry out to him at the beginning of Israel’s new age, just as he acted for Abraham so many years ago.

¹⁵ Blenkinsopp, “Second Isaiah--Prophet of Universalism,” 95.

¹⁶ Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 56-66: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 139.

¹⁷ C. E. Hammock, “Isaiah 56:1-8 and the Redefining of the Restoration Jewish Community,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 30 (2000): 51.

Sabbath and Covenant

Of all the changes in the worship life of Israel during and immediately after the exile, one of the most fundamentally transformed was the move from worship in a particular location to worship in a particular time. The importance of Sabbath to the exiled Israelites has already been discussed, but in the context of Isaiah 56:1-8 we must come to understand it as at least one of, if not the only, requirement for the post-exilic community:

Respect for the Sabbath now permits entrance into the house of the Lord in the same way that profanation of the Sabbath demands exclusion [Exod. 31:14]. After their arrival into the land, the first generations had not respected the Sabbath. Respect for the Sabbath must be seen as the difference between these generations and those who returned after the exile. It is now the main law that permits the chosen and the servants to enter [and it] seems to include the eunuch and the foreigner.¹⁸

In including the foreigner and the eunuch in the requirement for Sabbath observance, Trito-Isaiah is, in effect, pointing towards their full participation in the community; all people must observe the Sabbath. There is no longer one rule for the Israelite and one for the foreigner (and eunuch); they are alike before the Lord. Middlemas continues in this vein in saying that “the acceptance of the eunuchs and foreigners depends on their observance of Sabbath worship and behaving according to the principles acceptable to Yahweh. To them is applied another criterion, however: commitment to the covenant (*berit*).”¹⁹ Polan would disagree with this assessment, as laid out in the analysis of v. 4 above, and would say instead that the covenant *is* the observance of the Sabbath and the acceptance of the Lord’s principles. So what is meant by “my covenant” in vv. 4 and 6?

¹⁸ Bernard Gosse, “Sabbath, Identity and Universalism Go Together after the Return from Exile,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 29, no. 3 (2005): 367.

¹⁹ Middlemas, “Trito-Isaiah’s Intra- and Internationalization: Identity Markers in the Second Temple Period,” 112-113.

Freedman and Miano suggest that there are two kinds of covenants between God and humans in the Hebrew Bible. “The first type is where the terms and stipulations of the covenant are imposed upon the human party by the Divine Being. It is a covenant of human obligation and is best exemplified by the covenant made with Israel at Mount Sinai (Exodus 19-24, 32-34).”²⁰ This first category of covenant is one wherein the agreement depends on the actions and behavior of the people, and it can only continue as long as the people keep up their end of the agreement. In the second type of covenant, the Lord must meet certain conditions, and the covenant is not dependent on what Israel does. Israel does not force the Lord to make this kind of covenant, and in most cases the people involved do not even ask for such a thing. It is the Lord who makes the second kind of covenant with people freely, out of love.

Since the suzerain in the biblical examples is God, we may call these agreements covenants of divine commitment, and they are unconditional. They find their principle illustration in the covenant made with Abraham in Genesis 15, where Abraham is granted a gift, but is not, on that occasion, put under any obligation.²¹

Despite this difference in classification between the Mosaic Covenant given at Sinai and the Abrahamic Covenant, both have similar essential elements: “1) promise of population/prosperity, 2) promise of land/property, and 3) promise to become the channel or source through which the nations would seek divine blessings.”²²

For the eunuchs, who lament their inability to sire any children, and for the foreigners who are the post-exilic versions of the “wandering Aramean” who fathered the

²⁰ David Noel Freedman and David Miano, “People of the New Covenant,” in *The Concept of the Covenant in the Second Temple Period*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Jacqueline C. R. De Roo (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2003), 7.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

²² *Ibid.*, 10.

nation of Israel, both kinds of covenant are of considerable importance. It is the latter type, the unconditional covenant from the Lord, to which they must appeal, not knowing whether they will be heard, and if the Lord hears them it will be because of a love they could not hope to earn. At the same time, it is the former kind of covenant, the one that requires something of them, that the Lord initiates, calling them to continue keeping the Sabbath, choosing the things which please him, and being his servants, in exchange for a promise of an eternal name in the place of children, acceptance and blessing in the Temple, and a position in the Lord's community. (It is this pairing of the promise of land and children to Abraham and to Israel that rumbles beneath the pairing of the eunuch and the foreigner in Trito-Isaiah; "This pairing links social, economic and political motives surrounding land and children to Judean identity and group membership."²³) In a way, the covenant that is referenced in vv. 4 and 6 is really a renewal of a simplified Mosaic covenant with people who have previously not been allowed to make such a commitment.

What the words "my covenant" in vv. 4 and 6 most probably do not reference is the covenant of circumcision: "Sabbath observance and not circumcision is here the criterion of membership in the community."²⁴ However, Blenkinsopp notes, it is strange that neither Trito-Isaiah nor Ezra-Nehemiah address the importance of circumcision at any point.

This means that our only point of reference for what "my covenant" might be is contained within vv. 4 and 6 themselves, as well as the stipulations given in vv. 1-2. Westermann ties the two sets together by pointing out that "the only real indication of

²³ Hammock, "Isaiah 56:1-8 and the Redefining of the Restoration Jewish Community," 47.

²⁴ Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 56-66: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 135.

whether a man truly holds to ‘justice and righteousness,’ whether he is truly devout, is strict observance of the Sabbath.”²⁵ Ezekiel seems to hold to the same position, that observance of the Sabbath constitutes the covenant, when he writes, “...hallow my sabbaths that they may be a sign between me and you, so that you may know that I the Lord am your God.”²⁶ Blenkinsopp believes that this is not the first time in Israelite history when the Sabbath has been treated as the essence of the covenant:

The fact that Sabbath observance can stand, by metonymy, for covenant observance has roots in a particular tradition of holy history. At the conclusion of the work of constructing the wilderness sanctuary, observance of Sabbath was enjoined in imitation of the Sabbath of God following the creation of the world, and its observance was described as a perpetual covenant (*berit olam*, Exod. 31:12-17).²⁷

With all this in mind, we must conclude that Polan’s position on the text of vv. 4 and 6 is correct; that is, that the phrase “holding fast to my covenant” is a summary of the preceding list for each group. He affirms that “The word to eunuchs in v. 4 mentions observing the sabbath, choosing that in which the Lord delights, and concludes with holding fast to the covenant,” therefore, “both the keeping of the sabbath and deciding to act according to what delights the Lord are expressive of adherence to a relationship in covenant,”²⁸ and the same may be said of the treatment of the foreigners in v. 6.

A House of Prayer for All People

One of the most common conclusions drawn from Isaiah 56:1-8 is that it exemplifies an attempt to change the nature of the Israelite community from a group

²⁵ Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66: A Commentary*, 310.

²⁶ Ezek. 20:20.

²⁷ Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 56-66: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 135.

²⁸ Polan, *In the Ways of Justice toward Salvation: A Rhetorical Analysis of Isaiah 56-59*, 69.

based on ethnicity to a collection of people centered around a common confession. Because many of the verbs in the passage, especially in vv. 4 and 6, are voluntary, such as having “chosen” the things that please the Lord and “loving” his name, one could argue, as Westermann does, that “membership of the community which worships Yahweh is now based upon resolve, a free affirmation of this God and his worship. No longer is [the community] thought of in national but in individual terms. The chosen people has turned into the confessing community.”²⁹ Blenkinsopp agrees, saying that Trito-Isaiah shows in 56:1-8 that “Incorporation and membership are determined not on ethnic or national considerations but on a profession of faith and a level of moral performance compatible with it.”³⁰ This is a convincing conclusion, especially for those who come from a Christian theological background, as it points the way forward to a new covenant in Jesus Christ that welcomes all people based on their willingness to confess Jesus as Lord.

The problem with this conclusion is that it does not take into account what we now know about the concept of ethnicity in the ancient world. Cristophe Nihan directly refutes Blenkinsopp’s belief stated above, and instead asserts that “While biblical scholars often appear to have a narrow understanding of ‘ethnicity’ as consisting of genealogy alone, ethnicity actually always encompasses biological as well as cultural aspects.”³¹ While the modern mind has come to understand the concept of ethnicity as genetic and biologically inherited, the ancient Greeks, the originators of the term *ἔθνος*,

²⁹ Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66: A Commentary*, 313.

³⁰ Blenkinsopp, “Second Isaiah--Prophet of Universalism,” 95.

³¹ Nihan, “Ethnicity and Identity in Isaiah 56-66,” 92-93.

categorized groups of people based on many different factors, including their biological origin, but also taking into account customs, norms, political systems, and religious practices.³² The Israelites, therefore, were ethnically the combination of Israelite biology, the laws for conduct found in scripture, the political system that was headed by a monarch until the Assyrian and Babylonian takeovers, and the people who worshiped the Lord God of Israel, among other qualifiers. Therefore, Nihan says,

[Trito-Isaiah] does *not* represent the transition from a community based on blood ties to a community based on voluntary membership... It would be more accurate to say that ethnicity remains the basis of that community; but the dispute in [Trito-Isaiah] is about *how* Judean ethnicity is defined. *Ancestry* alone no longer suffices for full membership in "Israel:" observance of central Judean ethnic markers, paradigmatically, the Sabbath (56:2, 4, 6; 58:13-12; 66:23-24)...are now even more significant.³³

In speaking the Lord's welcoming word to foreigners and eunuchs, while also emphasizing the importance of observing the Sabbath and doing the things that please the Lord, Trito-Isaiah is not attempting to turn the Israelites into a "confessing community," where admittance is based on a creed shared in common. Rather, he was arguing against those like Ezekiel who were apparently attempting to constrict the ethnicity of the Israelites to blood and biology alone. Trito-Isaiah's oracle in 56:1-8 calls for the full inclusion of eunuchs and foreigners on the basis that their joining to the Lord and keeping the covenant transforms them into true ethnic Israelites. He does not appear to negate the role of biology in the creation of what it means to be a member of Israel, but he does downplay its necessity, and insists that the Lord says those who have all the earmarks of

³² For more on this subject see Steve Mason, "Jews, Judaeans, Judaizing, Judaism: Problems of Categorization in Ancient History," *Journal for the Study of Judaism: In the Persian Hellenistic & Roman Period* 38, no. 5/4 (2007).

³³ Nihan, "Ethnicity and Identity in Isaiah 56-66," 92-93.

being an Israelite *except* for the bloodline, or ability to carry on that bloodline, will be fully included in the new Israelite community.

Another common conclusion in the study of Isaiah 56:1-8 is that Trito-Isaiah is creating a universalistic model wherein all people are allowed into the community of Israel, unconditionally. This is not strictly true, because although v. 2 calls out to all persons (the *enosh* and the *ben adam*³⁴), and v. 7 says the Lord's house will be "a house of prayer for all peoples," there are always specifications that require certain kinds of action, especially as laid out in vv.1-2, 4 and 6. We can begin to understand why specifications for behavior are necessary when we remember that for the people of the exile "a direct correlation is made between the transgression of the people and the delay of Yahweh's salvation....[T]he failure of the deity to return is based on the actions of the people."³⁵ Therefore, Trito-Isaiah is not suggesting "'universalism' in the modern meaning of the word,"³⁶ but instead means to widen and clarify the boundaries of inclusion. Trito-Isaiah's beginning oracle "is not a simple welcoming without responsibility; it is a thoughtful welcoming that seeks to incorporate the foreigner into the Yahwism that [Trito-Isaiah] supported. More specifically, it is an integration that seeks to show [the outsider] how to worship as an Israelite."³⁷

³⁴ On this phrase see Jill Middlemas, "Trito-Isaiah's Intra- and Internationalization: Identity Markers in the Second Temple Period," *ibid.*, 111-113.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 118-119.

³⁶ Gosse, "Sabbath, Identity and Universalism Go Together after the Return from Exile," 369.

³⁷ Flynn, "A House of Prayer for All Peoples'--the Unique Place of the Foreigner in the Temple Theology of Trito-Isaiah," 11.

Abrogation and Fulfillment

Since at least 1985, when Herbert Donner published his work *Ein Abrogationsfall innerhalb des Kanons Implikationen und Konsequenzen*, there has been a question of whether or not the acceptance of the eunuch in Isaiah 56:1-8 should be read as a direct contradiction of Deuteronomy 23:1, which says, “No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord.” Donner argued that Isaiah 56:1-8 was the only place in scripture where there was “an abrogation in the strict sense of the word, ‘abrogation’ being a technical term coined in Roman law that indicates the public, authoritative abolition of a law or custom.”³⁸ He believed that prior to Trito-Isaiah’s oracle, the practice of prohibiting eunuchs from the Israelite community was upheld, but that with the Lord’s words to the eunuch in Isaiah 56:3-5, Trito-Isaiah intentionally destroyed the prohibition of Deut. 23:1.

Many scholars followed him in this belief, including Westermann, who said that Isaiah 56:4-5 show that “the old regulation given in Deut. 23:2 is cancelled. Henceforth the eunuch is expressly and solemnly granted a place in the community which worships Yahweh.”³⁹ Trito-Isaiah would not be the first prophet to reinterpret the law, even if this is the only example of such an abrogation. Achtemeier compares Isaiah 56:1-8 to other parts of the Isaiah corpus: “On the basis of a new Word from God, [Proto-Isaiah] had earlier reinterpreted cultic law (1:10-17), and he had extended the first commandment to apply to foreign alliances and military weapons (31:1),”⁴⁰ and both Proto- and Deutero-

³⁸ Schaper, “Inner-Biblical Exegesis of Divine Oracles in Ezekiel 44 and Isaiah 56,” 133.

³⁹ Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66: A Commentary*, 313.

⁴⁰ Achtemeier, *The Community and Message of Isaiah 56-66: A Theological Commentary*, 35-36.

Isaiah share with Trito-Isaiah the idea of all peoples gathering to Israel, despite the exclusion of foreigners shown in parts of the law.⁴¹

The main problem with interpreting Isaiah 56:1-8 as an abrogation of Deut. 23:1 is that, though Deuteronomy must have been known by Isaiah, “the two texts do not share a single term in common.”⁴² The term סריס, translated as “eunuch,” does not show up in Deut. 23:1, and none of the words used to describe the castration in Deut. 23:1 seem to have any connection to the terms in Isaiah 56:1-8. Frederick Gaiser believes this can be explained by a simple change in terminology over time, and that Trito-Isaiah chose to use a term that was more commonly used in his context, and would therefore be more recognizable to readers, than the terms used in Deut. 23:1. He points out that “An interest in ‘eunuchs’ is not limited to chapter 56. The same term סריסים shows up in 39:7 (and only there), where we learn that some of Hezekiah's sons ‘shall be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon.’”⁴³ Nihan disagrees, and says that on the basis that the two texts lack any connecting language, “the relationship between Isaiah 56 and Deuteronomy 23 should not be identified with an instance of ‘inner-biblical revision,’” or abrogation.⁴⁴ Instead, he believes, Isaiah 56 is more likely to be a response to the exclusivist polemics of Ezra-Nehemiah or Ezekiel. However, even if Trito-Isaiah did not deliberately attempt to abrogate the law found in Deut. 23:1, the oracle in Isaiah 56:1-8 does effectively place eunuchs within the congregation of Israel and the assembly of the Lord by making their

⁴¹ Achtemeier cites the following verses on this subject: Isaiah 2:2-4; 14:1; 19:19-25; 42:1-4; 44:5; 45:22-23; 49:6.

⁴² Nihan, “Ethnicity and Identity in Isaiah 56-66,” 75-77.

⁴³ Gaiser, “A New Word on Homosexuality? Isaiah 56:1-8 as Case Study,” 286.

⁴⁴ Nihan, “Ethnicity and Identity in Isaiah 56-66,” 75-77.

intentional joining, or conversion, to Israel more important than any personal physical attribute.

We must ask, finally, why the new community of Israel after the return from exile never looked the way Trito-Isaiah envisioned that it would. Much of the information that we have concerning the restoration period prior to the reign of Alexander the Great comes from the scrolls of Ezra-Nehemiah, and while it speaks about the building of the Second Temple and the renewal of the city of Jerusalem, Trito-Isaiah's positive attitude toward the eunuch and the foreigner are nowhere to be seen.⁴⁵ Instead, rulings became more exclusive and regimented, and of all the pieces of the covenant which Ezra-Nehemiah believed to be most important to the survival and righteousness of Israel, the only one that appears in Isaiah 56:1-8 is the observance of the Sabbath.⁴⁶

Some scholars believe that Trito-Isaiah's vision of a new community never came about because Israel eventually regained enough power, through the backing of Persian and subsequent empires, to force their practices and beliefs on the surrounding gentiles, and therefore no longer had to find a way to build up their own ranks through inclusion, and thus eventually had no need for a philosophy of conversion.⁴⁷ This may account for the treatment of foreigners in the days of Ezra-Nehemiah and later periods, but it hardly answers the question of inclusion for the eunuchs. As has been mentioned before, there was once speculation that Nehemiah himself was a eunuch, but most linguists and historians now discount that argument.

⁴⁵ Bezalel Porten, "History: From the Destruction to Alexander," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, 2nd ed., vol. 9 (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007).

⁴⁶ See Nehemiah 10:28-39.

⁴⁷ Hammock, "Isaiah 56:1-8 and the Redefining of the Restoration Jewish Community," 56.

Westermann, who doubts that Isaiah 56:1-8 is a salvation oracle in the first place, claims, “Trito-Isaiah’s proclamation of salvation was not directly fulfilled, especially in the matter of the details in his description of the era of salvation to come. The failure to be fulfilled, which throughout the Bible determines the relationship between prophecy and fulfillment, makes itself especially felt in this case.”⁴⁸ However most scholars, like Blenkinsopp, believe that the text of Trito-Isaiah is largely eschatological:

[E]verything in 56-66 is decisively oriented to the future. ... This refers in the first place to the moral life of the individual and community, which is clearly affirmed right from the outset (56:1). God will appear with power, and the power of God is essentially the power to overcome evil. Projecting the future can be delusive and self-deceptive, but it can also give meaning and direction to the present action. ... While the future intervention presented in Isa. 56-66 is, literally, an act of God, its effects lie for the most part within the bounds of historical plausibility, including physical reconstruction, freedom from oppression, and the repopulation of province and city with immigrants from the diaspora. On the whole, then, the world view of chs. 56-66 is best described as that of prophetic eschatology but with elements that serve as material for the divinely scripted apocalyptic dramas of the Greco-Roman period.⁴⁹

As Blenkinsopp points out, much of the prophecy in Trito-Isaiah requires the action of the Lord in order to be fulfilled. That said, if Isaiah 56:1-8 does fall under the heading of eschatological prophecy that gives direction to present action, then the issue is not so much a question of why it has not yet been fulfilled (since that can be known only by the Lord), as much it is why communities who hold these texts sacred have not made more of an effort to fulfill the pieces that do lie within the boundaries of human time and ability.

⁴⁸ Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66: A Commentary*, 308.

⁴⁹ Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 56-66: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 89.

PART 4

LIVING COMMUNITIES IN ACTION

When the remnant of Israel came back to the land the Lord had promised them after years of subjugation and displacement, the task of rebuilding all that had been destroyed must have seemed nearly impossible. Their numbers had been severely diminished, there was no temple in Jerusalem, and the communal identity that had been reshaped during their years in exile now had to stand the test of time in common use. Modern religious communities also struggle with living in a pluralistic context that challenges one's perception of identity, and most continue to deal with the prospect of that community shrinking. The voice of Isaiah 56:1-8 can speak particularly into the experience of Christians and Jews, for whom this text is especially significant, when it comes to identity in covenant, inclusion in that covenant, and action in expectation of God's revealing work. As communities who endeavor to be faithful to scripture, we may learn from each other how best to "promote justice and practice righteousness."

Identity through Covenant

In analyzing Isaiah 56:1-8, we came to the conclusion that for Trito-Isaiah, the meaning of the word ברית (covenant) means the combination of Sabbath observance and choosing the things in which the Lord delights. For modern Christians and Jews, the word "covenant" is not as narrowly defined, and can refer to a number of different covenants (the Noahide covenant, Abrahamic covenant, Sinai/Mosaic covenant, etc.). Covenant, as

a whole, is something that Jews and Christians have in common; “Judaism and Christianity are covenantal faiths. Both spiritual traditions understand themselves to be in a covenantal relationship with God.”¹ For both communities, their particular perception of belonging to a covenant defines that group’s identity. For example, the covenant the Lord makes with Abraham in Genesis chapter 12 is, like all forms of covenant, “particularistic, forming an exclusive relationship between the parties.”² That is to say, by making a covenant with Abraham, the Lord was by default making a promise to a particular people at the expense of any other group. As the father of the Jewish people, Abraham passed on this covenant to modern-day Jews, but since the time of Paul of Tarsus, Christians have also seen themselves as inheritors of the promise to Abraham as the branch grafted on to the covenant through Jesus Christ.³

Through its particularity, a covenant can create a sense of identity for a people. Isaiah 56:1-8 calls those who would join to the Lord and to the community of Israel and requires that they promote justice, practice righteousness, observe the Sabbath and keep from doing evil, all under the heading of holding fast to the covenant. Trito-Isaiah intends for those to be the earmarks of the new people of Israel after the restoration, and by exemplifying those characteristics, the people of Israel will be set apart from all others: they will be known as the ones who hold fast to the covenant.

Modern-day Jews will recognize these requirements, as they are rooted in the Mosaic covenant, whose 613 *mitzvot* are still upheld to varying degrees in Jewish

¹ Eugene B. Korn, “One God, Many Faiths: A Jewish Theology of Covenantal Pluralism,” in *Two Faiths, One Covenant?: Jewish and Christian Identity in the Presence of the Other*, ed. Eugene Korn and John Pawlikowski (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005), 147.

² Ibid.

³ See Romans 11:17-24.

communities today, whether they be Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, or another faction.

Jews today can still say,

Just as blessings extend from God to creation and return from creatures to God, in recognition of his grace, closing an arc of intimacy between creature and Creator, so the Sabbath covenant becomes a commitment, through which we acknowledge God's gifts and accept his sovereignty. Sin and disloyalty are figured as breaches of that covenant (Deut. 17:2). And if the covenant is a marriage bond (Prov. 2:17), its betrayal is adultery. So we are asked to tie a little fringe on the corners of our garments, to remind us to be faithful, not just in thought but in deed, to walk in God's ways, as spelled out now in his commandments.⁴

This holding to the Mosaic law is, for many Jews, the thing which still sets them apart from other peoples and binds them together as a community, across nations and continents. Obedience to covenantal law creates a group identity that reaches across time.

For modern Christians, Catholic and Protestant, the term "covenant" is often preceded by the word "new." This is based on texts such as Hebrews 8, which says "But Jesus has now obtained a more excellent ministry, and to that degree he is the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted through better promises. For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no need to look for a second one."⁵

Hebrews then quotes Jeremiah 31:31-34, which says that a new covenant will be made with Israel, and then closes with the phrase "In speaking of 'a new covenant,' he has made the first one obsolete. And what is obsolete and growing old will soon disappear."⁶

Based on these words attributed to Paul of Tarsus, early Christian writers such as Ignatius of Antioch wrote, "It is outlandish to proclaim Jesus Christ and practice Judaism, which

⁴ Lenn E. Goodman, "The Covenant and Religious Ethics Today," in *Two Faiths, One Covenant?: Jewish and Christian Identity in the Presence of the Other*, ed. Eugene Korn and John Pawlikowski (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005), 133.

⁵ Heb. 8:6-7.

⁶ Heb. 8:13.

has now come to an end. For where there is Christianity there cannot be Judaism. For Christ is one, in whom every nation that believes, and every tongue that confesses, is gathered unto God.”⁷

The problem with Ignatius’ exegesis of Hebrews 8 is that Paul himself did not believe that the “old” Mosaic covenant was no longer of use, and he certainly did not believe that Jews and Judaism were dispensable.⁸ Though Paul has often been blamed for this kind of theology,

Paul takes issue, not with the Law itself, but with Israel’s inability to keep it (Gal. 3:10; Rom. 2:17-24; 7:14). . . . Paul knows the practical impossibility of maintaining the covenant relationship by human effort alone. Yet, the moral element of the relationship between God and humanity, the necessity for obedience, he does not abandon. The covenants of human obligation are inescapable. . . . [Paul] believes that a new covenant has been inaugurated between God and a special community, one that he sees as the true “Israel,” but looks forward to its actual realization sometime in the future. Under this arrangement, the machinery of justice by which the provisions of the covenant were enforced would no longer be required. However, there is still continuity between the Sinai covenant and the covenant in Christ. Accepting the traditional view, Paul sees the Abrahamic covenant as the foundation upon which the obligatory covenants are built and upon which the new covenant is built (Gal. 3:15-18). His teaching is distinguished by a redefinition of the covenant boundaries so that others besides the one ethnic group may be included in the arrangement.⁹

This extension of the covenant will sound familiar, since Trito-Isaiah also attempted to formulate a community based on covenant that might reach to those outside Israel and welcome them in. The covenant in Christ which Paul describes does not mean that obedience to the Lord’s will is no longer necessary, but in requiring only that one confess Jesus Christ as Lord, Christianity makes the great leap to becoming a confessing

⁷ Ignatius of Antioch as quoted in Anders Runesson, “Extending or Restricting the Covenant? Abraham and the People of God in Christian Tradition,” *Lexington Theological Quarterly (Online)* 44, no. 1 (2011): 10.

⁸ See Romans 10-11.

⁹ Freedman and Miano, “People of the New Covenant,” 24.

community, which Trito-Isaiah never made. Therefore, with the emphasis on confession of belief in Christ, Christians have their own covenantal identity that sets them apart from other peoples, just as surely as the observance of the Mosaic law indicates one's Jewish identity.

Despite having different covenantal identities, we do share common callings in the world. The covenantal practices shown in Isaiah 56:1-8 are just as relevant for Christians as they are for Jews. Though Christians do not believe that obedience to Mosaic law is required for salvation, still, Christians are called to do good works *because of that salvation*, as Paul explains: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, *created in Christ Jesus for good works*, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.”¹⁰ Christians are called to promote justice, as we can see in the teachings of Jesus when he rebuked hypocrites, saying “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others.”¹¹ Christians are also called to practice righteousness, as shown when Jesus teaches, “strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness,”¹² and “unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”¹³

¹⁰ Eph. 2:8-10, emphasis mine.

¹¹ Matt. 23:23.

¹² Matt. 6:33.

¹³ Matt. 5:20.

In the same way, although Christians do not observe the Sabbath according to the stipulations of the Mosaic law, one day of the week is still celebrated as a day of worship and praise to the Lord. In the teachings of the Protestant reformer Martin Luther, we find that

[a]lthough the Sabbath commandment as law has been abrogated, it is not irrelevant for the Christian community....there is continuing social and cultic significance in the Sabbath, namely, that “man-servants and maid-servants who have attended to their work and trades the whole week long” should have a day for rest and refreshment, and that people be given the time and opportunity for public worship....The Sabbath commandment is “violated” by those who frivolously “neglect to hear God’s Word”...as well as by those who only appear to listen to the Word but do not do so seriously with an earnest attempt to learn and retain that Word.¹⁴

Similarly, John Calvin, in attempting to clarify the Christian movement of Sabbath from the last day of the week (Saturday) to the first (Sunday), composed sermons explaining that

the first day of the week is peculiarly appropriate for worship because it was the day of the Lord’s resurrection in which the purpose and fulfillment of true rest are to be found....In the new order ushered in by grace, “keeping the Sabbath” means first of all a constant, daily resting from sinful deeds. Christians must continue to observe the “substance” of the commandments by suppressing their own will and works and by opening themselves to the will and work of God....a Christian “keeping of the Sabbath” requires secondly a literal, physical cessation of daily labor on the Lord’s Day, not as an end in itself but to provide time for worship of God....Calvin then elaborates on the social implications of the requirement that rest be granted to servants, beasts of burden, and sojourners. He clearly regards this obligation as applicable to the Christian community as well as to ancient Israel.¹⁵

The views put forward by these two reformers obviously do not speak for the whole of Christian history and experience relating to the Sabbath, but they do help to clarify the

¹⁴ John H. Primus, “Sunday: The Lord’s Day as a Sabbath--Protestant Perspectives on the Sabbath,” in *The Sabbath in Jewish and Christian Traditions*, ed. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, Daniel J. Harrington, and William H. Shea (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 100-101.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 105-107.

idea of the Christian observance of Sabbath as something that is celebrated not because it is mandated, but because it is given by grace. Both Luther and Calvin assert that although observance of the Sabbath is no longer necessary, it is a gift given by the Lord, and should be kept as such. In this way, Christians may be able to understand and practice their own way of keeping the Sabbath, as prompted in Isaiah 56:1-8.

By learning about our own covenantal obligations, Christians and Jews can each forge a sense of self that resists any syncretism we face in our pluralistic world. By learning about the covenantal practices of the other, Christians and Jews can find the places where we might meet in the middle in order to promote justice and practice righteousness in the here and now. Though our methods may be different, the covenants with the Lord to which we adhere give us, as communities of faith, identity, strength, and hope.

Welcoming the Outcasts

In coming to understand the Jewish and Christian views of covenant that define our religious identity, we have also spoken briefly about the difference between the confessional community of the Christian and the ethnic community of the Jew. Jewish theologian Will Herberg explains this difference by saying,

“the Jew is born a Jew, the Christian is born a pagan and becomes a Christian through accepting Christ. The Christian’s religious experience, therefore, normatively begins with personal confrontation and a personal act of faith, even if (as in infant baptism) that act is vicariously performed by a sponsor. For the Jew, however, religious existence is normatively corporate from the beginning, since the Jew is born into the covenant. (The pagan convert to Judaism constitutes the exception that, so to speak, proves the rule, since the pagan who becomes a Jew,

like the pagan who becomes a Christian, but in contrast to the Jew born a Jew, begins with a personal act of faith and its appropriate ritual expression.)”¹⁶

This illustration of differences aligns clearly with the kinds of community described in Isaiah 56:1-8: first, there are the Jews born Jews, the ones returning from exile to their native land as a community. Then there are the foreigners and the eunuchs, the proselytes who do not wish to be separated from the Lord or from the community, whose actions show their willingness to join themselves to Israel. In modern-day Christianity, proselytes are welcomed into the confessing community through a personal act, or confession of faith. In modern-day Judaism, conversion is dealt with in different ways by different denominations, but all conversion stems from the proselyte’s confirmation of intent to act in accordance with the Mosaic covenant as understood by that particular community.

Unfortunately, as in Trito-Isaiah’s day, there are certain groups of people, analogous to the eunuch and the foreigner, who are not welcomed in modern Christian and Jewish communities. For Christians, one issue currently debated is the acceptance of people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender in our churches. For Jews, the issue of the “foreigner” is still somewhat relevant, in that Judaism still retains much of its focus on ethnicity, and issues surrounding the acceptance of non-ethnic Jews can be precarious, especially for communities in the State of Israel.

Since the loss of over six million Jews in the Shoah during World War II, some Jewish authorities have suggested that Judaism as a whole should initiate a more concerted effort toward the conversion of non-Jews, in order to make up for the great loss in population. Though there have been moves toward making conversion more feasible,

¹⁶ Will Herberg, “Judaism and Christianity: Their Unity and Difference,” in *Jewish Perspectives on Christianity*, ed. Fritz A. Rothschild (New York: Continuum, 1996), 249.

especially in the Reform movement where circumcision of converts is no longer required, overall programs supporting conversion have been “blocked by the aversion to proselyting that has been traditional since the Middle Ages; and unwillingness, in fact if not in theory, to accept gentile members; and a general ambivalence to gentiles because of recurring anti-Jewish activities, particularly in Russia and the Middle East.”¹⁷

Reactions toward those who have already converted is also mixed, with some communities refusing to welcome the convert as a “true” Jew, which may, Joseph Rosenbloom suggests, indicate an individual’s inability to integrate him or herself into Jewish culture, “but it also reflects the remarkable influence of ethnicity among Jews, in spite of an extremely high level of acculturation.”¹⁸ In communities where Jewish converts are seen as more fully incorporated, he notes, they are often described as “‘more Jewish than anyone else.’ This indicates the feeling that such converts have not only become acculturated to Jewish ways but have also been detached from gentile clique groups.” These proselytes who have disengaged themselves from any gentile identity in order to become more fully integrated into their Jewish community are often individuals who have converted because of intermarriage with someone born Jewish. Intermarriage itself is another hotly debated issue in Judaism, especially among Orthodox and Conservative movements, and it frequently leads to the loss of a community member as often as it leads to the addition of a convert.

In the State of Israel, there is a much more emphatic movement against the acceptance of converts, especially among Orthodox communities. In a survey taken of

¹⁷ Joseph R. Rosenbloom, *Conversion to Judaism: From the Biblical Period to the Present* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1978), 122-123.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 132.

Israeli students in 1964-65, fifteen years after the recognition of Israel as a sovereign state, 68 to 70 percent of students and their families opposed conversion and the seeking of converts, which shows a majority negative view against such measures.¹⁹ Ethnic Jews are allowed to become citizens of the State of Israel under what is known as the “Law of Return,” however converts to Judaism have a much more difficult time gaining citizenship. More traditional groups often attempt to bar the way to citizenship for Jewish converts, and “the Orthodox rabbinate regularly attempts to exclude non-Orthodox converts under the Law of Return, defining converts from Reform and Conservative rabbis as gentiles.”²⁰ More research needs to be done on the experiences of Jewish converts who are also people of color, especially as regards their ability to become citizens of the State of Israel under the Law of Return, but suffice it to say, they face significant obstacles.

However, there are some within Judaism, especially within the Reform and Conservative communities, who “call for the unconditional acceptance of the potential and actual convert by the Jewish family and by the Jewish community.”²¹ Jewish sociologists like Brenda Forster points out that many Jewish converts are familiar with Christian communities where “potential converts are lovingly wooed and supported, and those who convert are fully accepted, highly valued, and aided in numerous ways,”²² and she suggests that Judaism may have much to learn from the Christian practice of

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Brenda Forster and Joseph Tabachnik, *Jews by Choice : A Study of Converts to Reform and Conservative Judaism* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav Pub. House, 1991), 44.

²¹ Ibid., 142.

²² Ibid.

welcoming the proselyte. This is a special point at which interfaith dialogue between Christians and Jews may help us to understand better what it means to welcome the outcast and open the doors to the house of prayer.

For Christians, one of the most prevalent issues in our congregations is the debate over the acceptance of those with different sexualities and gender identities. Many people have made the connection between the eunuch, as seen in biblical texts like Isaiah 56:1-8 and Acts 8:26-40, and the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community, especially as concerns issues of procreation. In the eunuch's lament of Isaiah 56:3, some see an echo of their own inability to share in a blessing that includes biological children, but George Knight suggests that the Lord speaks to these people through Trito-Isaiah's oracle: "In the spirit of that promise made to Sarah in Genesis...God himself (Isa. 56:4a) now 'gives' (v. 5) to the unmarried woman, the bachelor, the widow, the homosexual an equally valid and eschatologically significant place in the Covenant, even though these folk are unable to form a link in the historical chain of human life."²³ If indeed Isaiah 56:1-8 speaks a word of comfort to the gay or transgender person as it speaks to the eunuch, promising a place and a name within the community, then it is also beholden upon the Christian community to welcome that person; it is up to church and congregation to "not let the eunuch say" by assuring them of their place in the Lord's house.

Even so, we must remember that in the case of both the foreigner and the eunuch, Trito-Isaiah was not advocating for a universalism without rules or boundaries. Isaiah 56:1-8 welcomes those who keep the Sabbath and hold fast to the covenant, and while

²³ George Angus Fulton Knight, *The New Israel: A Commentary on the Book of Isaiah 56-66* (Grand Rapids; Edinburgh: Eerdmans; Handsel Press, 1985), 8.

those stipulations may look different in Jewish and Christian communities, they are guidelines by which we may keep our covenantal identities. For Christians facing the issue of LGBT inclusion, Frederick Gaiser believes that “This means the participation in the church of practicing homosexuals would be based, first and foremost, on a confession of faith.”²⁴ For Jewish communities, inclusion of the foreigner, or the person who is not ethnically Jewish, will depend on that person’s commitment to the Mosaic covenant, and their ability to live that covenant out in community with other Jews. Though much of Trito-Isaiah’s oracle may still be read through an eschatological lens, and though it is ultimately the Lord’s salvation and deliverance which will bring about a gathering of all peoples, there are measures which Christian and Jewish communities can take in the meantime to encourage the welcoming spirit that makes all people joyful in the Lord’s house of prayer.

²⁴ Gaiser, “A New Word on Homosexuality? Isaiah 56:1-8 as Case Study,” 291.

CONCLUSION

For the restoration community, identity in covenant with the Lord was paramount. Whether reading the prophetic writings of Ezekiel, Ezra-Nehemiah, or Trito-Isaiah, all focus on the idea of Israel as the Lord's chosen people, and what that covenantal identity means in terms of obligation on the part of the Israelites. For Trito-Isaiah, the call to promote justice, practice righteousness, keep the Sabbath, and choose the things that please the Lord comprises what it means to keep the covenant, and therefore what it means to be an Israelite. All those who keep that covenant, whether they be Israelite by birth or by conversion, whether they are able to multiply and be fruitful or whether they trust the Lord to keep that promise of blessing; all are welcome. Trito-Isaiah trusts that the Lord will bring all people to his holy mountain, but continues to call for action in the here-and-now.

For Christians and Jews today, the call to hold fast to the covenant looks the same, and yet different. The covenantal relationship for Jews may still require Sabbath observance, and may still follow the principles of the Mosaic law, but just like the restoration community the modern Jewish community will continue to find out for itself what concepts like justice and righteousness look like in everyday life. For Christians, the call to keep the covenant may no longer be thought of as a requirement standing between a person and salvation; nevertheless, we are called to do good works just as surely as our Jewish siblings. Whether we, as Christians and Jews together, will find ways to live into our covenantal identity while also opening the doors to those outside is yet to be seen, but we can live boldly, assured that the Lord is still gathering.

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