

Isaiah 65:17-25: A Millennial Reign on Earth? Or a Vision of a New Heaven and Earth (the Eternal State)?¹

One of the most remarkable prophetic scenes in all the Bible is Isaiah's vision of a new heavens and earth (Isaiah 65:17-25). Isaiah's vision speaks of the created order being renewed and transformed to such a degree that former things will not be remembered. Jerusalem, too, will be renewed as her years of mourning turn to joy. The scene given us by Isaiah speaks of long life, the bounty of the land, carnivores (lions and wolves) eating straw with lambs and oxen, and with poisonous serpents no longer feared. Although Isaiah's vision was given in the eighth century B.C., it points ahead to the distant future; both to the coming messianic age (Christ's first advent) and to the final consummation at the end of the age (Christ's second advent). Here is the text:

Isaiah 65:17–25 (ESV)

17 “For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth, and the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind.

18 But be glad and rejoice forever in that which I create; for behold, I create Jerusalem to be a joy, and her people to be a gladness.

19 I will rejoice in Jerusalem and be glad in my people; no more shall be heard in it the sound of weeping and the cry of distress.

20 No more shall there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not fill out his days, for the young man shall die a hundred years old, and the sinner a hundred years old shall be accursed.

21 They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.

22 They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands.

23 They shall not labor in vain or bear children for calamity, for they shall be the offspring of the blessed of the Lord, and their descendants with them.

24 Before they call I will answer; while they are yet speaking I will hear.

25 The wolf and the lamb shall graze together; the lion shall eat straw like the ox, and dust shall be the serpent's food. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain,” says the Lord.

¹ Taken from the Riddleblog post, “Isaiah 65:17-25: A Millennial Reign on Earth? Or a Vision of a New Heaven and Earth (the Eternal State)?” @kimriddlebarger.com

The nature of Isaiah's prophecy raises questions about when and how the scene will come to pass. When the prophet speaks of long life is he speaking literally—that the current human life span will be extended past one hundred years, and that carnivores will become herbivores? Is he foreseeing that the earthly city of Jerusalem will be the center of piety and the worship of YHWH? Or is Isaiah speaking of things which are eternal (a post-consummation new heavens and earth) using temporal earthly images (which people can understand) to point to eternal things which, on Isaiah's side of Christ's resurrection, would be impossible to understand.

There are several interpretations of this passage familiar to those interested in eschatology: (1) The dispensational view, (2) The postmillennial view, and (3) The amillennial view. We will take them up in order.

According to traditional dispensationalists (such as J. Dwight Pentecost), Isaiah is referring to a millennial kingdom on earth (the thousand year reign of Christ), which commences after his return. Dispensationalists, who strive to interpret Isaiah's prophecy "literally" (a dispensational operating assumption), conclude that Isaiah foresees the following: ordinary human reproduction, the removal of the curse, the end of sickness and bodily deformity, along with universal peace and economic prosperity. Pentecost concludes his list of millennial blessings with the following statement regarding "the perpetuity of the millennial kingdom." He writes, "that which characterizes the millennial age [presumably the things Pentecost has listed] is not viewed as temporary but eternal."^[1] Some changes to the natural order do occur in the millennial age after the return of Christ, but final transformation of the earth does not come about until the creation of the new heavens and earth following the final judgment at the end of the thousand years. The millennial age, therefore, is a sort of half-way step toward the final consummation.

Contemporary dispensationalists have tweaked the traditional view a bit, with one writer describing the passage as referring to "the intermediate kingdom."^[2] Matt Waymeyer interprets the scene depicted by Isaiah as a mixture of an "intermediate kingdom" and the eternal state. This, he believes, creates a serious challenge to the amillennial view which understands the fulfillment of the passage in eternal terms—a new heavens and earth.^[3] If people die during this period, then Isaiah cannot be referring to the eternal state, and the amillennial view (discussed below) becomes untenable. Progressive dispensationalist Craig Blaising contends that "Isaiah 65:17-25 describes the new world of the eschatological kingdom, a condition of real joy and blessing. But curiously, death still remains a feature in that world order (65:20)."^[4] If Isaiah's vision for the "new world" includes physical death (although human life-spans are substantially lengthened) and a greatly transformed quality of natural life, yet still falling short of eternal life, then Isaiah's vision must be pointing to a future thousand year millennial reign established by Jesus at his return, which, in many ways, anticipates the eternal state.

The premillennial interpretation of the vision fails for a number of reasons. First, the primary error of dispensationalists and premillennarians such as Blaising, is a hermeneutical one. These writers draw the conclusions they do only by overlooking a fundamental interpretive rule—the New Testament interprets the Old. Insisting that a "literal" reading of the Old Testament

predetermines what prophecies such as Isaiah 65 must mean in the New Testament, ignores how Jesus and the apostles handle and reinterpret various Old Testament texts (like Isaiah 65), in light of Jesus' conquest of death and the grave, and his promise to return at the end of the age. Before our Lord's death and resurrection, the idea of life in resurrected human bodies such as Christ's glorified human nature was incomprehensible to Isaiah's original audience (eighth century BC Israel). Yet, after Christ's death and resurrection, it becomes clear that Isaiah was using images of prosperity and long human life to describe something associated with a consummated messianic age, not a temporal, earthly, millennial kingdom. When Isaiah 65 is read through the lens of New Testament hindsight, we find that in two texts (2 Peter 3:13 and Revelation 21:1), Peter and John tell us that Isaiah's vision refers to "the eternal dwelling place of God's people, who are the New Jerusalem."^[5] Paul speaks of a "new creation" in Galatians 6:15 and 2 Corinthians 5:17, both times in connection with entrance into eternal life (via regeneration through the power of the Holy Spirit) associated with union with Christ. According to Paul, the new creation is inaugurated by Christ's resurrection, ushers in the age to come (provisionally), and points ahead to the final consummation when death itself is swallowed up in victory at Christ's return (1 Corinthians 15:50-56). Paul appeals to Isaiah's "new creation" language as fulfilled in Jesus Christ and associates it with the fullness of the age to come.

Second, the very idea that death occurs in a millennial kingdom supposedly established after Christ's return is highly problematic and creates much confusion as to how we are to understand the unfolding drama of redemptive history. When Jesus returns, three events occur which bring about the final consummation and usher in the age to come in all its fullness. These are the general resurrection (Daniel 12:2, John 5:29, Acts 24:15, 1 Corinthians 15:22, Revelation 20:12), the final judgment (2 Thessalonians 1:6-9, Revelation 20:14-15), and the establishment of the new heavens and earth (Romans 8:21; 2 Peter 3:10) as foretold by Isaiah (65:17). When Christ returns, the temporal gives way to the eternal. How can there be people on the earth in natural bodies who die, after the general resurrection brought about by Jesus at his return? All people are raised and judged at that time, as seen in the separation of the wheat from the tares, the sheep from the goats, the elect from the reprobate. One group enters eternal life, the other eternal perdition. The premillennial contention that people make it through the second coming in natural bodies to repopulate the earth is simply a biblical impossibility.

This leads to a third point, which is closely related to the previous. As noted above, our premillennial friends are very comfortable asserting that the kingdom foreseen by Isaiah includes those born by natural means after Christ returns, as well as those who coexist with them in glorified bodies—the mixture of the temporal with the eternal mentioned previously. Yet, Jesus denies the very possibility of the temporal and eternal coexisting (including procreation) after his return. In response to a trick question put to him by the Sadducees (Luke 20:27-33), Jesus addresses this matter directly in verses 34-36. "And Jesus said to them, 'The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage, but those who are considered worthy to attain to that age and to the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage, for they cannot die anymore, because they are equal to angels and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection.'" Jesus makes it perfectly clear, there is no human existence in unresurrected and unglorified bodies after his return.

To summarize, in a number of places the New Testament writers interpret Isaiah's prophecy as referring to the eternal state (the new heavens and earth). Each of these texts are highly problematic for dispensational and premillennial interpreters, as well as for postmillennarians (the second interpretive option), to which we now turn.

According to postmillennarians, Isaiah's vision refers to the latter day glory of the church on the earth which precedes the second advent of Jesus. J. A. Alexander (1809-1860) the author of an influential commentary on Isaiah, and who taught at Princeton Seminary in the days of Archibald Alexander and Charles Hodge, saw Isaiah 65 as a reference to a time "naturally connected with moral and spiritual changes than with one of a material nature," tying this to Paul's "new creation" language associated with regeneration and conversion.[6] Isaiah is not referring to the eternal state (a material change) but the world-wide effects (a moral and spiritual change) brought about through the gospel ministry of the church.[7] J. Macellus Kik agrees with Alexander's exegesis. "In its context it [Isaiah 65:17-25] cannot refer to the consummate kingdom."[8] John Jefferson Davis agrees, offering a more detailed explanation. He writes . . .

The blessings of the church's latter-day glory spoken of in Isaiah 11:6-9 are reiterated and expanded in Isaiah 65:17-25. The intensified period of spiritual blessing produces conditions in the world that are termed 'new heavens and a new earth.' (V. 17). This refers to the dramatic moral renovation of society rather than to the eternal state, since Isaiah speaks of a time when children are still being born (v. 20), when people are still building houses and planting vineyards (v. 21) and engaging in their earthly labors (v. 22). Paul uses similar language when he says that salvation in Christ is like a 'new creation' (2 Cor. 5:17), or again in Gal. 6:15, 'for neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation.' The conditions of health and temporal peace of which Isaiah speaks in 65:17-25 are not the essence of the gospel, but they are properly the consequences of the gospel when its impact is intensive and extensive in the world. The message of reconciliation with God also produces as its fruit reconciliation between man and man and even with the natural order itself. It should also be noted that 65:17-25 makes no reference to the Messiah's physical presence on earth. In the latter days, God desires to create in Jerusalem (the church) a rejoicing (v. 18). But the realities of verses 18-25 refer neither exclusively to the eternal state nor to the time following the second advent, but rather to the messianic age when Christ still rules at the right hand of the Father in heaven.[9]

In light of the preceding comments, we note that both amillennarians and postmillennarians agree that the second coming of Jesus Christ follows the millennial age, which ends with the great apostasy immediately before the Lord's return. Therefore, the differences between the two positions are not structural as is the case of amillennialism over against premillennialism. But there are two questions and their conflicting answers which do distinguish postmillennialism from amillennialism: (1) When does the millennial age commence? and (2) What is the nature and character of the millennial age? Often times, this debate centers around those who claim an eschatological optimism (postmillennialism) vs. those inclined to eschatological pessimism (with premillennialism and amillennialism often lumped together).[10] Unfortunately, the

optimism/pessimism paradigm obscures some rather obvious exegetical differences between the different schools of thought.

The critical difference of opinion between amillenarians and postmillenarians about the nature and character of the millennial age seen in the work of postmillennialists Alexander, Kik, and Davis just cited, is given an exclamation point in the work of one popular writer who did much to bring about a brief postmillennial resurgence in the 1980s and 1990s. David Chilton tells us that Isaiah 65:17-25, the prophet “cannot be speaking of heaven, or of a time after the end of the world; for this ‘new heaven and earth’ there is still death (at a very advanced age— ‘the lifetime of a tree’), people are building, planting, working and having children . . . The only point I will make here is that it is clearly a statement about this age, before the end of the world.”[11] Postmillenarians, therefore, agree with dispensationalists and premillennarians that Isaiah 65:17-25 is speaking of an earthly scene, although dispensationalists and premillennarians mix earthly with eternal elements, and place the passage’s fulfillment after Christ’s return. But Postmillenarians disagree with amillennarians, who hold that Isaiah is speaking exclusively of eternal things even if using earthly images to point ahead to the end of the age.

Since amillennial interpreters affirm that Isaiah’s vision refers to the eternal state (as in those biblical texts cited above where multiple New Testament authors associate Isaiah’s vision with the eternal state—a new heaven and earth and heavenly Jerusalem), much of what amillennarians contend about Isaiah 65:17-25 refutes the postmillennial interpretation of the passage as referring exclusively to this age (temporal), and in no sense to the age to come (eternal). As with the unfortunate propensity of dispensationalists and premillennarians to insist that Old Testament texts (in their literal sense) must predetermine New Testament meanings, in this instance, such is also true of postmillennarians. By not allowing the New Testament authors to tell us to what Isaiah’s prophecy is referring, postmillennarians must conclude that Isaiah is referring to an earthly scene, which is therefore limited to gospel success (important as that is) and to the church’s latter day glory in a world characterized by material blessings such as long life and economic prosperity—but not the eternal character of the age to come. Here, I must chide my postmillennial friends, “isn’t your vision a bit pessimistic?”

As for the amillennial position, a number of points should be made. First, as J. Alec Motyer points out in his commentary on Isaiah, in terms of its literary structure, Isaiah 65:1-66:21 is a chiasm. In a chiasm, the logic of these two chapters flows from the opening verses (A1) toward the conclusion, which comes in the middle of the chiasm (E), not at the end (A2) as in a typical syllogism—A implies B, therefore C. The structure of Isaiah 65-66 looks something like this: A1 (65:1) > B1 (65:2-7) > C1 (65:8-10) > D1 (65:11-12) > E (65:13-25), < D2 (66:1-4) < C2 (66:5-14) < B2 (66:15-17) < A2 (66:18-21). E is the conclusion of the chiasm—Jerusalem is the center of the new creation for the people of God .[12]

Why does this matter and how does it help us understand the passage? Isaiah 65:1 (A1) and the final verses, 66:18-21 (A2)—both deal with those who have not heard nor sought the Lord and are the outlying declarations which move toward Isaiah’s conclusion. Steps A1-D1 and A2-D2 must be realized before the hoped-for reality (E) comes to pass. Since Isaiah 65:13-25 (E) falls in the

middle of the chiasm, these verses are the central theme of the entirety of the 65th and 66th chapter—the joy of the Lord’s servants in the new creation. The key part of the passage (vv. 17-25) deals with the new creation with its Zion, the heavenly city, according to Hebrews 12:18-24. Given the structure of the prophecy as a whole, the climax of the passage is the eternal state (the new heavens and earth), not a half-way redeemed earth in which people experience life-extension and prosperity, only to die later on.

Second, verses 17-20 of Isaiah 65 are composed of two poems. The first is a poem of the new creation (vv. 17-18b), while the other is a poem of the city and its people (vv. 18c-20). As Motyer points out, "throughout this passage Isaiah uses aspects of present life to create impressions of the life that is yet to come. It will be a life totally provided for (13), totally happy (19), totally secure (22-23) and totally at peace (24-25). Things we have no real capacity to understand can be expressed only through things we know and experience. So it is that in the present order of things death cuts off life before it has begun or before it has fully matured. But it will not be so then." [13] The images Isaiah uses (long life, the joy of Jerusalem, removal of the curse) point to greater things which neither Isaiah or his original audience can fully understand. The poetic structure surely points in this direction.

Third, as Meredith Kline points out, the language of the prophecy reflects covenantal blessings (i.e, eternal life, glorification) which are magnified in light of new heavens and earth (the consummation). The blessings pictured here take us well beyond the natural order, but can only be understood in light of the natural order.[14] J. Richard Middleton makes a similar point. This is the case, he says, in "Isaiah’s vision of a restored Jerusalem in the context of a ‘new heavens and a new earth . . . (Isa. 65:17). Originally promising healing for for the communal life of God’s people after the exile, this vision later was universalized to refer to genuine cosmic renewal in the eschatological future." [15] Hoekema is correct to assert, this is "the loftiest Old Testament description of the future life of the people of God." [16]

Fourth, is Isaiah telling us that as a consequence of the spread of the gospel (which produces "moral renovation" in Jefferson’s terms), people will live longer, only to die? Where does the gospel (or even as a consequence of believing the gospel) promise a long life, the end of carnivores, and the de-fanging of serpents as depicted by Isaiah? Rather, the gospel promises us eternal life! In fact, isn’t the whole point of prophecy clearly stated in verse 17, "I will create new heavens and a new earth?" a transformation so great that former things will no longer be remembered? As Motyer reminds us, the blessing recounted in verse 16 (namely, what God has forgotten—our sins!) is reflected in the last half of verse 17. Everything is made new so that the old is completely forgotten. "The divine forgetfulness of verse 16 will be matched by general amnesia." [16]

Isaiah’s vision, therefore, describes a time subsequent to that of the millennial text of Revelation 20:1-10, which speaks of the binding of Satan and the reign of the saints in heaven after they have suffered upon the earth, a period where John can warn of a great apostasy coming before the final judgment at Christ’s return (Matthew 25:31-46). Both pre and post millennarians must assign Isaiah’s prophecy to the same period of time as Revelation 20. But given the chiasmic

structure and Isaiah's use of earthly images pointing to the age to come and the eternal state, isn't it far better to understand Isaiah 65:17-25 as describing the same time frame as Revelation 21:1-2 which comes after the millennial age? "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband." I sure think so.

This is the eternal state which Isaiah saw in the 8th century BC: a new Jerusalem, a new creation, and a new heavens and earth, filled with joy and no memories of life as it was before. Both premillennialism and postmillennialism leave us with a vision of long life and greater prosperity on a semi-improved earth, but what truly awaits the people of God is far greater—life eternal, where all memory of sin (and the fall) has long since been forgotten.

[1] J. Dwight Pentecost, Things to Come, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978) 487-490. (490).

[2] Matt Waymeyer, Amillennialism and the Age to Come (NP: Kress Biblical Resources, 2016), 31-45.

[3] Waymeyer, Amillennialism and the Age to Come, 45.

[4] Craig A. Blaising, "Premillennialism" in Darrell L. Bock, Three Views of the Millennium and Beyond (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1999), 202.

[5] Robert B. Strimple, "An Amillennial Response" in Bock, Three Views of the Millennium and Beyond, 266.

[6] Joseph Addison Alexander, Commentary on the Prophecies of Isaiah, Reprint ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1953), 452.

[7] Alexander, Commentary on the Prophecies of Isaiah, 97.

[8] J. Macerllus Kik, An Eschatology of Victory (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian Reformed Publishing, 1971), 255.

[9] John Jefferson Davis, The Victory of Christ's Kingdom: An Introduction to Postmillennialism (Moscow ID: Canon Press), 37-38).

[10] I address the use of ethos to characterize one's eschatology in some detail here; Eschatology by Ethos @ the Riddleblog.

[11] David Chilton, Paradise Restored: A Biblical Theology of Dominion (Ft. Worth: Dominion Press, 1987), 204.

[12] J. Alec Motyer, The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction & Commentary (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 522-523.

[13] Motyer, The Prophecy of Isaiah, 530.

[14] Meredith G. Kline, Kingdom Prologue, (Self-Published, 1993), 152-153.

[15] J. Richard Middleton, A New Heaven and a New Earth (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 201.

[16] Anthony Hoekema, The Bible and the Future (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 283.

[17] Motyer, The Prophecy of Isaiah, 529.