

## Isaiah 56:1-8

"Thus says the LORD, 'Preserve justice and do righteousness, for My salvation is about to come and My righteousness to be revealed. How blessed is the man who does this, and the son of man who takes hold of it; who keeps from profaning the sabbath, and keeps his hand from doing any evil.' Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the LORD say, 'The LORD will surely separate me from His people.' Nor let the eunuch say, 'Behold, I am a dry tree.' For thus says the LORD, 'To the eunuchs who keep My sabbaths, and choose what pleases Me, and hold fast My covenant, to them I will give in My house and within My walls a memorial, and a name better than that of sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name which will not be cut off. Also the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, to minister to Him, and to love the name of the LORD, to be His servants, every one who keeps from profaning the sabbath and holds fast My covenant; even those I will bring to My holy mountain and make them joyful in My house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be acceptable on My altar; for My house will be called a house of prayer for all the peoples.' The Lord GOD, who gathers the dispersed of Israel, declares, 'Yet *others* I will gather to them, to those *already* gathered.'"

The statements appearing in Isaiah 56:1-8 have some critical points to convey not just about the seventh-day Sabbath and its importance for salvation history, but also the inclusiveness of the Kingdom of God.

There are, to be sure, some differences in the vantage points of interpreting Isaiah 56:1-8. Liberal interpreters, who divide the Book of Isaiah between multiple prophets or authors,<sup>1</sup> tend to conclude that the setting of this prophecy is post-exilic, representing the scene of the return of the Jewish exiles from Babylon to the Holy Land in the Sixth Century B.C.E., and how various foreigners were attracted to Judaism. Positing that this passage originates from a Deutero- or Second Isaiah (often thought to be Isaiah chs. 40-55), Benjamin D. Sommer concludes in *The Jewish Study Bible*, "Deutero-Isaiah assures the foreigners that through full observance of the covenant they can become like members of the Judean community. This passage shows the beginnings of the religious institution that later came to be called conversion, and rabbinic commentators understand the passage as referring to converts."<sup>2</sup> Others, holding to this material being the product of a Tritio- or Third Isaiah, may conclude that the tenor of passage conveys the returned exiles needing to compose a community mainly defined by those who seek after the Lord and are willing to obey.<sup>3</sup>

Conservatives, who will ascribe a unified prophetic ministry of Isaiah son of Amoz (1:1) to this oracle—one that is notably pre-exilic to the Eighth Century B.C.E.—necessarily have to argue that while a return of the exiles to the Holy Land, and them being a community that will welcome in non-Jewish outsiders is going to be important, **that it conveys something most imperative about the mission of God.** In the estimation of John N. Oswalt, "What could be added to the promises of the return to the land and the forgiveness of sin, both by the pure grace of God? It is not enough to say that chs. 56-66 were written to address a new

<sup>1</sup> If necessary, do consult the entry for the Book of Isaiah, appearing in the workbook *A Survey of the Tanach for the Practical Messianic*.

<sup>2</sup> Benjamin D. Sommer, "Isaiah," in *The Jewish Study Bible*, 896.

<sup>3</sup> Childs, *Isaiah*, pp 452-455; Goldingay, *Isaiah*, pp 315-316.

historical situation, the one that existed after the return, and so were appended to what was written before. For the historical setting was clearly of little importance to the writer(s)...There must have been some other reason why the author(s) felt something more needed to be said."<sup>4</sup> Noting some of the major themes of Isaiah, Oswalt goes on to conclude for chs. 56-66,

"[They are] a synthesis of what seem to be conflicting points of view in chs. 7-39 and 40-55. Chs. 7-39 call people to live righteous lives in obedience to the covenant, with the threat of destruction if they fail. Chs. 40-55 seem to speak of grace that is available to the chosen people and depends on nothing but receiving it. These two ideas seem irreconcilable. This final division of the book shows that is not the case. It is as people, any people, choose to live the life of God as he graciously empowers them that they come to know the true meaning of being the servants of God."<sup>5</sup>

Evangelical interpreters of Isaiah 56:1-8, for sure, will focus their attention on how the Kingdom of God is to be a welcoming place to disenfranchised persons such as foreigners and eunuchs. It is also most appropriate, given Yeshua the Messiah's quotation of Isaiah 56:7 in the Gospels, that they will also attach various degrees of Messianic importance to this passage, associated with His ministry and mission. Yet, while the Kingdom of God tends to be stressed as a place where one does not have to be an ethnic Israelite to be welcome, there can be significant details overlooked or glossed over, such as **the significance of the Sabbath**, which certainly needs to be emphasized. A Jewish commentator such as I.W. Slotki stresses, "The reward [is] in store for all who keep justice, righteousness and observance of the Sabbath, irrespective of whether they are Israelites, eunuchs, or proselytes."<sup>6</sup>

A proper evaluation of Isaiah 56:1-8 is necessary for anyone wanting to weigh the Biblical and theological importance of *Shabbat*.

56:1 This prophetic word opens with the exclaim, "Thus said HASHEM: Observe justice and perform righteousness, for My salvation is soon to come and My righteousness to be revealed" (ATS). That the Lord places a high priority on people who "Keep justice" (RSV; *shamru mishpat*, שְׁמְרוּ מִשְׁפָּט) is certain enough. Previously, it has been asserted, "Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness, who seek the LORD: Look to the rock from which you were hewn and to the quarry from which you were dug...Listen to Me, you who know righteousness, a people in whose heart is My law; do not fear the reproach of man, nor be dismayed at their revilings" (Isaiah 51:1, 7). Whatever admonitions Isaiah issues, are to be in keeping with the salvation-historical intentions of God, first present in His Torah.

It is fair to recognize that one of the first major actions of *ki-qerovah yeshuati* (כִּי־קְרוּבָה יְשׁוּעָתִי), "for my salvation is close at hand" (NIV), would be God's deliverance witnessed in the end of the Babylonian exile. Recognizing how a wide degree of sin and injustice would have caused the judgment, figures like Isaiah wanted to be sure that such crimes against God would not be committed again. Noting what would be some of the causes of the exile, Barry G. Webb directs,

<sup>4</sup> John N. Oswalt, *New International Commentary on the Old Testament: Book of Isaiah, Chapters 40-66* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), pp 451-452.

<sup>5</sup> Oswalt, *Isaiah 40-66*, 453.

<sup>6</sup> I.W. Slotki, *Soncino Books of the Bible: Isaiah* (London: Soncino Press, 1983), 273.

## Messianic Sabbath Helper

“Religion had become divorced from social responsibility, ritual from right living, and so God destroyed Jerusalem and drove his people out of it rather than permit such monstrous dishonouring of his name to continue. Now those who will wake on the other side of this nightmare and have the opportunity to make a fresh start are reminded that God has the same passionate commitment to justice that he always had, and that he expects them to share it.”<sup>7</sup>

Recognizing how there will be two groups of people referenced (vs. 3, 4, 6), which would normally be excluded from the community of Israel—but will now be decisively welcomed in if sincerely joined to the Lord—is vital to appreciating this passage. God’s overriding concern is for *tzedakah* (צְדָקָה), His “righteousness,” or what the New Jerusalem Bible actually renders as “saving justice.” What we see emerging in the statements which follow, involve the community that He intends to form, which will accomplish His purposes as originally given to Israel—and which would surely reach their climax in the work of Yeshua of Nazareth. And, what is important about this community, is how it cannot be composed of ethnic Israelites or Jews exclusively. John D.W. Watts indicates, “What distinguishes one person from another is the ability to keep justice or not, whether one does right or not. It has nothing to do with ethnic origins, economic power, or political status.”<sup>8</sup>

56:2 As important as justice and righteousness are, God’s deliverance present in the community of faithful will manifest itself not just in a removal of evil, but also in a proper keeping of His Sabbath. It is declared, “Happy is the mortal that ever doth this, and the son of man that ever layeth hold on it; that keepeth the sabbath by not violating it, and keepeth his hand from doing any evil” (Leeser Translation).

It is actually stated *ba shomeir Shabbat meichallo v'shomeir yado mei'asot kol-ra* (בְּה שֹׁמֵר שַׁבָּת מֵחַלְלוֹ וְשֹׁמֵר יָדוֹ מֵעֲשׂוֹת כָּל-רָע), “who keeps from profaning *Shabbat*, and keeps his hand from doing any evil” (TLV). It witnessed how there is some kind of interconnection between profaning or “desecrating” (NIV)<sup>9</sup> the Sabbath, and performing evil. While Jewish readers and interpreters of v. 2, for whom *Shabbat* is an important institution for the faith community, would have little issue with honoring the Sabbath and doing good being the implied directive here—Christian readers and interpreters will have some difficulty.

Webb is one who makes a connection between keeping the Sabbath and not just the significance of the seventh-day rest, but the further significance of what the Sabbath symbolizes, as it points to the future New Heavens and New Earth which will be established:

“The fact that maintaining justice (1) is so closely linked to keeping *the Sabbath* (2) may surprise us, but it would not have surprised any Israelite of the Old Testament period. For the Sabbath had to do with rest; not just for masters, but for servants as well, and even for working animals and resident foreigners. To keep the Sabbath meant, among other things, that you served the God who created the world and cared for everyone and everything in it. It also had to do with perfection or completeness. It recalled the completeness of God’s original work of creation, and looked forward to the time when his work of re-creation would also

---

<sup>7</sup> Barry G. Webb, *The Message of Isaiah* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), 220.

<sup>8</sup> John D.W. Watts, *Word Biblical Commentary: Isaiah 34-66*, Vol 25 (Nashville: Nelson Reference & Electronic, 2005), 820.

<sup>9</sup> Heb. verb *chalal* (חָלַל); appearing in the Piel stem (intensive action, active voice), “profane” or “make (profane) use of” (*CHALOT*, 105).

be complete. The Sabbath rest was a sign of the final rest which all God's people will enjoy in the new heavens and new earth (66:22-23). So there is no petty legalism here. The Sabbath is viewed not as an end to itself, but as a sign that the whole of life was to be lived in submission to God, and that meant sharing his concern for justice."<sup>10</sup>

Oswalt's approach is hardly anti-Sabbath, but does seem a bit ambiguous. He emphasizes the ritual components of *Shabbat*, and how God wants His people to be able to avoid evil and stay true to the things that He has designated as sacred unto Him. Oswalt's following points should be well taken:

"No one who is concerned to avoid doing any evil could think that God is satisfied by mere formal adherence to ritual. It reflects a fundamental attitude of life, to avoid anything that is not in keeping with the Good. On the other hand, such a commitment can be entirely shapeless. Who is to say what is evil and what is not? The concern for maintaining the sanctity of the Sabbath with its emphasis on God as Creator (Gen. 2:3; Exod. 20:11) and Savior (Deut. 15:5) speaks of a life that understands good and evil from within a firmly covenant-ordered framework. Thus avoidance of evil is to be an expression of worship, and true worship must issue in a life of hatred for all that the adored one hates."<sup>11</sup>

J.A. Motyer makes an important point that readers of Isaiah 56:1-8 need not overlook, in terms of the composition of the Book of Isaiah. As an advocate of unified Isaianic authorship, he draws out how many have concluded that this passage is post-exilic, and how this need not be the case for a fair handling of what is communicated:

"This strong emphasis on *the Sabbath* has prompted many to write a post-exilic scenario for these passages, noting the Sabbath emphasis in Nehemiah 10:31; 13:15. There is, however, no compelling necessity about this. The Sabbath was an equally strong factor in pre-exilic days. Isaiah 1:13 and Amos 8:5 reveal the very sort of formal punctiliousness that 58:1-14 rejects. The exilic Ezekiel looks back to profanation of the Sabbath as a pre-exilic sin (Ezk. 20:12, 20; 22:8, 26) and Jeremiah makes Sabbath observance a test case (17:19-27), just as Isaiah does."<sup>12</sup>

Too frequently, Christian people would be among those who would focus their attention almost exclusively on v. 2 admonishing against committing evil. However, the Lord desires His people to be mature, and they should be able to carefully balance—via the presence and compulsion of His Holy Spirit—avoiding evil *and* honoring His Sabbath. The Sabbath, in fact, when observed properly, should be a safe haven where men and women of God rest, they are able to meditate upon Him, and find evil to be something utterly repulsive.

56:3 The deliverance God enacts, and the community He desires to see emerge, is not something that is exclusive, but is rather inclusive. Those who would have most definitely been viewed as not being the equals of the Israelites in the past, are to now be regarded as the full equals of those in God's community. The sentiment expressed by the Prophet Isaiah is, "Let not the foreigner say, who has attached himself to the LORD, 'The LORD will keep me apart from His people'; and let not the eunuch say, 'I am a withered tree'" (NJPS).

---

<sup>10</sup> Webb, 221.

<sup>11</sup> Oswalt, *Isaiah* 40-66, 456.

<sup>12</sup> Motyer, *Isaiah*, pp 464-465.

## Messianic Sabbath Helper

What does it mean to have joined oneself to the Lord? The verb of note is *lavah* (לָוָה), with *TWOT* detailing, “Used once in the Qal [simple action, active voice] (Eccl 8:15); the remaining usages are in the Niphal [simple action, passive voice, as in Isaiah 56:3]. *lavà* refers to the joining of an item or person to someone or something else. Most significant theologically is its usage to refer to foreigners who join themselves to God's people as converts.”<sup>13</sup> Jewish interpreters would often regard this as likely speaking of those who have gone through formal proselyte conversion.<sup>14</sup> More reserve is warranted for Bible readers, as the issue in view involves, “A foreigner who has joined the LORD's people should not say, “The LORD will not let me worship with his people” (Good News Bible).

V. 3 specifically identifies two groups disenfranchised, who are not to be turned away from God's community. The first is the *ben-ha'neikar* (בֶּן־הַנֵּיקָר), typically translated as “foreigner” or “stranger” (Keter Crown Bible), a little more literally “the son of the stranger” (Jerusalem Bible-Koren). In the Torah, the foreigner was decisively forbidden to eat from the Passover (Exodus 12:43), with widescale prohibitions issued against groups like the Ammonites and Moabites (Deuteronomy 23:3), and certainly with some level of discrimination present against Edomites and Egyptians (Deuteronomy 23:7-8). Yet, the Prophet Isaiah definitely foretells of a reversal of their fortunes and status, as he will further declare, “Foreigners will build up your walls, and their kings will minister to you” (60:10).

The second to be included within God's community is the *saris* (סָרִס) the eunuch or “castrated” (Good News Bible).<sup>15</sup> Those who had crushed testicles were forbidden from priestly service (Leviticus 21:16-23), and more broadly Deuteronomy 23:1 asserts, “No one who is emasculated or has his male organ cut off shall enter the assembly of the LORD.” Frequently men who had their testicles removed, did so resultant of participation in pagan cultic activities or worship.

For the more immediate context of Isaiah's prophecies, it is to be noted how “some of your sons who will issue from you, whom you will beget, will be taken away, and they will become officials in the palace of the king of Babylon” (39:7), and as a result many would be castrated as eunuchs for government service. When the return to the Holy Land would transpire, Isaiah's word should have conveyed a message of inclusion, and not exclusion, as their forced castration would not merit a dismissal from God. Webb concurs, “How were such people to be regarded in the situation following the exile—as people permanently tainted with paganism and cursed by God? Certainly not.”<sup>16</sup> At the same time, though, given the presence of future figures seeking Israel's God, such as the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:27, 38-40),<sup>17</sup> Isaiah's oracle here would definitely have a more further reaching influence than the post-exilic period. For, the Prophet had already spoken of the God of Israel preparing a great banquet feast, for all of the peoples of Planet Earth—hardly something exclusive to any group or sub-group:

---

<sup>13</sup> Andrew Bowling, “לָוָה,” in *TWOT*, 1:471.

<sup>14</sup> Slotki, *Isaiah*, 273.

<sup>15</sup> The renderings “barren one” (ATS) or “Men who are unable to become fathers” (Contemporary English Version) are probably not too helpful.

<sup>16</sup> Webb, 222.

<sup>17</sup> Consult the FAQ on the Messianic Apologetics website, “Acts 8:27, 36, 38.”

“The LORD of hosts will prepare a lavish banquet for all peoples on this mountain; a banquet of aged wine, choice pieces with marrow, *and* refined, aged wine. And on this mountain He will swallow up the covering which is over all peoples, even the veil which is stretched over all nations” (25:6-7).

56:4-5 Eunuchs are most certainly included within the people of God, given Isaiah's declaration, “For thus says *ADONAI*, ‘To the eunuchs who keep My *Shabbatot*, who choose what pleases Me, and hold fast My covenant” (v. 4, TLV). These are persons who are noted by the actions *yishmeru et-Shabbtoai* (אֲשֶׁר־יִשְׁמְרוּ אֶת־שַׁבְּתוֹתַי), “observe My Sabbaths” (ATS), *u'machaziqim b'briti* (וַיִּמְחֲזְקוּ בְּבְרִיתִי), “and hold firmly to My covenant” (HCSB) or “and grasp My covenant tightly” (ATS).

Is the inclusion of a group like eunuchs in the community of God, only reflective of a post-exilic setting after the return from Babylon? Or, is it something that necessarily must reach more into a Messianic future? Brevard S. Childs, reflective of a critical, multi-authored approach for the composition of Isaiah, and that this passage is mainly important for the returned exiles, still has some useful points in drawing out how observance of the Sabbath is something to be regarded as normative and edifying for God's own:

“It is highly significant that in v. 4 acceptance of the eunuch is conditioned on three things: keeping the Sabbath, choosing the things that please God, and holding fast to the covenant. These stipulations parallel closely those set forth in v. 2, as forming the grounds for divine blessing. In a real sense, the conditions are simply the norms appropriate to a life lived under torah. While it is true that in the postexilic period the emphasis on Sabbath observance greatly increased in importance as the means of expressing obedience to God under the restraints of postexilic life without political autonomy (Jer. 17:21-22; Ezek. 20:12ff; 22:9; Neh. 13:17-18), these commands serve as a concrete expression of the selfsame will of God on which the original Mosaic covenant was based are not a descent into narrow legalism, as has frequently been charged by Christian antinomianism.”<sup>18</sup>

More reflective of a conservative, unified authorship of Isaiah, is Oswalt. He focuses more on the theological tenor of what is being communicated, and how those joining to the Lord, embrace the things of the Lord such as the institution of the Sabbath:

“These people are on God's side (Exod. 32:26). They love what he loves, hate what he hates, want what he wants. They do not keep the Sabbaths because they must or they will be destroyed. They keep them because they are the Lord's Sabbaths. Their behavior is an expression of a relationship. This is what God longs for in his people, and if anyone will do this, their parentage or their body has nothing to do with their acceptability.”<sup>19</sup>

The eunuch, because of his lack of ability to produce offspring, was a category of person, at best widely thought to be in an unfortunate predicament, but more frequently considered to be cursed and effectively worthless. The eunuch himself, in encountering the community of Israel in the Torah, would not have felt too included. But, the prophecy of Isaiah offers great hope, as God says, “I will give them a place of honor and renown in My house and within My walls, which is

<sup>18</sup> Childs, *Isaiah*, 458.

<sup>19</sup> Oswalt, *Isaiah 40-66*, 458.

## Messianic Sabbath Helper

better than sons and daughters; I will give them eternal renown, which will never be terminated” (v. 5, Keter Crown Bible). Eunuchs are indeed promised a *shem olam* (שֵׁם עוֹלָם) or an “everlasting name,” and a place within the House or Temple of God. Commonly rendered as “memorial” is the Hebrew *yad v'shem* (יָד וְשֵׁם), more literally “hand and name.”

As Psalm 23:6 would prompt readers, “Surely goodness and lovingkindness will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.” Much later, Wisdom 3:13-15 in the Apocrypha would state, “Blessed also is the eunuch whose hands have done no lawless deed, and who has not devised wicked things against the Lord; for special favor will be shown him for his faithfulness, and a place of great delight in the temple of the Lord. For the fruit of good labors is renowned, and the root of understanding does not fail.”

56:6 Those who are foreigners, which would necessarily have to include those from different oppressors and enemies of Israel, are fully welcomed into the community of God. Isaiah speaks of, “Also the foreigners who join themselves to ADONAI, to minister to Him, and to love the Name of ADONAI, and to be His servants—all who keep from profaning *Shabbat*, and hold fast to My covenant” (TLV). *CHALOT* details how for the noun *eved* (עֶבֶד), that it can “indicat[e] man’s position before God, i.e. either ‘slave’ or ‘trusted servant.’”<sup>20</sup> The CJB actually renders *avadim* (עֲבָדִים) as “workers,” which could be taken in the direction of these people only being some kind of laborers for Israel. Far more profound is that regardless of background, those who are brought into the Kingdom of God, get to service the broad intentions and mission of the Kingdom of God, the same as any native-born Israelite.

A repetition of themes seen in v. 4 previously, is now seen in v. 6: *l'heyot lo l'avadim kol-shomer Shabbat meichal'lo u'machaziqim b'briti* (לְהֵיוֹת לוֹ וּמְחַזְּקִים בְּבְרִיתִי), “and-to-be to-him as-worshippers every-of one-keeping Sabbath without-to-desecrate-her and-ones-holding-fast” (Kohlenberger).<sup>21</sup> Far from the empty and desecrated sacrifices and Sabbath observance witnessed early in Isaiah’s prophecies (1:11-13), the foreigners are portrayed as keeping the Sabbath as willing worshippers of the God of Israel, finding a welcome place within His House, accomplishing His intention.

56:7 It is not difficult to detect why many examiners have given significant importance to the claim of v. 7: “I will bring them to My sacred mount and let them rejoice in My house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices shall be welcome on My altar; for My House shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples” (NJPS), *ki beiti beit-tefilah yiqarei l'kol-ha'ammim* (כִּי בֵּיתִי בַּיִת תְּפִלָּה יִקָּרֵא לְכָל־הָעַמִּים). The inclusion of those from outside of native Israel—foreigners and eunuchs, among others—is widely and correctly believed to be a fulfillment of King Solomon’s prayer of 1 Kings 8:41-42:

“Also concerning the foreigner who is not of Your people Israel, when he comes from a far country for Your name’s sake (for they will hear of Your great name and Your mighty hand, and of Your outstretched arm); when he comes and prays toward this house.”

---

<sup>20</sup> *CHALOT*, 262.

<sup>21</sup> Kohlenberger, 4:113.

Beyond this, are the significant quotations of Isaiah 56:7 appearing in the Synoptic Gospels, when Yeshua the Messiah overturns the moneychangers in the Temple complex:

“And He *began* to teach and say to them, ‘Is it not written, “MY HOUSE SHALL BE CALLED A HOUSE OF PRAYER FOR ALL THE NATIONS”? But you have made it a ROBBERS’ DEN [Isaiah 56:7; Jeremiah 7:11]” (Mark 11:17).

“And He said to them, ‘It is written, “MY HOUSE SHALL BE CALLED A HOUSE OF PRAYER”; but you are making it a ROBBERS’ DEN [Isaiah 56:7; Jeremiah 7:11]” (Matthew 21:13).

“saying to them, ‘It is written, “AND MY HOUSE SHALL BE A HOUSE OF PRAYER,” but you have made it a ROBBERS’ DEN’ [Isaiah 56:7; Jeremiah 7:11]” (Luke 19:46).

While there is variance on the details of Isaiah 56:7, some of which are reflective more of a post-exilic setting and others of a more Messianic setting, generally speaking commentators recognize how the intention is something that was subversive to the contemporary thinking of many ancient Jews. Far from God’s community and people wanting to keep outsiders away, God’s actual intention was to welcome outsiders in.

Reflective of a critical composition of Isaiah and this oracle having significance more for the post-exilic Jewish community, Watts’ observations are still useful of indicating the ideology that Isaiah 56:7 opposes:

“The position of the proselytes was a controversial one in Judaism. Not all Jews were prepared to grant them full covenant rights. Such openness to receiving Gentiles who would commit themselves to YHWH was actively resisted by some...In this passage YHWH assures those who voluntarily seek to join themselves to YHWH, i.e., to the covenant community of worship, of full acceptance.”<sup>22</sup>

Motyer, representing an evangelical Christian approach to Isaiah, takes readers in the important direction of needing to balance out the inclusivist tenor of Isaiah 56:7, with what can be perceived as the exclusivist tenor of Ezra-Nehemiah:

“The Old Testament was never exclusivist on a nationalistic basis. Deuteronomy 23:3ff. dealt with specific matters requiring special treatment, but Exodus 12:48-49 expresses the general position that the ‘stranger’ was always a welcome convert. Ezra and Nehemiah have been sadly misunderstood as if their motive was exclusivism. Their problem was to preserve the identity and purity of the people of God when these things were under threat. This is a vital task, for if the people of God lose distinctiveness there is nothing for anyone to join nor any good reason for seeking to do so! An inclusive objective requires a distinctive base of operation.”<sup>23</sup>

The theme of Isaiah 56:1-8 is how disenfranchised groups such as eunuchs and foreigners have a place in the Kingdom of God. A major theme of Ezra-Nehemiah is how intermarriage—so that foreign wives can bring in their pagan religion to a fledgling Jewish community—is something to be resisted and opposed. Isaiah 56:7 and God’s Temple being “a house of prayer for all the peoples,” is not one where

---

<sup>22</sup> Watts, 820.

<sup>23</sup> Motyer, *Isaiah*, pp 465-466.

## Messianic Sabbath Helper

coercion or force is enacted to bring people to God's Temple. Instead, others are uniquely and supernaturally drawn to God's House, precisely because Israel proper has been accomplishing its vocation of being a light to the world around it. The inclusion of outsiders from the nations at large, within a Kingdom of God with Israel proper at its center, is not to take place at the expense of the canceling out of such an Israel proper.

56:8 Some key questions are necessarily posed by the statement widely closing off this prophetic oracle: "The word of my Lord, HASHEM/ELOHIM, Who gathers in the dispersed of Israel: I shall gather to him even more than those already gathered to him" (ATS). That the Prophet Isaiah has spoken forth a word to those who would return after the Babylonian exile, is fair to assume. That this was not all which God intended to do, is witnessed in the statement *od aqabbeitz alayv l'niqbatzayv* (עוֹד אֶקְבֵּץ עִלַּי לְנִקְבָּצַי), "still I-will-gather-to-him besides-ones-being-gathered-of-him" (Kohlenberger).<sup>24</sup>

Jewish interpreters may take the statement, "I will gather still more to those already gathered" (NJPS), as representing those from the nations at large, who will offer themselves as proselytes.<sup>25</sup> Evangelical Christian interpreters, associating what is seen here with the mission of Yeshua of Nazareth, will take a much broader approach. A wider reaching perspective of v. 8, extending beyond the immediate period following the Babylonian exile, would find support in some of the key themes witnessed in the Book of Isaiah:

"Then it will happen on that day that the Lord will again recover the second time with His hand the remnant of His people, who will remain, from Assyria, Egypt, Pathros, Cush, Elam, Shinar, Hamath, and from the islands of the sea. And He will lift up a standard for the nations and assemble the banished ones of Israel, and will gather the dispersed of Judah From the four corners of the earth (11:11-12).

"For I know their works and their thoughts; the time is coming to gather all nations and tongues. And they shall come and see My glory" (66:18).

Most decisive for many, is how the tenor of Isaiah 56:8 is witnessed in Yeshua's word of John 10:16, where the Lord says, "I have other sheep, which are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will hear My voice; and they will become one flock *with* one shepherd." It was not enough for Israel's Messiah to only serve those of the Jewish people, as there were other sheep out there in the world who needed to be served as well, and brought into a massive sheepfold. Among examiners, Webb takes Isaiah 56:8 in the direction of its post-exilic setting—with Jewish people returning from Babylon and outsiders being welcomed into the community—representing a shadow of a much more significant substance to manifest itself with the arrival of the Messiah:

"The great reality which governs everything in this passage is the end, the goal towards which all God's purposes are moving. Something much more is in view than the rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple and the inclusion of formerly excluded people in the worship associated with it. To the degree that these things happened at all in the sixth century BC they were only signs of something that was 'close at

---

<sup>24</sup> Kohlenberger, 4:114.

<sup>25</sup> Slotki, *Isaiah*, 275.

hand' and 'soon to be revealed' (1). It was with the coming of Christ that sign finally gave way to substance, and the gathering of the outcasts began in earnest."<sup>26</sup>

**Isaiah 56:1-8 application** In the anticipated deliverance of God, which is rightfully recognized as extending out to the arrival of Yeshua the Messiah on the scene of history, we not only see how excluded foreigners and eunuchs will be included within His Kingdom—but how they will take a hold of His covenant and Sabbath. Isaiah 2:2 had previously decreed, "Now it will come about that in the last days the mountain of the house of the LORD will be established as the chief of the mountains, and will be raised above the hills; and all the nations will stream to it." While many Jews, Christians, and Messianic people alike will all find their own points of importance from Isaiah 56:1-8—often with an emphasis on how belief in the God of Israel is not at all to be exclusive to ethnic Israelites and Jews—it is the third group, Messianic people, who will specifically in our day find some sizeable level of importance regarding the seventh-day Sabbath or *Shabbat* from this oracle.

The stress of a commentator like Watts, noting v. 6 and the community that is to emerge, is how "This group includes all those 'keeping Sabbath' holy and 'holding fast [his] covenant.' This implies a return to the original understanding of Israel as a worshiping and covenanting congregation, composed of persons who swore fealty to YHWH in covenant ceremonies (cf. Exod 19:1-20:21; Deuteronomy; Josh 24)."<sup>27</sup> Many people in the Messianic community indeed have a vision of openness and welcomeness, where all regardless of background are to have a place, *as the Lord sovereignly directs them in*. Others have a more exclusivistic approach. However, as we recognize some of the very unique and special things which have indeed occurred in the past few decades of the emerging Messianic movement—as a generation of Jewish people have come to faith in Messiah Yeshua *and* many evangelical Christians have embraced their Hebraic Roots and a life of Torah obedience in a tangible way—an inclusivistic community will undoubtedly be the one which will prevail. Christopher R. Seitz astutely directs,

"This passage is once again the fulfillment of former Isaianic proclamation, concerning 'days to come' (this time Isa 2:2-4). Many peoples were to stream to Zion to learn torah and be taught God's ways (2:3). Now joining Zion's children taught by God (54:13) are those from the peoples. God has gathered them twice (56:8). The original vision of Isaiah is seen as coming to fruition in this fresh prophetic instruction."<sup>28</sup>

Being able to balance and appreciate the distinction of Israel proper, but also how the God of Israel will supernaturally direct those from the world at large into His community—is not always easy to do for today's Messianic movement, but is hardly something that is impossible. The center of God's intention for humanity is indeed a restored Twelve Tribes, but with expanded borders incorporating the righteous masses of humanity (Amos 9:11-12; Acts 15:15-18). Non-Israelites or non-Jews embracing God's Sabbath, as anticipated in oracles such as Isaiah 56:1-8, should never take away from today's Jewish people being the legitimate physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and the rightful heirs to the Holy Land. The thoughts of Oswalt, focusing on how v. 7 says "For My house will be called a

---

<sup>26</sup> Webb, 222.

<sup>27</sup> Watts, 821.

<sup>28</sup> Christopher R. Seitz, "The Book of Isaiah 40-66," in *NIB*, 6:485.

## Messianic Sabbath Helper

house of prayer for all the peoples,” are indeed quite poignant for our consideration:

“What are the benefits that God offers to foreigners such as these? He *will bring them to his holy mountain* (2:3; 11:9; 25:6; 57:13; 65:11; 65:25; 66:20). Not only will they be permitted to come, but the Holy God himself will conduct them, just as he brought his own people back from the land of exile...God had not chosen Israel and given them all that he did in order to shut out the world, but to bring in the world. All of Israel’s separation from the world was in order to keep Israel from being absorbed into the world and thus losing the ability to call the world out of itself into the blessings of God. But should Israel ever come to believe that its separation was so that Israel could keep her God and his blessings to herself, then all was lost. It is precisely this attitude that infuriated Jesus (Matt. 21:13) and that Isaiah is countering.”<sup>29</sup>

Individual Messianic people and families approaching Isaiah 56:1-8 in their Sabbath keeping, probably all have some important things they likely need to take before our Heavenly Father in prayer and contemplation. In v. 2 it is stated that the one “who keeps the Sabbath without desecrating it, and keeps his hand from doing any evil” (NIV) will be blessed. In the view of Motyer, “*Keeps the Sabbath* is the positive reordering of life around God and *keeps his hand from doing any evil* is the negative restraint of personal behaviour from doing wrong.”<sup>30</sup> Let it never be overlooked how **anyone who properly keeps the Sabbath is going to have his or her life oriented around God and His ways.** Those who commit themselves to the rest and refreshment that He offers in the institution of *Shabbat*, should necessarily find themselves repulsed by the influences of evil.

The weekly Sabbath is to be the time when we consider our relationship with our Creator, and with one another. We are to recognize ourselves as citizens of the Kingdom of the Light, and members of a society where all can be changed by the power of the good news of the Messiah, into a welcome place of service and worship before Him. Isaiah 56:1-8 is not just a prophetic word where outsiders will keep *Shabbat*, but they are also to be members of a people who are truly empowered by it.

---

<sup>29</sup> Oswalt, *Isaiah 40-66*, pp 460-461.

<sup>30</sup> Motyer, *Isaiah*, 465.