

Isaiah 66:15-17

“Judgment For Those Eating Unclean Things”

“For behold, the LORD will come in fire and His chariots like the whirlwind, to render His anger with fury, and His rebuke with flames of fire. For the LORD will execute judgment by fire and by His sword on all flesh, and those slain by the LORD will be many. Those who sanctify and purify themselves *to go* to the gardens, following one in the center, who eat swine's flesh, detestable things and mice, will come to an end altogether,” declares the LORD.”

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

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

Of course, the oracles in view were delivered over 2,500 years ago (discussed previously), and we should not be surprised that with the reality of the New Heavens and New Earth assured by God, that concurrent with this that He will judge human sin. Errant religious practices are targeted, with the Lord issuing the word, “*But* he who kills an ox is *like* one who slays a man; he who sacrifices a lamb is *like* the one who breaks a dog's neck; he who offers a grain offering *is like one who offers* swine's blood; he who burns incense is *like* the one who blesses an idol. As they have chosen their *own* ways, and their soul delights in their abominations” (66:3). Perhaps not unlike 65:3-6 preceding, Isaiah 66:3 includes the insulting remark, “he who presents a grain offering, [is] like one who offers pig's blood” (ESV).

Further in Isaiah 66:15-17, one reads a repetition or an echo of the religious practices which had been previously rebuked in 65:4-5, where the eating of pork was associated with idolatry and necromancy. The challenge for interpreting Isaiah 66:15-17, is not that this language is associated with Ancient Near Eastern religious practices involving idolatry and eating pork; the challenge is that Isaiah 66:15-17 has a more eschatological, futuristic setting in view, whereas Isaiah 65:4-5 had more the fall of Jerusalem and Judea to the Babylonians in the Sixth Century B.C.E. in mind. Isaiah 66:15-17 is a scene that has the Lord coming to Planet Earth to issue judgment upon those in rebellion against Him, and one of the specific sins people are indicted for is consumption of pork. How does this seemingly relate to today's Messianic kosher-friendly people, and those who might look negatively upon us for not eating unclean meats like pork?

66:15-16 Judgment from Heaven is coming: “See, the LORD is coming with fire—His chariots are like a whirlwind—to vent His anger in fury, His rebuke in flaming fire” (v. 15, NJPS). God as a warrior, with a huge army or fighting force, is a theme witnessed throughout the Tanach (Jeremiah 4:13; Habakkuk 3:8; Psalm 68:17). God coming in fire is

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certainly witnessed throughout the Book of Isaiah (10:16-18; 29:5-6; 30:27, 30; 33:14), as well as God coming in a whirlwind or cloud (19:1; 29:6; 30:30). These are themes to which Yeshua Himself will also refer (Matthew 10:34; Luke 12:49-51). Perhaps most important, is how the Apostle Paul alludes to much of this in 2 Thessalonians 1:6-10, speaking of the return of the Messiah:

“For after all it is *only* just for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to give relief to you who are afflicted and to us as well when the Lord Yeshua will be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Yeshua. These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, when He comes to be glorified in His saints on that day, and to be marveled at among all who have believed—for our testimony to you was believed.”

It is decreed, “For with fire will the LORD contend, with His sword, against all flesh; and many shall be the slain of the LORD” (v. 16, NJPS). Some interpret the reference to *kol-basar* (כָּל-בָּשָׂר) as only relating to Israel proper,¹ or even those local to the environs of Jerusalem,² yet this would seem to be very unlikely. J.A. Motyer carefully describes, “The only itemized judgment in chapters 56-66 is that executed on apostate Israel, but references like this to ‘all flesh’ keep the wider dimensions of holy wrath in mind.”³ John N. Oswalt further states, “Here all God’s triumphs over sinful humanity are caught up together in a climatic statement. Isaiah is in no doubt that evil will not prevail on the earth.”⁴ It cannot go unnoticed that while *kol-basar* is literally and more correctly, “all flesh,” that Jewish Tanach versions will render it as “all mankind” (ATS, Keter Crown Bible) or “all humanity” (CJB).⁵ So, it would seem appropriate that the sins detailed in v. 17 following, are going to affect far more than just the Ancient Israelites and/or their descendants to whom the Prophet Isaiah originally issued this word.

66:17 The sinners for whom judgment will be issued are described: “Those who consecrate and purify themselves to go into the gardens, following the one in the midst of those who eat the flesh of pigs and rats and other abominable things—they will meet their end together,’ declares the LORD” (NIV). The description of this idolatry is rooted within Ancient Near Eastern paganism, as gardens were associated with inappropriate worship (1:29; 65:3). These sinners are stated to be following or centered around some kind of a figure or leader, with various interpreters making light of the further prophetic word of Ezekiel 8:7-11, and the sins depicted:

“Then He brought me to the entrance of the court, and when I looked, behold, a hole in the wall. He said to me, ‘Son of man, now dig through the wall.’ So I dug through the wall, and behold, an entrance. And He said to me, ‘Go in and see the wicked abominations that they are committing here.’ So I entered and looked, and behold, every form of creeping things and beasts and detestable things, with all the idols of the house of Israel,

¹ Geoffrey W. Grogan, “Isaiah,” in Frank E. Gaebelien, ed. et. al., *Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 6:320.

² John Goldingay, *New International Biblical Commentary: Isaiah* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2001), 372.

³ J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction & Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 539.

⁴ Oswalt, 685.

⁵ The NIV has “all men,” followed by the TNIV with “all people.”

were carved on the wall all around. Standing in front of them were seventy elders of the house of Israel, with Jaazaniah the son of Shaphan standing among them, each man with his censer in his hand and the fragrance of the cloud of incense rising.”

Motyer interjects the thought for v. 17, “It sounds, on the surface, simply like a congregation taking their lead from a central figure, but it may be a colloquialism by which members of a secret or semi-secret society identified each other.”⁶ There is some dispute over who the “one” of v. 17 is, given some textual variants seen in the Hebrew: *achar* (*echad*) [*achat*] *b’tavekh* (אָחַדְרַךְ) (אָחַדְרַתְךָ) (אָחַדְרַתְךָ). There is a slight difference between the Ketiv (what is written) and the Qere (what is read),⁷ as noted by I.W. Slotki, “The *kethib* reads the word as masculine [*echad*], the *kerē* as feminine [*achat*]. The former may denote the leader of the procession, the latter a goddess, possibly the *asherah*.”⁸ IVPBBC seems relatively stumped on v. 17, stating, “There is no extrabiblical evidence illuminating this custom.”⁹ Following either a male or female religious leader could be in view, as well as following either a male or female deity.

It would seem more appropriate than not, that while God does decree that He will judge those who eat pork (cf. 65:4; Leviticus 11:17) and rodents (cf. Leviticus 11:29), that this is connected to some kind of idolatry and/or inappropriate religious observance. General eating of pork and rodents, while regarded as an unclean practice in the Torah, would not seem to merit harsh condemnation unless there were *something more* associated with it than just physical consumption. Barry G. Webb offers the general thought, “Some details of verse 17 are obscure...but the general sense is clear. The wide-ranging judgment of verse 16 narrows here to those who practise idolatrous rites (cf. 65:3-7). The judgment is on the heathen and on those (including apostate Jews) who have become like them.”¹⁰ John D.W. Watts offers the more specific thought, “Their communal judgment stresses the horrible and social nature of their sins. It will be a mass judgment and a mass execution as it has been a mass provocation against God.”¹¹ Oswalt approaches v. 17 more thematically, thinking that it describes the problems of empty religion more than anything else:

“Here the prophet returns to a specific kind of rebellion that has been at the heart of this division’s (and this book’s) concern from the outset: ritualism. How easy it is for all religionists to read the predictions of the destruction of the wicked with a certain satisfaction. Yes, God will be avenged on his enemies and we true believers will finally be vindicated. But the satisfaction of such ritualists is not in the biblical tradition, and it is certainly not in view here. Just as in Isa. 57:3-13; 58:1-5; 65:1-7; and 66:3-4 (as well as 1:11-20), religion that is nothing other than form and routine and is not demonstrated in a heartfelt obedience to the covenant is as disgusting to God as rank idolatry. It is not pleasing to God, but is as nauseating as the eating of swine and mice.”¹²

⁶ Motyer, *Isaiah*, 540.

⁷ Aron Dotan, ed., *Biblia Hebraica Leningradensia* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2001), 648.

⁸ Slotki, 324.

⁹ Walton, Matthews, and Chavalas, 641.

¹⁰ Barry G. Webb, *The Message of Isaiah* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), 249 fn#150.

¹¹ Watts, 939.

¹² Oswalt, 686.

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66:15-17 application While it certainly has to be observed how in the Last Days, in association with the Second Coming of Yeshua, that the Lord will judge those “eating the flesh of pigs, vermin, and rodents” (v. 17, NRSV)—that this has been applied a little too flippantly, at times, to Christian people eating unclean things. Many of these people, even if not having too much regard for the Torah’s instruction, have not had what “kosher” is explained to them that well (truly necessitating publications like this!). At the most, what Isaiah 66:15-17 can be applied to, are those who **defiantly** eat pork or rodents, believing that *kashrut* has been totally abolished—and that to abstain from various unclean meats is somehow an affront to God, when it is actually obedience to God. Many of us who are a part of the Messianic community know of Christian family and friends who do not understand kosher, do eat pork and shellfish, but are not judgmental about it, even though they cannot process the validity of kosher for the post-resurrection era. **These are not the people in view for Isaiah 66:15-17.** But, it does have to be sadly observed, that there can certainly be various Christian people who are more critical to Messianic people who are kosher-friendly, not exhibiting the love and patience of Yeshua—than there are secular people who, while not understanding the Torah’s instruction on eating, will be rather tolerant toward others.

Today’s Messianic people need to exhibit some caution when quoting Isaiah 66:15-17—because while those who eat pork and rodents will be judged by God, **it is an Eternal God who knows the true intention of the human heart who will issue the judgment**, and not limited mortals. Furthermore, the word about judgment is associated not just with eating pork and rodents, but also with gardens and the idolatry previously described in Isaiah 65:4-5. 66:17 says that people will follow some kind of a figure, and then engage with eating unclean meats. This does not seem to be Christians ignorant of the importance of kosher, blindly following an under-informed pastor or teacher, nor does it describe people in the Tribulation period who might eat pork or rodents to physically survive. 66:17 involves people following after an errant religious system, which will permit undue feasting and revelry, and being significantly indignant toward God’s Instruction. The NLT offers the unique paraphrase of 66:17, “Those who ‘consecrate’ and ‘purify’ themselves in a sacred garden with its idol in the center—feasting on pork and rats and other detestable meats—will come to a terrible end.”

If we want a more text-conscious reading of Isaiah 66:15-17, taking into consideration Isaiah 65:4-5 preceding, a case could be made for it describing various rituals and traditions like the Día de Muertos or Day of the Dead, commonly observed throughout Mexico and Latin America, around October 31 or Halloween. This is a holiday that is syncretic, and observed by many Roman Catholics, where the gravesites of loved ones will be visited with their favorite foods and drinks, and the spirits of the departed will be consulted and entreated. This the kind of holiday where the unclean things of the dead and the meats declared unclean by the Torah can truly intersect with one another, with many people thinking they are doing something sanctioned by God.

While in the relatively Protestant West many evangelical Believers would think that an observance like the Day of the Dead is superstitious and perhaps just flat unenlightened, this is one of many pagan or pagan-esque observances witnessed throughout the world—be it sanctioned by “Christian” religious authorities or not—that can likely be associated with the occult, consultation of the dead, and eating unclean

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things. While it remains unknown what kind of religious rites, similar to that witnessed in the Ancient Near East, might “revive” themselves prior to the Messiah’s return, in association with the rise of the antimessiah/antichrist and false prophet—there are customs and traditions already present throughout the world to be taken notice of, the practitioners of which will find themselves condemned by God, if unrepentant.