

## Sometimes the Center is the Wrong Place to Be: An Examination of Isaiah 66:17

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Given the Hebrew Bible as our only historical source, the period of the Israelites' return to Judah and restoration of Jerusalem *seems* to be one of religious, social, and political anarchy; the Biblical record is wrought with historical lacunae and contradictions which ultimately leave us in the proverbial dark concerning the epoch.<sup>1</sup> Historical-Biblical scholarship must, it appears, be content to do without a coherent and comprehensive narrative fully describing the repatriated Israelites' situation. But, this is not to say that our knowledge of the period is wholly deficient; from a more studious examination of the texts we might be able to glean more than just isolated minutiae floating through the void. We can certainly assert that a portion of the exiled Israelites, the ones most interested in preserving their identity as specially chosen by God,<sup>2</sup> would have adopted conservative attitudes regarding authentic religious worship. While some of the exiles may have made forays into religious syncretism and cultural assimilation (and most likely did, given the fact that some elected not to return to Palestine after Cyrus' liberation), others refused acquiescence to such syncretism and assimilation on the grounds that authentic God-worship could not be genuinely undertaken in Babylon and should not be sullied by the taint of other gods. Indeed, a group of exiles did return to Jerusalem, intent on reestablishing authentic God-worship in the land and rebuilding the Temple in Jerusalem as the locale of this worship.

What is unclear, though, is the nature and practice of this worship. If we aver that those who returned to Jerusalem truly were the *hasidim* (so to say) among the community of exiles, we would expect that their worship in Jerusalem would mimic the practices of pre-Exilic Israel conserved throughout the Exile.<sup>3</sup> In this light, Isaiah 66:17 is intriguing:

<sup>17</sup>Those who sanctify and purify themselves to go into the garden, following the one in the center, eating the flesh of pigs, vermin, and rodents, shall come to an end together, says the LORD.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A good example of the untenable nature of the Biblical material discussing the return and restoration is the seemingly double-construction of the Temple, done first by Sheshbazzar and chronicled in Ezra 5:14-17, and then again by Zerubbabel and described in Haggai and Zechariah, whose accounts lack any reference to Sheshbazzar's activity.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout my examination, "God" will be used to refer to the God of Israel; all other gods will be mentioned by name.

<sup>3</sup> This dynamic seems linear to me. 1. Israelites worship in X manner before the Exile. 2. Exiled Israelites, to preserve their religious identity, try as closely as possible to continue X in Babylon (or, at least retain the memory of X). 3. Upon return to Jerusalem, Israelites reengage in the practice of X as it has been remembered. There are some simplifying assumptions at work here, though. It is assumed, for instance, that religious practices remembered in Babylon did not evolve, so that there is a one-to-one correspondence between pre- and post-Exilic practice.

<sup>4</sup> Scripture quotations are New Revised Standard Version. For a presentation of some alternate (and interestingly illuminating) translations of Isaiah 66:17, please consult the Appendix below.

This verse occurs near the very end of Trito-Isaiah's<sup>5</sup> prophetic record and is only the second prosaic verse (of seven total prosaic verses, five of which are Isaiah 66:18-21, 24; the rest of the Trito-Isaian corpus is poetry) in the Trito-Isaian corpus. Due to this stylistic inconsistency, we should entertain the possibility that Isaiah 66:17 is an editorial insertion. Further, though Isaiah 66:17 seems clearly to describe a "deviant cultic celebration,"<sup>6</sup> the text leaves no explicit clues as to *whom* this celebration was dedicated or *why* it was performed. The thrust of my examination, therefore, will be threefold. First, I will attempt to locate several themes contained in Isaiah 66:17 within a larger Trito-Isaian context. Secondly, I will make a suggestion regarding how we should understand the identity of the "one in the center." Finally, I will attempt to provide an explication of this garden ritual: what is done and why. My hope, in the end, is a suggestion for how this verse, stylistically inconsistent with the rest of Trito-Isaiah's writings, can be understood.

### Isaiah 66:17 in a Trito-Isaian Context

We need not abandon Isaiah 66:17 to the status of totally unequivocal gloss; there is indeed thematic consistency between Isaiah 66:17 and the material in Isaiah 65:3-7. Blenkinsopp grants that Isaiah 66:17 might be contextually isolated from its surrounding verses, but has enough in common with Isaiah 65:3-7 to admit the same source.<sup>7</sup> Of these five verses, Isaiah 65:3-4 are the most important for my study:

<sup>3</sup>a people who provoke me  
to my face continually,  
sacrificing in gardens  
and offering incense on bricks;  
<sup>4</sup>who sit inside tombs,  
and spend the night in secret  
places;  
who eat swine's flesh,  
with broth of abominable things  
in their vessels...

Immediately, we notice the thematic similarities of illicit cultic practices taking place in a garden and of the consumption of proscribed foods. Though itself an independent literary unit, we should thus understand Isaiah 66:17 as "a later expansion of the latter [Isaiah 65:3-7] verses' description of cultic malpractices."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Over and against the exegetical view that insists on a single Isaian author, most contemporary exegetes agree that the biblical Book of Isaiah consists of three separate prophetic works: that of a pre-Exilic Isaiah of Jerusalem (Isaiah 1-39), one of an Exilic Deutero-Isaiah (Isaiah 40-55), and one of a post-Exilic Trito-Isaiah (Isaiah 56-66). For an introductory treatment of the stylistic and theological affinities and differences between these three, the historical contexts out of which each was produced, and individual treatments of each work, see James D. Newsome, Jr., *The Hebrew Prophets* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1984), 58-78, 139-156, 170-179.

<sup>6</sup> Joseph Blenkinsopp, "The One in the Middle," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003): 63.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1969), 422.

We can speculate upon the malpractice. Assuming Trito-Isaiah (or the redactor responsible for inserting Isaiah 66:17) was of the ultra-pious persuasion, the immediate transgression of Isaiah 65:3 is that sacrifice is being performed in Jerusalem outside of the confines of the Temple: “Sacrifice in ancient Israel came to be allowed only in the Jerusalem temple [sic], most likely in order to keep close control and regulation over it, and thus hopefully to prevent misuse.”<sup>9</sup> While it is abject speculation as to whether any and all worship outside the Temple was regarded as malpractice, it seems that Trito-Isaiah holds this to be so. More ambiguously, it has been suggested that Trito-Isaiah is responding to a particular cultic attitude which disregarded ritual prescription and assumed that any worship was genuine and authentic, regardless of locale; “Isaiah may well ... say that the ‘cult-for-cult’s sake’ approach was no better than out-and-out paganism.”<sup>10</sup> If this is the case, no actual worship in gardens need have taken place; Trito-Isaiah’s language here would be rhetorical and instructive, addressing not a cultic practice but a cultic attitude. Regardless, Isaiah 65:3-7 firmly entrench Trito-Isaiah within a longstanding prophetic tradition that discouraged unsanctioned cultic activity and urged the people to subject themselves to God.<sup>11</sup> While Isaiah 65:3 provides no specific reference to these unsanctioned cultic activities aside from their location, Trito-Isaiah nonetheless asserts that the people are “[walking] in a way that is not good, following their own devices....”<sup>12</sup>

A more nefarious and pernicious possibility exists with the inclusion of the gardens in Isaiah 65:3, as well: the worship of foreign (or, if Israelite, non-God) deities. To this end, generic worship of Canaanite deities,<sup>13</sup> worship of Osiris,<sup>14</sup> of the Syrian vegetation deity Adonis,<sup>15</sup> or of Asherah<sup>16</sup> each have some scholarly support. Indeed, if the ancients wished to engage in ritual activity, there could hardly be a more appropriate setting than a garden, especially when the ritual celebrated the union of male and female deities.<sup>17</sup> Further, a garden was often understood as a deity’s abode, so ritual activity located within a garden was done because “it is the place where one can experience the deity’s numinous and beneficent power.”<sup>18</sup> Were the references to the gardens to have been absent of any cultic or ritual activity, we might be able to adduce that the people’s presence there is innocuous and benign; as it stands, Trito-Isaiah’s linkage of presence in gardens with the performance of explicitly cultic practices indicates that worship was indeed happening.

The references to consumption of ritually-impure foods likewise points in this direction; eating the flesh of swine was prohibited by Leviticus 11:7 and of mice by Leviticus 11:29; this signals communion with foreign deities.<sup>19</sup> The pig was a common sacrificial animal in Greece and elsewhere in Palestine and the Near East, most specifically attested by a scene carved on an Eleusinian urn depicting an initiation. On one side of the urn, Heracles offers a pig for sacrifice

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<sup>9</sup> Michael E.W. Thompson, *Isaiah: Chapters 40-66* (Peterborough, United Kingdom: Epworth Press, 2001), 166.

<sup>10</sup> John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40-66* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 637.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 636-637.

<sup>12</sup> Isaiah 65:2.

<sup>13</sup> Paul D. Hanson, *Isaiah 40-66* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1995), 243; Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972), 503.

<sup>14</sup> “Leaves from the ‘Golden Bough’,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 8, no. 4 (July 1896): 704.

<sup>15</sup> Thompson, *Isaiah 40-66*, 166.

<sup>16</sup> Blenkinsopp, “Middle,” 68.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>19</sup> Thompson, *Isaiah 40-66*, 166.

on a low altar to a priest, who pours a libation over the animal.<sup>20</sup> This is especially compelling when considered along with the apparent initiation ritual described by “sanctifying” and “purifying” in Isaiah 66:17, a possibility which will be considered below. Ritually resonant is the inclusion of the mouse, which was religiously significant in Philistine religion, as well as in that of the Phoenicians, Edomites, and perhaps Judeans.<sup>21</sup> Less clear is the precise meaning of “vermin.” The Hebrew word here, *šeqes*, refers generically to unclean foods.<sup>22</sup> Given the correspondence between other elements in Isaiah 65:3-4 and Isaiah 66:17, it seems reasonable to identify Isaiah 66:17’s *šeqes* with the also-vague *p<sup>e</sup>raq piggulîm* of Isaiah 65:4, the “broth of abominable things.”<sup>23</sup>



Figure 1. Eleusinian Urn.

*The depiction on this portion of the Lovatelli Urn is of an initiation scene into, perhaps, the cult of Demeter. The completely-visible figure on the right is Heracles, donned with a lion skin, offering a pig on a low altar. The completely-visible figure of the left is a priest, pouring a libation over the pig and holding an offering tray.*<sup>24</sup>

The conclusion we might draw from this part of the examination is that there is a ritual and cultic correspondence between the independent Isaiah 66:17 and likely Trito-Isaian poetry of Isaiah 65:3-4; Isaiah 66:17 is not a hopelessly isolated insertion with no referent.

<sup>20</sup> Walter Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults* (London and Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1987), 55; see Figure 1 below.

<sup>21</sup> Blenkinsopp, “Middle,” 69.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*; Susan Ackerman, “A *Marzēah* in Ezekiel 8:7-13?” *Harvard Theological Review* 82, no. 3 (July 1989): 273.

<sup>23</sup> Blenkinsopp, “Middle,” 69.

<sup>24</sup> Burkert, *Mystery Cults*, 55 (figure), 94; see n. 21 above.

## “Knave, Show Thyself!” Identifying “The One in the Center”

Thus far, we have seen that the garden cults mentioned first in Isaiah 65:3 and again in Isaiah 66:17 are directed toward the worship of *some* non-God deity, though there is, by no means, any consensus regarding the identity of this deity. And, again, we might be faced with the prospect of accepting an untenable ambiguity: “There are indeed indications that, both before and after the fall of Jerusalem, cults were carried out in deliberate defiance of Yahwistic orthodoxy,”<sup>25</sup> assuming, of course, that such orthodoxy existed. Given that garden cults seemed to be plentiful, perhaps it is a mistake to try to whittle their characterization down to one specific deity; likely, many gods were worshipped in this manner, and it might be impossible to determine the particular from the generic in Isaiah 65:3 and Isaiah 66:17.

This caveat must allow, however, for some more-than-cursory speculation regarding the deity to whom Trito-Isaiah’s garden rituals were directed and the precise identification of “the one in the center.” Given the language of Isaiah 66:17, it seems entirely plausible that the deity is not “the one in the center” because the initiates, the ones who purify and sanctify themselves, are following this “one in the center.” Indeed, the concept of “centerhood” seems tied to human involvement.<sup>26</sup> Within a ritual context, though, “centerhood” is “mythic imagery, an archetypal symbol referring to a sacred center, a place where earth and heaven met...”<sup>27</sup> Thus, it seems as though Trito-Isaiah’s usage of “the one in the center” is meant to refer to both deific realities and human involvement within the cultic practices that manifest those realities. In other words, Blenkinsopp recognizes in Isaiah 66:17 both a reference to an hierophant and another to the deity served in the garden rituals.<sup>28</sup>

Blenkinsopp admits murkiness in the scholarly tradition regarding this deity’s identification. Nineteenth-century biblical scholars tended to identify “the one in the center” as a representative and devotee of Adad, a Syrian god.<sup>29</sup> Others of the period preferred biblical reference, and found one in the record of apostasy contained in Ezekiel 8:14-15: an initiator to the cult of Tammuz-Adonis.<sup>30</sup> In both cases, though, there is the explicit recognition that the garden ritual was some sort of initiation. In the ancient Near East, all significant cultic activity required both the cultic space and those who officiated and participated therein to be sacralized.<sup>31</sup> So, one who wished to participate must have first undergone some process of purification and sanctification, and this is exactly what Isaiah 66:17 describes. For the uninitiated, encroaching upon sacralized space was a transgression worthy of the most severe punishment;<sup>32</sup> initiates into this garden cult underwent some sort of process of purification before following “the one in the center.”

Young asserts that the hierophant in Isaiah 66:17, unlike those of Ezekiel 8:7-13, is female.<sup>33</sup> Also, the hierophant would both represent the deity and officiate during the ceremonies; she did not merely guide the neophytes through the initiation process and into the garden, for she could

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<sup>25</sup> Blenkinsopp, “Middle,” 69.

<sup>26</sup> Stephen G. Brown, “The Intertextuality of Isaiah 66:17 and 2 Thessalonians 2:7: A Solution for the ‘Restrainer’ Problem,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993): 263.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Blenkinsopp, “Middle,” 70-71.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, cf. Exodus 19:13.

<sup>33</sup> Young, *Isaiah*, 530-531.

not be both the head of a procession and at the center of the ritual at the same time.<sup>34</sup> Her position was in the center of the ritual.<sup>35</sup> Considering Isaiah 1:29 along with Isaiah 66:17, cultic gardens are linked with sacred trees.<sup>36</sup> Thus, the deity worshipped in the gardens against which Trito-Isaiah rails is probably Asherah, assuming that Trito-Isaiah continues the theological themes of Isaiah. Most convincingly, the sacred tree called *“šērâ* in the Bible is associated with sacrifice,<sup>37</sup> incense altars,<sup>38</sup> chthonic cults,<sup>39</sup> and erotic cults;<sup>40</sup> these are precisely the cultic elements to which Isaiah 65:3-4 alludes or describes.<sup>41</sup> Blenkinsopp concludes of the deity, hierophant, and cult (especially in reference to the garden in Genesis):

The woman Havva, mother of all the living (Genesis 3:20) as the Canaanite-Hebrew Asherah was mother of all the gods, would be the human counterpart of the goddess, her hierophant and cultic intermediary. In view of the sacramental meal in the garden shrine, her leading the initiates to the goddess would be appropriately symbolized in the act of eating. There is therefore a kind of symbolic superimposition of goddess, tree, and hierophant.<sup>42</sup>

Thus, though Trito-Isaiah certainly might aim his polemic against any garden ritual whose performance sacrifices to and worships a god who is not God, the textual evidence points to garden worship of Asherah in particular. We can conclude that Trito-Isaiah is party to another longstanding prophetic tradition which eschewed both unsanctioned worship outside the Temple and worship of non-God gods, Asherah included. Trito-Isaiah might be insisting on strict monotheism here, but he is in a religious minority; worship of Asherah (and other deities) had been revived shortly after the return to Judah.<sup>43</sup>

### **The Ecstasy in the Garden: What’s Happening in Isaiah 66:17**

We have thus far established that Isaiah 66:17 refers to some sort of ritual activity taking place within the locale of a garden,<sup>44</sup> is replete with consumption of ritually- and culturally-forbidden foods, and is most likely an initiation ritual into the cult of Asherah. But Blenkinsopp finds pause at this point; “The participants would not have gone through a perhaps lengthy and expensive initiation process just to have a non-kosher meal.”<sup>45</sup> Further, the connotation of sexuality when referring to the garden must also be kept in mind; the Northwest Semitic stem *‘dn* (as in *‘ēden*, the garden of Genesis 2-3 and Isaiah 51:3) “denotes pleasure, luxury, abundance. It

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<sup>34</sup> Blenkinsopp, “Middle,” 71.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Deuteronomy 16:21; Jeremiah 17:2; 2 Chronicles 34:4, 7.

<sup>38</sup> Isaiah 17:8, 27:9; 2 Chronicles 34:4.

<sup>39</sup> 2 Kings 16:4; 2 Chronicles 28:4.

<sup>40</sup> 1 Kings 14:23; Jeremiah 2:20, 3:6, 13.

<sup>41</sup> For explanation of these themes, see below.

<sup>42</sup> Blenkinsopp, “Middle,” 72.

<sup>43</sup> Westermann, *Isaiah 44-60*, 401, 422.

<sup>44</sup> Apparently, garden sacrifices were prescribed in Ugaritic cultic rites; see RS 24.250+: Dennis Pardee, *Ritual and Cult at Ugarit*, ed. Theodore J. Lewis (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002), 53-56.

<sup>45</sup> Blenkinsopp, “Middle,” 69.

also denotes sexual pleasure....”<sup>46</sup> We have already seen that garden activity symbolized the union of male and female deities, but the discovery of the Dead Sea Scroll Isaian manuscripts have also allowed for the recognition of ritual fellatio in Isaiah 65:3-4.<sup>47</sup>

An equally-pregnant possibility for these garden rituals is mortuary. Isaiah 65:4 explicitly links performance of garden rites and sacrifices with participation in incubation rituals within tombs.<sup>48</sup> This foray into necromancy has some precedent in Israel and is elsewhere condemned in scripture.<sup>49</sup> But the tendency to consult with deceased ancestors in the hopes of obtaining oracles was consistent in the ancient Near East: “the cult of Demeter ... had a strong mortuary character, the Bacchic *thiasoi*’s custom was to spend the night in tombs,”<sup>50</sup> and Osiris’ cult was one of death.<sup>51</sup> Blenkinsopp notes that mortuary cults seem to be connatural with erotic activity, most comprehensively attested in Isaiah 57:3-13, in which a sorceress is condemned for participation in mortuary cults as well as for sexual transgressions.<sup>52</sup>

The most cogent suggestion for what is really happening in the garden rituals to which Trito-Isaiah alludes in Isaiah 66:17 depends upon the above-mentioned apostasy described in Ezekiel 8:5-18. Ackerman questions, firstly, whether the “image of jealousy” (*semel*) in Ezekiel 8:5 is really an *“šērā.”*<sup>53</sup> But the greater question, and perhaps the more important point for my examination, concerns the second abomination Ezekiel witnesses, in Ezekiel 8:7-12:

<sup>7</sup>And he brought me to the entrance of the court; I looked, and there was a hole in the wall. <sup>8</sup>Then he said to me, “Mortal, dig through the wall”; and when I dug through the wall, there was an entrance. <sup>9</sup>He said to me, “Go in, and see the vile abominations that they are committing here.” <sup>10</sup>So I went in and looked; there, portrayed on the wall all around, were all kinds of creeping things, and loathsome animals, and all the idols of the house of Israel. <sup>11</sup>Before them stood seventy elders of the house of Israel, with Jaazaniah son of Shaphan standing among them. Each had his censer in his hand, and the fragrant cloud of incense was ascending. <sup>12</sup>Then he said to me, “Mortal, have you seen what the elders of the house of Israel are doing in the dark, each in his room of images? For they say, ‘The LORD does not see us, the LORD has forsaken the land.’”

This appears to be a unique situation in the Hebrew Bible; though the text is clear, the rite Ezekiel describes is nonetheless obscure.<sup>54</sup> Ezekiel is told to enter the room in which this illicit worship was taking place by digging through its walls. As has been proposed above, a non-initiate could not enter the locale of cultic activity. Ezekiel is thus an interloper to this cult; were he a legitimate cultic participant, the door would have been open to him.<sup>55</sup> The implication, then, is that the cultic activity Ezekiel witnesses is that of a private, perhaps even secret, cult.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>47</sup> Hanson, *Isaiah 40-66*, 243.

<sup>48</sup> Blenkinsopp, “Middle,” 69.

<sup>49</sup> Thompson, *Isaiah 40-66*, 166; Young, *Isaiah*, 503; cf. Deuteronomy 18:11; 1 Samuel 28:3; Isaiah 57:9.

<sup>50</sup> Blenkinsopp, “Middle,” 70.

<sup>51</sup> Ackerman, “*Marzēah*,” 273.

<sup>52</sup> Blenkinsopp, “Middle,” 70.

<sup>53</sup> Ackerman, “*Marzēah*,” 267.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 268.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

Interestingly, Ezekiel 8:10 describes the walls of this room engraved with images of *šeqes*, the generically-unclean foods of Isaiah 66:17. Ackerman suggests that the abomination Ezekiel witnessed in Ezekiel 8:10 included a food component: *šeqes*-food was laid out for a ritual meal in a room with carved images of *šeqes*-animals into the walls.<sup>57</sup> Taken together, the obvious conclusion was that this meal was not a benign, non-religious activity, but *expressly* celebrated in honor of the idols pictured in relief on the walls.<sup>58</sup> We may note the parallels with Isaiah 66:17: in the midst of the garden in which the initiates have been sanctified and purified to enter, they consume a meal. While Isaiah 66:17 describes no carved-relief images of Asherah (or any other deity, for that matter) owing to the garden locale, there is an hierophant in the middle of the assembly who is the symbolic representation of the deity and the cultic intermediary for the deity. While not identical in nature, the activity Ezekiel describes in Ezekiel 8:7-12 and that which Trito-Isaiah blasts in Isaiah 66:17 seem nonetheless to be of the same religious stuff. The conclusion, explicitly for Ezekiel 8:7-12, and therefore by extension for Isaiah 66:17 (and also Isaiah 65:3-4) is that this cultic activity was a *marzēah*.<sup>59</sup>

While the exact dimensions of a *marzēah* are not clear, the biblical record is certain enough of its gist: it involves the celebration of a feast, especially drinking.<sup>60</sup> Ugaritic references to *marzēah*-celebrations typically conclude that the religious associations participating in a *marzēah* owned fields or vineyards.<sup>61</sup> Is it too much to surmise that adherents to the Asherah cult in post-Exilic Jerusalem could have owned gardens? If this is the case, Trito-Isaiah's condemnation of the garden rituals is both cultic and social: to own gardens (or to have a room entirely dedicated to *marzēah*-celebrations, as is the case in Ezekiel 8:7-12<sup>62</sup>), the cult must have included wealthy members. Indeed, Ezekiel 8:11 describes seventy elders of Israel participating in the *marzēah*; the religious and social *elites* were celebrating in this fashion. We might conclude that the *marzēah* was a lavish, ornate, and expensive affair; consider Amos 6:4-7, which Ackerman reckons is an earlier denouncement of the *marzēah*:<sup>63</sup>

<sup>4</sup>Alas for those who lie on beds  
of ivory,  
and lounge on their couches,  
and eat lambs from the flock,  
and calves from the stall;  
<sup>5</sup>who sing idle songs to the sound  
of the harp,  
and like David improvise on  
instruments of music;  
<sup>6</sup>who drink wine from bowls,  
and anoint themselves with the  
finest oils,  
but are not grieved over the  
ruin of Joseph!

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 273.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 274.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 275. Blenkinsopp also suggests the *marzēah* as a plausible conclusion for the activity Trito-Isaiah describes in Isaiah 66:17: Blenkinsopp, "Middle," 70.

<sup>60</sup> Ackerman, "Marzēah," 275.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> The important point here is that the idols were *carved* into the walls: Ackerman, "Marzēah," 274.

<sup>63</sup> Ackerman, "Marzēah," 276.

Thus, the celebration of the *marzēah* was an affair for the wealthy; could Trito-Isaiah be standing within yet another longstanding prophetic tradition which decried the well-heeled's neglect of the poor while they themselves spent extravagantly on religious celebrations? Also, given the identity in the ancient world twixt wealth and political power, could Trito-Isaiah be lamenting the aristocracy's continued participation in non-God worship with the fear that such worship could become a national institution during a period in which the nation of Israel must have felt the need to redefine itself? Finally, while the precise purpose of the *marzēah* is not clear, Ackerman suggests that its most probable association was with the funerary cult.<sup>64</sup> If this is the case, we have yet another parallel between Ezekiel 8:7-12 and the Trito-Isaian condemnation of garden rituals, whose members "sit inside tombs."<sup>65</sup> Ackerman concludes nicely:

...we might infer that the prophets do not consider *marzēah* associations to be a legitimate part of the religion of Israel. Amos does not attack the religious aspects of the *marzēah* of Samaria; rather he criticizes the *marzēah* for what he perceives to be its social flaws. The *marzēah* is for Amos a symbol of the conspicuous consumption of the upper classes. Amos, as a spokesman against economic exploitation, despises the *marzēah* as an institution of the rich. Moreover, Amos regards the men who belong to the *marzēah* as those property owners who have accumulated money and land at the expense of the poor. It is possible that Ezekiel condemns the *marzēah* simply because it violates the law prohibiting graven images and the priestly dietary laws. ...It is more likely that the *marzēah* of Ezekiel 8 is condemned because it was under the patronage of a god other than Yahweh.<sup>66</sup>

I submit that Trito-Isaiah's name could be qualifiably substituted for both those of Amos and Ezekiel. Given the apparent anarchy of the restoration, Trito-Isaiah seems to express a wish to rally the nation under the banner of God through proper ritual, religious, and cultic expression. Thus, while the *marzēah*, understood generally, might have been an acceptable form of worship, the object of that worship, whether Asherah or another deity, would have been unpalatable for Trito-Isaiah. Further, insofar as the economic elites were the religious elites in post-Exilic Jerusalem, an elite participation in illicit cults to non-God gods would have, in Trito-Isaiah's esteem, deflated the currency of God-worship; the possibility of the establishment of cults to these deities as national institutions would have been a palpable threat. In other words, Trito-Isaiah, through Isaiah 65:3-4 and Isaiah 66:17, is insisting on both social and religious orthodoxy under the aegis of God.

## Conclusion

From a passage which gives us remarkably little context for understanding, we can now make some tentative suggestions regarding the referent and proceedings of Isaiah 66:17. First, Isaiah 66:17, though itself an independent literary unit, is an editorial insertion meant to refer to the

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 278. An obvious question, then, assuming Isaiah 66:17 refers to the cult of Asherah, is whether the cult of Asherah ever had a funerary character to it.

<sup>65</sup> Isaiah 65:4.

<sup>66</sup> Ackerman, "Marzēah," 279-280. Apologies for the length of the quote.

garden rituals and meals mentioned in Isaiah 65:3-4. These rituals are to be understood as initiation rites into the cults of various deities, especially that of Asherah. The cultic neophytes are inducted into the cult following ritual purification, after which they are sacralized and permitted to enter the cultic enclosure. Within the confines of the cultic locale, the initiates share a meal around an hierophant, a cultic intermediary meant to represent the deity and officiate at the meal, understood to be sacrificial. The neophytes thus “follow” the hierophant into the body of the cult’s adherents. The totality of the rite is best understood as a *marzēah*, a rite and meal sacrificed to a deity, perhaps with a funerary dimension. Given Trito-Isaiah’s tone, it is clear that the prophet disapproves of these rituals; archaeological evidence suggests that the ancient Israelites were never wont to depict or worship God in a manner consistent with these *marzēah*-celebrations.<sup>67</sup>

We might also draw some very preliminary historical conclusions from these suggestions. Despite the Exilic tendency on the part of the Israelites to adopt conservative religious attitudes, the post-Exilic Israelites nonetheless operated within what seems to be a turbid religious environment. By no means was God the only deity worshipped, and by no means was the reconstructed Temple (if it was in fact reconstructed during Trito-Isaiah’s prophetic career) the only *de facto* site of religious activity; Isaiah 66:17 asserts otherwise. Thus, we can conclude that strict monotheism, though perhaps a prophetic ideal, was certainly nowhere near a religious reality: Asherah and others certainly seem to have their share of worshippers. For Trito-Isaiah, convinced that the only legitimate religious activity was the worship of Yahweh in the Jerusalem Temple, these realities were unsettling. Insistent upon calling the returning Jews to such orthodoxy, Trito-Isaiah, in Isaiah 66:17, has provided a rubric for such worship by denouncing another religious expression, that of Asherah’s garden cult. Clearly, in Trito-Isaiah’s esteem, those who participated in such expressions effectively brought on their own end because the one in the middle was not Yahweh. Worship of Asherah (or any other god, for that matter) detracted from the worship of Yahweh, and for that reason, the center was a theological location appropriate only for Yahweh, and that center had geographical reference: the Temple in Jerusalem. Any other center was, for Trito-Isaiah, the wrong place to be. But an Israel set aside only for God, and an Israel dedicated to worshipping God solely in the Jerusalem Temple is, for Trito-Isaiah, still in the future.

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 280.

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## Appendix: Isaiah 66:17 in Translation

Though my examination of Isaiah 66:17 has chiefly utilized the NRSV translation, it is interesting to survey and compare a number of translations for an arcane passage; the theological presuppositions of the translator certainly can be communicated through the translation. Further, it seems as though the Biblical text is rife with ambiguous bits which lack reference elsewhere in the text; the translator must rely on her or his discretion in such cases; such discretion also seems to be theologically driven. Here, then, are some variant translations of the passage; complete theological dissection of each translation is left for the reader. I, for my part, have emboldened what I think are the most exegetically interesting translations.

### *Amplified Bible*<sup>68</sup>

<sup>17</sup>Those who [attempt to] sanctify themselves and cleanse themselves to enter [and sacrifice to idols] in the gardens, following after [a] one in the midst, eating hog's flesh and the abomination [creeping things] and the [mouse – their works and their thoughts] shall come to an end together, says the Lord.

### *Contemporary English Version*<sup>69</sup>

<sup>17</sup>Some of you get yourselves ready and go to a garden to worship a **foreign goddess**. You eat the meat of pigs, lizards, and mice. But I, the LORD, will destroy you for this.

### *Holman Christian Standard Bible*<sup>70</sup>

<sup>17</sup>“Those who dedicate and purify themselves to [enter] the groves following their **leader**, eating meat from pigs, vermin, and rats, will perish together.” [This is] the LORD's declaration.

### *King James Version*

<sup>17</sup>They that sanctify themselves, and purify themselves in the gardens behind **one tree** in the midst, eating swine's flesh, and the abomination, and the mouse, shall be consumed together, saith the LORD.

### *The Message*<sup>71</sup>

<sup>17</sup>“All who enter the sacred groves for **initiation** in those unholy rituals climaxed in that foul and obscene meal of pigs and mice will eat together and then die together.” God's decree.

### *New American Bible*<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> *Amplified Bible* [La Habra, California: The Lockman Foundation, 1960, 1962-1963, 1968, 1971-1973, 1975, 1977, 1995].

<sup>69</sup> *Contemporary English Version* [New York: American Bible Society, 1995].

<sup>70</sup> *Holman Christian Standard Bible* [Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 1999-2000, 2002-2003].

<sup>71</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message* (Colorado Springs: NavPress Publishing Group, 1993-1996, 2000-2002).

<sup>17</sup>They who sanctify and purify themselves to go to the groves, as followers of one who stands within, they who eat swine's flesh, loathsome things and mice, shall all perish with their deeds and their thoughts, says the LORD.

*New International Version*<sup>73</sup>

<sup>17</sup>“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.

*New International Reader's Version*<sup>74</sup>

<sup>17</sup>“Some people set themselves apart and make themselves pure. **They do it so they can go into the gardens to worship other gods. They do what the worship leader tells them to do.** They eat meat of pigs and rats. They also eat other things I hate. All of those people will come to a horrible end,” announces the Lord.

*New King James Version*<sup>75</sup>

<sup>17</sup>“Those who sanctify themselves and purify themselves,  
To go to the gardens  
After an **idol** in the midst,  
Eating swine's flesh and the abomination and the mouse,  
Shall be consumer together,” says the LORD.

*New Living Translation*<sup>76</sup>

<sup>17</sup>“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,” says the Lord.

*Young's Literal Translation*<sup>77</sup>

<sup>17</sup>Those sanctifying and cleansing themselves at the gardens | After **Ahad** in the midst | Eating flesh of the sow | And of the abomination, and of the mouse | Together are consumed | An affirmation of Jehovah.

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<sup>72</sup> *New American Bible* [Wichita: Fireside Bible Publishers, 1970].

<sup>73</sup> *New International Version* [Grand Rapids, Michigan: International Bible Society, 1973, 1978, 1984].

<sup>74</sup> *New International Reader's Version* [Colorado Springs: International Bible Society, 1996. 1998].

<sup>75</sup> Thomas Nelson, *New King James Version* (Nashville; Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

<sup>76</sup> *New Living Translation* [Wheaton, Illinois: Tynedale House Publishers, 1996].

<sup>77</sup> Robert Young, *Young's Literal Translation* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1898).