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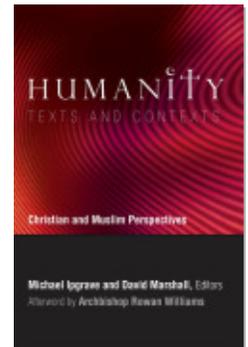
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CHAPTER SIX

Human Destiny

6.1 Isaiah 65:17–25; Revelation 21:1–8, 21:22–22:5

Roland Chia

In the closing chapters of Isaiah we find the promise that God would “create new heavens and a new earth” that will last for all eternity.⁴⁶ This promise finds its fulfillment in John’s vision of the holy city—the New Jerusalem—descending from heaven and taking its place in a creation totally transfigured by divine grace.⁴⁷ These two passages from the Old and New Testaments vividly and powerfully portray the eschatological life of the people of God mediated by the renewed creation. Accordingly, because of its future-oriented message, Isaiah 65:17–25 is read during Kingdomtide leading up to the beginning of Advent, while the passages from the final chapters of Revelation are read during Eastertide in celebration of Christ’s resurrection.⁴⁸

Isaiah 65–66 presents a vivid description of God’s plan for his elect in a completely nonviolent world.⁴⁹ In one sense, these chapters recall the idyllic existence in the Garden of Eden before the rebellion of the first humans. But in envisioning the future of the created order as “the new heavens and the new earth,” these chapters speak not so much about the return to the primordial Garden but the *telos* of the creation.⁵⁰ Isaiah 65–66, therefore, announces the transformation of the present creation, a future that is radically different from the past.⁵¹

Our passage, Isaiah 65:17–25, consists of two pronouncements, each beginning with “Behold I will create.”⁵² In the first pronouncement, God promises to create “new heavens and a new earth” while in the second he promises to create the New Jerusalem.⁵³ The emphasis on the creating activity of God here is important. Only God can create, and in Isaiah God as Creator is a dominant theme.⁵⁴ Creating refers not just to the initial work of bringing the cosmos into being but also to God’s continuing work of maintenance and preservation.⁵⁵ In this passage, the verb refers to the bringing into being of new things that will supersede and replace the former things.⁵⁶

The new creation of God is referred to as the “new heavens and the new earth,” a comprehensive phrase that encompasses every aspect of the creation, including the spiritual realm. In this new creation, the people of God will forget the “former things.” This expression refers not only to the “former troubles” alluded to in 16b but, indeed, to

everything connected to the old existence. Not only will all the vestiges of the old order be removed when the vision is realized, the old order of existence will not even be remembered. Nothing in the new creation will prompt a recollection of the past. A general amnesia among the redeemed people of God will match the divine forgetfulness described in 65:16f. This first poetic cameo therefore speaks of the transformation of the entire cosmos resulting in the emergence of an entirely new world that will last for all eternity.

While the first pronouncement has to do with the transformation of the cosmos, the second focuses on the New Jerusalem, the holy city.⁵⁷ In the New Jerusalem there will be much rejoicing.⁵⁸ This is brought out by the use of apposition, where the nouns “Jerusalem” and “delight,” and “people” and “joy” are so identifiable with one another that they are said to be the same.⁵⁹ The mood in this passage is in stark contrast to the sadness that prevails in chapters 1–39. The exhortation to “be glad and rejoice forever” indicates the eschatological character of these verses: the uncertainty and transience of the joys of this present world will be transcended by a joy that knows no end.⁶⁰ This corresponds with the announcement that the “sound of weeping and of crying will be heard in it no more.”⁶¹ In addition, the joy of the New Jerusalem is not just found among its inhabitants. It is reciprocal: God also takes joy in his new creation.⁶²

By using different aspects of this present life to create impressions of the life to come, the author asserts that God’s people will be completely happy, completely secure, and completely at peace in the New Jerusalem.⁶³ No infant will die prematurely, an elderly person will live to the fullest, and a person who dies at a hundred years of age would be but a youth.⁶⁴ This latter expression, of course, does not imply that death will still be a reality in the new heavens and earth.⁶⁵ Rather, what the writer wishes to convey is that in the new era the whole of life will be free from the power of death. In similar vein, although there will be no sinners in the New Jerusalem, the metaphor is used in 20d.⁶⁶ Not only will God’s elect enjoy longevity, they will also remain in possession of their houses and enjoy the fruits of their labor.⁶⁷ When they call upon God, he will answer.⁶⁸ “With this access to God via word and answer,” writes Westermann, “there is free access to the wellspring of life.”⁶⁹

The presence of verses 17a and 25 suggests that verses 19b–24 should not simply be read as merely describing the conditions of life in the present order. If these verses are taken as an integral part of this passage and not as arbitrary editorial additions, they serve as the hermeneutical key that unlocks the meaning of the entire passage. Verse 25 refers to the peace in the animal kingdom. The wolf and the lamb, which are proverbial opposites—the one aggressive and ferocious and the other weak and helpless—will feed together. The carnivorous lion will eat straw while the snake will no longer be at enmity with humankind.⁷⁰ The negative statement in 25d, “They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain,” further enhances the picture of harmony portrayed in these vivid images.⁷¹ Verse 25 therefore serves as a compendium of the messianic oracles in 11:6–9 by incorporating two virtually identical lines from it: “the lion will eat straw like the ox” (65:25b) and “they will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain” (65:25d).⁷² Thus, chapter 65 is of a piece with the messianic hope described in the entire book of Isaiah.⁷³

The themes found in Isaiah 65 are taken up and expanded by John in his grand vision of the renewal of the cosmos in Revelation. The final section of Revelation (chapters 21–22) opens with the vision of a new heaven and a new earth, which serves as the setting for the New Jerusalem that will descend from heaven. The old order of creation, with its fragmentation and chaos, has passed away, and a harmonious new world full of life has replaced it. The righteous people of God will dwell in this world in communion with their Creator and Redeemer, and will reign with him forever. In the elegant words of Austin Farrer, here we have “the last of the Last Things and the end of the visionary drama.”⁷⁴

Structurally, Revelation 21:1–2 is modeled on Isaiah 65:17–19 and follows the same sequence of events: the appearance of the new creation, the disappearance of the old order, and the manifestation of the New Jerusalem. The passage begins with the vision of “a new heaven and a new earth,” which will emerge when “the first heaven and the first earth had passed away.” As in Isaiah 65:17, this phrase does not refer to the annihilation of the old created order but its transfiguration or transformation.⁷⁵ The new transfigured creation is characterized by the disappearance of the sea, the primeval ocean, which is a symbol of chaos.⁷⁶ Its disappearance signals the ultimate and total victory of God over evil: no accursed thing will be found in his new creation.

Revelation 21:2 announces the descent of the New Jerusalem from heaven. The phrase “coming down from heaven from God” emphasizes that the holy city is not simply an earthly metropolis rebuilt by human hands and will but is rather of heavenly origin.⁷⁷ The New Jerusalem is therefore a “creation of God which is to fulfil for the glorified humanity the role which the prophets saw of the earthly Jerusalem in relation to Israel (and in a less degree the Gentile nations).”⁷⁸ The double imagery of “city” and “bride” goes back a long way and is found in both the Testaments. The imagery of the “city” comes from the apocalyptic strand and can be traced to Ezekiel 40 while the metaphor of “bride” is found in both the Old and New Testaments.⁷⁹ Here as elsewhere in Revelation, “bride” is used to refer to the church.⁸⁰ The New Jerusalem can therefore be seen both as synonymous with the church or God’s elect people or to the place where the saints dwell.⁸¹

Not only is the holy city the place where the saints will dwell, it is also the dwelling place of God.⁸² The phrase “God will be with his people” is a metaphor that refers to the presence of God in victory as well as the abundance of his providential grace.⁸³ It is pertinent to note that John substituted “peoples” for “people,” indicating that in the New Jerusalem, the many peoples of redeemed humanity will be one single elect people of God. In this holy city, God himself will wipe away every tear, and all that has damaged and disfigured the creation and human society, all the sorrow and suffering and pain, even death itself will no longer cast a shadow here.⁸⁴ The old has indeed passed away; the new has come.

The New Jerusalem is portrayed as a garden city, with lush greenery and “the river of the water of life as clear as crystal flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down to the middle of the great street of the city.”⁸⁵ This imagery, which puts together the river of life and the tree of life, recalls the enchanted Garden in Genesis.⁸⁶ Its

employment here does not indicate a return to the beginning, however, but rather that the *telos* of the creation will be in line with God's original purpose and intention. That this river flows from "God and from the Lamb" signifies that God alone is the source of life. In Revelation 21:6, God is described as the fountain, the spring of the water of life, water being the symbol of life and therefore a feature of the messianic age.⁸⁷ The river with its water of life therefore symbolizes the inexhaustible grace of God in the new heaven and the new earth.

There will be no temple in the New Jerusalem "because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple."⁸⁸ The Old Testament prophets have already envisaged the New Jerusalem as the temple of God, but John takes a step further and eliminates the temple altogether.⁸⁹ The immediate presence of God, his *Shekinah* glory, is so pervasive that it fills the entire city and sanctifies everything in it. God is all in all, omnipresent, and he is constantly accessible to his priestly race.⁹⁰ In the New Jerusalem, there will also be no need for sun or moon "for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp."⁹¹ The uncreated light of God's glory will illumine the city. But the immediacy of God's presence is expressed supremely by the phrase, "They will see his face."⁹² The inhabitants of the holy city will see what no one is able in this mortal life to see and survive.⁹³ To see the face of God is the deepest of religious aspirations, and its realization in the New Jerusalem "will be the heart of humanity's eternal joy in their worship of God."⁹⁴

The throne of God, which features so prominently in Revelation, refers to the reign or kingdom of God.⁹⁵ In Revelation 21–22, "the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ."⁹⁶ "Revelation's theme is the transfer of the sovereignty of the whole world from the dragon and the beast, who presently dominate it, to God, whose universal kingdom is to come to earth."⁹⁷ Revelation is indeed full of universalistic language, but it is important that we understand its universalism. John's vision that the "nations will walk in its light and the kings will bring their splendor into it" resonates with that of Isaiah and points to the ingathering of the worldwide harvest.⁹⁸ But, as Revelation 21:8 and 27 make perfectly clear, the wicked will be excluded from the New Jerusalem, emphasizing that there will be a dual outcome for humankind.⁹⁹ These verses give a clear warning to God's people that if they fail to be faithful witnesses and instead participate in the sins of Babylon, they will not inherit the holy city. In Revelation 21:8, the imagery used to describe the fate of sinners is that of divine judgment, whereas in 21:27 the imagery suggests the exclusion of the unholy from the holy city.¹⁰⁰ But to those who overcome, Revelation presents a wonderful promise of salvation: They will inhabit a world free from pain, sorrow and evil. God will be their God and they will be his people. And they will reign with him forever and ever.

Isaiah 65:17–25

¹⁷For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth;
the former things shall not be remembered
or come to mind.

¹⁸But be glad and rejoice for ever
in what I am creating;

for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy,
and its people as a delight.

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

²⁰No more shall there be in it
an infant that lives but a few days,
or an old person who does not live out a lifetime;
for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth,
and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed.

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

²²They 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.

²³They shall not labor in vain,
or bear children for calamity;
for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord—
and their descendants as well.

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

²⁵The wolf and the lamb shall feed together,
the lion shall eat straw like the ox;
but the serpent—its food shall be dust!
They shall not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain, says the Lord.

Revelation 21:1–8; 21:22–22:5

21 ¹Then 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. ²And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; ⁴he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.” ⁵And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.” ⁶Then he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life. ⁷Those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God and they will be my children. ⁸But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, the murderers, the fornicators, the sorcerers, the idolaters, and all liars, their place will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulphur, which is the second death.”

21 ²² I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. ²³And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. ²⁴The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. ²⁵Its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. ²⁶People will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. ²⁷But nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.

22 ¹Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb ²through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. ³Nothing accursed will be found there anymore. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; ⁴they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. ⁵And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.

6.2 *al-Rahmān* 55:26–78; *al-Qiyāma* 75:20–25

Seyed Amir Akrami

Both of the following Qur'anic passages refer to “that day,” the last day or day of judgment on which the destiny of human beings is determined.¹⁰¹ These are just two of many other eschatological passages in the Qur'an in which the last day is described with a great variety of terms such as “the day of resurrection” (*yawm al-qiyāma*), “the day of judgment” (*yawm al-dīn*), “the hour” (*al-sā'a*), “the day of reckoning” (*yawm al-ḥisāb*) and “the day of gathering” (*yawm al-jam*). The Qur'an also describes various events associated with the last day, such as the rolling up of the heavens, the blowing of a trumpet, and the opening of books. Muslim thinkers have reflected at great length on some of the eschatological references in the Qur'an, for example, “*barzakh*,” which is widely understood to refer to the state in which human beings will exist between death and the final resurrection.¹⁰²

In terms of our concern here with the question of human destiny in the Islamic perspective, the eschatological passages of the Qur'an are significant in that they establish with great emphasis the reality of a fixed point beyond this life at which God will pass judgment on every human being and will decree for each a future of either eternal reward or eternal punishment. The last day is thus a point at which, for each person, the past is reviewed and the future is decided. This review of the past will involve a total unveiling, a searching clarity before which all must stand alone. God will attend in detail to human affairs, and nothing will be left unevaluated by him. All people will be confronted with the truth of how they lived. Even a person's own limbs will bear witness to their actions.¹⁰³ Then everybody will be repaid justly, in accordance with their past life, with some being rewarded in “the garden” (*al-janna*) and others being punished in “the fire” (*al-nār*). The destiny of all human beings is thus ultimately determined by God, but this divine judgment is carried out on the basis of their behavior in this life, as expressed especially in their believing or unbelieving response to the divine message and their obedience or disobedience to it. In the Qur'anic account of human destiny there is thus a strong link between this world (*al-dunya*) and the next (*al-akhira*). Freely chosen acts in the former will determine one's place in the latter.

Turning from these general points to the specific texts under consideration here, we note some salient features of the passage from *sūrat al-Rahmān* 55:26–78. One striking characteristic is the emphatic repetition of the rhetorical question: “O which of your Lord's bounties will you and you deny?” This is designed to provoke gratitude (very closely bound up with faith in the Qur'an); believers are each time being invited to respond: “I do not deny.”

Verses 26–27 give memorable expression to the Qur'anic sense of the contrast between the fleeting quality of this world and the eternity of God: “All that dwells upon the earth is perishing, yet still abides the Face of thy Lord, majestic, splendid.” It is a mark of genuine faith to maintain this perspective in a world where many demonstrate

their failure to grasp true human destiny by living only for transient pleasures (see also 75:20–21, following).

As in many other eschatological passages, two pictures of human destiny are starkly juxtaposed: the positive picture of the destiny of those rewarded in heavenly gardens and the dark picture of the destiny of those being punished with the torments of hell (*Jahannam*). We also find the same juxtaposition, more concisely conveyed, at 75:22–25. (It should be noted, however, that although a division into these two categories is the Qur'anic norm, one passage speaks of a third category, the “foremost” in faith (*al-sābiqūn*), who will be nearest to God.¹⁰⁴) While both types of human destiny are vividly conveyed, it is notable that in the passage from *sūrat al-Rahmān*, the account of the bliss of the righteous is considerably longer than that of the punishment of the sinners. This can be taken as an indication of the primacy, in the Qur'an, of God's mercy, which is greater than God's wrath.

A feature of the Qur'anic portrayals of paradisiacal bliss that has attracted much comment is the presence of good and beautiful women seen as rewards for devout believers. They are mentioned in *sūrat al-Rahmān* at verses 56–58 and 70–74 and also in several other contexts.¹⁰⁵ The term *hūr*, used on four occasions to describe these women, is the source of the anglicized “houris.”¹⁰⁶ Less often noted are references to young male servants.¹⁰⁷ Such passages have been variously interpreted by Muslims; alongside a widespread assumption that they are to be taken literally, different approaches have been adopted by more mystical and rationalist exegetes. More generally, while the physical pleasures and torments in the afterlife described by the Qur'an have usually been taken by Muslims to imply the reality of bodily existence in the hereafter, there has been debate between Islamic philosophers and theologians on the nature of the resurrection and the related question of whether to interpret the Qur'an's eschatological passages in literal or symbolic senses.

The shorter passage from *sūrat al-Qiyāma* is most notable for its reference to the vision of God (*ru'yat Allāh*) enjoyed in the hereafter by believers: “Upon that day faces shall be radiant, gazing upon their Lord.”¹⁰⁸ Again, the history of exegesis of this passage contains divergent impulses, typified in the classical period by the literalism of the Ash'arites and the symbolic interpretation favored by the Mu'tazilites. Within the Shi'ite tradition there has been particular emphasis on the vision of God as the fulfillment of human destiny.

These texts, together with the many other Qur'anic passages belonging to the same eschatological genre, raise many questions that have been and, indeed, continue to be debated and discussed among Muslims. Some of the most widely discussed of such questions include the following.

- How far should such eschatological texts be interpreted literally, for example in relation to what they describe of punishment and reward?
- Why does the Qur'an place so much emphasis on physical pleasure in the afterlife when it also encourages detachment from pleasure in this world?
- Does God's mercy ultimately overrule his judgment?

Al-Raḥmān 55:26–78

²⁶All that dwells upon the earth is perishing, ²⁷yet still abides the Face of thy Lord, majestic, splendid.

²⁸O which of your Lord's bounties will you and you deny? ²⁹Whatever is in the heavens and the earth implore Him; every day He is upon some labour.

³⁰O which of your Lord's bounties will you and you deny? ³¹We shall surely attend to you at leisure, you weight and you weight!

³²O which of your Lord's bounties will you and you deny? ³³O tribe of jinn and of men, if you are able to pass through the confines of heaven and earth, pass through them! You shall not pass through except with an authority.

³⁴O which of your Lord's bounties will you and you deny? ³⁵Against you shall be loosed a flame of fire, and molten brass; and you shall not be helped.

³⁶O which of your Lord's bounties will you and you deny? ³⁷And when heaven is split asunder, and turns crimson like red leather—

³⁸O which of our Lord's bounties will you and you deny? ³⁹on that day none shall be questioned about his sin, neither man nor jinn.

⁴⁰O which of your Lord's bounties will you and you deny? ⁴¹The sinners shall be known by their mark, and they shall be seized by their forelocks and their feet.

⁴²O which of your Lord's bounties will you and you deny? ⁴³This is Gehenna, that sinners cried lies to; ⁴⁴they shall go round between it and between hot, boiling water.

⁴⁵O which of your Lord's bounties will you and you deny? ⁴⁶But such as fears the Station of his Lord, for them shall be two gardens—

⁴⁷O which of your Lord's bounties will you and you deny? ⁴⁸abounding in branches—

⁴⁹O which of your Lord's bounties will you and you deny? ⁵⁰therein two fountains of running water—

⁵¹O which of your Lord's bounties will you and you deny? ⁵²therein of every fruit two kinds—

⁵³O which of your Lord's bounties will you and you deny? ⁵⁴reclining upon couches lined with brocade, the fruits of the gardens nigh to gather—

⁵⁵O which of your Lord's bounties will you and you deny? ⁵⁶therein maidens restraining their glances, untouched before them by any man or jinn—

⁵⁷O which of your Lord's bounties will you and you deny? ⁵⁸lovely as rubies, beautiful as coral—

⁵⁹O which of your Lord's bounties will you and you deny? ⁶⁰Shall the recompense of goodness be other than goodness?

⁶¹O which of your Lord's bounties will you and you deny? ⁶²And besides these shall be two gardens—

⁶³O which of your Lord's bounties will you and you deny? ⁶⁴green, green pastures—

⁶⁵O which of your Lord's bounties will you and you deny? ⁶⁶therein two fountains of gushing water—

⁶⁷O which of your Lord's bounties will you and you deny? ⁶⁸therein fruits, and palm-trees, and pomegranates—

⁶⁹O which of your Lord's bounties will you and you deny? ⁷⁰therein maidens good and comely—

⁷¹O which of your Lord's bounties will you and you deny? ⁷²houris, cloistered in cool pavilions—

⁷³O which of your Lord's bounties will you and you deny? ⁷⁴untouched before them by any man or jinn—

⁷⁵O which of your Lord's bounties will you and you deny? ⁷⁶reclining upon green cushions and lovely druggets—⁷⁷O which of your Lord's bounties will you and you deny? ⁷⁸Blessed be the Name of thy Lord, majestic, splendid.

Al-Qiyāma 75:20–25

²⁰No indeed; but you love the hasty world,

²¹and leave be the Hereafter.

²²Upon that day faces shall be radiant,

²³gazing upon their Lord;

²⁴and upon that day faces shall be scowling,

²⁵thou mightest think the Calamity has been wreaked on them.