Intertextuality, Canon, and “Undecidability”
Understanding Isaiah’s “New Heavens and New Earth” (Isaiah 65:17–25)

RICHARD L. SCHULTZ
WHEATON COLLEGE

As developed by M. Bakhtin, J. Kristeva, R. Barthes, and T. K. Beal, intertextual approaches have largely replaced the examination of inner-biblical quotation or allusion and literary influence studies in analyzing the relationships between texts and contexts. These studies, however, can involve the endless tracing of intertextual relations, undermining the possibility of determinate meaning. By deriving several key interpretive emphases and procedures from the intertextual theory of Michael Riffaterre, a Columbia University professor of French Literature, one can “redeem” intertextuality. This kind of modified approach to intertextuality, which is better suited to canonical Scripture, is illustrated by a detailed analysis of Isa 65:17–25. Reading Isa 65 in light of its primary intertexts results in a richer reading that directs the interpreter’s attention to neglected textual features as well as latent emphases and associations.

Key Words: intertextuality, Michael Riffaterre, Isa 65, Isa 11, lion and lamb

INTRODUCTION

Isaiah 65:17–25

“Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind.” Thus begins an Isaianic portrait of the future (Isa 65:17–25) that is one of the most glorious and yet one of the most puzzling for interpreters, for it combines a wide variety of disparate images drawn from Israel’s sacred traditions, in some

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cases reversing the reader’s present experience while in others fulfilling the fondest human hopes. To be sure, what is said of the citizens of that future world—“The former things will not be remembered”—cannot be claimed with regard to the ancient Hebrew prophet-poets who recorded these visions, for they drew instinctively and abundantly from their rich heritage of earlier texts describing the mighty acts and assurances of God. Precisely how one should properly understand this description of the future goes far beyond the debate between premillennialists and amillennialists. Rather, this passage offers an ideal text for illustrating and adjudicating the contemporary hermeneutical dispute over how one should read any text, including one that is a part of Christian Scripture.

Intertextuality and Biblical Interpretation

Until recently, the analysis of verbal parallels and allusions within the Bible has been largely, or even exclusively, a diachronic enterprise. When it is claimed that an NT writer is quoting or alluding to OT texts, no one disputes the direction of this kind of borrowing, even though the textual basis, nature, and significance of reuse of this sort have been the object of considerable scholarly debate. However, when similar parallels are alleged within the OT, normally without any introductory formulas, as in, for example, the comparison of the blessed individual to a tree planted by water in Ps 1 and Jer 17, the nature and direction of the dependence is indeterminate; no foolproof criteria have yet been suggested for determining who is borrowing from whom. Nevertheless, the scholarly literature discussing what is termed inner-biblical exegesis or allusion is extensive and growing, a prominent example of which is Michael Fishbane’s monograph Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel. Since the early 1970s, however, a new, largely synchronic approach known as “intertextuality” has been introduced into biblical studies from linguistic and comparative literary theory.


The Rise of Intertextuality

Although Still and Worton have pointed out that the discussion of some forms of intertextuality goes back as far as Plato and Aristotle, the term *intertextuality* was coined by the Bulgarian-born French linguist and philosopher Julia Kristeva in her 1966 essay “Word, Dialogue and Novel.”³ That term was derived from her analysis of the Russian linguist Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of dialogicity as “an open-ended play between the text of the author and the text of the reader.”⁴ In his examination of literature from the Middle Ages, Bakhtin discovered quotations that were openly and reverently emphasized as such, or that were half-hidden, completely hidden, half-conscious, unconscious, correct, intentionally distorted, unintentionally distorted, deliberately reinterpreted and so forth. The boundary lines between someone else’s speech and one’s own speech were flexible, ambiguous, often deliberately distorted and confused. Certain kinds of texts were constructed like mosaics out of the text of others.⁵

However, Kristeva’s focus was not simply on the relationships between texts, as the term might imply. Her understanding of the intertextuality of the “literary word,” as reflected in Bakhtin’s work, involved “an intersection of textual surfaces rather than a point (i.e., a fixed meaning), as a dialogue among several writings: that of the writer, the addressee (or the character) and the contemporary or earlier cultural context.”⁶ According to Kristeva, then, “any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another. The notion of *intertextuality* replaces that of intersubjectivity, and poetic language is read as at least *double*.”⁷ In other words, the emphasis shifts from *users* to *uses* and every expression carries with it semantic freight from other contexts in which it is employed. According to Simone Murray, Kristeva simply expanded Bakhtin’s observations regarding specific texts into a general theory regarding texts. Similarly, for fellow French poststructuralist Roland Barthes, intertextuality was not simply “a characteristic of specific cultural works” but rather “the inescapable medium in which all human discourse must necessarily take place.”⁸

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7. Ibid., 66.
Its Definition and Distinctiveness

During the past three decades, this understanding of textual meaning has been widely accepted and further developed by numerous literary and biblical scholars. The speed with which academic circles in America embraced these and other poststructuralist ideas in the 1970s and 1980s has been described by Udo Hebel as “a critical craze most likely without precedent.”9 Unfortunately, however, as Donald Polasky has noted, the term *intertextuality* already “has accumulated a bewildering variety of definitions and uses.”10 Or, as David Duff states more pessimistically, “the term . . . seems permanently suspended between opposed meanings and uses.”11 Therefore, it is helpful at the outset to distinguish three primary ways in which the term is currently being employed, in both literary and biblical studies.

In its broadest application, intertextuality is understood, according to Peter Miscall, (1) as “a covering term for all the possible relations that can be established between texts. The relations can be based on anything from quotes and direct references to indirect allusions to common words and even letters to dependence on language itself.”12 In its narrowest application, due to its current popularity, the term can also serve simply (2) as a trendy label for the traditional study of inner-biblical exegesis or inner-biblical allusion, that is, according to Ellen van Wolde, “as a modern literary theoretical coat of veneer over the old comparative approach.”13 Between these two usages, there is another understanding of the term that is shared by many contemporary literary critics. According to Benjamin Sommer, this intertextuality (3) “focuses on manifold linkages among texts or on connections between a text and commonplace phrases from the cultural systems in which the text exists. . . . [Thus] readers may notice links among many texts, whether the authors of the texts knew each other or not.”14 With this understanding, intertextuality offers an alternative to the traditional approach to inner-biblical allusion that traces numerous rather than a few prominent connections between texts, is synchronic rather than diachronic in emphasis and reader- rather than author-focused, and thus explores the effect rather than the purpose of such interconnections.

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The Accompanying Decline of Influence Studies

One possible reason for the rapid growth of intertextual studies was that it filled the vacuum left by the decline of “influence studies.” Clayton and Rothstein suggest four reasons for this decline:

1. Evaluation: behind an idea of influence lie dubious normative judgments about originality.
2. Expression: the biographical issues crucial to influence are at best ancillary to texts.
3. Legitimation: a stress on the author’s being influenced or influencing tends to make the author authoritative, thus to brush aside the activity of readers, let alone their freedom of interpretation and response.
4. Ideology: a concern about influence promotes an outworn humanism.¹⁵

The Hermeneutical Consequences

However, there are significant hermeneutical consequences if one adopts the understanding of intertextuality that has been promoted by the French poststructuralists. Kristeva explains that, “in the space of a given text, several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect and neutralize one another.”¹⁶ Furthermore, the definition of “text” has been broadened to encompass “anonymous ideas, commonplaces, folk wisdom, and clichés that make up the background of one’s life.”¹⁷ Therefore, each text is, in Roland Barthes’s terms, “a galaxy of signifiers” that is “no longer restrained by any final signified.”¹⁸ In Barthes’s understanding, this results from the fact that “a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author.”¹⁹ Furthermore, “the citations which go to make up a text are anonymous, untraceable, and yet already read.”²⁰ Thus, according to Barthes, “by degrees, a text can come into contact with any other system: the inter-text is subject to no law but the infinitude of its reprises.”²¹

The radical implications of this understanding of texts and intertexts have not been lost on the proponents of intertextual theory in biblical studies.

According to NT scholar Robert Brawley, “All texts [in Scripture] are materializations out of an unformulated text, a reservoir of all the possibilities that go into the production of texts—a reservoir that Roland Barthes refers to as the cultural voice of text. Massive amounts of the cultural repertoire materialize in texts in indeterminate ways at subconscious or unconscious levels.” Accordingly, some theorists contend that traditional analysis of “the relationship of texts to specific precursors is an unworkable distortion of relationships.”

Even more strongly, T. K. Beal claims that since every text is a locus of intersections, overlaps, and collisions between other texts . . . one’s arrival at a particular interpretation is always a matter of exhaustion and despair. The tracing out of intertextual relations is endless and, quite literally, pointless . . . Our commonly held definitions of written texts, writing subjects, origins, and religious traditions are all called into question and potentially dynamited by the theory of intertextuality.

In other words, the development of intertextual theory brings with it not only the death of the author (so Barthes) but also the death of determinate meaning.

The Options for Evangelical Hermeneutics

So where does this leave Evangelical interpreters who hold the Bible to be the authoritative Word of God, a trustworthy revelation of his character, will, and redemptive plan? Can current intertextual theory be squared with a view that canonical Scripture was shaped by the superintending work of the Spirit of God, who guided human authors as they consciously drew and built upon the writings of their inspired predecessors? There are four possible responses to the growing dominance of intertextual theory in contemporary hermeneutics. The first option is simply to ignore this development and continue to practice traditional “historical-grammatical” exegesis. The second option is to embrace radical intertextual theory and thereby abandon biblical interpretation to hermeneutical chaos, allowing every individual to do what is right in his or her own eyes. By relegating the Bible to an unprivileged position within society’s code system and allowing readers complete freedom to make meaning, one would embark upon a course that could result in the disappearance of normative theological claims. A third option has been adopted by many less-progressive interpreters who simply have renamed their traditional tracing of textual sources and influences as “intertextual studies,” largely disregarding the way “intertextuality” has been understood and employed by those who have devel-


oped this theory. However, this does not constitute a “charitable reading” of the theoretical literature.24

The final option is to “redeem” intertextuality.25 There are several reasons why this is preferable. (1) It allows one to benefit from the genuine hermeneutical insights that postmodern interpreters in general—and intertextual theoreticians in particular—can offer, instead of ignoring or rejecting them. (2) It affirms that biblical texts are linked in verbal and conceptual ways other than quotation, allusion, and echo and that these links merit consideration when one is interpreting these texts. (3) It offers a strategy for reading two texts when the direction of dependence between them remains unclear. (4) It acknowledges that tracing a text’s history of interpretation and reception may lead us to some valid, even Spirit-directed interpretive options that we might not discover on our own simply by studying the text. (5) It recognizes the role that preunderstanding plays in the interpretive process. Every reader draws on prior knowledge when reading a text, including previously encountered interpretations or appropriations of the text in ecclesial or wider cultural contexts. Intertextual theory can help one to process these associations so as to enrich one’s understanding of the text rather than allowing them to supplant the text.

One way to redeem intertextuality is to develop an approach to interpreting biblical texts that builds on the work of a less-radical literary scholar whose (inter)textual understanding and hermeneutical stance are more compatible with an Evangelical view of Scripture. To be sure, even a modification such as what we are proposing here may not win over some of the opponents of the application of contemporary intertextual theory to biblical studies.26

But would this also involve a deliberate and therefore uncharitable misreading of Kristeva’s approach? Kristeva has complained about those who have used the term intertextuality to designate what she calls “the banal sense of ‘study of sources,’”27 even to the point of preferring other terms such as intersection or transposition. Kristeva may have her own ideological reasons for rejecting “influence” studies, even though her own theories reflect her dependence on the many sources that she studied carefully in developing them. More importantly and ironically, having modified the

25. The term redeem is adapted from Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 281.
26. For example, Antoon Schoors (“[M]isuse of Intertextuality in Qoheleth Exegesis,” in Congress Volume: Oslo 1998 [ed. André Lemaire and Magne Sæbø; VTSup 80; Leiden: Brill, 2000], 45) dismisses the study of intertextuality as an approach [that] does not belong to scientific but more to homiletical discourse. Applied to biblical exegesis, this sort of intertextuality . . . is part of the widespread naiveté which believes that synchronic methods and the study of general and vague connections between texts will help us to avoid the shortcomings or unsolved problems of the diachronic approaches.
approach of Bakhtin, whose writings constitute her dominant “intertext,” Kristeva now wants to control the future use of the word. However, this is contrary to her claim that all language use involves the free and endless play of words and meanings. According to intertextual theory, the original usage of a word or concept certainly may influence later usage, but it cannot determine it.

REDEEMING INTERTEXTUALITY

The Rationale for Drawing upon Michael Riffaterre’s Intertextual Theory

Having chosen the fourth option, one intertextual theorist, Michael Riffaterre, immediately presents himself as offering a clear alternative to a Kristevan hermeneutic. Born in France in 1924 and long-term Professor of French Literature at Columbia University, Riffaterre has been developing and applying intertextual theory for more than three decades. More importantly, according to Clayton and Rothstein, he is the writer “who has used intertextuality most effectively in his practical criticism,” even using it to “achieve greater interpretive certainty.”28 Surprisingly, however, to my knowledge, thus far no biblical scholar has made use of his numerous publications on the topic.29

Intertextuality according to Riffaterre

In the following section, I would like to summarize the key aspects of Michael Riffaterre’s intertextual theory, despite thereby running the risk of oversimplification or of a selective appropriation, while disagreeing with other aspects of his approach. However, even such a brief overview should indicate how radically Riffaterre differs from Kristeva while still preserving essential features of mainstream intertextual theory, although the question may arise at various points regarding whether Riffaterre is describing how an ideal reader should or how an actual reader would respond to intertextuality.

A Backward- and Forward-Looking Textual Emphasis

Unlike theorists who emphasize larger cultural “codes” or ideas as being among the nearly limitless and diffuse potential intertexts of a text, Riffaterre’s primary focus is on written, especially literary or even poetic, texts. However, this does not quickly revert to the traditional tracing of sources and influences, for intertextuality concerns the “linguistic network connecting the existing text with other preexisting or future, potential

texts." Thus, while influence involves a vertical relationship, intertextuality relates texts laterally, resulting in “a simultaneity and otherness, a contiguity, a mutual solidarity.” Although it is clear from various publications that Riffaterre’s understanding of a “text” also can include larger cultural topoi, values, and motifs, such as “stereotypes belonging to the linguistic corpus,” he nevertheless gives more attention to written texts, especially as the object of his interpretive analysis.

The Response-ability and Responsibility of the Reader

Like most contemporary interpreters, Riffaterre stresses the central role of the reader rather than that of the author. The analysis of literary phenomena involves “not only the text, but also its reader and all of the reader’s possible reactions to the text.” Riffaterre speaks of the intertext proper as the corpus of texts the reader may legitimately connect with the one before his eyes, that is, the texts brought to mind by what he is reading. This corpus has loose and flexible limits. Theoretically it can go on developing forever, in accordance with the reader’s cultural level; it will expand as his readings expand and as more texts are published that can be linked up to the original point whence the associated memories took their departure.

Although a text (and its intertexts) can place demands on a reader’s ingenuity, the same text also “leaves little leeway to readers and controls closely their response” by compelling them “to look to the intertexts” in order to understand the text’s unexpected features. According to Riffaterre, literary analysis must be “absolutely obedient to the texts,” for they contain elements “that we are obliged to perceive.” Far from creating meaning as the result of the free association of textual elements in the text with a limitless number of intertexts, correct reading is constrained by the text, and the reader must be able and willing to follow wherever it leads.

The Competent Reader and Cultural Change

Although Riffaterre once used the designation “superreader,” he later abandoned the term because he holds that even normal readers should be able to understand the significance of the intertext(s). He concedes that

37. Idem, Text Production, 6; the emphasis is Riffaterre’s.
“implicit intertextuality is highly vulnerable to the erosion of time and cultural change, or to the reader’s unfamiliarity with the corpus of the elite that bred a particular poetic generation.”

Though he notes that “the reader who shares the author’s culture will have a richer intertext,” he claims that, “even when the intertext has been obliterated, the text’s hold on the reader is not affected.”

The Marking of “Sunken Meaning”

Although the less-competent reader may make a somewhat more impoverished appropriation of the text, Riffaterre asserts that the “efficacy of the text is in no way altered, because the text remains unchanged. . . . the reader who is denied access to the intertextual paragram still sees the distortion, the imprint left upon the verbal sequence by the absent hypogrammatic referent.”

Since all texts “contain dispersed fragments of a pre-existent verbal sequence that has been borrowed from another text,” the reader “encounters ‘ungrammaticalities’—difficulties, obscurities, undecidable moments, figurative language—any wording so unacceptable in a mimetic context that it prompts one to look elsewhere for the ‘significance’ of the work.”

Readers may be unable immediately to decipher the absent hypogram, as he calls the “originating pre-existent word group,” on the basis of the “clues” that it has left behind. However, they will still react to the “grid of ungrammatical or nonsense phrases . . . [that] function as buoys marking the positions of sunken meaning.”

As examples, Riffaterre refers to a poem by William Carlos Williams that incongruously describes a “glazed” wheelbarrow and a Wordsworth poem entitled “Composed upon Westminster Bridge” that is designed to cancel reader preconceptions within the sociolect concerning the opposition between the city and nature. The more clearly marked an intertext is, including the “overdetermination” of quotation, the more directly it can lead the reader to the specific context that will complete any observable “incompleteness” in the text, so that perceived “breaks” in the text will not detract from the reader’s sense that the text is a unified whole.

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42. Ibid., 232.
43. This is a summary by Clayton and Rothstein, “Figures in the Corpus,” 25, of Riffaterre’s claims in “Interpretation and Undecidability,” *New Literary History* 12 (1981): 227–42.
44. This explanation of Riffaterre’s term is given by Still and Worton, introduction to *Intertextuality*, 25.
Retroactive Reading
Because of the pervasive existence of intertexts, Riffaterre views reading as inevitably involving two stages: "the heuristic or initial, linear ‘learning’ reading, and the subsequent, retroactive hermeneutic reading." This means that "the meaning of what already has been read is constantly being modified by what one is currently reading" as one reviews and makes comparisons backward, "recognizing repetitions, recognizing that some segments of the text are variations on a semantic sameness and therefore variants upon the same structure(s)." Because of this intertextual cross-reference, "each such reading is in fact a rereading, a revised interpretation of a preceding stretch of text, the starting point being wherever the reader first becomes aware of a connection or an alternative between two or more textual segments."

Determinate Meaning
Finally, Riffaterre soundly rejects the claim, mentioned above, that intertextuality necessarily results in "the dispersal of meanings through an infinite system of interlocking codes." In his view, "ambiguity, obscurity, undecidability, indeterminacy, unreadability, ungrammaticality—all of these exist only as a stage in the reading process and serve to alert the reader to the presence of an intertext that will resolve the work’s difficulties." In Riffaterre’s understanding, intertextuality so restricts and guides the reading process that it is even appropriate to speak of "the proper interpretation, since there will necessarily be only one" that encompasses all "constants observed again and again" in repeated readings and by various readers. Clearly, Riffaterre’s approach to intertextuality is far removed from that of Kristeva and Barthes.

The Biblical Canon as the Primary Christian Sociolect
In summarizing what a modified approach to intertextuality might look like, based on our understanding of Michael Riffaterre’s literary theory, an approach more suitable to Scripture as the inspired Word of God, we must also consider the role of canon within an intertextual approach. According to James Sanders, the distinguishing characteristics of canon are "adaptability and stability." When intertextuality is viewed rather as

47. Quoting a summary of Riffaterre’s theory by Still and Worton, introduction to Intertextuality, 25.
53. James A. Sanders, From Sacred Story to Sacred Text (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 30. Here, however, one must note that stability is maintained only if the believing community holds to the same canonical collection.
destabilizing meaning, one can understand a believing scholar’s reticence in appropriating the concept in studying authoritative texts.

However, any careful Bible reader must note how instinctively—and pervasively—biblical authors quote from, allude to, and echo the growing corpus of Hebrew and Greek texts that ultimately would make up the canonical collection or refer more obliquely to the historical and theological themes contained therein. As a consequence, one realizes that intertextuality, more narrowly construed, is one of the most striking characteristics of Scripture, with stability being provided by the acknowledged or incipient authority of the written texts and the continuity in the self-identity of the people of God and adaptability being necessitated by their changing circumstances.54 Indeed, Miscall is correct in stating that no (biblical) text is an island55 and, accordingly, no biblical text can be understood without reference to other texts. Michael Fishbane attributes this feature of the texts to the “canonical imagination”:

intertextuality is the core of the canonical imagination. . . . a canon . . . presupposes the possibility of correlations among its parts, such that new texts may imbed, reuse, or otherwise allude to precursor materials—both as a strategy for meaning-making, and for establishing the authority of a given innovation. Put in a nutshell . . . intertextuality is a form that literary creativity takes when innovation is grounded in tradition.56

Gerrie Snyman, however, posits a more uncontrolled process that resulted in a plurality of textual (that is, manuscript) traditions, including striking differences between the Samuel–Kings and Chronicles accounts: “by ascribing inspiration to the words of the text . . . the words and phrases in themselves were shrouded with sacredness, which enabled readers to render limitless the number of combinations of words and phrases resulting in new interpretations without altering the text, and yet keep the text authoritative in an ever-changing society.”57 Accordingly, whether one views canon formation as a merely human process, as Snyman appears to do, or as a divinely directed process, as I would, it is appropriate when interpreting biblical passages to weight intertextual (or intratextual) connections to other biblical texts more heavily than other perceived intertexts.

Summary: The Contours of a Modified Approach to Intertextuality

- Intertexts result in a layering of meaning (“palimpsestes,” as one scholar has termed them\textsuperscript{58}), resulting in richer rather than diffused meaning (something more and potentially also something different).
- Textual meaning can be assessed apart from intertextual awareness. Intertextuality thus differs from metaphor, in which understanding the point of comparison is essential to interpretation.
- Clear marking, such as “ungrammaticalities,” gives greater prominence to some intertexts. These markings “constrain the reading by intensifying attention on some points rather than others.”\textsuperscript{59}
- It is legitimate to cut off the process of following intertextual links (indefinitely), even on an arbitrary basis, especially by giving preference to more clearly marked intertexts.
- Canonical Scripture was produced through a self-consciously intertextual process and also forms a primary socio-cultural intertext for the Christian.
- Since Scripture was oriented toward addressing future generations of believers, one should give attention both to its “pre-texts” and to its “post-texts” rather than focusing exclusively on chronological relationships. These “post-texts” undeniably affect how we read biblical texts, although turning to specific post-texts for hermeneutical guidance has the potential either to enhance or skew one’s understanding of a given biblical text.

Interpreting Isaiah 65

Can this kind of modified approach to intertextuality, drawing on Michael Riffaterre’s work, help us to resolve some of the interpretive problems presented by the text referred to at the beginning of this essay, Isa 65:17–25? Or, to frame the question more generally, could a broader synchronic understanding of intertextuality enrich our understanding of the biblical text as well as the reading process?

Interpretive Problems

Significant interpretive problems raised by this text include the following.
- Why does the description of the new creation focus especially on the creation of the new Jerusalem?
- How radically “new” is the new creation that is portrayed here? (E.g., How can there still be death on the new earth?)


• Why is the description of the future life so this-worldly and “un-spiritual” in focus?
• Should one translate the second-to-last verb in v. 20 as “the one who fails” or as “sinner”?
• Why does this passage conclude with a description of harmony among the animals?
• What is the relationship between v. 25 and Isa 11:6–9, and how can one account for the divergences between these two descriptions?
• How should one envision the time and nature of the fulfillment of this promise?

The Identification of Intertexts

According to Kristin Nielsen, “a text is always part of an ongoing dialogue between older and younger texts. Our task as exegetes is therefore to try to trace this dialogue.”60 In seeking to resolve the interpretive problems of Isa 65:17–25, our first challenge, then, is to determine the intertexts that have enriched and thereby also complicated this text. This involves identifying other texts, both intertextual and intratextual (that is, within the book of Isaiah), on which the prophet/author may have drawn in formulating this vision. Brevard Childs writes, “The growth of the larger composition has often been shaped by the use of a conscious resonance with a previous core of oral or written texts.”61 John Goldingay considers Isa 1–39 to be the primary “intertext” that has influenced the author(s) of chaps. 40–66.62

A closer study of the language and imagery of Isa 65:17–25 reveals a large number of intra- and intertextual connections, as portrayed in fig. 1.

Within Isaiah

• The mention of “the former things” in 17b reminds one of similar expressions in 41:22; 42:9; 43:9, 18; 46:9; and 48:3 (cf. also 65:16b), though the reference is probably more comprehensive here.
• The use of the call/answer word pair in v. 24 recalls its use in 55:6, 58:9, 65:1, and 66:4 and emphasizes the intimate spiritual relationship between God and Israel that will then prevail.
• The summary quotation of 11:6–9 in v. 25 is the most evocative link between the two major sections of Isaiah.

62. John Goldingay, “Isaiah 40–55 in the 1990s: Among Other Things, Deconstructing, Mystifying, Intertextual, Socio-Critical, and Hearer-Involving,” BibInt 5 (1997): 225–46. Goldingay views Isaiah as a “many-voiced book” in which the poet(s) and preacher(s), identified, respectively, as Second and Third Isaiah by scholarly convention, “sometimes preached on texts from First Isaiah” (and Second Isaiah, in the case of the latter) and “perhaps produced a new edition of their words” (Goldingay, Isaiah [NIBC; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2001], 5).
With Pentateuch


- The return of paradisiacal conditions in the new heavens and new earth (v. 17 → Gen 1:1), including prolonged life (v. 20 → Gen 6:3) and a vegetarian diet (v. 25 → Gen 3:1, 2, 4, 13, 14; Deut 28:41). These inner-biblical intertexts, in turn, have produced some of the interpretive difficulties in Isa 65.

The “Utopian” Intertexts

The dominant feature of Isa 65:17–25 is its utopian perspective, marked by an “Endzeit wird Urzeit” motif (i.e., an eschatological reversion to primeval conditions), with Zion becoming like Eden. In interpreting this vision, the reader’s attention could be directed to a wide range of biblical and extra-biblical texts, in addition to Gen 1–2 and Isa 11, as noted above. Virgil’s “Fourth Eclogue” is frequently cited in this regard, but a closer parallel is provided by the Sumerian myth of Dilmun, which describes the ideal world before.

Pure was Dilmun land!
Virginal was Dilmun land. . .
In Dilmun the raven was not (yet) cawing,
the flushed partridge not cackling.
The lion slew not,
the wolf was not carrying off lambs,
the dog had not been taught to make kids curl up,
the colt had not learned that grain was to be eaten.

This topos or text may have been familiar to the Hebrew prophet, but he incorporates it in a demythologized manner, merely as an unusual and vivid description, for the Isaianic text refers to the future, not to the distant past. Other prophetic portrayals of the future transformation could be recalled,

63. See, for example, B. S. Childs, Myth and Reality in the Old Testament (2nd ed.; SBT 27; London: SCM, 1962), 66.
such as those described in Isa 35, Jer 31–32, and Ezek 37–38. However, only Hos 2:18–20 includes animals within the provisions of the new covenant.

Uncovering “Layered” Meaning in Verse 25

The contemplation of these intertexts sheds light on the striking details of Isa 65:17–25.

- The piling up of diverse descriptions of the better future as a new earth, as a newly created city, as a prolonged lifespan, as domestic tranquility, as spiritual intimacy, as the cessation of animal hostility (which is never described as resulting from the fall), paralleled in various biblical texts, suggests that these are not to be taken too literally.

- Each statement in Isa 11:6–9 is reflected in Isa 65:25, but each incompletely and each to a different degree. Isaiah 65:25 contains only the first and the fifth animal pair from Isa 11. The restored animal harmony is apparently an integral part of the new creation, the call / answer language in v. 24 perhaps replacing the reference in 11:9 to the pervasive knowledge of God.

- Isaiah 65:25aβ does not share a single Hebrew word with 11:8, even though both portray the future harmlessness of the serpent. In the former, the unified emphasis on the vegetarian diet of the animals (Gen 1:20) and the reference to dust as the serpent’s food (Gen 3:1, 2, 4, 13, and especially v. 14) both stem from Gen 1–3. This would also account for Isa 65:25’s use of Hebrew נָחָהָּשׁ to designate the serpent, as in Gen 3, rather than either of the words used in Isa 11:8 (peten or שׁיפֹ֑ני). If Isa 11:8 reflects Gen 3:15, the cessation of enmity between the serpent’s seed and the woman’s seed, 65:25 reflects a peculiar interpretation of Gen 3:14. Whereas other curses are reversed, the curse of Gen 3:14 is continued, though now not representing humiliation and submission (cf. Mic 7:7, Isa 49:23, Ps 72:9) but rather a literal, harmless, nonflesh diet. This may also explain the puzzling reference to sin and curse in 65:20.65

The “Peaceable Kingdom’s” Future:
Apocalyptic, Explorers, Quakers, and Kitsch

What impact has Isa 65’s vision of the new heaven and the new earth had on Christendom and the wider culture? An intertextual approach will pay attention to these, for the interpretation and reception history of a biblical text will, in turn, influence how a later reader understands the earlier text. Here are some of the highlights:

- 2 Peter 3:13 appears to combine Isa 11 and 65, for righteousness is mentioned only in the former (vv. 1–5), and the new heavens and new earth are mentioned only in the latter.

65. For a more complete discussion of the intertextual connections of Isa 65:25, see my Search for Quotation, 240–56.
Revelation 21, like Isa 65, focuses almost exclusively on the new Jerusalem in describing the new heaven and new earth (vv. 1–2), similarly emphasizing the close relationship between God and his people (v. 3). However, this apocalyptic description of future bliss goes beyond Isa 65, being enriched by another Isaiahic intertext, Isa 25:6–8, which announces the end of death and tears.66

According to the medieval rabbi Moses Maimonides, “the Days of the Messiah” were a necessary state before “the World to Come.” For him, the “lion and the lamb” was an allegory for a future age when the Gentiles would stop their vexation of Israel.67

While returning from the West Indies in chains, Christopher Columbus wrote: “God made me the messenger of the new heaven and the new earth, of which He spoke in the Apocalypse by St. John, after having spoken of it by the mouth of Isaiah; and He showed me the spot where to find it.”68

This prophecy of Isaiah is cited in most studies of utopia as one of the foundational ancient texts fueling that vision. On the one hand, and partly due to Isa 65’s mixed imagery, “the relation of the utopian to the heavenly always remains problematic,”69 but a this-worldly focus consistently dominates. On the other hand, the vision of a return to paradise may sustain hope, but, according to Kumar, it is “not a goal or a paradigm.”70

Surprisingly, the “lion and lamb” motif received little attention in the early or medieval period. However, the American Quaker preacher and sign painter Edward Hicks’s numerous artistic renditions of it over the course of three decades in the early 1800s turned it into a cultural icon. Hicks’s earlier paintings followed the text of Isa 11 more closely, with the little child representing the young Messiah, the righteous branch of v. 1. Each of the paired animals represents a vice or a corresponding virtue. Soon a portrayal of William Penn’s treaty with the Indians was added as an illustration of the “peaceable kingdom” in operation: its message was political rather than zoological. Later, Lady Liberty was added as well, with an olive branch in her hand. As tensions grew within Quakerism, Penn’s treaty was replaced by groups of disputing Christians and the animals became noticeably more restless. Only near the end of Hicks’s life did tranquility return, and his young daughter replaced the Messianic lad. A

69. Manuel and Manuel, Utopian Thought in the Western World, 17.
copy of one of Hicks’s paintings hangs in our neighborhood elementary school, presumably a portrayal of the goal of secular education?  

- One also could mention here a poem by Alexander Pope based on Isa 11:1–10 and one by William Meredith based on Isa 65:25.  
- Today, Isaiah’s original vision of animal harmony has become a symbol for any setting where harmony and safety are fostered (e.g., a “Peaceable Kingdom” tablecloth to guarantee tranquil family meals).  

Reading Isaiah in Reverse

According to intertextual theory, both intertexts that are chronologically earlier and those that are later can influence the contemporary reader. The post-Isaianic interpretations and appropriations of Isa 65 would tend to reinforce a symbolic, political, and this-worldly rather than a literal, biological, and other-worldly understanding of the text. This could, however, also be derived from Isa 11, in which the “peaceable kingdom” is attributed to the pervasive knowledge of God (v. 9, hardly a fitting description of the animals!), leading to the cessation of hostilities between and the reunification of Israel and Judah (vv. 10–16). However, the appropriation of Isa 65 in 2 Peter and Rev 21 maintains the tension between the this-worldly and other-worldly dimensions. Isaiah’s “new earth” looks like a “new improved” version, but it cannot be “as good as it gets” if death and, consequently, sorrow have not yet ceased.

In addition, within the book of Isaiah, chaps. 11 and 65 mutually help to interpret each other. When one reads Isa 11 with Isa 65 as intertext, one is directed to view the promise of pervasive peace within the context of Yahweh’s eschatological re-creation of the new heavens and new earth, thereby blocking the nonmessianic interpretation that sees in Isa 11 simply a reform movement brought about by a good contemporary king. The expected fulfillment of Isa 11:6–9 is thus placed chronologically considerably beyond the events surrounding the eighth-century Assyrian crisis and the later Babylonian conquest, the political deliverance through Cyrus, the spiritual deliverance through God’s servant, and the vengeance wrought by the anointed conqueror. The restored paradisiacal conditions, free from any covenantal curse, are to be understood as resulting from Yahweh’s direct intervention in history and not dependent on any human efforts.

71. For a thorough discussion of the symbolism and development within Hicks’s series of paintings, see C. J. Weekley with L. P. Barry, The Kingdoms of Edward Hicks (Williamsburg, VA: Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1999), 51–64.


73. A search of various websites indicates that the motif has been associated with topics as diverse as ecology, Christian ethics, a puppet ministry, and a pet haven.
Conversely, when one reads Isa 65 with Isa 11 as intratext, one recalls that, in Isa 11, justice for the poor, pervasive peace, and the restoration of the nation are all the achievements of the future righteous ruler (vv. 1–5). In chap. 65, however, there is no trace of this King. This is simply in keeping with the basic portrayal of Yahweh’s dominant role in Israel’s present and future affairs throughout the entire book of Isaiah. Nevertheless, Isa 11 insists that these dramatic benefits will be administered by the messianic King.

CONCLUSIONS

For Biblical Interpretation

According to Karlheinz Stierle, “Every text opens up a space of textual memory to which it refers and against which it asserts itself. . . . Making the text readable means first and foremost reconstructing its pretext.”74 Employing an interpretive framework such as that set forth by Michael Riffaterre, as summarized in this essay, may help prevent this from becoming simply an exercise in imagination and creativity. In biblical exegesis, more attention should be given to the diverse texts or motifs that have influenced or found new expression in the text that is being analyzed. In the case of Isa 65, this applies especially to the pentateuchal “blessings and curses” texts and the Isaianic “call/answer” motif. Intertextual links of this sort may be neglected in our customary “verse-by-verse” and even in a tradition-critical approach, especially when a more extensive relationship exists between texts. A canonical reading strategy will lead us to consider how 2 Pet 3:13 and Rev 21 serve to clarify and complete the eschatological vision of Isa 65.

Our goal in identifying and considering intertextuality is not primarily to achieve a more accurate but rather a richer interpretation, even while acknowledging that the latter may not necessarily entail the former. In giving more attention to the interpretation and Wirkungsgeschichte of the text, one should not focus simply on those interpreters who, in our opinion, “got it right.” On the one hand, later readings of Isa 65 may bring to light overlooked features lying latent in the text. On the other hand, even readings that we cannot affirm—or even understand—can cause us to consider which specific features of the biblical text and of the interpreter’s historical-cultural context prompted a particular reading. Edward Hicks’s paintings illustrate the possibilities and problems of understanding the animals of Isa 65:25 symbolically. Interestingly, the tension between “this-worldly” and “other-worldly” dimensions in “utopian” appropriations of Isa 65 is paralleled in efforts by theologians to incorporate this text smoothly into their eschatological systems.

For Evangelical Hermeneutics

We must not reject out of hand new literary or hermeneutical theories or, sometimes disingenuously, simply rename what we always have been doing, thereby giving the impression that we are on the theoretical “cutting edge” of our discipline. Rather, we need to evaluate new theories and methods fairly, though critically in light of our theological “non-negotiables,” adopting and adapting them in an honest but appropriate manner, as I have sought to do in this essay. As Bernhard Lang has said, with reference to anthropological approaches, “What biblical scholars need are not only more answers, but also more questions.”

Intertextual theory, especially as developed by Michael Riffaterre, suggests to us some new questions to address to the text, helping us to understand and appreciate more fully the intertextual richness of canonical Scripture.