Of Lions and Lambs

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Isaiah 11:6-9:

6 *The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat,*
and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together; and a little child shall lead them.
7 *The cow and the bear shall graze; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall*
eat straw like the ox.
8 *The nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra, and the weaned child shall put his*
hand on the adder's den.
9 *They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the*
knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.

Ever since the 2nd century AD there have been two principal interpretations of Isaiah's prophecy.
Irenaeus (ca. 180 AD) understood the prophecy literally, as indicative of the conditions that will prevail in the millennial kingdom. The natural world, he believed, will be radically renewed when Jesus returns.
The resurrected saints will reign with Christ over the world for 1000 years. Animals will all be vegetarian.
(Irenaeus' views are further discussed in the Appendix).

Significantly, Irenaeus acknowledged that some in his day interpreted the prophecy metaphorically:

> I am quite aware that **some persons endeavor to refer these words to the case of savage men**, both of different nations and various habits, **who come to believe, and when they have believed, act in harmony with the righteous**. But although this is [true] now with regard to some men coming from various nations to the harmony of the faith, **nevertheless in the resurrection of the just [the words shall also apply] to those animals mentioned**.[1]

My aim here is to show that the metaphorical interpretation is correct:
Isaiah's description relates to the harmony and peace enjoyed by diverse peoples united under the lordship of Christ — not to the transformation of animal diets.

[1] From Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5.33.4.
For the context of this citation, see the Appendix, where the whole of Paragraph 4 (of Book 5, Chapter 33) is presented.

We should note first that in Isaiah 11, we have a further prophecy concerning the Davidic king that has already been referenced in 7:14 and 9:6-7.
With David's royal line cut down in judgment, this king will arise as a shoot from Jesse's "stump" (11:1).[2]
Endowed with God's Spirit, he will rule over the (restored) nation wisely and with justice (11:2-5).
God's people will enjoy peace and security on his "holy mountain" — in Jerusalem, and under his rule (11:6-9).
The Gentiles will themselves rally to and seek guidance from this king (11:10; cf. Isa 2:3).
His resting place (where he lives) will be "filled with glory" (11:10, EXB; cf. Isa 4:5).
God's people will be gathered as in a second Exodus, and their former dominion will be restored (11:11-16).

The lasting peace to be enjoyed in the messianic kingdom is a prominent theme in Isaiah:

- International relations will be transformed (2:1-4).
- Foreign oppression will cease (9:1-7).
- Former enemies (Egyptians, Assyrians, Israelites) will be reconciled as they worship God together (19:23-25).
- Nothing will threaten God's people gathered to Jerusalem (35:9-10; 65:19-25).

Isaiah 11:6-9 depicts perfect harmony between creatures that are natural enemies: predators and prey.
The imagery speaks of conditions in Messiah's kingdom: former enemies will dwell harmoniously together under his rule.
Isaiah informs us that even the Gentiles will rally to and seek guidance from this king (11:10).
So, the prophecy is concerned with harmony between Israelites and their (former) Gentile enemies.
Similarly, the complete absence of ferocious animals in Isaiah 35:9 and Ezekiel 34:25 describes the peace and security to be enjoyed by God's redeemed people.

It is important to recognize that the prophecies of Isaiah 9 – 12 were given ca. 730 BC.
Behind these prophecies lurks the brutality of the Assyrian invasion of Israel in 733 BC.
Assyria had annexed the northern half of Israel (Galilee) as well as the region east of the Jordan (Gilead).
Many Israelites had already been deported (2Kgs 15:29).
There was an implied threat to Judah and Jerusalem too, which was realized under Sennacherib in 701 BC.[3]

One final point:
The series of ferocious beasts in the vision of Daniel 7 represents the succession of oppressive Gentile world powers that would rule until the advent of God's kingdom.
The fourth beast, representing the Roman government and empire, is the most terrifying of them all.
But ultimately, the rule of the "Son of Man" and of those who belong to him ("the saints") will prevail.
See Daniel 7:13-14, 18, 22, 27.[4]

[2] He will be a new and better son of Jesse, a greater David.
[3] Even as the Assyrians were busy deporting the northern Israelites into exile (2Kgs 15:29), Isaiah was prophesying divine judgment upon the invaders (10:12-19). The Assyrians, he notes, are presently God's instrument to discipline and punish Israel (10:5-6, 12), but a remnant of the nation will survive those judgments (10:20-27). The Assyrians will later invade Judah but will fail to take Jerusalem, for the Lord will defend that city (10:28-34). This latter prophecy anticipates Sennacherib's 701 BC campaign in Judah when he took numerous villages and walled towns (including Lachish) but failed to subdue Jerusalem itself.
[4] In Daniel 2 these same four kingdoms are represented by the parts of a great statue, which is finally destroyed as God himself takes the reins of power (2:35, 44-45). The four successive world powers were: Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome.

New Testament fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy

In **Romans 15:9-12** Paul quotes from the Old Testament to show that it had always been God's intention to include the Gentiles as his people. The verse he cites in 15:12 is Isaiah 11:10. Paul cites from the Septuagint version of Isaiah, which specifically predicts Messiah's rule over the Gentiles.
In context, Paul is urging his readers to accept one other despite their differences (Rom 15:1-7).
Such unity will bring praise to God, who (in Christ) has fulfilled his promises to the patriarchs (Rom 15:7-8).
With the Gentiles brought in, they too will praise God for his mercy (Rom 15:9).

Paul viewed the prophecies of Isaiah as being fulfilled in his day through the gospel.
As the apostle to the Gentiles (Ac 9:15; Rom 15:16; 1Tim 2:7), he saw his role in terms of calling the nations to the obedience that comes through faith in Christ (Rom 1:5; 15:18; 16:26).
Through his apostolic priestly service the Gentiles were being reclaimed for God (Rom 15:16).
Paul even saw his mission as an extension of the Isaianic Servant's work of calling the nations from darkness and into spiritual light (Acts 13:47; cf. Isa 49:6).
And so, through Paul the "knowledge of the LORD" (Isa 11:9) was being spread throughout the Mediterranean world. In contrast to the false unity imposed by the Roman government, Paul sought to unite the diverse peoples of the empire under the lordship of Christ.

Paul famously refers to this newfound unity between Jews and Gentiles in Ephesians 2:14-15 (MEV):

> [14] *For He is our peace, who has made both groups one and has broken down the barrier of the dividing wall,*
> [15] *by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of the commandments contained in ordinances, that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, thus making peace,*

In church life and through the gospel, the natural hostility between Jews and Gentiles was being steadily eroded as they worshipped God together (cf. Isa 19:23-25).

Peace under Messiah's rule

Freedom, peace and security for the people of God is a prominent biblical theme — and not just in Isaiah.
However, foreign oppression is not our main problem:
God's deliverance of his people from Egyptian bondage typified the far greater redemptive accomplishments of Jesus, who delivers his people from enslavement to sin. See Matthew 1:21; John 8:34-36; Romans 6:16.
Accordingly, in the prophets we find Israel's redemption and restoration tied to the coming of God's kingdom.
The prophets looked beyond their nation's temporal deliverance from exile to the definitive deliverance to be accomplished by the Davidic/messianic king, or (in the latter section of Isaiah) by Yahweh's Servant.
We need to keep these facts in mind when considering the following Old Testament prophecies.

2 Samuel 7:
Lying behind God's election of David and his heirs (in 7:11-16) was his concern for his people — that they might dwell in safety, free from oppression (7:8-11).

1 Kings 4:
The "perfection" of Solomon's reign — his extensive rule; the people's happiness and safety (4:20, 25); his fame, wisdom, and justice (4:29-34) — foreshadowed the coming messianic kingdom.

Psalm 72
The (future) messianic king will rule with justice and protect the poor and needy (72:2, 4, 12-14).
He will rule forever (72:5), and over all nations (72:8-11).

Isaiah 7 – 8: The Immanuel ("God is with us") promises.
For King Ahaz, the birth of baby Immanuel (probably within the next year) was intended to encourage faith in God, whose presence with them meant that, just as their immediate enemies (Aram and Israel) would soon be destroyed (7:16; 8:4), so ultimately will Assyria and all other enemies of God's people (8:9-10).[5]

Isaiah 9:
Building on the Immanuel promise, Isaiah foretells the birth of a son — a king from David's line — through whom God will crush the foreign oppressor and restore the nation.
Gloom and distress will come to an end for the northern tribes (Zebulun and Naphtali) who had borne the brunt of Assyrian brutality (9:1-2).[6]
The nation will be restored, and foreign oppression and subjugation will cease (9:3-5).
The fourth name of this king — "Prince of Peace" — in 9:6 is especially significant:
He will bring universal peace through resolving disputes and enacting just decisions (cf. Isa 2:4; 11:3-9; 42:4).
His rule will forever expand — characterized by peace, justice, and righteousness (9:7).

Isaiah 32 – 33 further relates the messianic kingdom to Jerusalem's deliverance from the Assyrian threat.[7]
The ultimate king will reign justly and appoint godly leaders over his subjects (32:1-2).
God will save his people; his life-giving Spirit will undo the devastation caused by the invaders (32:15).
Justice, righteousness, quietness, and confidence will be their lot (32:16-17).
Zion will at last be inhabited by a righteous remnant (33:15-24):
They will see their king; indeed, Yahweh will himself be their judge, lawgiver, king, and savior (33:17, 22).

Micah
Under the messianic Shepherd-King the restored remnant will live in peace and security; they will even rule over their former enemies (5:2, 4-9).

Around the time of Judah's exile, **the later prophets** reiterate the earlier prophets' promises of restoration:
Both Israel and Judah will return and be reunited as one nation under "David" to dwell in peace and safety.
See Jeremiah 23:5-6; 30:3, 9; 33:14-17; Ezekiel 34:23-24; 37:15-28.

The Song of Zechariah
Zechariah (the father of John the Baptist) foretold that through the soon-to-be-born Christ, God would fulfill his ancient promises; he will deliver his people from their enemies (Lk 1:71, 74), and from the darkness and death of foreign oppression (Lk 1:79; cf. Isa 9:2).

[5] See further comments concerning these promises in my article on this website: *The Throne of David — an Overview* (pages 7-8).
[6] According to Matthew 4:12-16, Jesus' early ministry in Galilee fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah 9:1-2.
[7] This prophecy was given just prior to Sennacherib's 701 BC invasion of Judah.

The New Creation

As explained elsewhere on this website, the new heaven and earth of Revelation 21 – 22 depicts the new, post-70 AD world order. "Jerusalem" is the capital and seat of government of this new order:

- Jesus, with the Father, is enthroned therein (Rev 22:1, 3b), and the surrounding nations are firmly under his/their rule (cf. Rev 12:5; Ps 2:6-9).
- The saints co-reign with Christ from Jerusalem (Rev 2:26-27; 5:10; 22:5; Dan 7:27).
- The city (as the Church) serves as a light and ministers gospel healing to the nations (Rev 21:24; 22:2).
- The wicked outside the city are invited to repent and enter through the gates and partake of the tree and water of life (Rev 22:2, 14-15, 17).
- In time, all nations will come to worship God in Jerusalem (Rev 15:4; cf. Ps 86:9; Isa 2:1-3; Mt 28:18-19).

John's final vision depicts the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy through Christ.
The saints (within the city) enjoy freedom from sorrow and pain, death and curse (Rev 21:4; 22:3).
Outside the city God's curse remains on the impenitent (Rev 22:15).
Complete freedom from sorrow, pain, death and curse will only come posthumously, in heaven.

Appendix: Irenaeus' comments on Isaiah 11:6-9

In this section we consider the view of Irenaeus, the influential bishop of Lugdunum (now Lyon), who lived ca. 130-202 AD. Irenaeus was possibly born in Smyrna in Asia Minor, for as a boy he encountered bishop Polycarp, the disciple of John. Irenaeus wrote extensively, but only two of his works have survived intact.
Irenaeus was a strong advocate of the resurrection of our physical bodies. This was necessitated by his belief in an earthly millennium: the saints would be raised up with their bodies to enjoy the paradisical conditions of the millennium, in preparation for the final, eternal kingdom.

Irenaeus wrote his major work, *Adversus haereses* (= *Against Heresies*, hereafter "AH") ca. 180 AD.
As its name suggests, it served as a refutation of the various Gnostic heresies of his day.
The heretics denigrated the physical creation; for them, salvation entailed the discarding of (or release from) the body. This further stirred Irenaeus to advocate for the raising up of our self-same fleshly bodies.
While Irenaeus quotes extensively from Scripture, he also places considerable weight on the teaching of the Church, with its succession of "presbyters" going all the way back to the apostles.
This continuity of teaching enjoyed by the Church stands in stark contrast to the *ad hoc* teachings of the heretical groups denounced in his writings. But there were also some separatist orthodox groups that he took aim at — those whom he calls "schismatics".

What is apparent is that as early as the second century there were two views of Isaiah's prophecy.
Irenaeus claimed support from Papias for his own (literalistic) interpretation of Isaiah 11:6-9:
the conditions to be found in the millennial kingdom.

AH 5.33.4:

> And these things are borne witness to in writing by Papias, the hearer of John, and a companion of Polycarp, in his fourth book; for there were five books compiled (συντεταγμενα) by him. And he says in addition, Now these things are credible to believers. And he [Papias] says that, when the traitor Judas did not give credit to them, and put the question, 'How then can things about to bring forth so abundantly be wrought by the Lord?' the Lord [Jesus] declared, 'They who shall come to these [times] shall see.' When prophesying of these times, therefore, Esaias says: The wolf also shall feed with the lamb, and the leopard shall take his rest with the kid; the calf also, and the bull, and the lion shall eat together; and a little boy shall lead them. The ox and the bear shall feed together, and their young ones shall agree together; and the lion shall eat straw as well as the ox. And the infant boy shall thrust his hand into the asp's den, into the nest also of the adder's brood; and they shall do no harm, nor have power to hurt anything in my holy mountain. And again he [Papias] says, in recapitulation, Wolves and lambs shall then browse together, and the lion shall eat straw like the ox, and the serpent earth as if it were bread; and they shall neither hurt nor annoy anything in my holy mountain, says the Lord. I am quite aware that **some persons endeavour to refer these words to the case of savage men**, both of different nations and various habits, **who come to believe, and when they have believed, act in harmony with the righteous**. But although this is [true] now with regard to some men coming from various nations to the harmony of the faith, **nevertheless in the resurrection of the just [the words shall also apply] to those animals mentioned**. For God is rich in all things. And it is right that **when the creation is**

> **restored, all the animals should obey and be in subjection to man, and revert to the food originally given by God** (for they had been originally subjected in obedience to Adam), **that is, the productions of the earth**. But some other occasion, and not the present, is [to be sought] for showing that the lion shall [then] feed on straw. **And this indicates the large size and rich quality of the fruits. For if that animal, the lion, feeds upon straw [at that period], of what a quality must the wheat itself be whose straw shall serve as suitable food for lions?**

Evaluation:

All this is fairytale exegesis — from Papias' story about Judas on.

Irenaeus, following Papias, applies Isaiah's prophecy to conditions in the millennial kingdom: all animals will be vegetarian, and this will be possible because of the great fruitfulness of the earth.

Significantly, however, he acknowledges that some in his own day believed Isaiah to be referring to the new-found harmony enjoyed in the Church between diverse peoples and nations.