

Rethinking The Prophecy Concerning Immanuel in Isaiah 7:1-25

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Isaiah prophesied about a Child to be born who in some way would relate to the nation's deliverance. The birth of the Baby, to be named Immanuel, has great significance for the line of David.

I. The Fear of Ahaz – 7:1-2.

¹ Now it came about in the days of Ahaz, the son of Jotham, the son of Uzziah, king of Judah, that Rezin the king of Aram and Pekah the son of Remaliah, king of Israel, went up to Jerusalem to wage war against it, but could not conquer it. ² When it was reported to the house of David, saying, "The Arameans have camped in Ephraim," his heart and the hearts of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake with the wind.

Rezin, king of Aram (later called Syria¹), northeast of Israel, and Pekah king of Israel (752-732) had made an alliance. Rezin may have usurped the throne of Aram, and Pekah was a usurper. Rezin was Aram's last king, and Pekah was Israel's next-to-last king. After Jeroboam II (793-753) of Israel died, the Northern Kingdom became increasingly weak. Rezin convinced Pekah to join him against Pekah's southern neighbor Judah (2 Kings 15:37; 16:5). In 734 b.c. they threatened to replace Judah's King Ahaz with a puppet king, "the son of Tabeel" (Isa. 7:6). The word Ephraim, the name of Israel's largest tribe, referred to the ten northern tribes that had broken off after the Solomon died. Evidently, Ahaz attempted to enlist the aid of the Assyrian King Tiglath-Pileser III (745-727) and protect him from the Aram-Ephraim alliance.

II. The Command to Isaiah – 7:3-9.

³ Then the Lord said to Isaiah, "Go out now to meet Ahaz, you and your son Shear-jashub, at the end of the conduit of the upper pool, on the highway to the fuller's field,

A. The Place of Meeting – 7:3

The Lord ordered Isaiah to go with his son to meet King Ahaz at the end of the aqueduct of the Upper Pool. This pool was a reservoir that held water from the Gihon Spring near Jerusalem. Ahaz was there, perhaps to secure the water supply in case of an attack. The aqueduct was near the road to the Fuller's Field, just outside Jerusalem's city walls.² The name of Isaiah's son, Shear-Jashub, which means "a remnant will return," is only mentioned in this one place. The name seems predictive of the future of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin. The nation of Judah/Benjamin would survive this event, and the ultimate destruction of both Syria and Ephraim, as well as the end of Assyria itself. It would eventually be taken captive by Babylon in 586 b.c., but a remnant would return 70 years later.

B. The Nature of the Situation – 7:4-6.

⁴ and say to him, 'Take care, and be calm, have no fear and do not be fainthearted because of these two stubs of smoldering firebrands, on account of the fierce anger of Rezin and Aram, and the son of Remaliah. ⁵ 'Because Aram, with Ephraim and the son of Remaliah, has planned evil against you, saying, ⁶ "Let us go up against Judah and terrorize it, and make for ourselves a breach in its walls, and set up the son of Tabeel as king in the midst of it,"

Isaiah told Ahaz not to fear Rezin and Pekah, for they were mere smoldering stubs of firewood. Their lives would soon end; like firewood they would be burned up and gone. Both men died two years

1 The word Syria is possibly a Greek corruption of the Hebrew word צִיֹּר, Tyre.

2 A fuller was one who dyed cloth. It was necessary to wash the cloth thoroughly, hence the need for much water. A fuller usually used a large field to lay out the cloth for drying. (This place is also referred to in Isaiah 36:2.)

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later in 732 B.C. Aram (Syria) and Israel threatened to invade Judah, split it between the two conquering nations, and set up a Puppet king.

C. The Warning by the Lord – 7:7-9.

⁷ thus says the Lord God, “It shall not stand nor shall it come to pass. ⁸ “For the head of Aram is Damascus and the head of Damascus is Rezin (now within another 65 years Ephraim will be shattered, so that it is no longer a people), ⁹ and the head of Ephraim is Samaria and the head of Samaria is the son of Remaliah. If you will not believe, you surely shall not last.””

In response to the Aram-Israel threat the Sovereign LORD had an answer: It (the attack) would not take place; it would not happen. The reason was that both of those nations were headed by mere (only, vv. 8-9) men. Ironically Isaiah referred to Pekah by name only once (v. 1). Four other times he called him “the son of Remaliah” or Remaliah’s son (vv. 4-5, 9; 8:6). He and Rezin could not thwart God’s plans.

In fact Isaiah prophesied that within 65 years Israel would no longer even be a people because they would be shattered (7:8). Isaiah gave this prophecy in 734 B.C., so 65 years later was 669. When Assyria conquered Israel in 722, many Israelites were deported to other lands by Assyria and foreigners were brought into Samaria (2 Kings 17:24). However, in 669, 65 years after the prophecy of Isaiah 7:8, a huge number of foreigners were brought to Samaria by Ashurbanipal (Ezra 4:10), who became king of Assyria in 669, and reigned until 626). This “shattered” Israel, making it impossible for her to unite as a nation (“a people”).

The second sentence in Isaiah 7:9 has been translated in various ways. But it challenged Ahaz to believe what Isaiah was telling him. Obviously Ahaz was not alive 65 years later. But he could have faith that God would fulfill both predictions: that Israel would be shattered 65 years later and that in his day the northern confederacy (Aram and Israel) would not overpower Judah. If he did not believe those predictions he too would fall.

III. The Refusal by Ahaz – 7:10-12.

¹⁰ Then the LORD spoke again to Ahaz, saying, ¹¹ “Ask a sign for yourself from the LORD your God; make it deep as Sheol or high as heaven.” ¹² But Ahaz said, “I will not ask, nor will I test the LORD!”

As a means of strengthening his faith Ahaz was told to ask the LORD for a sign, a miracle that would confirm God’s word. The king could choose any miraculous work he wished, from the deepest depths to the highest heights. This was a figure of speech, a merism, that mentioned two extremes with the intention of including all the areas in between them. With a miracle performed simply for the asking, Ahaz would have visible confirmation that Isaiah’s words (vv. 7-9) were truly from the Lord. Ahaz could count on the fact that the northern alliance would not defeat Judah.

But Ahaz refused to request a sign, claiming he would not tempt God (see Deut. 6:16). This answer sounded pious but probably the way he said it showed he was not believing Isaiah. Perhaps he did not *want* to believe Isaiah, who had been prophesying about the eventual destruction of Judah if her people did not return to the LORD.

IV. The Response by the Lord – 7:13-16

A. The Lord’s Rebuke of Ahaz – 7:13

¹³ Then he said, “Listen now, O house of David! Is it too slight a thing for you to try the patience of men, that you will try the patience of my God as well?”

Ahaz, by rejecting the offer of a sign from God’s messenger, was in effect rejecting the One who sent the prophet. The house of David (cf. v. 2) refers not to all David’s descendants, but to Ahaz and those

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kings of Judah who would descend from him. Ahaz's answer was impious. He said he did not want to test the Lord, but by refusing to follow God's directive to ask for a confirming miracle, he *was* testing the Lord's patience (as well as man's patience).

B. The Lord's Sign to Ahaz – 7:14-16.

¹⁴ "Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel. ¹⁵ "He will eat curds and honey at the time He knows enough to refuse evil and choose good. ¹⁶ "For before the boy will know enough to refuse evil and choose good, the land whose two kings you dread will be forsaken.

Though Ahaz refused to request a sign that would have confirmed the truth of Isaiah's message, the prophet said God would give him one anyway. The sign was to be a boy named Immanuel. Three elements pertain to the sign: (1) The boy would be born of a virgin (v. 14). (2) He would be raised in a time of national calamity (v. 15; on the curds and honey see comments on v. 22). (3) While he was still a youth, the two-king alliance would be broken (v. 16).

"Virgin" translates *almah*, a word used of an unmarried woman of marriageable age. The word refers to one who is sexually mature. It occurs elsewhere in the Old Testament only in Genesis 24:43 ("maiden"); Exodus 2:8 ("girl"); Psalm 68:25 ("maidens"); Proverbs 30:19 ("maiden"); Song of Songs 1:3 ("maidens"); 6:8 ("virgins"). It also occurs in 1 Chronicles 15:20 (*alamot*) and in the title of Psalm 46 (*alamot* may be a musical term). The child's name Immanuel means "God (is) with us."

Most Bible scholars hold one of three views on the virgin in Isaiah 7:14-16:

(1) The boy of whom Isaiah wrote was conceived shortly after Isaiah spoke this message. A young woman, a virgin, married and then had a baby. Before he would be old enough to tell the difference between good and evil the northern Aram-Israel alliance would be destroyed. According to this view the woman was a virgin when Isaiah spoke his prophecy but was not when the boy was born because he was conceived by sexual relations with her husband. Some say this child was born to Isaiah (8:3-4). They point out that 8:1-4 corresponds in a number of ways to 7:14-17. But this view must be rejected because (a) Isaiah's wife already had a child (Shear-Jashub, v. 3) and so was not a virgin, and (b) the second child born to Isaiah's wife was not named Immanuel (8:3). In this view Ahaz would have known this woman, and hearing of the child's birth and his name Immanuel he would understand that Isaiah's prophecies were correct.

(2) A second view sees the predicted birth as exclusively messianic and the virgin as Mary, Jesus' mother. It is argued that in Isaiah 7:14 the virgin is said to be with child (lit., "the virgin is or will be pregnant"). It is also argued that Matthew, stressing the fact that Joseph and Mary's marriage was not consummated till after Jesus' birth (Matt. 1:18, 25), affirmed that Jesus' birth fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy (Matt. 1:21-23).

Proponents of this view point out that since Isaiah spoke this prophecy to the house of David (Isa. 7:13) and not just to Ahaz himself, the sign was given not just to the king but to the entire kingly line and the entire nation. However, if the fulfillment did not occur until Joseph and Mary's day, how does the prophecy relate to Isaiah's point that the Aram-Israel confederacy would soon be defeated? And how does the birth of the Lord Jesus relate to the eating of curds and honey (v. 15) and to the breaking of the alliance before the boy was old enough to know good and evil? (v. 16) Proponents of this view answer that the time is similar: the two years of Jesus' babyhood (before He would know between right and wrong) point to the same time segment, two years, within which the Aram-Israel threat would be gone.

(3) A third view, a combination of the first two, sees the prophecy as directed primarily to Ahaz regarding the breaking of the alliance. The *almah* was a virgin when Isaiah spoke his message, but then she

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would marry and have a baby. When the Aram-Israel alliance was broken the boy would still be young. Centuries later the Holy Spirit led Matthew to quote Isaiah 7:14 as a statement that was also true of a virgin birth (i.e., a birth to a woman who was still a virgin). This is the first of many prophecies about the Messiah given by Isaiah.

The sign must have had some significance for the historical situation in which it was given. The sign involved not only the birth and the boy's name (Immanuel, "God [is] with us, "would assure the people of God's presence), but also a designated length of time: before the boy knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, the land of the two kings will be laid waste.

Within about three years (nine months for the pregnancy and two or three years until the boy would know the difference between good and evil) the alliance would be broken. It was broken in 732 B.C. when Tiglath-Pileser III destroyed Damascus. After Tiglath-Pileser had defeated Aram and put Rezin to death Ahaz went to Damascus to meet the Assyrian monarch (2 Kings 16:7-10). Ahaz liked an altar he saw in Damascus, and had a sketch of it drawn so a similar altar could be set up in Jerusalem. No wonder Isaiah and God were angry with Ahaz. Even after the alliance had been broken by Tiglath-Pileser Judah had no peace. Though Assyria did not defeat Judah, she had to pay Assyria a heavy tribute.

Another view, generally not considered, but superior to all the previous views, has to do with the meaning of *fulfilled* in Matthew's gospel.

The use of the word *fulfill* (Greek = πληρώω) does not always mean a prediction is coming to pass. See Matthew 5:17-18: Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. ¹⁸ For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled. - Here the word *fulfilled* means *to bring to completion, to keep perfectly*, as Christ did in His human nature. The perfect human kept the law perfectly.

A tendency to read into the Greek word πληρώω (*pleroo*) the meaning of the English translation *fulfill* is unfortunate. Such is not the primary meaning of the word, even when the New Testament author refers back to an Old Testament event. Several examples of such occur in the New Testament. Just two examples will suffice to illustrate this point.

1. **Matthew 2:17-18 compared to Jeremiah 31:15.** Matthew refers to Jeremiah's statement thusly:

2:17 Then the statement by Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled, saying, ¹⁸ A noise in Ramah was heard, crying and wailing and much mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, and she did not desire to be comforted, because they were not." The important point is that there was no original prediction. Jeremiah 31:15 simply records a historical fact.

Here the single point of comparison is weeping. Matthew is not reinterpreting Jeremiah's statement allegorically. He is simply stating that there is a similarity in the events. Both events caused weeping by bereaved mothers.

2. **Matthew 2:15 compared to Hosea 11:1.** Matthew 2:15 reads:

2:15 ...and he (Joseph) was there until the death of Herod, in order that the statement of the Lord through the prophet might be fulfilled, Out of Egypt I called My Son.

Again, there was no prediction in the Hosea passage, yet the word fulfilled occurs. Clearly fulfilled does not mean a prediction occurred which was realized later. One must look for a point of comparison between the two events. The single point of comparison is the fact that both Israel and Christ spent time in Egypt and subsequently returned to the land of promise. At that point the com-

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parison ends, since Hosea 11:2 clearly represents Israel in sin. Matthew is not changing the original literal interpretation of Hosea 11:1.³

Often a passage is fulfilled in the New Testament because the author refers to a specific element of a historical passage that perfectly *corresponds* with a New Testament event. Thus, the New Testament author finds fulfillment of the Old Testament quotation through that *single point of correspondence*. Only a thorough, literal approach to the original statement in the Old Testament will reveal the nature of the singular correspondence that the New Testament author is indicating. In this type of quotation there is only one analogy which the author is making. The author is not suggesting that the original statement was in any way predictive. When interpreting passages such as these, the student must look for the *single point of comparison* that is being made.

When New Testament states that an Old Testament predictive prophecy is fulfilled, the interpreter must not overlook the principle of compenetration, which is the act of God by which He uses a single event in two different ways for illustrative purposes. There is one specific point of comparison between the two events, but there is only one actual realization of the prediction.

Matthew 1:23 compared to Isaiah 7:14 is a case in point: The original statement is a prediction concerning the defeat of two kings, Rezin and Pekah, who were tormenting Judah's king Ahaz (Isaiah 7:1-9). As a sign of their defeat, a child who would not know the difference between good and evil was to be born of a person before the destruction of the two kings (7:16). The predicted historical event takes place in Isaiah 8:1-4. The Hebrew word unfortunately translated by the KJV translators "virgin" is *almah* which refers to a young woman, who may or may not have been a virgin. Historically the prophetess gave birth through natural means.

Matthew, in his statement, is not disputing, changing or allegorizing the original prophecy. He is not saying that Isaiah predicted the virgin birth of Christ. He is saying that the prophecy is finding its ultimate use⁴ *in a literary sense* in the virgin birth of Christ. Matthew expresses *almah* by the Greek word *parthenos* which indicates a virgin. By compenetration Matthew provides a legitimate literary allusion for Isaiah's prophetic utterance that was not evident to the original participants in the historical non-messianic situation. It is incorrect to call it a "double reference prophecy," which smacks of abnormal interpretation.

V. The Prediction concerning Assyria – 7:17-25.

A. The Coming Attack – 7:17-19

¹⁷ "The LORD will bring on you, on your people, and on your father's house such days as have never come since the day that Ephraim separated from Judah, the king of Assyria." ¹⁸ And it will come about

- 3 Some have attempted to draw an analogy between Christ as the Son and Israel as the son, both being brought out of Egypt. But no such analogy exists, since Christ is a Son *in a totally different way* that Israel was a son. Others have attempted to show that as Israel was in sin and was to be judged by God, that Christ ultimately, as Son, was judged by God. It is highly doubtful the Matthew's original readers would have thought of this, as it is not explicitly so stated by a proposition. These kinds of attempts miss the point. Neither Hosea nor his readers would have thought that there was any such purpose behind his statement, though such a purpose is often thought to exist today. Matthew is using Hosea's statement as an example of the same kind of thing.
- 4 There is a prediction and realization in Isaiah, but that prediction *had nothing to do with the Lord Jesus Christ*. It was realized historically, one time. *There was never a time in which that the divine person Christ did not know the difference between good and evil!* Hence, the original prediction was not about Christ at all. Matthew expresses the Hebrew *alma* (young woman) by the Greek *parthenos* (virgin). Matthew knew that *alma* had nothing to do with a virgin birth, and he used the word *fulfilled* in the legitimate use of *brought to a literary completion*, not in the sense of a prophecy being realized. That happened in Isaiah 8. We must not forget that God, in the person of the Holy Spirit, was bearing Matthew along as he wrote (2 Peter 1:21), and brought to Matthew's mind a good illustrative passage to bring GOD'S use of Isaiah 7:14 to fulfillment, that is, to completion in a strictly literary sense.

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in that day, that the LORD will whistle for the fly that is in the remotest part of the rivers of Egypt, and for the bee that is in the land of Assyria.¹⁹ And they will all come and settle on the steep ravines, on the ledges of the cliffs, on all the thorn bushes, and on all the watering places.

God said He would send the king of Assyria to Judah. These would be the worst enemy attacks since the 10 Northern tribes (here called Ephraim; see comments on v. 2) broke from the 2 Southern tribes in 931 B.C. From Ahaz's day on, Judah was troubled by the Assyrian Empire, to which it had to pay a large tribute. Ahaz called on Tiglath-Pileser to rescue him from Aram and Israel, which the Assyrian king gladly did. However, Tiglath-Pileser gave Ahaz trouble, not help (2 Chron. 28:20-21). Then in Hezekiah's reign Sennacherib, king of Assyria, invaded Judah, who had asked for help from Egypt (Isa. 30:1-5), and was about to take it when, in 701 B.C., God miraculously delivered Jerusalem (chaps. 36-37). God's hand was in all this for He would whistle for flies from Egypt (i.e., Egyptian soldiers were as numerous and bothersome as flies) and for bees from Assyria (i.e., Assyrian soldiers who were vicious as bees).

B. The Resulting Devastation – 7:20-25.

²⁰ In that day the Lord will shave with a razor, hired from regions beyond the Euphrates (that is, with the king of Assyria), the head and the hair of the legs; and it will also remove the beard. ²¹ Now it will come about in that day that a man may keep alive a heifer and a pair of sheep; ²² and it will happen that because of the abundance of the milk produced he will eat curds, for everyone that is left within the land will eat curds and honey. ²³ And it will come about in that day, that every place where there used to be a thousand vines, valued at a thousand shekels of silver, will become briars and thorns. ²⁴ People will come there with bows and arrows because all the land will be briars and thorns. ²⁵ And as for all the hills which used to be cultivated with the hoe, you will not go there for fear of briars and thorns; but they will become a place for pasturing oxen and for sheep to trample.

Judah would experience deprivation and humiliation. Assyria, like a razor, would shave Judah's hair. In the ancient Near East shaving one's hair and beard was a sign of humiliation or deep distress (cf. Job 1:20; Isa. 15:2; Jer. 47:5; 48:37; Ezek. 7:18; Amos 8:10; Micah 1:16). The abundance of milk was a distressful factor, not a good one. With many animals dying, a farmer's young cow and two goats would have no young to nurse, and so the milk (and curds from it) would be plentiful for the people. Honey would also be abundant because wild flowers would grow in the desolate fields and bee swarms would be more plentiful. All this would fulfill the sign given Ahaz by Isaiah (Isa. 7:15): he will eat curds and honey. Also the farmers would have no crops because of the ruined farmland. The vineyards would be ruined along with the cultivated land, and only briars and thorns (mentioned three times in vv. 23-25) would grow. The land would be good only for grazing by cattle and sheep.

In that day (v. 21) denotes a time of judgment on the nation of Judah. Often this phrase (as in 4:2, e.g.) is used eschatologically to refer to the time of extreme judgment in the Great Tribulation just before the Messiah will return to establish the millennial kingdom. But sometimes as here (7:21) it refers to a judgment to come on the nation soon. The near judgment pictures the extreme judgment to come at the end of the age.