

## **The Miracle of Immanuel**

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### **I. The setting of the Immanuel prophecy**

#### ***A. Historical background***

The scene is Jerusalem. The time is the 8th C. BC. The nation of Israel, once a strong and mighty nation under the leadership of David and Solomon, has diminished to a tattered and insignificant handful of people clinging to their former glory. What is left is focused on Jerusalem—the residence of the king and the location of God's Temple. Most of the Jews had mutinied more than 150 years earlier. They now comprised the much larger and more prosperous northern kingdom of Israel.

#### ***B. Political scene in Judah***

The man in charge at Jerusalem was a king by the name of Ahaz. His elderly father, Jotham, was still living and was king in name, but Ahaz held the reigns of power and controlled the affairs of state. He was an ungodly king—the most ungodly king to date in the history of Judah. He was not a believer at all, going so far as to offer his own children as human sacrifices and building a pagan altar in the Temple area. He had been vice-regent for a bit less than 10 years at this time. They had been

troublesome years, constantly beset by internal and, especially external pressures.

The prophets Isaiah, Micah, and Hosea sought to call Ahaz and Judah back to God, but to no avail.

### ***C. Foreign affairs***

On the foreign scene the nations that exercised immediate influence on Judah were Israel and Aram (what is today Syria). The northern kingdom, Israel, was caught up in very turbulent affairs at this time. Several political factions were vying for power. There were actually three men jockeying for control of the government in Israel. Israel was also at the peak of her apostasy from the Law of God.

On the wider scene, this was the time of Assyrian expansion. Tiglath-Pileser, the Assyrian king, was bent on conquest. Judah was sheltered from the immediate brunt of Assyrian ambitions by Israel and Aram who stood between her and the King of the North. Although Israel and Aram had been adversaries for many years, the threat of Assyrian expansion forged an alliance between them. They sought to include Ahaz in their anti-Assyrian coalition as well, but he refused. As a result, Israel and Aram conspired to invade Judah and place their own man on the throne. The initial invasion that began the Syro-Ephramite War was unsuccessful. Tiny Judah managed to hold off the two larger powers. But the future looked quite bleak. Surely they could not hold out against the sustained siege of these two larger, more powerful armies. The mood in Judah was anything but optimistic. Both the king and the people were scared—shaken as the trees of the forest are shaken by the wind.

Pick up the story with me at that point in Isaiah chapter 7.

### ***D. Prophetic reassurance (7:4-9)***

When Ahaz son of Jotham, the son of Uzziah, was king of Judah, King Rezin of Aram and Pekah son of Remaliah king of Israel marched up to fight against Jerusalem, but they could not overpower it.

<sup>2</sup> Now the house of David was told, “Aram has allied itself with Ephraim”; so the hearts of Ahaz and his people were shaken, as the trees of the forest are shaken by the wind.

<sup>3</sup> Then the LORD said to Isaiah, “Go out, you and your son Shear-Jashub, to meet Ahaz at the end of the aqueduct of the Upper Pool, on the road to the Washerman’s Field. <sup>4</sup> Say to him, ‘Be careful, keep calm and don’t be afraid. Do not lose heart because of these two smoldering stubs of firewood—because of the fierce anger of Rezin and Aram and of the son of Remaliah. <sup>5</sup> Aram, Ephraim and Remaliah’s son have plotted your ruin, saying, <sup>6</sup> “Let us invade Judah; let us tear it apart and divide it among ourselves, and make the son of Tabeel king over it.” <sup>7</sup> Yet this is what the Sovereign LORD says:

“It will not take place,  
it will not happen,

<sup>8</sup> for the head of Aram is Damascus,  
and the head of Damascus is only Rezin.

Within sixty-five years

Ephraim will be too shattered to be a people.

<sup>9</sup> The head of Ephraim is Samaria,  
and the head of Samaria is only Remaliah’s son.

If you do not stand firm in your faith,  
you will not stand at all.”

Isa. 7:1–9

God’s message to Ahaz and to his people, Judah, was that he had not abandoned them. His covenant promise of protection was still in effect. They had nothing to fear from the military threat which they faced. Yes, from the perspective of Ahaz, Aram and Israel constituted “a major threat, but from God’s point of view they are negligible and need not occupy the king’s time.”<sup>2</sup> Within 65 years those two countries would be destroyed. “Stand firm, Ahaz. Trust God. If you do not, you will not stand at all.” In his despair over the military threat, Ahaz should have turned to the Word of God, perhaps to a passage like Ps. 46:7—“The Lord Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.”<sup>3</sup>

Notice what he does instead:

<sup>10</sup> Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, <sup>11</sup> “Ask the LORD your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights.”

<sup>12</sup> But Ahaz said, “I will not ask; I will not put the LORD to the test.”

## II. The sign of the Immanuel prophecy

### A. *The sign offered to Ahaz*

Ahaz did not *want* to trust God. That is evident in his response to the offer God makes in v 11. God had said, “Ask for a sign.”

If you are following in your Hebrew text, note the verb: שִׁאֵל —a Qal imperative! [If you’re wondering where the imperative’s holem went, remember this is an ש gutteral verb—or ‘IIG’ if you had Dr. Engle for first-year Hebrew, or ‘second gutteral’ if you learned Dr. Ingalls’ or Mr. McGinniss’ terminology!]

Ahaz’s response seems out of character. His reputation is that of an *ungodly* king, yet he pleads piety to avoid obeying God’s instructions (note v 12): “I will not put the Lord to the test.” Ahaz did not *want* evidence that he should trust God. “Why? Apparently it is because his mind is already made up. He is going to trust his and his nation’s fate to *Assyria*, and he does not want ... evidence that such a drastic decision is unwarranted. Any sign provided by Isaiah could only be an embarrassment to him, so he attempts to avoid the dilemma by an appeal to piety.”<sup>4</sup>

He had perhaps already sent word to Assyria asking for protection from the two nations arrayed against him. He never considered trusting God. Now to have this nosy old prophet telling him that God would give a miraculous sign of deliverance—well, that was just not welcome. It would disrupt the plans he had already made. But to acknowledge that to Isaiah, and to have word of it get out to the people, well, that would be embarrassing. So he “hid his hypocrisy behind a pious façade by pretending to be concerned to obey the command not to put God to the test.”<sup>5</sup>

## *B. The sign given to God's people*

In response to Ahaz's superficial pretense of piety, Isaiah issues a stinging rebuke. Look at what he says in verse 13:

Then Isaiah said, "Hear now, you house of David! Is it not enough to try the patience of men? Will you try the patience of my God also? <sup>14</sup>Therefore **the Lord himself** will give you a sign....

What's the point? Isaiah is saying, in other words, "Ahaz, you have tried men's patience before, but now you have tried God's patience to the limit. You may pretend to be pious and refuse to ask for a sign, but God, who knows the real reason for your refusal, is going to give a sign anyway."

### *1. Recipients of the sign*

It is interesting to note that Isaiah does not say that God will give the sign to Ahaz alone. The "you" of v 14 is plural instead of the singular we would expect if the sign was for Ahaz. Isaiah announces that God will give a sign to all Judah.

### *2. Elements of the sign*

But just what is this sign? The text says in v 14, that "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel...."

Is that the sign? Too often we stop with v 14. Since we know that this verse is cited in the NT and applied to the birth of Jesus, we too frequently assume that Jesus' virgin birth is the sign that Isaiah announces. But that is *not* what the text says. Look at it again.

<sup>14</sup>Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. <sup>15</sup>He will eat curds and honey when he knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right. <sup>16</sup>But before the boy knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, the land of the two kings you dread will be laid waste. <sup>17</sup>The LORD will bring on you and on your people and on the house of your father a time unlike any since Ephraim broke away from Judah—he will bring the king of Assyria."

<sup>18</sup>In that day the LORD will whistle for flies from the distant streams of Egypt and for bees from the land of Assyria. <sup>19</sup>They will all come and settle in the steep ravines and in the crevices in the rocks, on all the thornbushes and at all the water holes. <sup>20</sup>In that day the Lord will use a razor hired from beyond the River—the king of Assyria—to shave your head and the hair of your legs, and to take off your beards also. <sup>21</sup>In that day, a man will keep alive a young cow and two goats. <sup>22</sup>And because of the abundance of the milk they give, he will have curds to eat. All who remain in the land will eat curds and honey. <sup>23</sup>In that day, in every place where there were a thousand vines worth a thousand silver shekels, there will be only briars and thorns. <sup>24</sup>Men will go there with bow and arrow, for the land will be covered with briars and thorns. <sup>25</sup>As for all the hills once cultivated by the hoe, you will no longer go there for fear of the briars and thorns; they will become places where cattle are turned loose and where sheep run.

Isaiah's announcement of the promised sign includes *not only* the birth of a child, *but also* his name (Immanuel), the diet he will eat, the age at which he learns the difference between right and wrong, the destruction of Aram and Israel, *and* the coming of the king of Assyria.

That is *not* a reference to the birth of Jesus Christ. This sign “only makes sense if it means something to Ahaz [and the people of Judah].... The sign [also] includes verses 15–16.... [and probably vv. 17–25 as well. We] cannot divorce verse 14 from its context without destroying the logic and literary integrity of the pericope.”<sup>6</sup>

Who is this virgin? Who is the boy that is to be born? I do not have time to consider all the possible solutions that have been suggested for those questions. The answer, I think, is to be found where such things are usually found: *in the text*.

Let me start with the significance of the name *Immanuel*. There was, I am convinced, a boy born in the 8th C. BC who was named Immanuel by his mother. That name means “God is with us.” Remember the context. Judah was facing what appeared to be certain destruction. It was a day of despair and hopelessness. Yet Isaiah proclaims a message of deliverance. *Within 65 years* (that's important) Aram and Israel will be no more. But that is a long time to wait. (It is a lifetime for us humans.) Ahaz and most of the others in Isaiah's audience will be long dead in 65 years, even if

they die of old age. So there is a more immediate sign given. A son to be born will be named Immanuel. Both his birth and his name will serve to remind the people that God was indeed with them and would deliver them from the threat of invasion.

But who is the boy? Of course, if we can answer that question, we can probably also figure out who the mother is. Again, the context provides the answer. Isaiah chapter 8 follows Isaiah chapter 7. (That is not a very profound conclusion, but it seems to be ignored too often in connection with Isa. 7:14.) Look at what your Bible says in the very next paragraph—which is still talking about the same topic that we just read about in ch 7.

The LORD said to me, “Take a large scroll and write on it with an ordinary pen: Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz. <sup>2</sup> And I will call in Uriaah the priest and Zechariah son of Jeberekiah as reliable witnesses for me.”

<sup>3</sup> Then I went to the prophetess, and she conceived and gave birth to a son. And the LORD said to me, “Name him Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz. <sup>4</sup> Before the boy knows how to say ‘My father’ or ‘My mother,’ the wealth of Damascus and the plunder of Samaria will be carried off by the king of Assyria.”

<sup>5</sup> The LORD spoke to me again:

<sup>6</sup> “Because this people has rejected  
the gently flowing waters of Shiloah  
and rejoices over Rezin  
and the son of Remaliah,

<sup>7</sup> therefore the Lord is about to bring against them  
the mighty floodwaters of the River—  
the king of Assyria with all his pomp.

It will overflow all its channels,  
run over all its banks

<sup>8</sup> and sweep on into Judah, swirling over it,  
passing through it and reaching up to the neck.  
Its outspread wings will cover the breadth of your land,  
O Immanuel!”

<sup>9</sup> Raise the war cry, you nations, and be  
shattered!  
Listen, all you distant lands.

Prepare for battle, and be shattered!  
Prepare for battle, and be shattered!

<sup>10</sup> Devise your strategy, but it will be thwarted;  
propose your plan, but it will not stand,  
for God is with us.

In chapter 8, Isaiah marries a woman identified only as “the prophetess.” The marriage is referenced in v 2 and 3a. To that union a son is born, v 3b. His name is given as Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz. I am confident that the boy identified as Immanuel in 7:14 is the same boy called Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz in 8:3. It is the birth of a son to Isaiah’s new bride that serves as the sign.

Both names given to this boy are significant. Immanuel, the name given to him by his mother, reminds the people that God is with them. Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz, the name given by his father, Isaiah, means “quick to the plunder, swift to the spoil.” The second name depicts the Assyrian army plundering Aram and Israel in the very near future. The Assyrian invasion of the northern kingdom is God’s means of demonstrating his presence with his people and delivering them from the foreign threat.

Notice that Immanuel is still in focus in chapter 8. He is mentioned again, once by name, and once by inference. Look first at v 8. As Isaiah explains the significance of the name Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz, he speaks of Judah as *the land of Immanuel* in v 8. Not only Israel, but also the land where Immanuel lives, the land of Judah, is going to experience invasion by Assyria. Judah will not be taken into exile as will the northern tribes. Assyria has those thoughts in mind according to v 10, but God assures Judah that Assyria’s plans will be thwarted. Why? Because, *Immanuel!*—**because God is with us.** The last phrase in v 10 is the same word that we read in 7:14 and 8:8, used not as a proper name this time, but as a reminder of the truth of God’s presence with his people. You see, chapters 7 and 8 are closely linked, both by the theme of each and by the name Immanuel in both chapters.

Connecting the two chapters in this way *not only* identifies Immanuel as Isaiah’s son, but it *also* identifies the virgin: she is the young woman whom Isaiah marries in 8:1–3. That identification, of course, raises the

question of her virginity. There are several things to consider in that regard.

For years it has been popular to declare that Isaiah 7:14 *must* refer to the miraculous birth of a child to a virgin—a woman who had never had a sexual relationship with any man. That statement is based on the NT reference to this verse and its reference there to Mary, who was a virgin. Since I intend this at least in part as a Christmas message and not a lecture on Isaiah, I will not take time to rehearse all the evidence.

Suffice it to say that the use of the word “virgin” itself does *not* demand that a woman who has never had a sexual relationship with a man give birth to a son. The word *‘almah* is not translated “virgin” in the other OT passages where it occurs. It *may* refer to a virgin, but it is not clear that the word demands that reference. “Young woman” or “maiden” can, indeed, be an acceptable and accurate translation of the word *‘almah*. It is very natural that young women described by this word *would* be virgins in the technical sense of that English word, but the word itself does not carry that meaning. Context must decide. Here it probably is best to translate “virgin.”

It is also very possible that the young woman to whom Isaiah refers in Isaiah 7:14 *was* a virgin at that time. Of course, following the marriage ceremony described in 8:1–3, this young woman is no longer a virgin.

### **III. The Savior of the Immanuel prophecy**

But now turn with me to the Gospel of Matthew. There is more to the story than has yet been told. Matthew’s gospel introduces us to Jesus Christ, the Son of David. It is one of his chief concerns to portray to his readers the fulfillment of the OT Messianic hopes of the greater David who was to come. After recording for us the genealogy of Messiah in the first seventeen verses of the Gospel, he turns to an account of the circumstances of Messiah’s birth.

In v 18 Mary is discovered to be pregnant *before* the wedding. As Joseph contemplates how to divorce her quietly, v 19, an angel appears with a message from God.

“Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. <sup>21</sup> She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

After recording the angel’s explanation, Matthew continues by explaining, v 22, that...

<sup>22</sup> All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: <sup>23</sup> “The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel”—which means, “God with us.”

<sup>24</sup> When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. <sup>25</sup> But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

Of interest to us is the statement of vv 22 and 23. Matthew quotes from Isaiah and applies that 8th C. BC prophecy to the birth of Jesus Christ. But it is more than application. He says that Jesus’ birth is the *fulfillment*—πληρώω—of what the Lord said through the prophet. Here is the greater Immanuel. We have moved from Isaiah’s son to Isaiah’s Savior. In Isaiah 7 and 8 Isaiah’s son, Immanuel is the *sign* to God’s people that they had not been forsaken by God because *Immanuel*—because “God is with us”—and he would protect them.

But in Matthew we have more than a *sign* of God’s presence. Here we have God himself personally, bodily present with his people. The same truth is clearly in view, but the fulfillment is far greater than the first Immanuel.<sup>7</sup> If I were to express that in traditional terminology, I might say that the antitype is always greater than the type—the fulfillment evidences an escalation in meaning.<sup>8</sup> Here is the God-man: The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world (John 1:9). The Word became flesh and lived for a while among us. We have seen his

glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth (John 1:14).

Our need was no less desperate than 8th C BC Judah. No, we were not facing invasion by foreign armies. It was not our national hopes that were in jeopardy. Our need was far greater than that. It was a need that the human Immanuel could never have met. Our need was for life, for we were those who had sinned and fallen short of God's glory. We were those under God's wrath, whose foolish hearts were darkened, who were without excuse before a holy God.

To meet that need God sent his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering (Rom. 8:3). The one who was in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used for selfish advantage, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness (Phil. 2:6-7). That is the story of Immanuel—the story of Christmas. The story of God's presence with us and the enormous significance of that event.

Notice one seemingly minor detail in Matthew 1:23 as we close. Isaiah wrote, “she will call him Immanuel”—*כְּרִיאַת*, “she will call him Immanuel.” Matthew, however, writes, “The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel”—*καλέσουσιν*. Matthew changes the verb from a third person feminine singular to a third plural—one little pronoun in English. He makes that change deliberately to make a very significant point. He changes the mother's naming of a child into the ascription of all those who come to know the reality of Immanuel's presence: *they*—believers—will call him Immanuel. That is our privilege, the privilege to know the daily presence of the Savior, not just at Christmas, but every day of our lives. After all, is not that the note on which Matthew closes his gospel? He begins his narrative with the coming of Immanuel—*God with us*—and he concludes with Immanuel's promise: “Surely *I will be with you* always, to the very end of the age.”

<sup>1</sup>Originally prepared for Calvary Bible College Chapel, 12/9/92; then in BBS chapel, 12/15/97 and revised for 12/20/2001 and 12/18/2007. Introductory notes:

1. Please note that this document is of the genre “sermon manuscript,” not “journal article.” As such there is minimal documentation and the style reflect its oral delivery. I have added a few terse notes to address a question or two that have been raised in discussions subsequent to the chapel presentations on different occasions.

2. Since this is a *seminary* chapel message, there is explicit Greek and Hebrew in the sermon—something I would never do in a local church context. Even here I’ve tried to be discrete and only commented on those aspects of the text that are crucial to understanding the passages in question.

3. I have included the full text of the Scripture read within the manuscript. The text is NIV.

4. This is a difficult passage, though at first it does not appear so. It raises some very difficult questions regarding the use of the OT in the NT. How can we reconcile the contextual meaning of Isaiah 7:14 with the context of Matthew 1:23? Both are very different, yet Matthew declares that Jesus’ birth *fulfills* (πληρόω) the words of the prophet. A number of answers have been suggested to this dilemma. My conclusions are most nearly the same as those of Gleason Archer, *Enc. of Bible Difficulties*, 266–68. H. Wolf, *Interpreting Isaiah*, has also been influential, as has John Walton’s article in *JETS* 30.3:289–306. The commentaries of Oswalt (NICOT), France (TNTC), and Gundry (*Matt.*) also contain helpful material. The material below reflects my understanding of the passage, although not all the reasons for various statements and assumptions can be included in a chapel message—especially since it is intended to be part of a Christmas series. Relevant Scripture: Isaiah 7:1–8:10; Matt. 1:23; All occurrences of *Immanuel*: Isa. 7:14; 8:8; Mt. 1:23. BDB, 769; Isa. 8:8, 10 “is a declaration of trust and confidence, *with us is God!*” (cf. 1 K 8<sup>57</sup> Ψ 46<sup>8,12</sup>)” 1 Kgs. 8:57—Solomon’s prayer at the dedication of the Temple, “May the Lord our God be with us as he was with our fathers” [an almost identical phrase, same words written separately in reverse order].

I have recently (Dec. 2007) discovered another article that argues almost the identical position as proposed here: Jim Hamilton, “The Virgin Will Conceive: Typology in Isaiah and Fulfillment in Matthew, The Use of Isaiah 7:14 in Matthew 1:18–23,” Tyndale Fellowship Biblical Theology Study Group, July 2005, available online at <<http://beginningwithmoses.org/articles/thevirginwillconceive.htm>>, accessed 12/14/2007. It is well worth reading.

<sup>2</sup>Oswalt, *Isaiah*, 196.

<sup>3</sup>Ps. 46:7, 11; Heb.= 8, 12; both verses are identical and function as a refrain; similar phrase to Isa. 7:14, but uses YHWH; not as close a verbal parallel, but clearly the same semantic field.

<sup>4</sup>Oswalt, *Isaiah*, 203; italics added.

<sup>5</sup>Wolf, *Isaiah*, 90.

<sup>6</sup>R. Chisholm, *BSac* 146.582:222.

<sup>7</sup>Archer, *EBD*, 266–68.

<sup>8</sup>Note that both direct prophecies and types can be fulfilled—πληρόω is used of both categories. The conclusion implied above is that Isa. 7:14 is not a *direct prophecy* of Messiah’s birth, but is rather a typological fulfillment. There are two key differences

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between a prophecy and a type: to be classed as a prophecy, it must be demonstrable from the context that the (human) author *intended* and understood his text to be prophetic of a specific person/event, whereas a typological relationship is only discernable at the level of the NT text; and second, there must be an *escalation* in meaning from the OT text to the NT fulfillment—the antitype is always significantly greater in some respect(s) when compared with the OT type. This does *not* suggest that the NT changes the meaning of the OT text (that would be hermeneutically illegitimate), but that the reference to, in this case, Messiah is only evident at the NT level. Given the OT text alone it is not possible to say that any given person/event/etc. is typical. Typology is retrospective (not prospective/prophetic) as the NT writer looks back and draws the comparison between the two situations.