

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE 'ALMAH PROPHECY IN THE CONTEXT OF ISAIAH 7-12

JOHN N. OSWALT
Asbury Theological Seminary
Wilmore, Kentucky 40390

Isaiah 7:14 raises for us a question which is re-emerging in biblical studies these days. Does biblical prophecy contain within itself the idea of prediction of the distant future? For much of the Church's history this has been taken as a given. Accurate prediction was the sign of inspiration.¹ Generally speaking, this view prevailed until the middle of the last century, when prophecy began to be seen primarily as confrontation with the social and religious status quo. The name of Julius Wellhausen is especially associated with this new view. In the middle years of this century there was some swinging back of the pendulum so that as recently as 1987 J. E. A. Sawyer could say that the belief in the Bible that the prophets could accurately predict the future [whether they actually did or not!] was an established fact.² Yet, a year before Sawyer's book appeared another book was published which--if I judge the spirit of the times correctly--more accurately expresses present directions. This is J. Barton's *The Oracles of God* in which he argues at length that the biblical understanding of the prophets as predictors of the future is actually an imposition of a post-exilic and intertestamental understanding upon the earlier documents. For Barton, Wellhausen's understanding of the nature of prophecy is correct.

¹ See, for instance, the arguments of J. Orr, *The Problem of the Old Testament* (New York: 1914) 455-60.

² J. F. A. Sawyer, *Prophecy and the Prophets of the Old Testament* (Oxford: 1987) 16.

It is very difficult to counter arguments like Barton's because whenever one refers to evidence from the text, the chances are that the evidence will be disallowed as reflecting a late stage of the tradition. Nevertheless, it must still be pointed out that it is God's capacity to predict the future through the prophets which forms the backbone of Isaiah's lawsuit against the gods found in Isaiah 40-48. Over and over God through the prophet challenges the gods to bring forward evidence to show that just once they have done what is characteristic of Him: specifically predicted not merely the events, but the pattern of events which have subsequently occurred as predicted.³ B. Duhm, in his well-known commentary, says that only one who was quite unfamiliar with pagan religion could make such an overblown statement. Anyone with even an elementary knowledge of Babylonian religion would surely know that the gods regularly predicted the future.⁴ But the fact is, Isaiah's statements are neither naive nor overblown. As C. Westermann points out, we look in vain in the non-biblical literatures for anything approximating the duration and specificity of the prophecies of the exile, for instance.⁵ In fact, the pagan oracles were noteworthy for their ambiguity. Most of the time they could be taken in several ways. Thus, whatever happened, it could be argued that the oracle was correct.⁶

But even if we recognize this characteristic ambiguity, if Isaiah were merely saying that the gods had never predicted the outcome of some event correctly, Westermann's argument would be open to question. Anyone familiar in any way with the ancient world could have surely pointed to some case of that happening. What Isaiah is clearly talking about has to do with what Westermann saw. Isaiah is talking about the prediction of a pattern of specific events shaping the course of history out into the far-distant future. It is this which the gods could not even begin to duplicate, as the inspired prophet well knew.^{7,8}

³ Cf. Isa 41:21-24; 43:8-10; 44:6-8; 45:21; 46:8-10; 48:5,14-16.

⁴ *Das Buch Jesaia* (Gottingen: 1892) 307-8.

⁵ C. Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66: a Commentary* (Philadelphia: 1969) 91. Cf. also G. E. Wright, *The Book of Isaiah* (Richmond: 1964) 103.

⁶ Two well-known examples are the oracle to Croesus and the one regarding the Persian threat to the city of Athens. Croesus took the oracle about a mighty empire's being lost to refer to the Persians, and therefore inferred that he would triumph. After he lost the battle, it was declared that the empire being referred to was Croesus'. Similarly, when the oracle declared that the Athenians would be saved by "the wooden wall; it was assumed that the reference was to the walls around the city. Later, when the Greek fleet had removed the threat of attack by destroying the Persian fleet, it was declared that "the wooden wall" must have referred to the fleet. See Botsford and Robinson's *Hellenistic History*, rev. D. Kagan (New York: 1969) 102, 147.

I would like to argue that Isa 7:14 is a part of one of those patterns and, as such, supplies evidence for exactly the kind of thing Isaiah, and orthodox Christianity, have insisted proves both the unique transcendence of God and the inspiration of Scripture.⁹ This is not a matter of mere academic interest because of what the New Testament does with that prediction. If the event is nothing more than the insightful reading of the signs of the times coupled with religious exhortation, which Matthew has ingeniously appropriated to support his convictions concerning the tremendous importance of Jesus Christ, then a very great deal is at stake.

Historically, those who have espoused positions like that just described have been divided into two camps: believers and unbelievers. The unbelievers (like A Comte and, more recently, J. Hicks¹⁰), have simply seen the church's position as an exercise in mass delusion. The believers (like G. A. Smith¹¹) have argued that while the original intent had nothing to do with the NT, the NT writers were providentially

⁷ Thus, Isaiah's use of the terms "former things" (41:22; 43:9; 44:7, etc.) is significant. B. Childs believes this is "II Isaiah" speaking of "I Isaiah's" predictions, as in 38:6 and 39:5-7 (*Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* [Philadelphia: 1979] 329-30). More plausibly, R. E. Clements ("The Unity of the Book of Isaiah," *Interpretation* 36 [1982] 117-29) and C. Stuhlmüller ("'First and Last' and 'Yahweh-Creator' in Dt.-Is.," *CBQ* 29 [1967] 495-511) believe it refers to the Exodus events (the importance of the Exodus events as a paradigm for understanding the return from Exile in Isaiah 40-55 is widely recognized). But I believe even this is too limited; I am confident that all of God's promises from Abraham through Moses and David to Hosea are in the prophet's mind. How can Israel even think that the God who has called the nation into existence by such promises and preserved it against all the odds by wondrously fulfilling those promises while giving even greater ones could either forget them or could be just one more of the gods (40:27; 43:11-12)?!

⁸ This insight has bearing upon the significance of the Cyrus prophecy for our understanding of the authorship of the book of Isaiah. Surely the centerpiece for Isaiah's claims for the uniqueness of the Lord is the Cyrus prophecy. "Have the gods ever made this kind of prediction? Of course not!" If indeed the prediction was penned 125 years before Cyrus was born, then the claim was absolutely correct. On the other hand, if, as those who support multiple authorship claim, the "prediction" of Cyrus' victory was only made after Cyrus had begun his conquests, there is, in fact, nothing unique about Isaiah's predictions, and his arguments are indeed dependent upon misuse of logic. For the claim that Isaiah's predictions were only made after the emergence of Cyrus, see C. R. North, *The Second Isaiah* (Oxford: 1964) 105.

⁹ Two examples of OT theologies which see the promise element as the organizing principle in OT thought are G. von Rad's *Old Testament Theology* (2 vols. New York: 1962), and W. Kaiser's *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: 1978). The former sees promise/fulfillment as the general scheme which shapes the emerging theology. The latter more correctly, in my view, sees the specific promises of the OT, and their outworking, as expressing the plan of God for the saving of the race.

¹⁰ *The Myth of God Incarnate* (Philadelphia: 1977).

¹¹ *The Book of Isaiah* (2 vols., The Expositor's Bible, London: n.d.).

guided in their discovery of links between the OT and NT. The early Fundamentalists were surely right in their insistence that neither of these positions did justice to the Biblical claims.¹²

This is not the place to enter into a defence of the orthodox position on prophecy and fulfillment. But it is the place to register a note of concern. Recently the "believers" position which I have described above seems to have begun to gain currency among the descendants of the Fundamentalists, the Evangelicals. In various ways it is being said that imaginative reflection upon the inspired texts in which connections to one's own time are found, although those connections were not originally intended, is consistent with a high view of inspiration.¹³ Thus, it has been argued that both propositions are true: Isa 7:14 bears no reference to the heaven-sent Messiah; Matt 1:22-23 is inerrantly inspired when it says that the virgin birth of Christ was "to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet."¹⁴ The only way such a logical contradiction can be maintained is to say that the NT writers did not mean by "fulfill" what the English word normally means. Frankly, this looks like sleight-of-hand and does not give confidence in the argument. One must ask why a more correct translation of *pleiro-mai* has never come into use if that is the case. No, the New Testament writer believes, and wishes his readers to believe, that Isaiah predicted the virgin birth of the Messiah and that that prediction was completed, fulfilled, in the virgin birth of Jesus Christ. The choice before us is either to accept or reject that claim. The Fundamentalists were correct in insisting that there is no middle way.¹⁵

But is it possible to accept Matthew's claim? Even if we grant that such long-distance prediction is possible under divine inspiration, is there genuine reason to believe that it took place? Does not a careful historical-critical investigation of the text in the light of nor-

¹² See the discussion of J. G. Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ* (London: 1930) 287-94, a classic treatment of the passage.

¹³ This understanding has gained impetus through the study of the kind of exegesis done at Qumran and elsewhere by early Jewish exegetes. That this kind of exegesis, known in one form as Peshar, and in another as Midrash, was engaged in is clear. What is not clear is whether it was the only kind of exegesis used, and more to the point, why the literary links between it and the NT writings are so few. Barton's work (op. cit.) relies heavily upon the assertion that this was the method of NT exegesis.

¹⁴ A recent statement of such a position is that of J. Walton, "What's in a Name?" *JETS* 30:3 (1987) 289-306. His arguments are used as a backdrop for my own below.

¹⁵ Walton's attempt to solve the problem with reference to the OT use of names falls far short. He argues that children are given names in the expectation that those names will somehow become significant, but without any assurance of what that significance will be. He sees this as analogous to OT prophecy. First of all, this does not apply to Isa 7:14 as he sees it, since he has already deprived that passage of any larger predictive significance. But beyond that, this model of open-ended, and amorphous, possibilities does not correspond to what the prophets claimed for themselves. See the arguments above.

mal Biblical usages suggest that the passage was only intended for Ahaz' time? Certainly some weighty arguments can be mounted in defense of such a position. Especially strong is the evidence from within the text itself that the prediction was to be fulfilled, in one sense at least, within Ahaz' own lifetime. But does that realization demand that a later, fuller reference be given up? I think not. When the arguments for limiting the reference are examined, significant weaknesses can be found.¹⁶ But of greatest significance, in my opinion, is the evidence of the literary context, and it is to that which we now turn.

Although most recent commentators do not regard chaps. 7-12 to be a literary unity, there are good reasons to consider the chapters as a unity of thought. First of all, they show a very clear demarcation from what follows (chap. 13ff.), and a reasonably clear demarcation from what precedes (chap. 6).¹⁷ Furthermore, when the ideas are considered, there seems to be a clear progression of thought extending from Isaiah's opening challenge to Ahaz to trust God (7:9) to the closing hymn of the redeemed extolling God's trustworthiness (12:1-6). That progression moves through several stages: terror at the Syro-Ephramite threat

¹⁶ The article by Walton cited above lists a number of these arguments. In the interests of completeness those which are not responded to below will be responded to in brief form here. 1) The author asserts that "shall conceive and bear a son" is incorrect since *harah*, "conceive" is an adjective followed by a ptcp, which combination cannot have a future connotation. He cites the comparable phrases in Gen 16:10 and Judg 13:3, asserting that there also the word is an adjective and that only the converted perfects in those contexts give the future meaning. In fact, the forms are not converted perfects, but also participles (GKC §94f.). Thus, those references, which are clearly future by context, do not prove his contention, but precisely disprove it. The future rendering is entirely appropriate. 2) He asserts that *'ot*, "sign," does not connote anything miraculous. He makes this assertion on the basis of three passages, 1 Sam 2:34; Jer 44:29-30; 2 Kgs 19:29. But this overlooks two important aspects: the general usage of the word and its specific context in Isaiah 7. In general, the word is connected with "wonders" in the recitals of the Exodus. The Exodus signs were surely miraculous in nature. This is brought closer home by the miraculous sign of the shadow in Isa 38:7-8. But most important of all is the passage itself in which Ahaz is directly encouraged to ask for a miraculous sign as high as heaven or as deep as Sheol. Thus there is every reason to believe that the sign which God eventually gave was miraculous. The "fulfillment" which Walton suggests breathes none of the air of mystery and wonder which is found in the passage itself.

¹⁷ The lack of agreement among commentators as to whether chap. 6 should be included with chaps. 1-5 or 7-12 is an indication of the chapter's transitional function: in my view. Looked at from the perspective of chaps. 1-5, chap. 6 provides a clear solution to the problem posed in those chapters: how can proud, perverse, rebellious Israel (1:1-31; 2:6-4:1; 5:1-30) become clean and holy (4:2-6), the one to whom the nations come to learn the law of God (2:1-5)? The answer is that the nation of unclean lips can have an experience of God analogous to that of the man of unclean lips. But when chap. 6 is looked at from the perspective of chaps. 7-12, there are many ways in which it functions as an introduction to those chapters. Like them, it has a firm historical rootage; it provides a clear explanation for the blind and stubborn refusal of the promises of God which

(7:1-6); refusal to accept God's word of promise (7:7-16); the forecast of destruction by Assyria (7:17-8:8); reflection on the blindness of the people of God (8:9-9:1); the promise of the child deliverer (9:2-7); explanation of the reason for Assyria's coming (not geo-political power, but Israel's moral failure), (9:8-10:4); thus Assyria is merely a tool, and, as such, accountable to Him who wields it (10:5-34); (since Israel's destruction is not the result of Assyria's will but of the will of the morally responsible, trustworthy God, Israel's destruction will neither be complete nor final [10:20-27]); the glory of Israel's return to the Messianic kingdom (11:1-16); the hymn of redemption (12:1-6; cf. Exod 15:1-18). Thus, there is a clear thread of continuity which proceeds from the opening announcement of terror (7:2) to the final pronouncement of fearlessness (12:2), with each successive topic growing out of the preceding one.

This sense of continuity is enhanced by the recurring treatment of certain themes. Some of these are: the house of David (7:2, 13; 9:7; 11:1, 10); children as signs of threat and promise (7:3, 14; 8:3, 18; 9:6; 11:6, 8); Assyria (7:17, 18, 20; 8:7; 10:5, 12, 24; 11:11, 16); the remnant (7:3; 10:20, 21, 22; 11:11, 16); God's sole trustworthiness as seen especially in his will to deliver (7:7-9; 8:9-10; 9:1-7; 10:20-27; 11:11-12, 15-16; 12:1-6). All of these reasons argue strongly that, despite a diversity of literary forms (poetry, prose, threats, oracles of salvation, etc.¹⁸) these materials have been put in this particular sequence because they are intended to be understood in context with one another.¹⁹

This understanding of the contextual unity of chaps. 7-12 is significant for the interpretation of 7:14. The author, or compiler, has signalled to us that he understands this passage, as well as all the rest of the materials in the unit, as a part of that larger picture. Thus, to read this statement merely from within its immediate context, which is vv 10-17, would be like interpreting a musical phrase in a symphony in isolation, without considering the movement in which it

characterize the response in those chapters; it predicts the destruction which will result from that refusal; it sets the stage, with its final glimmer of hope, for the Messianic promises which conclude the unit. Thus, any simplistic inclusion or exclusion with from either 1-5 or 7-12 is to be avoided. Rather, both segments must be interpreted in the light of that pivotal chapter.

¹⁸ For a highly detailed discussion of the possible literary forms involved, see O. Kaiser, *Isaiah 1-12, a Commentary* (Philadelphia: 1972). While it is certainly possible that someone may yet analyze these forms in still more detail, it is hard to imagine that anything but very diminished returns can come from it. Kaiser already seems to have gone far in that direction.

¹⁹ P. Ackroyd ("Isaiah 1-12, Presentation of a Prophet," *VTS* 29 [1978] 16-48) has argued that chaps. 1-5 should be included in the unit as well. Although he makes a good case, the argument that chaps. 1-5 have a less restricted usage than this seems stronger.

occurs, let alone the larger symphonic structure. This is not to say that the larger context provides a warrant for reading a passage in a way which does violence to its immediate context, but it does say that exegesis which analyzes the grammar and syntax of a sentence, or even a paragraph, in minute detail, without paying attention to the shaping influence of the larger context, is not complete exegesis.

What is the larger message of which Isa 7:14 is a part? Of course, to follow the metaphor described above, the largest message is to be found in the entire symphonic structure of the book of Isaiah. While a lengthy discussion of that topic is not warranted here, neither should it be overlooked, for like many of the Biblical books, there is substantial evidence for the conscious shaping of the whole, and that all which is included is included as a part of that whole.²⁰ If I were to express the overall theme in a sentence, it would be this: "The Holy One of Israel is the Sovereign of the Nations and the Redeemer of the World": The book is about God as Holy, Sovereign Savior. Intertwined with that dominant theme is the issue of Israel's mission: will the chosen people bow down to the humanly-based gods of the nations or will they reveal the transcendent God to the nations? Thus, the move is from a people who, far from having light for others, grope about in a darkness of their own making (8:16-22) to people upon whom the Lord has risen in such brightness that all the nations are drawn to the glory (60:1-3).²¹

Coupled with the question of mission is the whole issue of kingship: how will the Holy King whom Isaiah saw in the temple establish His dominion on the earth? How will He conquer pride, rebellion, and oppression? Will He do so with domination and aggressiveness, crushing his enemies beneath a mailed fist? No, he will come as a child would, harmless and weak (9:6; 11:3; 42:1-4; 49:7; 52:15-53:3).²² Here is the power of God: to absorb all the evil of a hopelessly depraved world, and give back only boundless love and justice, free for the taking.

If that is what the larger movement is about, where do chaps. 7-12 fit into that? What part does this movement play in the larger structure? In one sense they are introductory to the entire structure,

²⁰ For an extended treatment of this subject, see my "The Kerygmatic Structure of the Book of Isaiah" in the festschrift in honor of Dwight Young (Winona Lake, Ind.: forthcoming).

²¹ For a further discussion of Israel's mission, see my "The Mission of Israel to the Nations," in *Through No Fault of Their Own: The Fate of Those Who Have Not Heard*, eds. W V: Crockett and J. G. Sigountos (Grand Rapids: 1991).

²² To be sure, there are statements of God's violent destruction of his enemies. Interestingly, all of those which occur in extended treatments are found after chap. 53 (59:15-19; 63:1-6; 66:15-16). Those who reject "the gently flowing waters of Shiloah" (cf. 8:6), will have to contend with rushing floodwaters.

in that they layout the complete program. There is a sense in which, once Ahaz has made his fateful choice not to take the radical step of trusting God, the entire sequence of Israel's experience from that point on follows with a certain ineradicable logic. The justice of God means that failure to trust Him brings destruction and darkness upon His people (7:17-8:22). But the love of God decrees that they cannot be left in such a condition. In faithfulness to His promises to Abraham and David, He must deliver Israel (9:1-7) and that, not because the people have earned it, but as an expression of his free grace (10:20-27). How is such deliverance possible? Because Israel was brought down by God, not Assyria, and He who brought her down has the power to lift her up again (9:8-10:19; 10:27-34). The power which will characterize the coming King will be moral, not political or military (11:1-5). In the light of that universal kingdom (11:6-9), the truest values of the Exodus will be realized (11:10-12:6). Thus it may be said that the great themes of the rest of the book are contained in capsule form in this segment of the book.²³

But there is another sense in which this unit fills a very specific place within the book. That is, it sets the stage for the particular teachings of chaps. 13-39. What Ahaz had refused to believe was that God was with him, and his dynasty, and his people in any unique way. He had already made his own plans for extricating all of these from the threat of Pekah and Rezin to depose the Davidic monarch and place someone else on the throne (2 Kgs 16:5-9). Ahaz would trust Assyria, his worst enemy, before he would trust God. Far from trusting God and revealing Him to the nations, Israel would trust the nations and, in so doing, deny God. As noted above, that decision would bring destruction, which would in turn bring redemption and the Messianic kingdom. But in the theological program of the book, this segment serves to introduce a question of major importance. Can God really be trusted? Chapters 13-35 provide the data to answer that question, and then chaps. 36-39 show us another Davidic monarch who, in a much more serious situation, does trust God and has that trust vindicated in a marvelous way.

Thus, in a specific sense chaps. 7-12 have to do with the question of "immanu-el": is God really with us in any way that makes any

²³ In this light, it may be asked if chaps. 1-12 are not the introduction to the book, and not just chaps. 1-5(6), as suggested above. While good arguments can be mustered in favor of such a position (cf. Ackroyd, *op. cit.*), two important points weigh against it. First, chaps. 1-5(6) seem to be much more broadly stated and addressed than do chaps. 7-12. Chaps. 7-12 might be more aptly characterized as preparation for what follows. Second, careful examination of 7-12 in the light of 36-39 suggests that the two sections are part of an *inclusio* around 13-35 showing that the whole segment (7-39) is about God's sovereignty and trustworthiness in the world. See below.

difference? Isaiah's answer is that He is presently with us in the sense that we can depend on him to deliver us from the threats of Rezin and Pekah, but also that he will actually be with us as the Messiah. These two promises are inseparable and interdependent. If God is not truly with His people in the affairs of that moment, the lovely messianic promises are highly suspect. By the same token, if God can never be with His people in actuality, then there is reason to doubt that His transcendence can ever be truly overcome on our behalf.

What all of this says is that all the elements of this unit must be understood in light of the emphasis on divine trustworthiness and immanence on the people's behalf which characterizes the unit. This has a considerable bearing upon the correct understanding of 7:14. Whatever we might conclude from the paragraph alone, and this is hardly unambiguous, the larger context points us to an understanding which far surpasses Ahaz' own immediate experience. Just as his choice was to have far-reaching consequences for the kingdom of Judah, so we should expect the mysterious sign to have significance beyond the immediate historic context as well.

That the sign does have such significance is supported by the connection of children with both of the messianic prophecies. This is particularly important with 9:2-7 where the Messiah's coming is as a child.²⁴ While the Messiah in 11:1-9 is not specifically called a child, the childlike qualities ascribed to him (11:3) and the repeated mention of children leading and playing among previously ravenous animals (11:6, 8) surely contributes to the same understanding. Can it be merely coincidence in a segment where the presence of God among his people is central that Immanuel is a child and the Messiah is a child? I think not.²⁵ In fact, there is every reason to believe that the language is intentional in order to guide the reader to make the association between the two.²⁶

It should not be inferred from this argumentation that I believe the Immanuel prophecy refers solely to the Messiah. As I have stated

²⁴ Efforts to relate 9:6 to the birth of a son to Ahaz, perhaps even Hezekiah, have not met with any wide-spread agreement. The language is too expansive and cosmic to be applied to a human ruler. For a further discussion, see my *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1-39* (Grand Rapids: 1986) 246-47.

²⁵ It may be objected that I have been selective in equating Immanuel with the Messiah and not either Shearjashub or Maher-Shalal-has-baz. But the reason for doing so is that there is absolutely no mystery about either of those two. They are clearly said to be the children of Isaiah and nothing more is to be said. But a great deal of mystery surrounds Immanuel. His mother is identified with a highly-ambiguous term; his father is not mentioned at all; and he is referred as the owner, or at least, a notable inhabitant of the land of Judah. All of this says that he is the only likely candidate for association with the Messiah.

²⁶ So for instance J. Skinner, *The Book of the Prophet Isaiah* (Cambridge: 1925) 83.

elsewhere,²⁷ the statements in 7:15-16 surely point to a birth during the lifetime of Ahaz. What we know of Israelite and Syrian history confirms this, in that both Syria and Israel had been defeated and annexed by Assyria by 722 B.C., approximately 12 years after the most likely date of this prophecy.²⁸ Thus, it seems beyond question that the prediction was fulfilled, as intended, during Ahaz' lifetime. In addition, it seems very likely that it was fulfilled in Isaiah's own family through the birth of his son, Maher-shalal-hash-baz.²⁹ This argument is supported by the recurrence of language in 7:14 and 8:3 ("she conceived and bore a son"), by the similarity of the signs,³⁰ and by the mention of Immanuel on both sides of the mention of Maher-shalal-hash-baz. One significance of this equation is that it clearly means that if the ultimate fulfillment of the Immanuel sign is that God will be with us in and through a son of David (9:7; 11:1), then the fulfillment in Ahaz' own time was not the ultimate one.

But even more importantly, it shows us that we should read 7:10-17 as part of a larger unit which extends at least as far as 9:7. The sequence of thought would be something like this: 1) the prophecy of Immanuel (7:10-17); 2) expansions on the prophecy, showing that it is two-sided (God's presence with us is not a cause for happiness if we have rejected that presence), (7:18-23);³¹ 3) initial fulfillment of the prophecy in Maher-shalal-hash-baz (8:1-4); 4) expansion of that prophecy with particular connection to Immanuel (again two-sided), (8:5-10); 5) further reflection on the two-sidedness of God's presence, concluding that the ultimate significance of the signs was hidden at that time (8: 11-22); and, 6) revelation of the ultimate meaning of Immanuel in the child who would be born to sit forever on the throne of David (9: 1-6). Thus it can be seen that a contextual reading not only supports the understanding that there was a fulfillment of the

²⁷ Oswalt, *Isaiah*, 206-14.

²⁸ "Refuse the evil and choose the good" (v 15) is taken by most commentators to refer to a child's attaining the age of accountability-12 years old.

²⁹ See H. M. Wolf, "A Solution to the Immanuel Prophecy in Isaiah 7:14-8:22," *JBL* 91 (1972) 449-56.

³⁰ Walton argues against this supposition on the grounds that the woman in 7:14 is already pregnant, whereas Isaiah's wife is just conceiving. As noted above, the argument that the *'almah* is already pregnant rests upon a misreading of the fem. ptcps. in Gen 16:11 and Judg 13:5. These two passages are clearly future and the fact that they are grammatically identical with Isa 7:14 argues that it too is future. He further argues that the signs are not the same since saying "mama" and "papa" occur long before the twelfth year. However, Damascus fell in 732 and Samaria paid heavy tribute at that same time. Clearly that date would be entirely in keeping with the sign. More importantly, both signs have to do with something the child can or cannot do by a certain date.

³¹ Note the recurrence of "curds and honey" in 7:15 and 22. This underscores the continuity of thought.

prophecy in Ahaz' own day, but also that that fulfillment was not the ultimate one.

But what about the specific wording of the promise in its context? J. Walton has set forth some strongly worded arguments against reading *'almah* as "virgin" under any circumstances and has proposed an understanding of the historical setting which is at least plausible, although highly restrictive. What does the use of this word in this context imply? Of greatest significance is the air of mystery and ambiguity which surrounds the term. If, as Walton argues, the sign refers to one of Ahaz' concubines who is now pregnant and will shortly give birth, it is very hard to explain this language. Why not simply say "Your concubine has conceived and will bear a son to you. You shall call his name Immanuel. He will eat curds and . . ." Why not identify the father, particularly if it is the Ahaz to whom the oracle is addressed? Why not use the common term for concubine? Why not identify whose concubine it is?³² In fact, the text gives no reason at all to associate this woman with the court, or with Ahaz. By its silence on these points it specifically points away from that possibility. Walton is grasping at straws in order to support his contention that the NT reading is simply a midrash on a misreading of the OT

But if the initial fulfillment of 7:14 is to be found in 8:1-4, as was contended above, why was that not stated explicitly in 7:14? That is just the point; it is an initial fulfillment only. If indeed Maher-shalhash-baz' conception, birth, and naming said all that the sign in 7:14 was to say, then it is very hard, if not impossible, to understand why 7:14 is not more explicit. Why not use a common term for "young woman" or even "your wife"? On the other hand, if the sign was intended to point to the birth of Christ, why not use the unambiguous *betulah*, "virgin"?

I believe that the answer to both questions lies in the double nature of the sign. It has two historic contexts: the immediate future when the evidence of God's presence would be the defeat of Syria and Israel and the ensuing attack of Assyria upon Judah, and the distant future when God would be physically present among his people

³² Walton's attempt to answer this question by reference to the definite article on *'almah* is very weak. He suggests that Ahaz would not have had so many concubines but that if one of them appeared to be pregnant there would have been some comment about the situation in the court and that by Isaiah's saying the *'almah*, his hearers would have known to whom he was referring. In the first place, there is no reason to associate *'almah* with a concubine at all. Perhaps the term could have been used to refer to a concubine, but that is not the meaning of the term and it would not connote that meaning without some modifier. From that point the argument successively falls in upon itself, with each supposition being more questionable than the last.

either to purify or to judge (cf. Mal 3:1-5). In the immediate future the virginity of the mother was not the issue, but in the distant future that was all-important. Thus an ambiguous word was used. Walton is certainly correct when he asserts that *'almah* does not mean "virgin." But he is wrong when he goes on from that to imply that the word can never connote virginity in a given setting. In fact, as he admits, the word seems to have to do with adolescence. If we are talking about an adolescent female in Hebrew society, there is every reason to think that this would be one of the chief connotations of the word. This supposition is only confirmed by the Septuagint's use of *parthenos*, "virgin," to translate *'almah*.³³ In other words, the ambiguous term is used purposely so as to support both the immediate and distant occurrences of the sign. For this same reason the paternity of the child is left unidentified. All of this argues that no short-term fulfillment alone is in view here.

Added to this is the invitation to Ahaz to make the sign he asks be "as deep as Sheol or high as heaven." This hardly suggests something as insignificant as the naming of the child of an already pregnant concubine.³⁴ To be sure, Ahaz refused to ask, probably because he had already made his own plans. But that is all the more reason for God to make the sign even more stupendous as a final vindication of His trustworthiness.

In sum, I believe those who call Isaiah chaps. 7-12 the book of Immanuel are correct. At this absolutely critical point in salvation history when the Northern Kingdom was about to be expelled from the promised land and the Davidic monarch of Judah was displaying that breach of covenant which was to become calcified in his grandson Manasseh, and which would issue in the destruction of Judah, the complete outlines of the plan of God for His kingdom needed to be displayed. They are nowhere better done than in the book of Isaiah. And,

³³ Walton's attempt to devalue the significance of the LXX reading rests upon two pillars: an unpublished paper of G. L. Archer in which he is reported to have argued that the LXX translators of Isaiah often used equivalent terms and not exact ones, and the fact that *parthenos* does not always mean "virgin" in classical Gk. Neither of these will bear much weight. Whether *parthenos* is equivalent or exact, the question is why it was used at all, especially if, as Walton maintains, *'almah* has nothing to do with virginity. (Machen [op. cit., 297] makes a similar point but interestingly, insists *'almah* does have to do with virginity.) Second, as is well known, the LXX meanings are often at odds with classical usage. In fact, they must be defined by reference to the Heb. word they are translating in many cases! Furthermore, NT meanings, and NT *parthenos* definitely means "virgin," are frequently dependent upon LXX meanings. Perhaps the NT usage in this case is derived from the LXX!

³⁴ Note that the naming of the child is not even a command, as is that of Maher-shalal-hash-baz. Surely this would be a self-fulfilling prophecy and nothing more.

as shown above, that display is prepared for in chaps. 7-12. There God's trustworthiness is shown, not only in his ability to deliver from Syria and Ephraim, or even from the tool of Assyria brought on to punish them for their faithlessness, but ultimately and triumphantly from the unrighteousness and the wickedness which lie at the root of all this history. And how will this be accomplished? By the personal intervention of God in history. This has been the foundering point of all merely human philosophy. We have been terrified of the thought of transcendence. We need a god with us. But our attempts to make the divine immanent have resulted in the loss of any real transcendence, for we always submerge the god into ourselves in order to achieve our transitory desires. The glory of the Bible in general and Isaiah in particular is that they are able to maintain God's transcendence by demonstrating that He can break into the world without becoming the world. He is able to be truly with us, in our midst, without being submerged into us. This is what "Immanuel" is made to point to in this segment, and this is what Jesus Christ means for the world. "God with us" is not merely a theological/historical construct; it is a spiritual/material actuality. The final confirmation that this segment is preeminently about the real presence of the Transcendent with us is found in the final verse of the segment: "Shout, and sing for joy, O inhabitant of Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel" (12:6). To restrict the Immanuel prophecy to a banal event in Judean history, and to make the NT's appropriation of it an exercise in literary imagination is to miss the whole import of this segment, and indeed, of the book of Isaiah.

This material is cited with gracious permission from:

The Criswell College
4010 Gaston Ave.
Dallas, TX 75246
www.criswell.edu

Please report any errors to Ted Hildebrandt at: thildebrandt@gordon.edu