

# THE IMMANUEL PROPHECY IN ISAIAH 7:14–16 AND ITS USE IN MATTHEW 1:23: HARMONIZING HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND SINGLE MEANING

by  
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## INTRODUCTION AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

<sup>14</sup>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. <sup>15</sup>He will eat curds and honey at the time He knows *enough* to refuse evil and choose good. <sup>16</sup>For before the boy will know *enough* to refuse evil and choose good, the land whose two kings you dread will be forsaken (Isa 7:14–16).<sup>2</sup>

In Isaiah 7:1 Ahaz (735–715 B.C.) of the southern kingdom is confronted in 734 B.C. by a combined force of Rezin (750–732 B.C.) from Syria and of Pekah (752–732 B.C.) from the northern kingdom. The two kings had earlier formed a coalition to ward off Assyrian hegemony. Ahaz apparently had rejected their previous overtures to join them. In response, the two kings sent their combined forces against Jerusalem in an effort to depose Ahaz, replace him with a king of their choosing, and force the southern kingdom into joining their cause (v. 6).<sup>3</sup>

The motive behind this Syro-Ephraimite incursion, it may be assumed, was two-fold. By having the southern kingdom as part of the coalition, the coalition's chances against the formidable Assyrian forces would be enhanced. At the same time, a buffer would be provided for the coalition's southern flank in case Egypt decided to take advantage of the political instability in the region.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are from the *New American Standard Bible*, 1995 edition. Verses in brackets represent the Hebrew text, when the Hebrew text differs from the verses of the English translation.

<sup>3</sup>2 Kgs 16:5–6. Eugene H. Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests: A History of Old Testament Israel* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), pp. 405–7, 425–26.

<sup>4</sup>Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *A History of Israel From the Bronze Age Through the Jewish Wars* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1998), pp. 371–74.

In order to alleviate Ahaz's concern about the forces arrayed against him, God sends Isaiah with a message of hope. Isaiah promises Ahaz that God will intervene on his behalf and defeat the two kings opposing him (v. 7). Isaiah then directs Ahaz to seek a sign from God, even a miraculous sign, that will serve as a confirmation of God's promise (v. 11). However, Ahaz refuses to ask for a sign, ostensibly to avoid putting God to the test (v. 12).<sup>5</sup> His response is, in fact, a pious facade.<sup>6</sup> Unwilling to trust in God's promises, Ahaz's intent all along is to appeal to the Assyrians for help.<sup>7</sup>

Isaiah rebukes Ahaz for his obduracy and says that God will indeed give a sign, the king's refusal notwithstanding (vv. 13). The sign is that a virgin will conceive and bring forth a son who will be called Immanuel. Moreover, before the son reaches the age where he is able to tell right from wrong, the two nations and their kings who were threatening Ahaz will be overthrown (vv. 14–16).<sup>8</sup> Thus, the sign (vv. 14–16) is directly linked to God's promise of deliverance (v. 7), which, in turn, is directly linked to the threat facing Ahaz and the southern kingdom (v. 6).

### MATTHEW'S INTERPRETATION

<sup>22</sup>Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: <sup>23</sup>“BEHOLD, THE VIRGIN SHALL BE WITH CHILD AND SHALL BEAR A SON, AND THEY SHALL CALL HIS NAME IMMANUEL,” which translated means, “GOD WITH US” (Matt 1:22–23).

Matthew's application of the prophecy to Mary and Jesus and his use of the fulfillment formula leave little doubt how Matthew interprets Isaiah's words. Mary is the virgin prophesied by Isaiah, and Jesus is the child. In addition, Matthew clearly understands *virgin* in the technical sense. He follows the Septuagint in using the unambiguous Greek expression for virgin (παρθένος).<sup>9</sup> He carefully identifies the

<sup>5</sup>Based on Deut 6:16, “You shall not put the LORD your God to the test.”

<sup>6</sup>Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah*, Old Testament Library (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001), p. 65. Commenting on Ahaz's response, Childs states, “Taken by itself, his response seems to have the trappings of true piety before such an awesome decision. However, this possible interpretation is immediately excluded by the prophet's vehement response, which brands it as wearisome hypocrisy arising out of sheer unbelief” (ibid.).

<sup>7</sup>2 Kgs 16:7–9.

<sup>8</sup>Isa 8:4 represents a parallel prophecy. See the subsequent discussion on Isa 7:16.

<sup>9</sup>Matthew appears to follow the Septuagint, which, in turn, represents a fairly straightforward translation of the Masoretic text. For a comparison of the respective texts and the differences involved, see Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977), p. 145; Gleason L. Archer, Jr. and G. C. Chirichigno, *Old Testament*

Holy Spirit as the source of Mary's conception (1:18–20). And, he indicates that she remained a virgin throughout her pregnancy and that she had sexual relations with her husband only after the birth of her child (Matt 1:25).<sup>10</sup>

### MAJOR VIEWS

The crucial question with the Immanuel passage is to explain how the birth of Jesus *fulfilled* Isaiah's prophecy. The problem comes in harmonizing Isaiah 7:14 as a sign to Ahaz in the eighth century B.C. with Matthew's use of it as a reference to the birth of Jesus at the close of the first century B.C. Attempts at a solution have generally fallen under one of three approaches.<sup>11</sup>

One approach is to take the prophecy in verse 14 as *exclusively historical*. A young woman, who may or may not have been a virgin at the time of the prophecy, marries and gives birth to a son. Some identify the woman as Isaiah's wife and the son as Maher-shalal-hash-baz.<sup>12</sup> Others opt for the woman to be Ahaz's wife, Abi, and the son to be Hezekiah.<sup>13</sup> In either case, the prophecy in verse 14 has no direct or

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*Quotations in the New Testament: A Complete Survey* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1983), pp. 94–95. On the meaning of "virgin," see Walter Bauer, Frederick W. Danker, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilber Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed., rev. and ed. Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 777: "in our lit. one who has never engaged in sexual intercourse, *virgin, chaste person*." See also the discussion in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. "παρθένος," by Gerhard Delling, 5:832–37.

<sup>10</sup>D. A. Carson, *Matthew*, in vol. 8 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), pp. 78, 81. As Carson notes, "the overwhelming majority of the occurrences of *parthenos* in both biblical and profane Greek require the rendering 'virgin'; and the unambiguous context of Matthew 1 (cf. vv. 16, 18, 20, 25) puts Matthew's intent beyond dispute" (p. 78).

<sup>11</sup>Edward E. Hindson, *Isaiah's Immanuel: A Sign of His Times or the Sign of the Ages*, An International Library of Philosophy and Theology: Biblical and Theological Studies (n.p.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1978), pp. 15–24. For a brief survey of the interpretive issues with the Immanuel prophecy, see *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, s.v. "Immanuel," by Joseph Jensen, 3:392–95.

<sup>12</sup>Isa 8:3. R. E. Clements, *Isaiah 1–39*, New Century Bible (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), pp. 86–88.

<sup>13</sup>2 Kgs 18:2. John D. W. Watts, *Isaiah*, 2 vols., Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 1985, 1987), 1:97–104. Watts affirms that Immanuel is the King's son, Hezekiah, and the virgin is Ahaz's wife (p. 101). He responds to criticisms that Hezekiah was already born at the time of the prophecy, saying "the chronologies of this period are very uncertain, so no sure statement can be made" (p. 99). See also Hans Wildberger, *Isaiah 1–12: A Commentary*, trans. Thomas H. Trapp (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), pp. 310–12; Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 2000), pp. 232–34 (hereafter cited as AB). Blenkinsopp allows for the reinterpretation of the text by subsequent interpretive communities, including the early Christian community which applied the passage to Mary and Jesus (p. 234).

explicit reference to Jesus.

A second approach is to take the prophecy in verse 14 as *exclusively messianic*. The woman, a virgin, is Mary, and the son is Jesus. Opinion is divided over the meaning of verses 15–16. Some take verses 15–16 as describing the experience of Jesus in the first century B.C./A.D.<sup>14</sup> Others distinguish the reference to Jesus in verse 14 from the child mentioned in verses 15–16 so that verses 15–16 describe the experience of a child in eighth century Judah.<sup>15</sup> Regardless, verse 14 refers to the birth of Jesus and has no direct bearing on Ahaz's immediate circumstances.

A third approach is to combine the first two approaches and see something of a *double fulfillment*. The initial fulfillment takes place with the birth of a child shortly after the prophecy, while the subsequent fulfillment takes place with the birth of Jesus. Proponents explain the relationship between these fulfillments in one of two ways. Some see the relationship as involving a *sensus plenior* or fuller meaning where Matthew expands the meaning of Isaiah's words in their original setting to include a reference to Jesus' conception and birth.<sup>16</sup> Others understand the relationship to involve typology, where Matthew takes Isaiah's words as foreshadowing something beyond their immediate context and applies them to Jesus in a type-antitype relationship.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), pp. 84–87. Taking the expressions in v. 15 as connoting hardship, Motyer argues, “the name of the overlord power would change, from Assyria to Babylon to Persia to Greece and finally to Rome, before Immanuel would be born, but when he was born it was to share the poverty of his people...” (p. 87).

<sup>15</sup>Robert G. Gromacki, *The Virgin Birth: Doctrine of Deity* (reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), pp. 141–44. Gromacki takes 7:14 as a reference to the virgin conception and birth of Jesus; he sees 7:15–16 as a reference to Isaiah's second wife, a virgin at the time of the prophecy, and the son as Maher-shalal-hash-baz (pp. 143–44).

<sup>16</sup>Herbert M. Wolf, *Interpreting Isaiah: The Suffering and Glory of the Messiah* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), pp. 89–92. After identifying the historical fulfillment involving Isaiah's marriage to a virgin and the subsequent birth of Maher-shalal-hash-baz as the son, Wolf adds, “in the New Testament, Isaiah 7:14 was used in a fuller sense and applied to Mary and Jesus. Mary, unlike the virgin in Isaiah's day, was still a virgin even after becoming pregnant” (p. 91).

<sup>17</sup>J. Ridderbos, *Isaiah*, trans. John Vriend, Bible Student's Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), pp. 85–97; Robert B. Chisholm, Jr., *Handbook on the Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), pp. 32–34. Chisholm understands Maher-shalal-hash-baz as the historical type and Jesus as the antitype. Commenting on Jesus as the “second Immanuel,” Chisholm states that “He ‘fulfills’ Isaiah's Immanuel prophecy by bringing the typology intended by God to realization and by filling out or completing the pattern designed by God” (p. 34). See also Geoffrey W. Grogan, *Isaiah*, in vol. 6 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), pp. 63–65.

### THE MEANING OF VIRGIN

Before addressing these interpretations, a note is in order regarding the term *virgin*. A number of interpreters have argued that the word used in Isaiah 7:14, *almâ* (עַלְמָה), does not mean virgin in the technical sense. Rather, the expression is to be taken as a general term for a young woman (e.g., RSV, NRSV), that is, a physically mature female of marriageable age. These individuals claim that, while the concept of virgin is included within its semantic range, such is secondary to its essential force. They conclude that, had Isaiah intended the idea of a virgin, he would have used the less ambiguous expression *b'tûlâ* (בְּתוּלָה) to communicate that thought.<sup>18</sup>

An examination of the Old Testament evidence, however, does not support these contentions. The expression *b'tûlâ* is used fifty-one times in the Old Testament and is the common word for a physically mature young woman who is unmarried and assumed to be chaste, that is, a virgin.<sup>19</sup> However, the term has a broader semantic range and is even found to describe a young woman who has recently been married.<sup>20</sup> As well, when used to describe a young woman who is a virgin,

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<sup>18</sup>John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah*, 2 vols., New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987, 1998), 1:210–11 (hereafter cited as NICOT). In response to those who argue that *b'tûlâ* rather than *almâ* is the ambiguous term, Oswalt states, “this is manifestly not so, for *b'tûlâ* has no implication in addition to virginity, whereas *almâ* does” (1:210). See also Robert G. Bratcher, “A Study of Isaiah 7:14,” *Bible Translator* 9 (July 1958): 98–126; *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, s.v. “עַלְמָה,” by John Walton, 3:415–19 (hereafter cited as *NIDOTTE*). Bratcher’s conclusion on the meaning of *almâ* is representative of this position, “it is evident that the primary meaning of the word has to do with the sexual maturity and, by extension the age of a young woman, not with sexual experience or the lack of it. That the word may be used of a virgin is evident: it is not used, however, to define her virginity, but to define her capacity for marriage” (p. 98).

<sup>19</sup>E.g., Deut 22:13–29. Gordon J. Wenham, “*B'TŪLĀH* ‘A Girl of Marriageable Age,’” *Vetus Testamentum* 22 (July 1972): 326–48; *NIDOTTE*, s.v. “בְּתוּלָה,” by John Walton, 1:781–84. After discussing the categories of age, marital status, and sexual status, Walton concludes that “*b'tûlâ* should be identified as a social status, defining someone as ‘an ostensibly reputable young girl who is past puberty and is, by default at least, still in the household of her father’” (p. 782).

<sup>20</sup>E.g., Joel 1:8, “Wail like a virgin (*b'tûlâ*) girded with sackcloth for the bridegroom of her youth.” In defense of taking *b'tûlâ* in this verse as a reference to a young, married woman, see *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, s.v. “בְּתוּלָה,” by M. Tsevat, 2:341; James L. Crenshaw, *Joel*, AB (New York: Doubleday, 1995), pp. 97–98.

Those who hold that *b'tûlâ* is the unambiguous term for virgin, interpret Joel 1:8 as referring to a virgin who is betrothed, but not yet married. According to Deut 22:24, the engaged *b'tûlâ* is called the “wife” (אִשָּׁה) of her betrothed prior to the actual wedding. Thus, Joel is describing a *b'tûlâ* mourning the loss of her fiancé who died before the consummation of the marriage. See, among others, Hans Walter Wolff, *Joel*

the expression can take additional qualifiers that make the sexual purity of the young woman explicit. In Leviticus 21:3, for example, *b'tûlâ* is qualified by the expression “she has had no husband.” Similarly, in Judges 21:12, *b'tûlâ* is qualified by the expression “who had not known a man by lying with him.” Whether these qualifiers are restrictive, narrowing the meaning of the term, or descriptive, restating the meaning of the term, the point is that such would be unnecessary if the expression is the unambiguous term for a virgin.<sup>21</sup>

The expression *'almâ*, on the other hand, is found only nine times in the Old Testament. Two of these are used in connection with musical notations where the meaning is difficult to determine.<sup>22</sup> Of the remaining seven uses, the expression appears to overlap that of *b'tûlâ* with the idea of a physically mature young woman who is unmarried and assumed to be chaste, that is, a virgin.<sup>23</sup> This meaning, a young unmarried woman who is a virgin, fits all seven uses and can be denied in none of them.<sup>24</sup>

Interestingly enough, the one time the two words are used in the same context to describe the same woman, *b'tûlâ* is used first and is qualified by the expression, “and no man had had relations with her,” and then *'almâ* is used after this without any qualifiers.<sup>25</sup> Thus, when a comparison of the two expressions is allowed, *'almâ* appears to be the less ambiguous term for “virgin.” It is used by itself to describe the woman, after her sexual purity has been established with the use of *b'tûlâ* plus the clarifying phrase. Assuming then that *'almâ* is the less ambiguous term for “virgin,” the prophet selected *'almâ* over *b'tûlâ* to communicate more precisely the meaning intended in the prophecy.<sup>26</sup>

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and Amos, trans. Waldemar Janzen et al., ed. S. Dean McBride, Jr., Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), pp. 30–31.

The difficulty with this interpretation is that Joel describes the man in this verse as the woman's *ba'al* (בעל), a term regularly used of a husband, that is, of one who is married, but not elsewhere of one who is simply engaged. See *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, s.v. “בהר,” by Bruce K. Waltke, 1:137–39 (hereafter cited as *TWOT*). Commenting on the use of *b'tûlâ* in Joel 1:8, Waltke notes that “it probably does not mean ‘virgin’ for elsewhere *ba'al* is the regular word for ‘husband’ and its usual translation by ‘bridegroom’ in the versions is otherwise unattested” (p. 138).

<sup>21</sup>Richard Niessen, “The Virginité of the עַלְמָה in Isaiah 7:14,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 137 (April–June 1980): 145–46.

<sup>22</sup>See 1 Chr 15:20 and the superscription to Ps 46 [46:1].

<sup>23</sup>Gen 24:43 (singular); Exod 2:8 (singular); Ps 68:25 [68:26] (plural); Prov 30:19 (singular); Song 1:3 (plural); Song 6:8 (plural); Isa 7:14 (singular).

<sup>24</sup>Edward J. Young, *Studies in Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), pp. 164–85; Niessen, “The Virginité of the עַלְמָה in Isaiah 7:14,” pp. 135–41; *TWOT*, s.v. “עַלְמָה,” by Allen A. MacRae, 2:672.

<sup>25</sup>Gen 24:16 (*b'tûlâ*), 43 (*'almâ*), both referring to Rebekah.

<sup>26</sup>Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, pp. 84–85.

### EVALUATION OF THE MAJOR VIEWS

With this in mind, all three of the above interpretations face seemingly insurmountable problems. The *exclusively historical* approach appears to rob the promise in verse 14 of any literal sense. Neither the mother of Hezekiah nor the mother of Maher-shalal-hash-baz were virgins at the time of the prophecy. Hezekiah, on the one hand, was several years old when the prophecy was given.<sup>27</sup> Maher-shalal-hash-baz, on the other hand, was the second son of Isaiah's wife. The first son, Shear-jashub, was actually with Isaiah when the prophecy was given.<sup>28</sup>

Nor, in any case, was there one born who could literally be called "Immanuel," that is, "God with us." It is possible that Isaiah used the name in a figurative or metaphorical sense to mean that the child's birth simply represented God's working on behalf of His people. The thought would be something like "God is on our side."<sup>29</sup> However, subsequent references to this child describe him in terms of deity, arguing that Isaiah intended a literal sense with the designation Immanuel. Specifically in view here is Isaiah 9:6, where Isaiah repeats the expressions "child" ("For a child will be born to us") and "son" ("a son will be given to us") from Isaiah 7:14 and then describes this child, among other titles, as "Mighty God."<sup>30</sup>

The *exclusively messianic* interpretation faces the problem of

<sup>27</sup>2 Kgs 16:2; 18:2. For a discussion on the chronology of the period which supports placing Hezekiah's birth prior to Isaiah's Immanuel prophecy in 734 B.C., see Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests*, pp. 402–5.

<sup>28</sup>Isa 7:3. It is possible that Isaiah's first wife died and that the "prophetess" in 8:3 refers to a second wife who was a virgin at the time of the Immanuel prophecy and whom Isaiah subsequently married. See, for example, Herbert M. Wolf, "A Solution to the Immanuel Prophecy in Isaiah 7:14–8:22," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 91 (December 1972): 449–56; *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Immanuel," by Ronald F. Youngblood, 2:807.

While this would solve the problem of Isaiah's wife being a virgin at the time of the prophecy, there is no historical evidence of Isaiah having two wives and this interpretation still faces the difficulties with the designation "Immanuel." See Robert I. Vasholz, "Isaiah and Ahaz: A Brief History of Crisis in Isaiah 7 and 8," *Presbyterion* 13 (Fall 1987): 79–84. In response to those who identify the "prophetess" in Isa 8:3 as Isaiah's second wife, Vasholz declares, "there is not a sherd [*sic*] of evidence that Isaiah's first wife had died" (p. 83).

<sup>29</sup>E.g., Isa 8:10. See the discussion in Wildberger, *Isaiah 1–12*, pp. 311–12. Wildberger links the expression "God with us" to God's promises to be "with" David and the Davidic line to deliver it and to establish it in accordance with his promises (2 Sam 7:9; 1 Kgs 1:37; Ps 89:21, 24). So also Watts, *Isaiah 1–33*, pp. 100–101.

<sup>30</sup>Young, *Studies in Isaiah*, pp. 187, 194; idem, *The Book of Isaiah*, 3 vols., NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965–72), 1:289–91; Hindson, *Isaiah's Immanuel*, pp. 46–53; Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, pp. 85–86.

harmonizing the relationship between the birth of Jesus in verse 14 and the demise of the Syro-Ephraimite coalition in verse 16. Those who take verses 14–16 together and interpret them as a description of Jesus' birth and early childhood in the first century struggle to explain how Jesus' birth serves as a precursor for the overthrow of Rezin and Pekah in the eighth century. Yet verse 16 specifically states that before this child reaches the age of moral discernment, the lands of these two kings will be forsaken. Since the two kings and their respective lands were forsaken in the eighth century, how can what took place at the end of the first century serve as a condition? In other words, the birth of Jesus at the end of the first century hardly has relevance as a condition for the demise of the coalition partners seven centuries before that.<sup>31</sup>

Those who separate the reference to Jesus' birth in verse 14 from the child mentioned in verses 15–16, arguing that two different children are in view, fail to show from the immediate context how such a distinction exists. The statement at the beginning of verse 15, "He will eat curds and honey," involves a masculine, singular subject, whose antecedent can only be the child in verse 14. The description of this child in verse 15 is then picked up and repeated in verse 16, indicating that the same child is in view throughout the prophecy.<sup>32</sup> Thus, verses 14–16 give every indication of being a unified prophecy, describing the birth and early childhood experience of a single child.

The third approach, which opts for *two fulfillments*, a near and a far, also appears problematic. Those championing a *sensus plenior*, where Matthew expands the meaning of Isaiah's words in their original setting to include a reference to Jesus, raise serious hermeneutical questions. This approach must give different meanings to the words in Isaiah's prophecy in order for the prophecy to be applied both to a child in the eighth century and to Jesus. Depending on which fulfillment is in view, the woman was either a virgin or she was not; the son was either Jesus or someone else; and the child was literally God with us or the child was not.

The problem with *sensus plenior* is that it violates the principle of

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<sup>31</sup>Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, pp. 86–87. Motyer, a proponent of this interpretation, recognizes the tension, "on the one hand, it seems Immanuel will be born within the immediate threat...and on the other, that he will be born in the undated future" (p. 87). Although acknowledging the tension, Motyer does nothing to relieve it but simply places the problem with Isaiah. He states, "Isaiah does nothing to resolve this tension between immediacy and remoteness" (p. 87).

<sup>32</sup>Joseph A. Alexander, *Commentary on the Prophecies of Isaiah*, 2 vols. in 1, ed. John Eadie (reprint of an 1875 ed., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1953), p. 169; Robert L. Reymond, "Who Is the עִלְמָה of Isaiah 7:14?" *Presbyterion* 15 (Spring 1989), p. 12, n. 21. In response to the interpretation that distinguishes the child in 7:14 from the child in 7:15–16, Alexander counters, "nothing but extreme exegetical necessity could justify the reference of vers. 15, 16 to any person not referred to in ver. 14" (ibid.)



the univocal nature of language. What is meant by the univocal nature of language is that communication depends on words having one meaning in a given context. Even those who argue against this principle must employ it in an effort to overturn the principle. Applying this to the biblical text, Isaiah's prophecy can have only one meaning: it is the meaning intended by the author, and it is the meaning expressed in the selection of words the author uses to communicate that meaning. By arguing for additional meaning, *sensus plenior* violates the above principle and opens the Old Testament text, in effect, to whatever meaning the interpreter may discover from the New Testament.<sup>33</sup>

Those who argue for a typological relationship face a similar set of problems. Ultimately, the difficulty in identifying the Immanuel prophecy with an eighth century fulfillment as the type is that this interpretation fails to link the prophecy with what Isaiah says elsewhere about this child. For example, following the statement about the child's being called Immanuel, Isaiah later attributes to Immanuel ownership of the land.<sup>34</sup> After this, Isaiah describes the child that will be born as governing humanity, sitting on David's throne, establishing his kingdom, and as bearing the titles "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace."<sup>35</sup> Assuming Isaiah intended these references to be linked, their collective descriptions show the difficulty of identifying Immanuel with someone other than Jesus, even in a typological sense. In other words, the name cannot rightly be applied to anyone who is not God.<sup>36</sup>

### PROPOSED SOLUTION

With the above criticisms in mind, the proposed solution represents a modification of the second approach and, specifically, the interpretation which applies the prophecy exclusively to Jesus. The modification entails seeing Isaiah as giving a single prophecy that has two parts, with each part having its respective fulfillment.<sup>37</sup> The two

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<sup>33</sup>For a critique of *sensus plenior* and a defense of the single meaning of Scripture, see the discussion in R. Bruce Compton, "Dispensationalism, the Church, and the New Covenant," *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 8 (Fall 2003): 42–44.

<sup>34</sup>Isa 8:8.

<sup>35</sup>Isa 9:6–7.

<sup>36</sup>F. Delitzsch, *Isaiah*, trans. James Martin, 2 vols. in 1, in *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament* (reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 1:220; Young, *Studies in Isaiah*, p. 174; idem, *The Book of Isaiah*, 1:289–91; Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, pp. 85–86.

<sup>37</sup>Alfred Martin and John Martin, *Isaiah: The Glory of the Messiah* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1983), pp. 56–57; Allan A. MacRae, *Studies in Isaiah* (Hatfield, PA: Interdisciplinary Biblical Research Institute, 1995), pp. 25–29. For another example of a single prophecy in Isaiah having two parts, each with its respective fulfillment, see Isa 61:1–2 with Luke 4:17–21.

parts of the prophecy correspond to the twofold threat that the Syro-Ephraimite coalition represented to the house of David. Rezin and Pekah intended to slay Ahaz, a member of the Davidic house (7:2), and replace him with a non-Davidic successor (7:6). Thus, both the Davidic king and the Davidic line were placed in jeopardy by the hostile intent of the Syro-Ephraimite coalition.<sup>38</sup>

The first part of the prophecy encompasses the promise in 7:14 of a virgin conceiving and giving birth to a son called Immanuel. This part addresses the threat to the Davidic line and is given to the house of David and, by extension, to the entire nation.<sup>39</sup> Isaiah specifically addresses the prophecy to the house of David in verse 13. Furthermore, all the second person pronouns in verses 13–14 are plural, ruling out Ahaz as the antecedent. As such, this part of the prophecy does not function as confirmation of Ahaz's promised deliverance from the two kings opposing him. Rather, it serves as a prophecy to David's house and to the nation of God's preservation of the Davidic line and His fulfillment of the Davidic promises. Combining Isaiah's subsequent descriptions of Immanuel and Matthew's use of these verses, the first part of the prophecy refers specifically to Jesus' miraculous conception and birth. Isaiah's promise of the future birth of the Messiah in fulfillment of the Davidic promise means that the Davidic line will be preserved, the immediate threat notwithstanding.

The second part of the prophecy, 7:15–16, addresses King Ahaz directly. The pronoun "you" in 7:16 is singular and refers specifically to Ahaz. This part of the prophecy focuses on the time period or length of time between the birth of Immanuel and the age at which he is able to discern good and evil. The promise specifically states that before the child is old enough to make moral judgments, the kings threatening Ahaz will be overthrown. Opinion is divided whether the time period in view is two to three years (the age of moral accountability) or twelve to thirteen years (the age of legal accountability).<sup>40</sup> In either case, the intent is roughly the same. Before the designated time elapses, the land of the two kings whom Ahaz fears will be forsaken.

If the reference is to two to three years, then the promise refers

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Similarly Vasholz, "Isaiah and Ahaz: A Brief History of Crisis in Isaiah 7 and 8," pp. 81–84. Vasholz divides the prophecy between v. 15 and v. 16 and states, "Isaiah makes two predictions, a long-range prophecy in Isaiah 7:14–15 that Matthew reports is fulfilled and a short-range prophecy in Isaiah 7:16 for his audience to witness" (p. 82). Vasholz interprets v. 14 as referring to the birth of Jesus; v. 15 as describing the harsh conditions the Jewish remnant will experience after the land has been plundered by Assyria (Jesus is in some way identified with this remnant); and v. 16 as describing in effect the birth of Isaiah's son Maher-shalal-hash-baz.

<sup>38</sup>Kaiser, *A History of Israel*, pp. 372–73.

<sup>39</sup>Young, *Studies in Isaiah*, p. 158.

<sup>40</sup>Reymond, "Who Is the עַלְמָה of Isaiah 7:14?" pp. 12–13.

specifically to the death of Rezin and Pekah along with the demise of the coalition. Both kings were deposed by the Assyrians and their lands subjugated in 732 B.C. If the reference is to twelve to thirteen years, the promise points to the destruction of the respective kingdoms represented by these two kings. Syria was overthrown by the Assyrians in 732 B.C. and the northern kingdom by the Assyrians in 722 B.C. In any case, the second part of the prophecy has direct application to Ahaz and serves to confirm God's promise of deliverance in 7:7. As further confirmation of this interpretation, Isaiah 8:1–4 picks up the promise in verse 16 and in a separate prophecy, using similar language involving a period of time in a child's development, reinforces the impending demise of the Syro-Ephraimite coalition.<sup>41</sup>

### RESOLVING THE POINTS OF TENSION

As noted earlier in the evaluation of the various interpretations, the exclusively messianic view faces two related problems. If the entire Immanuel prophecy refers to Jesus, then how do verses 15–16 apply to Jesus, and, more to the point, how does Jesus' birth in the first century serve as a precursor for the demise of the Syro-Ephraimite coalition in the eighth century? The answer to the tension is to see the prophecy as a vision and to understand that verses 15–16 include an embedded assumption about the birth of this child. Thus, Isaiah prophesies that he sees in a vision a virgin who is about to become pregnant and bear a son.<sup>42</sup> The precise timing of this event is not revealed. Isaiah's embedded assumption is that *were the child born in the immediate future*, the child would certainly experience what verses 15–16 describe.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, were the child born at that time, before he reaches the age of discernment, God would intervene and defeat the coalition threatening Ahaz and the Southern Kingdom.

Technically, it does not matter when the promised son is actually born. The focal point with this part of the prophecy is the designated

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<sup>41</sup>Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, 1:303–4; Reymond, “Who Is the עלמה of Isaiah 7:14?” p. 14. Comparing 8:4 with 7:16, Reymond states, “This prophecy was surely fulfilled within the space of a year or so with Tiglath-pileser III's capture of Damascus and the spoliation of Samaria in 732 B.C. And its fulfillment, in accordance with its stated short-term time feature, both confirmed and illustrated the similar time feature attached to the previous long-term Immanuel prophecy—enhancing thereby the latter's relevancy to Isaiah's contemporaries” (ibid.).

<sup>42</sup>Young, *Studies in Isaiah*, pp. 159–63. Discussing the introductory announcement, “Behold, a virgin will be with child,” Young notes, “Of course, with the physical eyes it would have been impossible for Ahaz to have seen the mother. It was only in vision that the prophet saw her and commended her to the attention of his hearers” (p. 163).

<sup>43</sup>MacRae, *Studies in Isaiah*, pp. 28–29. Similarly Young, “Studies in Isaiah,” pp. 194–98.

period of time between the birth of a child and the age at which the child is capable of moral discernment.<sup>44</sup> In other words, the designated period of time Isaiah mentions is something of a constant and, therefore, does not depend on the fact that the child in view was not born for several centuries. In the context of this prophecy, Isaiah declares what will take place, *were the child born in the immediate future*. Assuming that were to happen, verse 16 identifies that aspect of the prophecy that serves to confirm God's promise to Ahaz in verse 7. By the time the child reaches that age, the land whose two kings Ahaz feared will be forsaken.<sup>45</sup>

### CONCLUSION

In 734 B.C., Isaiah brings a message of hope to a Judean king and nation beleaguered by their enemies and fearing the worst. Both the Davidic king and, consequently, the Davidic line faced imminent death. The message of hope is composed of a single prophecy with two parts, each having its own promise and fulfillment. The first part addresses the threat to the Davidic line. Isaiah announces that a virgin will conceive and bear a son, and she will call him Immanuel. This promise is fulfilled in the birth of Jesus and serves to confirm the preservation of the Davidic line and the fulfillment of the Davidic promises.

The second part of the prophecy addresses the threat specifically to Ahaz as the Davidic king. Supposing this son were born in the near future, Isaiah declares that before he would reach the age of discernment, the two nations and their kings threatening Ahaz will be overthrown. This second promise is fulfilled in the demise of these two kings and the subjugation of their lands by the king of Assyria, all within the time period designated by Isaiah. Furthermore, the near fulfillment of this second promise serves to confirm the fulfillment of

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<sup>44</sup>C. Hassell Bullock, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophetic Books*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 2006), pp. 166–67. Commenting on the time period as the sign, Bullock notes, “Isaiah was fond of abstracting time measurements from the lives of individuals and laying them down on the grid of history to gauge coming events.... Therefore, Isaiah’s time abstraction from Immanuel’s life...to measure the lapse of time before Assyria devastated the two kings in the north is not foreign to Isaiah’s method” (ibid.). Bullock lists Isa 8:4, 16:14, and 21:16 as parallels.

<sup>45</sup>Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, 1:291–94; MacRae, *Studies in Isaiah*, pp. 28–29. MacRae captures Isaiah’s intent with vv. 15–16, “In verses 15 and 16 Isaiah leaves aside the question of when this One is to come. He simply takes His life as a measuring stick. The unexpressed assumption is: ‘Suppose that the predicted One were to be born next year.’ On this assumption the conclusion is: ‘Then butter and honey should he eat, when he would know to refuse the evil and choose the good....’ The Hebrew expression used is a common Hebrew method of indicating the time when something occurs.... The reason is given in verse 16. Before such a child, even if born next year, would be a very few years old, both these hostile kings will be gone” (ibid.).

the first promise and to underscore the inerrancy and authority of God's word.