Identifying Immanuel in Isaiah 7,14

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IDENTIFYING IMMANUEL IN ISAIAH 7:14

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I. INTRODUCTION

The Immanuel prophecy\(^1\) of Isaiah 7 has long been considered one of the “most difficult,\(^2\) “most ambiguous,\(^3\) and “most controversial\(^4\) passages in the entire Bible. Scholars speculate that more commentary has been written about Isaiah 7:14 than any other Old Testament verse.\(^5\) The traditional interpretation defended by the early Christian apologists, by the Reformers, and by some scholars over the past two centuries is that the Immanuel prophecy is a prediction of the virgin birth of Christ and that Jesus is Immanuel, “God with us.” However, the rise of critical scholarship in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries opened up other fulfillment options that had not been considered by Christian interpreters before. Many contemporary scholars question the traditional interpretation because of the belief that παρθένος means “maiden”, not “virgin”, and because of the belief that the focal point of the Immanuel prophecy is the time element in 7:16 which demands a near fulfillment.\(^6\) For them, the prophecy has a dual-fulfillment in the birth of one Immanuel in Isaiah’ time and in the greater Immanuel, Jesus Christ.

\(^1\) The term “Immanuel prophecy” will be used throughout to describe Isaiah 7:14-16. Although the prediction includes more than just Immanuel, and there is debate as to whether Immanuel was a part of the sign or the prophecy (or both), this is the name generally given to the prophecy.


\(^3\) Kemper Fullerton, “Immanuel,” *AJSL* 34, no. 4 (July 1918): 259.


The purpose of this paper is to bring to the discussion table a comprehensive study of the issues surrounding the Immanuel prophecy. By way of introduction, this paper will review the nature of the controversy through a brief summary of the historical setting, but the priority of this paper is given to conducting an exegetical study of the Immanuel prophecy. Afterwards, this paper will proceed with a presentation of interpretative options regarding the historical fulfillment of Isaiah 7:14, including strengths and weaknesses of each, with a view to helping the reader understand how scholars arrive at various positions. The ultimate purpose of the paper, as reflected in the title, is to identify Immanuel in Isaiah 7 with a view to informing our understanding of the fulfillment described in Matthew 1:22-23.

II. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Any journey into the realm of interpretation must begin with a careful study of both the immediate context and the surrounding context of a given passage. The Immanuel prophecy was delivered in the immediate context of Isaiah 7–8 and in the larger context of Isaiah 6–12. In Isaiah 6, the LORD commissions Isaiah to proclaim judgment upon the people of Judah until the cities were devastated and uninhabited (6:9-12). However, the LORD would ensure that a remnant of the people, a tenth, would survive. Judah would be cut down like a terebinth tree, but the “holy seed” of the stump would remain (6:13).\(^7\) The LORD gives three, major promises in the midst of impending doom. The first is the Immanuel prophecy given to the House of David (Isa 7:13ff).

\(^7\) The “holy seed” might be the faithful remnant in Judah (Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965], 1:264-65), or the Davidic line (cf. 11:1; J. A. Motyer, *Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999], 74).
Isaiah’s first preaching assignment was to proclaim a series of oracles during the reign of Ahaz, king of Judah (7:1), in the midst of the Syro-Ephraimite Crisis (734-732 BC). Pekah, king of Israel, and Rezin, king of Syria wanted to force Ahaz into an alliance with them against Tiglath-pileser III of Assyria. If Ahaz did not comply, then Pekah and Rezin would replace him with their own puppet-king, the son of Tabeel (7:6). In the midst of this crisis, the LORD sent Isaiah and his son, Shear-jashub (“a remnant shall return”), to meet Ahaz who was securing the water supply for the city of Jerusalem in preparation for the coming siege. The message to Ahaz from the LORD was that there was no reason to fear the threats of these two smoldering “firebrands,” Pekah and Rezin (7:4), because their plans would not come to pass (7:7). Instead, the LORD promised that within 65 years, Ephraim would be shattered (7:8). Ahaz was faced with a moment of decision. Would he trust in the LORD? The alternative was to call upon Tiglath-pileser...
III, king of Assyria, for help. Isaiah announces that if Ahaz would not believe, then he would not be established (7:9).

The LORD spoke to Ahaz a second time to persuade him not to call Assyria for help. This time the LORD offered to give Ahaz a confirmatory, miraculous sign (7:11), but Ahaz piously refused to ask for the sign (7:12), thereby unmasking his unbelief and trying the LORD’s patience (7:13). Nevertheless, the LORD Himself gave His own sign to the House of David that שְּׁבִיקָה would become pregnant and bear a son and call his name “Immanuel” (7:14). The boy would grow up eating “curds and honey,” an image revisited in 7:20-22, so that he might learn to reject evil and choose good (7:15). Before

12 Ahaz rejected the LORD’s offer by stating that he did not want to put the LORD to the test (Isa 7:12). At first glance, this seems like a good, biblical response. In the Old Testament, the LORD often put humans to the test (e.g., Gen 22:1; Exod 16:4; Deut 13:14; 33:8; Judg 2:22; 3:14), but Israel was commanded not to put the LORD to the test (Deut 6:16). While it is sinful to test the LORD out of unbelief (Exod 17:2; Psal 78:18; Matt 16:4; Mark 8:12; Luke 11:29), at times the LORD invites His people to test Him in faith, as He did with Ahaz here (cf. 2 Kgs 20:8-11; Mal 3:10). Ahaz had probably already made up his mind to trust in Assyria instead of the LORD (Smith, Isaiah 1–39, 212).

13 In the view of this author, the underlying question throughout the “Book of Immanuel” (Isa 7–12) is, “How will the LORD keep His promise regarding the perpetuity of the Davidean line?” The Syro-Ephramite coalition threatened to cut off the Davidean line by replacing Ahaz with Tabeel (7:5-6), but the LORD declared that this would not happen (7:7-8). However, since Ahaz and Judah rejected the LORD’s counsel (7:9-13), the Assyrians would devastate their land also. The LORD had promised that the house and kingdom of David would endure (נַחַל) forever, but the warning to Ahaz was that if he would not believe (נַחַל), then he would not last (נַחַל). How would the LORD keep His promise to David in the midst of the coming judgment?

14 The precise form of the word מַעֲשֶׁה in 7:15b is only found here in the OT. The LXX reads πρὶν ἢ γνώσεται, “before he knows.” The word “before” would allow for Immanuel to be a little older than “when”, but Immanuel would not be very old either way (Gerhard van Groningen, Messianic Revelation in the Old Testament [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990], 532). Other translations have “when he knows” (RSV, NIV, ESV; cf. E. W. Hengstenberg, Christology of the Old Testament [repr., Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1956], 2:57; Allan A. MacRae, Studies in Isaiah [Hatfield, PA: Interdisciplinary Biblical Research Institute, 1995], 28) or “by the time he knows” (NRSV; cf. NLT; NASB). The preposition מ usually expresses finality or causality; only rarely is מ used in the temporal sense. When used in an infinitive construct, מ most commonly denotes the end or purpose of an action (BDB, 517-18). Additionally, none of the forty other occurrences of this particular infinitive construct (מ + מ) has the temporal force (see NET note on Isaiah 7:15). Therefore, it is more likely that מַעֲשֶׁה carries the idea of purpose or result as reflected in the translation “that he might know” (NKJV), or “which will help him know how” (NET). The final sense is also found in Jerome’s Vulgate (M. McNamara, “The Emmanuel Prophecy and its Context—III,” Scr 15, no. 29 [Jan 1963]: 82). If Isaiah had intended to communicate a temporal clause, he would have used a מ-prefix instead of a מ-prefix (Smith, Isaiah 1–39, 214).
Immanuel would grow up, the two kings threatening Ahaz would be laid waste (7:16). But because of Ahaz’s unbelief, the LORD would use Assyria to judge Judah (7:17-25). Isaiah’s own son, Maher-shalal-hash-baz, would be a sign that the Assyrians would be “quick to plunder” and “swift to spoil” Damascus and Samaria. But the LORD would also bring the Assyrians against Judah (8:5-10), even against “your land, O Immanuel” (8:8), though the plot would not ultimately stand because “God is with us” (8:10).

Chapter 8 ends with a warning from the LORD to Isaiah to disregard the wicked counsel of his generation and to turn instead to the Law of God (8:11-22).

The second promise is given in Isaiah 9, which is set in the time of distress, darkness, and gloom after the Assyrian invasion (8:22). The people who were in darkness would see a great light (9:2) with the arrival of a child who would be called “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (9:6). Following the announcement of the coming Davidic king and his everlasting kingdom (9:7), chapter 9 ends with a prophecy of judgment against Rezin and Israel (9:8-21). Isaiah 10 contains a prophecy of judgment against Assyria, the rod of the LORD’s anger, which boasted in its military conquests against God’s holy people. A remnant of people would return to the “Mighty God” (10:21; cf. 9:6).

The third promise comes in chapter 11 where Isaiah describes the kingdom of the coming Davidic ruler, the “shoot” from the stump of Jesse. He will rule with wisdom, power, righteousness, faithfulness, and peace, with the result that the knowledge of the

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15 The historical books indicate that Ahaz ignored the prophet and appealed to the king of Assyria by offering him silver and gold from the temple treasuries. The king of Assyria accepted Ahaz as his vassal and fought against the Syrians, eventually capturing Damascus and putting Rezin to death (2 Kgs 16:6-9; 2 Chr 28:16-21). The irony is that the Assyrian armies would later stand upon that same place, the Washer’s Field (Isa 7:3), and demand that Hezekiah, Ahaz’s son, surrender the city of Jerusalem (Isa 36:2).

16 For a discussion of the titles in 9:6, see Young, Isaiah, 1:332-342.
LORD will fill the earth (11:1-9) and Judah will be a banner for all nations (11:10-16).

Finally, the Book of Immanuel closes with an outburst of praise to the LORD for His promise of salvation. Although the LORD was presently angry with His people, the promise of salvation would bring comfort to the faithful (Isa 12:1-6). In the view of this author, the promises of a coming child of unparalleled character in chapters 7, 9, and 11 are linked together and answer the question about God’s promise concerning the perpetuity of the Davidic dynasty in the midst of the Assyrian threat.

III. IDENTIFYING IMMANUEL

The enigmatic nature of the Immanuel prophecy makes it difficult to identify an historical fulfillment. Scholars have made many attempts to identify Immanuel in the 8th century BC, but the most common views identify Immanuel as the son of Hezekiah, the son of Isaiah, or an anonymous child. The strengths and weaknesses of these views will be assessed and compared with the traditional interpretation.


18 Two other views which have not gained much of a following are the collective interpretation and the corporate-personification interpretation. These views will only be mentioned here. The collective interpretation posits that Isaiah did not designate any woman in particular, and therefore, every young mother would have reason to express confidence in God’s help. The article on הַדָּם is interpreted in the generic sense to mean not just “a young woman,” but “young women” (GKC, §126). Thus, there were many young women with who bore children and named them “Immanuel” (William McKane, “The Interpretation of Isaiah VII 14-25,” VT 17 [1967]: 214). Scholars raise several objections to the collective interpretation. 1) Isaiah uses singular terminology throughout 7:14-16 (Wildberger, Isaiah 1–12, 309). Although grammatically possible, there is nothing in the context to suggest that Isaiah had the collective interpretation in mind (Frederick L. Moriarty, “The Emmanuel Prophecies,” CBQ 19 [1957]: 231). 2) This view assumes that הַדָּם refers to young, married mothers, a highly debatable point. 3) There is no evidence that many women called their sons “Immanuel” during the devastation surrounding the Syro-Ephraimite Crisis and later Assyrian conquests (Smith, Isaiah 1–39, 201-202). 4) A group of little Immanuel-children does not account for the developing Immanuel theme throughout Isaiah 8–9, especially in Isaiah 8:8 where Immanuel is identified as a definite figure (Motyer, Isaiah, 78).

The corporate-personification view defended by Gene Rice is anchored in the earlier context of Isaiah 7 regarding Isaiah’s first son, Shear-jashub. Since Isaiah had already named his first son, “a remnant will return,” there was an expectation of the Day-of-the-LORD judgment which was coming upon the northern kingdom of Israel. Isaiah’s message to Ahaz and to Judah was that if they would return to
Immanuel was Hezekiah

When looking for an historical fulfillment, the most natural interpretation is that Immanuel was Hezekiah, the son of Ahaz. In this view, the πριγγα was Ahaz’s wife, Abi/Abijah, daughter of Zechariah (2 Kgs 18:2; 2 Chr 29:1). Isaiah may have pointed to her when announcing the conception and birth if she was standing nearby. There are several lines of argumentation which support this interpretation. 1) This view maintains a close connection with the political crisis of the moment. Since Ahaz had already sacrificed other sons in the fire (2 Kgs 16:3; 2 Chr 28:3), which might have eliminated an heir to the throne, the prophecy of a royal child, Immanuel (Hezekiah), was especially

Yahweh, then they would be the remnant which would be spared from the Day of the LORD. But Ahaz and the people proved to be unbelieving, just as the LORD had predicted in Isaiah 6:10, and they were no longer regarded as “my people” but as “this people” (6:9-10; 8:6, 11, 12; 28:11, 14; 29:13). Isaiah and the faithful few collectively became “Immanuel,” the remnant who had God’s presence. The mother of Immanuel, the πριγγα, was none other than Zion personified, and Immanuel was the name for the new Israel that would survive the Exile. The diet of “curds and honey” could have been the blessing for obedience or adversity for the faithful remnant.

There are several arguments which support this interpretation. 1) The name “Immanuel” is the only example in the OT of a name formed with the first-person plural pronoun (“us”) instead of the first-person or third-person singular pronoun (“I/me” or “him/her”). Therefore, it is likely that “God is with us” corporately represents the remnant. 2) This interpretation explains why Isaiah does not mention the father of Immanuel. If Immanuel is the remnant, and Jerusalem is the mother, then Immanuel has no earthly father to name him; this is why his mother names him. 3) The πριγγα is not directly told to name the child, depending on how one reads πριγγα. If one reads “she will name him” instead of “you (sg) will name him” (as in Gen 16:11), then Isaiah may have had in mind a personification (Gene Rice, “A Neglected Interpretation of the Immanuel Prophecy,” ZAW 90, no. 2 [1978]: 220-227; cf. Annie E. Skemp, “‘Immanuel’ and ‘The Suffering Servant of Jahweh,’” ExpTim 14 [1932-1933]: 94; L. G. Rignell, “Das Immanuelszeichen,” ST 11 (1957): 113; Ulrich Berges, Das Buch Jesaja, HBS [Freiberg: Herder, 1998], 113-17). The major objection to this interpretation is the fact that πριγγα is never used elsewhere as a term of personification (Arthur W. Evans, “Immanuel” ISBE, 3:1458). The normal word for “Virgin Israel” is πριγγα not πριγγα (2 Kgs 19:21; Isa 23:12; 37:22; 47:1; Jer 18:13; 31:4, 21; Lam 1:15; Amos 5:2). Additionally, although the corporate term “us” (“God is with us”) points toward a collective interpretation, the rest of the Immanuel prophecy describes Immanuel in singular terms (“son,” “his,” “he,” “the boy”). Finally, the identification of an individual person in Isaiah 8:8 argues against this interpretation.


timely. 2) Hezekiah is prominent in the book of Isaiah. Although his name means “The LORD is my strength”, his glorious reign earned for him the title “God is with us.” In fact, 2 Kings 18:7 states that God was “with” Hezekiah and prospered him.

3) Hezekiah’s faith (Isa 36:15, 18; 37:14-20), in contrast to Ahaz’s unbelief (7:12), demonstrates that Hezekiah was the child who refused evil and chose good (7:15). 4) Isaiah 7:14 LXX reads καλέσει, “you (sg) shall call,” which could be directed to Ahaz as the father who names the child. 5) Only Hezekiah could have fulfilled the demands of the prophecy historically yet also be “part and parcel of that climactic messianic person who would complete all that is predicted in this Immanuel prophecy.” In other words, Hezekiah best prefigured the ultimate, messianic fulfillment of the Immanuel prophecy in the greater Davidic king, Jesus Christ.

Scholars have produced several arguments against the view that Hezekiah fulfilled the Immanuel prophecy. 1) Bible chronology demonstrates that Hezekiah was born before the Immanuel prophecy was given; therefore, Hezekiah could not have fulfilled the prophecy. The typical response to this problem is that the chronology from

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24 Brennan, “Virgin and Child,” 972. The name τικτει does not necessarily imply divinity. It could simply be a theophoric name like τικτει (Daniel), “God is my Judge,” or τικτει (Ezekiel), “God is strong.” Both of these names have the suffix τικτει, but this does not imply that these men were God incarnate.


this period is confused, but few scholars are willing to amend the text to make this view work. 2) Hezekiah did not grow up eating “curds and honey”, the food associated with the Assyrian invasion (7:22), because the devastation of the land did not come until he

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29 Wildberger states that the chronology in this period is by no means certain, and that it is “at least not impossible that [Isaiah 7:14] might refer to Hezekiah” (Wildberger, Isaiah 1–12, 310-11; cf. Joseph Blenkinsopp, Isaiah 1–39, AB [New York: Doubleday, 2000], 234). McHugh postulates that Hezekiah was actually 15 at his ascension in 715 BC, setting his birth date back to 731 BC just after the Immanu prophecy was given in 734 BC. For this to work, he changes “25 years old” in 2 Kings 18:2 to “15 years old” (John McHugh, “The Date of Hezekiah’s Birth,” VT 14 [1964]: 446-453; cf. V. Pavlovsky, “Die Jahre der Könige von Juda und Israel,” Bib 45 [1964]: 342). Other scholars find this argument less than convincing (e.g., Marvin E. Tate, “King and Messiah in Isaiah of Jerusalem,” RevExp 65, no. 4 [Fall 1968]: 413n22; Young, Isaiah, 2:540-42).

30 Most translations render הָעֵדרָה פְּרִיְתָה, this as “curds and honey” (RSV, NRSV, NKJV, NIV, NASB, ESV). The KJV has “butter and honey,” the NLT reads “yogurt and honey,” and the NET has “sour milk and honey.” These foods were a part of the common diet in Palestine (Edward J. Kissane, The Book of Isaiah [Dublin: The Richview Press, 1941], 1-90). The term פְּרִיְתָה (curds) appears 10 times in the OT, and the term הָעֵדרָה (honey) occurs 54 times, but the couplet only occurs 4 times. In 2 Samuel 17:26, הָעֵדרָה and פְּרִיְתָה are listed among the foods that David and his people ate, but there is no apparent significance to them since they are listed with other common foods such as wheat, barley, and lentils. In Job 20:17-18, Zophar states that the wicked man “does not look at the streams, the rivers flowing with honey (עדר) and curds (פרי).” He returns what he has attained and cannot swallow it.” The river of honey and curds appears to be something good which the wicked man cannot enjoy. The final two occurrences are in Isaiah 7 where “curds and honey” will be the diet of young Immanuel (7:15) as well as the people who are left in Judah after the Assyrian invasion: “And it will happen that because of the abundance of the milk produced he will eat curds (פרי), for everyone that is left within the land will eat curds and honey” (7:22).

Some think that Immanuel’s diet is a sign of prosperity and abundance since פרי and עדר can refer to choice foods in the OT (Judg 5:25; Ps 81:16 [MT 81:17]). This diet is comparable to the עדר פְּרִיְתָה, “milk and honey,” of the Promised Land (Exod 3:8, 17; 33:3; Deut 6:3; 11:9; 26:15; Job 20:17). However, “a land flowing with milk and honey” is similar to “eating curds and honey,” but not the same (Joseph Jensen, “The Age of Immanuel,” CBQ 41 [Apr 1979]: 229-30n28; contra E. Hammersham, “The Immanu Sign,” ST 73, no. 2 [1949]: 136). Additionally, Isaiah 7:21 reads, “Now it will come about in that day that a man may keep alive (עדר) a heifer and a pair of sheep.” The Piel imperfect עדר is normally used of someone or something in a threatening circumstance which argues against the positive interpretation of this passage (e.g., Gen 19:32; Exod 1:17; Josh 9:15; Judg 21:14 [Jensen, “The Age of Immanuel,” 229n28]). Finally, it is worth noting that the Israelites no longer conceived of prosperity in terms of “milk
was an adult. If the term הָיוֹנָה means “young, marriageable women”, then this term would not have been applied to Abi, Ahaz’s wife. This objection depends on the meaning of הָיוֹנָה which is debated.

4) Although God was “with” Hezekiah (2 Kgs 18:7), he is never explicitly called “Immanuel” in Scripture. The response to this objection is that Jesus was never called Immanuel either because “Immanuel” is a title, not a name. 5) Isaiah 7:14 MT states the mother will name the child, not Ahaz. Also, it would be highly ironic for Ahaz to allow

and honey” once they reached the Promised Land. Rather, they considered other commodities like corn, wine, and oil to be signs of prosperity (e.g., 2 Kgs 18:32; Isa 25:6; 36:17; Hos 2:8; M. McNamara, “The Emmanuel Prophecy and its Context,” Scr 14, no. 28 [Oct 1962]: 122-23). The most decisive argument that “curds and honey” in Isaiah 7:15 is the fact that this is contextually connected to the diet of the remnant after the Assyrian invasion in 7:22. As Rice says, “The solution to the enigma of the meaning of curdled milk and honey then is that while Isaiah takes these terms in their usual sense of symbolizing plenty and felicity he converts them by his ironic usage into their opposite so that they mean in effect want and adversity” (Gene Rice, “The Interpretation of Isaiah 7:15-17,” JBL 96, no. 3 [Sept 1977]: 365).


33 Some have suggested that Immanuel is a different son of Ahaz by from another woman who was an הָיוֹנָה (not Abi). Immanuel then is another royal heir who will ensure the survival of the Davidic dynasty (John H. Hayes and Stuart A. Irvine, Isaiah, the Eighth-century Prophet: His Times and His Preaching [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987], 136) or perhaps begin a new dynasty (Antti Laato, Who is Immanuel? The Rise and the Foundering of Isaiah’s Messianic Expectations [Jyväskylä, Finland: Åbo Academy Press, 1988], 158). Against this view is the fact that Hezekiah was the actual successor to Ahaz, not a different person named Immanuel (R. E. Clements, Old Testament Prophecy: From Oracles to Canon [Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996], 70).

34 Isaiah 7:14 contains an archaic third person feminine form הָיוֹנָהְיוֹנָה, “she will call” (GKC, §74g). But Chisholm argue that הָיוֹנָה is actually a second feminine singular, “you will call” (Robert B. Chisholm, Handbook on the Prophets [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007], 32n32). If this reading is correct, then it appears that the הָיוֹנָה was present when the prophecy was spoken. This is reflected in the NET: “You, young woman, will name him Immanuel.” The third feminine singular perfect of הָיוֹנָה appears three other times in the OT as הָיוֹנָה (Gen 29:35; 30:6; 1 Chr 4:9), and the second feminine singular appears three times as הָיוֹנָה (Gen 16:11; Isa 60:18; Jer 3:4). The Targum supports the third-person reading (רַגְיָה, see J. F. Stenning, ed. and tran., The Targum of Isaiah [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1949], 25). In describing the rarer forms of 3fs verbs which end in ר, Gesenius does not list Isaiah 7:14 (GKC, §44f). De Rossi also lists four manuscripts which support this reading (De Rossi, Variae Lecitones Veteris Testamenti, 3:8). The BHS apparatus lists an alternative reading הָיוֹנָה, “he shall call” (3ms) which is also found in 1QIsa”. Rosenbloom suggests that this translation possibly sees God as the subject (Joseph R. Rosenbloom, The Dead Sea Isaiah Scroll: A Literary Analysis [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970], 15). This could also be a Pual perfect, “he shall be
his wife to name her son “God is with us” while the king refused to trust in God.\textsuperscript{35} 6) Hezekiah did not live up to the moral character of the Immanuel child (7:15). It is interesting to note that no other person in Scripture is described as “refusing evil” and “choosing good.”\textsuperscript{36} Rather, Hezekiah acted foolishly toward the end of his life when he showed the Babylonians his temple and treasuries (2 Kings 20:12-19). However, compared to Ahaz, Hezekiah was a moral, godly king. Thus, the strongest argument against the interpretation that Immanuel was Hezekiah is the chronological problem.

\textit{Immanuel was Isaiah’s Son}

Because of the chronological problems with Hezekiah, many scholars believe that the Immanuel prophecy was fulfilled in the birth of Isaiah’s second son, Maher-shalal-hash-baz (Isa 8:1-4).\textsuperscript{37} In this view, the παραγγέλλω was Isaiah’s wife, the “prophetess” (8:3),\textsuperscript{38} called,” or even a Qal imperative, “you call!” (Norman K. Gottwald, “Immanuel as the Prophet’s Son,” \textit{VT} 8 [1958]: 37). This reading would support the interpretation that Ahaz is being addressed (Wildberger, \textit{Isaiah 1–12}, 286).

The LXX reads \textit{kαλέσεται}, “you will call,” but the Greek manuscript Sinaiticus (a) reads \textit{kαλέσεται}, “he/she shall call.” Clements thinks that the variants arose because of differences in interpretation (R. E. Clements, \textit{Isaiah 1–39}, NCB [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980], 88). Menken explains that the variant \textit{kαλέσετε} is an adjustment to the context of plural “you all” in Isaiah 7:14a. The variant reading \textit{kαλέσεται} (a), which presumably takes \textit{παραγγέλω} as the subject, is either an error or an interpretation due to a negative view of Ahaz; either way, it is secondary. In Menken’s estimation, \textit{kαλέσεται} is most likely the original LXX reading (Maarten J. J. Menken, “The Textual Form of the Quotation from Isaiah 7:14 in Matthew 1:23,” \textit{NovT} 43, no. 2 [2001] 151). Most of the modern translations follow the MT reading (3fs) which could fit any of the interpretations of the prophecy (so NKJV, RSV, NRSV, NIV, NASB, NLT, ESV, although the NIV and NASB contain text notes with the alternate readings). Oswalt thinks the MT is preferable since it is the harder reading (Oswalt, \textit{Isaiah 1–39}, 202n2).

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\textsuperscript{35} Smith, \textit{Isaiah 1–39}, 203. Wildberger counters that the king would have had several wives in his harem, and thus he would not have been expected to name all of his children (Wildberger, \textit{Isaiah 1–12}, 310).

\textsuperscript{36} Jensen also demonstrates that the term \varepsilon\varepsilon\varepsilon\varepsilon, “to reject,” usually describes people who are rejecting something they should be choosing, such as the LORD’s statutes, judgments, law, and word. The fact that Immanuel rejects \textit{evil} and chooses good is indeed peculiar (Jensen, “The Age of Immanuel,” 224-27).

\textsuperscript{37} Even Coppens, who holds to the messianic view, states that if there was an historical fulfillment, then the prophet’s son is the most likely candidate (Joseph Coppens, “Une Interprétation Originale du Fils de la ‘Almah,” \textit{ETL} 33, no. 3 [July/Sept 1957]: 509-10).
who conceived shortly after the prophecy was given (8:3). Maher-shalal-hash-baz, then, is a type of the greater Immanuel to come, the Messiah. There are several arguments given for this interpretation. 1) The language in Isaiah 7:10-17 and 8:1-4 is strikingly similar. Isaiah 7:14 states that Immanuel’s mother “shall conceive and bear a son,” and Isaiah 8:3 records that the prophetess “conceived and bore a son.” Both prophecies use the boy’s childhood as a time marker (7:16; 8:4), and both children are called “signs” (7:14; 8:18). 2) There is a certain measure of symmetry if all three children in Isaiah 7–8 belong to the prophet (cf. 8:18). 3) The meaning of the sign is the same: before the child reaches a certain age, Samaria and Damascus will no longer be a threat to Ahaz.

Gottwald notes that in Exodus 15:20 Miriam the prophetess dances and plays the timbrel, which is a similar to the description of the πατρίς described in Psalm 68:25. He suggests that Isaiah’s wife continued to bear the name πατρίς even after she no longer served as a female musician in the temple (Gottwald, “Immanuel as the Prophet’s Son,” 44-45).

This view will not work if the syntax points toward a present pregnancy because Isaiah’s wife does not conceive until some time after the Immanuel prophecy (cf. 8:3; John H. Walton, “Isa 7:14: What’s in a Name?” JETS 30, no. 3 [Sept 1987]: 296).


Oswalt, Isaiah 1–39, 220.


4) Immanuel is directly addressed in 8:8, suggesting that his birth had just been recorded\(^{45}\) and that 7:10–8:10 constitutes a unit dealing with the Immanuel theme.\(^{46}\)

There are also several arguments against the view that Immanuel is the prophet’s son. 1) Isaiah would not have used the term הַדָּמֶר to describe the prophetess since she was already married and had borne Isaiah’s first son, Shear-jashub (7:3).\(^{47}\) If Isaiah was describing his own wife in 7:14, then he would have called her רַבָּא or רַבָּא נַע.\(^{48}\) Because of this objection, some scholars have suggested that Isaiah’s first wife had died and that the הַדָּמֶר was his fiancée who was a virgin. The advantage of this view is that the הַדָּמֶר was truly a “virgin,” thus agreeing with the definition of הַדָּמֶר as “young, unmarried woman” (virgin) and with the translation in the LXX and Matthew (παρθενός).\(^{49}\) The

\(^{45}\) Chisholm, Handbook, 33.

\(^{46}\) Oswalt, Isaiah 1–39, 220.

\(^{47}\) T. K. Cheyne, Introduction to the Book of Isaiah (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1895), 37; Georg Fohrer, Das Buch Jesaja (Zürich: Zwingli Verlag, 1966), 1:114n56. Hindson states that Isaiah and the prophetess had probably been married for some time. He points out that there are about 25 instances in the OT where a woman conceives and bears a child. Most cases recount how the husband “went in unto her and she conceived,” and the woman is always identified in the context as his “wife.” The only exceptions are when the couple has been married for some time such that no clarification is necessary (Gen 21:2; 29:32; 30:23; 2 Kgs 4:17), or when the woman is not the man’s legal wife (Gen 16:4; 38:3; 38:18; 2 Sam 11:5). Since Isaiah does not indicate that he “went in to his wife and she conceived,” then it must be assumed that they had been married for some time as evidenced by the birth of their first son, Shear-jashub (Edward E. Hindson, Isaiah’s Immanuel [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978], 48).

\(^{48}\) Franz Delitzsch, Biblical Commentary on the Prophecies of Isaiah, trans. James Martin (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), 1:217; cf. Wildberger, Isaiah 1–12, 309. Ward acknowledges this as a problem for this view, but he passes it off as less of an obstacle to his view than to others. As a solution, he proposes that the הַדָּמֶר could have been another wife of Isaiah since polygamy was practiced in Israel and since there is no indication that Isaiah’s sons had the same mother (James M. Ward, Amos & Isaiah: Prophets of the Word of God [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1969], 200-202). But there is nothing in the text, nor in the character of the prophet, to support this.

weakness of this view is that it is an argument from silence.\(^{50}\) Nothing in the text suggests that Isaiah’s first wife had died or that he had remarried.\(^{51}\)

2) Isaiah’s son did not grow up eating “curds and honey” in a time when the land had been devastated.\(^{52}\) One commentator suggests that Isaiah must have left Jerusalem with Immanuel to go live in the desolate land of Israel so that Immanuel could grow up with the diet prescribed in Isaiah 7:15,\(^{53}\) but there is nothing in the text to support this claim. 3) Immanuel and Maher-shalal-hash-baz seem to be two distinct signs—one to the house of David (7:13), and one to the people of Jerusalem (8:1).\(^{54}\) 4) The prophet’s son would hardly claim ownership of the land as Isaiah 8:8 announces.\(^{55}\)

5) The strongest critique of the view that Immanuel is the prophet’s son is that although there are many similarities between Isaiah 7:14-17 and Isaiah 8:1-4, the differences show that 8:1-4 is to be regarded as an additional prophecy, not a fulfillment


\(^{51}\) Wolf proposes that Isaiah 8 records the marriage of Isaiah to his new wife. The large “tablet” (קֵלֶל) in 8:1 was the official marriage document, and the “faithful witnesses” in 8:2 were witnesses to the marriage ceremony. The transition from the marriage ceremony to the consummation of the marriage (8:3) is also found in Ruth 4:13 and Hosea 1:3. The term זָכֵר, “to draw near,” describes their first sexual encounter (cf. Gen 20:4; Deut 22:14; Herbert M. Wolf, “A Solution to the Immanuel Prophecy in Isaiah 7:14–8:22,” \textit{JBL} 91, no. 2 [Dec 1972]: 449-56). Although this is a novel proposal, the parallel verses cited do not support it. Ruth 4:13 states that Boaz “took Ruth as his wife,” and Hosea 1:3 states that Hosea “took Gomer [as a wife],” but Isaiah 8 lacks any clear statement about Isaiah marrying the prophetess. Furthermore, the term זָכֵר does not necessarily describe the first sexual encounter. Leviticus 18:19 and Ezekiel 18:6 prohibit a man from “drawing near” (זָכֵר) to a woman (his wife) during menstruation; this likely pertains to more than their first encounter. Finally, it is worth restating that there is no textual evidence that Isaiah’s first wife had died.

\(^{52}\) See note 30.


of 7:10-17. One difference is that while there is no mention of Immanuel’s father in Isaiah 7:14, Isaiah is clearly the father of Maher-shalal-hash-baz (8:3). Perhaps chapter 8 provides the additional information concerning the identity of Immanuel’s father. But it is strange that Isaiah would directly connect himself to his two children in 7:3 and 8:3 but not to Immanuel in 7:14. On the other hand, it is possible that if the was Isaiah’s wife (assuming can describe a married woman), and if she was present when the prophecy was given, then Isaiah made the direct connection to himself by pointing to his own wife as Immanuel’s mother.

A second difference is that the child in Isaiah 7:14 is called “Immanuel,” not “Maher-shalal-hash-baz.” Some respond by suggesting that the two names represent the double significance of salvation and judgment. Although there are occasions where a child is given two names (e.g. Gen 35:18; 2 Sam 12:25), this practice is rare in the OT and is unprecedented for the child of a prophet. One has to decide if it is more likely that Isaiah’s son had two different names or that these were in fact two different children.

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56 Hengstenberg, Christology, 2:53.


59 There are other examples where a person is called by two names (Ruth 1:20; Jer 20:3; cf. Isa 62:4), but these are not fitting parallels since they do not have prophetic significance. First, Naomi decides to call herself , “bitter,” after losing her husband and two sons, but she is known as Naomi throughout the book. There is no indication that anyone ever called her “Mara,” and there was nothing prophetic about her name. Second, Jeremiah renames Pashhur the high priest by , “terror on every side,” but only his second name had any prophetic significance. Third, Isaiah 62:4 declares that Jerusalem will be known as and , “My delight is in her,” and , “married.” Although both of these names have prophetic significance, they describe a city (62:1), not a person. Hosea’s children had names that were both symbolic and personal, yet they only received one name each. Thus, there is no other example of a child having two names of prophetic significance.
A third difference is that in Isaiah 7:14 the mother names the child, but in Isaiah 8:3, Isaiah names the child.

A fourth difference between Isaiah 7:14-16 and Isaiah 8:1-4 is that there are two different ages given for the children: “to refuse evil and choose good” for Immanuel (7:16), and “to cry out ‘my father’ or ‘my mother,’” for Maher-shalal-hash-baz (8:4). The latter most likely refers to a young age of about 1-2 years old, but the former probably refers to a much older child. A fifth difference is that there is special attention given to Immanuel’s character (7:15), but nothing is said about the character of Maher-shalal-hash-baz. Finally, it is noteworthy that Isaiah 7:14-17 pronounces judgment on Judah and its enemies, but Isaiah 8:1-4 does not pronounce judgment on Judah. Isaiah 8:5-10 pronounces judgment upon Judah, but the prophet indicates that this is an additional word

60 There is only one other example of this in the OT. In Genesis 35:18, Rachel names her son “Ben-oni” as she is dying, but Jacob names him “Benjamin.” Jacob probably preferred the name “son of my right hand” over “son of my affliction,” but Benjamin was not known by both names. Jacob chose one name instead of the other, but Immanuel/Maher-shalal-hash-baz would have retained both names because of the prophetic significance of each name. Therefore, Genesis 35:18 is not a good parallel.

61 See note 34. Of all the possible readings suggested (3fs, 2fs, 3ms, 2ms), the first-person singular is not textually defensible. Therefore, Isaiah 7:14 may be stating just about anything except, “I, Isaiah, shall call his name Immanuel.”


63 See note 36.
from the LORD (8:5). Although a few of these differences can be explained, others are
difficult to harmonize,\footnote{In the opinion of this writer, the greatest difficulties are the differences in who names the children, how old the children are in relation to the coming events, the names of the children, and the fact that one pertains to Judah (7:17ff) and the other does not mention Judah (8:1-4).} thereby casting doubt on this interpretation.

\textit{Immanuel was an Unknown Child}

Because of the difficulties associated with the first two views, some scholars
suggest that Isaiah saw an \(\pi\varphi\gamma\tau\) standing nearby and addressed her directly. The identity
of the mother and Immanuel is insignificant to the timing aspect of the prophecy.\footnote{Walter Brueggemann, \textit{Isaiah 1–39} (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 69.} The
mother may have been a wife of Ahaz,\footnote{A. S. Herbert, \textit{The Book of the Prophet Isaiah: Chapters 1–39} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 64.} a young girl from the royal harem,\footnote{Geoffrey W. Grogan, “Isaiah,” in \textit{The Expositor’s Bible Commentary}, ed. Tremper Longmann III and David E. Garland, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008) 6:517-18. Walton points out that there was a class of women designated as \(\pi\varphi\gamma\tau\) who were a part of the royal harem (Song 6:8). He suspects that while Ahaz had many such women who were concurrently pregnant, there was one woman in particular who was well known around the palace who would give birth to Immanuel (Walton, “Isa 7:14: What’s in a Name?” 296). But Oswalt states that if Isaiah had intended to refer to a definite woman in the king’s harem, he would have used the common term for concubine (\(\varepsilon\varphi\gamma\tau\)) and would have identified her master. Oswalt concludes that Isaiah’s silence on these matters leads one away from this interpretation (Oswalt, “The Significance of the ’Almah Prophecy,” 233).} or a
nameless maiden.\footnote{J. Skinner, \textit{The Book of the Prophet Isaiah: Chapters I.–XXXIX.} (Cambridge: University Press, 1897), 62-63.} While giving birth, the young woman, whoever she was, would cry
Although this view avoids the difficulties associated with the previous two views, it nonetheless encounters problems of its own. 1) There is no indication that the mother was present at the time of the prophecy. The 2fs reading of $\partial^\text{a}$, as preferred by the editors of the NET Bible, is debatable. Also, it would have been against oriental custom for women (especially pregnant women) to be present when the prophet was speaking with the king. 2) It is unlikely that Isaiah would have given such an indefinite sign to Ahaz. The form of the birth announcement suggests a particular woman, not a random bystander. 3) Any child born within a short period of time would not have eaten the “curds and honey” that resulted from the Assyrian invasion. 4) The prophecy of Immanuel amounts to more than just a prophetic stopwatch. The Immanuel child will be a definite, unique child of notable character (7:15) who resurfaces in Isaiah 8:8, 10. Although some of these difficulties may be resolved, the definiteness of the child is the major argument against this interpretation.

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71 Contra the NET translation of Isaiah 7:14: “Look, this young woman is about to conceive and will give birth to a son. You, young woman, will name him Immanuel.”

72 See note 35.

73 Wildberger, Isaiah 1–12, 309.


76 See note 30.

77 See note 36.
IV. MESSIANIC-FULFILLMENT VIEW

Arguments for the Messianic-Fulfillment View

The messianic interpretation of the Immanuel prophecy represents the traditional Christian view. This interpretation claims that no initial, historical fulfillment is necessary since Isaiah directly predicted the virgin birth of Christ. The messianic view is that הָמַעְלָה means virgin, the הָמַעְלָה is pregnant, and that the הָמַעְלָה bears a son sometime in the definite future. Immanuel is the focus of the prophecy, and Immanuel represents

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79 There is some ambiguity as to whether the הָמַעְלָה is already pregnant or whether she will become pregnant. There is also some discussion about whether הָמַעְלָה is a feminine adjective (BDB, 248), a “participial adjective” (cf. 2 Sam 11:5; Delitzsch, Isaiah, 1:216), or a “verbal adjective” which functions like a participle (Menken, “The Textual Form,” 153). The term הָמַעְלָה appears in the OT as a predicate, “pregnant” (Gen 38:24-25; 1 Sam 4:19; 2 Sam 11:5; Isa 7:14), as a substantive, “pregnant women, women with child” (Amos 1:13; 2 Kgs 8:12; 15:16; Isa 26:17; Jer 20:17; 31:8), and as a verb, “to conceive” (e.g., Gen 16:4-5; Exod 2:2; 2 Kgs 4:17). The verb is also attested in Ugaritic, Aramaic, and Akkadian with the meaning, “to be pregnant, conceive” (M. Ottosson, "יָוִּית," TDOT, 3:458). But in Isaiah 7:14, הָמַעְלָה is most likely an adjective since the feminine participle of הָמַעְלָה appears elsewhere as נָעֶל (Hos 2:5; cf. Edward J. Young, Studies in Isaiah [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954], 161).

80 The syntax of Isaiah 7:14 is most similar to the birth announcements of Ishmael (Gen 16:11) and Samson (Judg 13:5) with some differences. The syntax is יָוִּית + substantive (noun/pronoun) + הָמַעְלָה (adjective) + verb/participle. We know from the context of Genesis 16 and Judges 13 that Ishmael and Samson were born in the near future. Since Isaiah 7:14 is a similar birth announcement, then it would seem that Immanuel would be born in the near future. However, the syntax of Isaiah 7:14 is different in that it is יָוִּית + noun + adjective + participle (יָוִּית). This is important to the interpretation of the Immanuel prophecy as a whole. The syntax of יָוִּית + participle often points to something in the near future (cf. IBHS, 158-59, 625, 627; William F. Stinespring, “The Participle of the Immediate Future and Other Matters Pertaining to Correct Translation of the Old Testament,” in Translating & Understanding the Old Testament: Essays in Honor of Herbert Gordon May, eds. Harry Thomas Frank and William L. Reed [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1970], 64; Paul Joüon, A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew, trans. and rev. T. Muraoka, Subsidia Biblica, vol. 27 [Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 2006], §121e). Isaiah may be predicting that a woman who is a virgin will become pregnant in the near future and give birth to Immanuel as a sign to the contemporary audience.

However, יָוִּית + participle sometimes communicates the idea of certainty more than imminence (e.g., Gen 6:17; Isa 3:1; 17:1; Joel 3:7 [MT 4:7]; Mic 2:3; Zech 2:9 [MT 2:13]; Mal 3:1; cf. Richard A. Taylor and E. Ray Clendenen, Haggai, Malachi, NAC, vol. 21A [Nashville, Broadman & Holman Publishers], 290; GKC, §116p; S. R. Driver, A Treatise on the Use of the Tenses in Hebrew and Some Other Syntactical Questions [1874; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998], 168-69). Although each of these examples could have been fulfilled in the lifetime of the audience (e.g., Gen 6:17), the point is that the timing of the event was not known. Two other important examples are the prophecies of the birth of Josiah (1 Kgs 13:2) and the coming of the Messiah on a donkey (Zech 9:9). Both of these prophecies have the יָוִּית
the reality of God’s presence with His people in the person of Jesus Christ.  

When Matthew quotes Isaiah 7:14, he affirms that the birth of Christ is the fulfillment of the Immanuel prophecy in that Jesus is “God with us.”

There are several arguments which support the messianic view. 1) The immediate context of the Immanuel prophecy concerns the Davidic dynasty. Since Pekah and Rezin were threatening to depose of Ahaz and put Tabeel on the throne in Jerusalem (7:6), the LORD sent Isaiah and Shear-jashub to reassure Ahaz that these plans would not come to pass (7:1-8). The LORD warned Ahaz that if he would not believe, then he would not be established (גָּשִׁית). The LORD even invited Ahaz to ask for a miraculous sign to confirm the prophecy, but Ahaz piously refused because he had no intention of trusting in the LORD (7:10-12). Ahaz angered the LORD with his unbelief, and Isaiah no longer referred to the LORD as “your (Ahaz’s) God” (7:11) but to “my God” (7:13). The LORD resolved to judge the faithless king and the people of Judah by means of the Assyrians (7:17-25). But if the LORD judged the house of David (7:13), how would He keep His promise to David that his dynasty would be established (גָּשִׁית) forever (2 Sam 7:16; Psa 89:29)? The answer lies in the promised birth of Immanuel which would ensure that the Davidic line would be preserved until the sign was realized.  

Although Ahaz refused the + participle construction but refer to something in the distant future. The LXX and Matthew translate Isaiah 7:14 with futuristic verbs: ἰδοὺ ἐπὶ παρθένος ἐν γαστρὶ ἔχει καὶ τέξεται. In summary, the syntax of the Immanuel prophecy could support any interpretation, though the futuristic pregnancy is favored by the LXX and Matthew.

81 Some believe that ἰδοὺ ἐπὶ refers to the very nature of the child such that God’s presence “with us” is be found in the child Himself (e.g., John Calvin, Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, trans. William Pringle [1560; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948], 1:244; Hengstenberg, Christology, 2:48; Young, Studies, 187; Reymond, “Who is the ἱμανοῦ of Isaiah 7:14?” 7; J. Stafford Wright and C. Brown, “Εμμαυνοῦ,” NIDNTT 2:86).

sign, the LORD Himself would give a sign to the “house of David”, the Davidic line (7:13).  

2) The larger context of Isaiah 7-12 fits the messianic interpretation of Isaiah 7:14. Throughout Isaiah 7-12, there are prophecies of judgment and hope. Isaiah 7 includes judgment for Ahaz and Judah (7:17-25) as well as the hope of Immanuel (7:14-16). Isaiah 8 contains a prophecy of judgment about the coming Assyrian conquest of Syria and Israel within a few years (Isa 8:1-4) which includes an invasion of Judah (8:5-8), but the hope that the Assyrians would not completely conquer Immanuel’s land (8:9-10). The LORD will be a stumbling block to Israel and for Judah (8:14-15), and the people will be left roaming around in darkness (8:21-22), but the promise of hope comes in Isaiah 9 when the people living in darkness will see a great light (9:2). A Davidic son will be born who will be called “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace”, and he will reign on David’s throne forever (9:6-7). The judgment against Israel and Judah continues in Isaiah 9:8-10:4, but the LORD will also judge Assyria, the rod of His anger (10:5-19). In that day, the remnant of Israel will return to “Mighty God” (10:21; cf. 9:6), and the LORD would punish the Assyrians (10:24-34).

Although the Davidic line will be a stump after the judgments, a shoot of Jesse will come up and will be a Branch that bears fruit (11:1). This Branch will have the power and presence of the Spirit of the LORD (11:1), and He will judge the earth with righteousness

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84 In response, it must be recognized that the designation “house of David” can refer to the royal administration (e.g., Jer 21:12; Zech 12:7-12). The shift from “house of David” (7:2) to Ahaz (7:3-12) back to “house of David” (7:13) may just be stylistic (Walton, “Isa 7:14: What’s in a Name?”). However, the phrase “house of David” often refers to the Davidic line (e.g., 1 Kgs 13:2; 2 Chr 21:7; Isa 16:5; Zech 13:1).
(11:3-5). His kingdom will be marked by unparalleled peace (11:6-9), and this Root of Jesse will be a banner for the nations (11:10-16) which will be a cause for rejoicing (12:1-6). Thus, the promise of Immanuel ("God with us") fits the oscillating judgment and hope in Isaiah 7–12. The promise of Immanuel is also linked to the divine child in Isaiah 9:6-7 and to the righteous Branch in Isaiah 11. All three are connected to the House of David.

3) The sign originally offered to Ahaz was miraculous (7:11), so it would follow that the second sign offered would be miraculous. The term πρόβατα means "young, marriageable woman" who is a virgin as reflected in Isaiah 7:14 LXX and in Matthew 1:23. Although other interpretations can accommodate this definition, it strongly favors the messianic interpretation, especially since the virgin is pregnant. 5) Immanuel is the focal point of the prophecy. He is given a divine name and will exhibit moral

85 The Hebrew term πρόβατα, "sign, pledge, token" (BDB, 16-17; HALOT, 1:26), is used to refer to many different types of events. Similarly, the NT term σημείον means "a sign or distinguishing mark whereby something is known," or "an event that is an indication or confirmation of intervention by transcendent power" (BDAG, 920-21). In the OT, πρόβατα can refer to a distinguishing mark (Gen 4:15; Exod 8:19; 12:13; Josh 2:12), a reminder of duty (Gen 9:12; 17:11; Exod 31:13, 17; Isa 19:20), a commemorative token (Exod 13:9, 16; Num 17:25; Deut 6:8; Isa 55:13), a sign confirming the truth of an earlier statement (Exod 3:12; Judg 6:17; 1 Sam 2:34; 10:7, 9, 2 Kgs 19:29), a miraculous sign which proves someone’s authority or power (Exod 4:8, 9, 17, 28, 30; Deut 13:2), God’s miraculous signs (Exod 7:3; 10:1; Num 14:11, 22; Deut 4:34; Josh 24:17; Ps 65:9; Neh 9:10), an omen foretelling the future (Gen 1:14; 1 Sam 14:10; 2 Kgs 20:8; Isa 8:18; 20:3; 37:30; 38:7, 22; 66:19), and a warning sign (Num 17:3; Ps 86:17; Isa 44:25). Sometimes the signs were miraculous (e.g., Exod 4:9; Judg 6:17), but other times they were natural events that served as symbols or memorials (e.g., Josh 4:6; Isa 8:3-4). In Isaiah, the term πρόβατα refers to both non-miraculous signs (8:18; 19:20; 20:3; 37:30; 55:13; 66:19) as well as miraculous signs (7:11; 38:7-8, 22). The immediate context of Isaiah 7:11 points toward a miraculous sign, though.

86 See Ballard, “Isaiah 7:14: Virgin or Maiden?” 6-41.

87 One of the difficulties with the Immanuel prophecy is distinguishing the sign from the prophecy. The πρόβατα and Immanuel must at least be a part of the sign if not the sign itself. Thus, the sign may have been Isaiah’s miraculous prediction that at that very moment, a young woman was giving birth to a son and had named him Immanuel (Warren C. Trenchard and Larry G. Herr, “The Interpretation of the Old Testament in the New: Isaiah, Matthew, and the Virgin,” Spec 28, no. 1 [Winter 2000]: 19). The sign also could have been the newborn child himself (John J. Collins, “Isaiah,” in The Collegetville Bible Commentary, eds. Dianne Bergant and Robert J. Karris [Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1992], 1:422), or possibly the name “Immanuel” (e.g., Barnes, Isaiah, 1:253; Johann Jakob Stamm, “Die
discretion (7:15), and Immanuel is either the owner of the land or significant enough to represent it (8:8). Isaiah also uses his name as a statement of God’s protection of Judah against her enemies’ plans (8:10).  

6) No child born immediately would grow up eating “curds and honey” (7:15) or would experience the devastation of the Assyrians since the Assyrians did not come against Judah until the reign of Hezekiah. 7) No expositors have been able to convincingly prove an historical fulfillment. In fact, Ahaz never came to trust in the LORD. If there was an immediate sign and child which was supposed to spawn faith in Ahaz, then it did not work because Ahaz still sought help from Assyria (2 Chr 28:16ff).

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88 It is possible that יִם ויָג is just a theophoric name like יִמְשָׂג (Daniel), “God is my Judge,” or יָמֵן (Ezekiel), “God is strong.” Both of these names have the suffix יִם, but this does not imply that these men were God incarnate However, “Immanuel” certainly could point to one who is “God with us.”

89 Chisholm points out that the phrase “your land” can refer to ownership (e.g., Num 20:17; 21:22; Deut 2:27; Judg 11:17; Isa 14:20; 37:7), or it may simply describe one who lives in the land (Gen 12:1; 32:9; Isa 13:14; Jon 1:8) (Chisholm, Handbook, 33). In response, it should be pointed out that the context of the latter references (Gen 12:1; 32:9; Isa 13:14; Jon 1:8) depict the person’s land of origin, a context which does not fit Isaiah 8:8. Thus, Immanuel appears to be the owner or representative of the land.

90 Terry, Biblical Hermeneutics, 494; Charles Augustus Briggs, Messianic Prophecy (Edinburg: T & T Clark, 1886), 197.
Additionally, any hope that an Immanuel-child might have given to Ahaz (7:16) was short-lived because the LORD promised to judge Ahaz and Judah (7:17-25; 8:5-10). All of this points to the probability that Immanuel did not arrive in Ahaz’s time.

**Objections to the Messianic-Fulfillment View**

There are two major objections which are often leveled against the messianic view.\(^{92}\) The first objection is that the messianic view disregards the context of Isaiah 7 which seems to point toward a near fulfillment (7:16).\(^ {93}\) The second major objection is that if the prophecy was fulfilled in the distant future, then there was no relevance for Ahaz or the contemporary audience.\(^ {94}\) If Immanuel (Jesus) was not born until 730 years later, then Isaiah “was both mocking Ahaz in the depth of his crisis, and rendering himself absurd by proposing such a distant event as proof of his own veracity.”\(^ {95}\) Both of these objections are formidable, but scholars who defend the messianic interpretation have come up with several plausible responses.

In response to the first objection, proponents of the messianic interpretation have offered several possible solutions. 1) Some scholars believe that Isaiah 7:14-15 refers to Immanuel, but verse 16 refers to Shear-jashub, Isaiah’s first son. This view removes the

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92 The most prominent objection is that παρθένος does not mean “virgin”, but this objection has been dealt with elsewhere.


difficulty of the near fulfillment for the coming of Immanuel (Jesus) by using the childhood of Shear-jashub to mark the time to the destruction of Syria and Ephraim.\textsuperscript{96} If the prophecies of Isaiah 7:1-9 and 7:10-25 were given at the same time, then Isaiah had Shear-jashub (7:3) with him when he gave the Immanuel prophecy.\textsuperscript{97} Verse 16 could then read, “Indeed,\textsuperscript{98} before the boy (Shear-jashub, who is present here)\textsuperscript{99} knows enough to refuse evil and choose good, the land whose two kings you dread will be forsaken.”\textsuperscript{100} Advocates of this view point out that it is odd that Isaiah used the term נְזֵר, “boy, lad,” to refer to Immanuel instead of בָּנוּ, “son,” or יְהוָה נַעֲמָל, “Immanuel.” Since Immanuel had not yet been born and grown up into a נְזֵר, then the “lad” must be Shear-jashub. If this is true, then the repetition of “knows enough to refuse evil and choose good” in verses 15 and 16 could be Isaiah’s way of tying together Immanuel in 7:14 with Shear-jashub in 7:16.\textsuperscript{101} Against this interpretation is the fact that Isaiah uses the term נְזֵר for Maher-shalal-hash-baz before he is born (8:4). Another objection is that Isaiah 7:14-16 appears to be a

\textsuperscript{96} E.g., Unger, \textit{Unger’s Guide to the Bible}, 189-90; Robert I. Vasholz, “Isaiah and Ahaz: A Brief History of Crisis in Isaiah 7 and 8,” \textit{PCSR} 13, no. 2 (Fall 1987): 83.

\textsuperscript{97} This interpretation was proposed by John Wesley who said that Shear-jashub was brought along for this very purpose (John Wesley, \textit{Wesley’s Notes on the Bible}, ed. Roger G. Schoenhals [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987], 324; cf. William Kelly, \textit{An Exposition of the Book of Isaiah}, 4th ed. [Minneapolis: Klock & Clock Christian Publishers, 1979], 125).

\textsuperscript{98} Bird translates יָא as “yea,” indeed,” “surely,” as it also appears in 7:9, 22 (Bird, “Who is ‘The Boy’ in Isaias 7:16?” 440; cf. BDB, 471-474; \textit{IBHS} §40.2.2b).

\textsuperscript{99} Bultema states, “We can imagine the prophet pointing with his finger at Shear-jashub, the little fellow he held by the hand” (Harry Bultema, \textit{Commentary on Isaiah}, trans. Cornelius Lambregste [1923; repr., Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1981], 108; cf. Aaron J. Kligerman, \textit{Messianic Prophecy in the Old Testament} [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1957], 74).

\textsuperscript{100} Smith, \textit{Isaiah 1–39}, 215n282.

\textsuperscript{101} Ibid.
unified prophecy describing the same child.\textsuperscript{102} A third objection is that there is no textual evidence for the idea that Isaiah pointed to his own son when he mentioned “the boy.”

2) Another possibility is that the Immanuel prophecy was not fulfilled immediately as one might expect because Isaiah’s vision lacked perspective. Isaiah saw both the immediate desolation and the birth of the Messiah in the same vision,\textsuperscript{103} but he did not know exactly when the prophecy would be fulfilled.\textsuperscript{104} Isaiah might not have been aware of the timing of the Messiah’s coming (1 Pet 1:10-11), and he may have expected the Messiah to come at any time in the near future.

3) A third view is that Isaiah saw the \( \pi\nu\mu\nu\delta\nu \) in a prophetic vision,\textsuperscript{105} and he used the childhood of Immanuel (Jesus) as a measuring stick for near events.\textsuperscript{106} The weakness of this view is that there is nothing which directly indicates that Isaiah saw a vision. However, it is not unusual for Isaiah to make vivid predictions of persons or events as if they were present to his perception (e.g., 11:1ff; 34:1ff; 52:13-53:12; 66:12ff). Among


his many prophecies, there are only a few which are clearly given in a vision (cf. 1:1; 2:1; 6:1; 13:1; 21:2; 22:1).

4) A fourth view is that Isaiah 7:16 simply states that Immanuel would reach the age of accountability sometime after Assyria had devastated Syria, Israel, and Judah. The main clause of verse 16 is “the land…will be forsaken,” and the subordinating clause is “before the boy will know….” The reason why the subordinating clause comes first is because the prophecy is primarily about Immanuel, not about Ahaz. The phrase “knows to refuse evil and choose good” connects the child in verse 15 with the events of verses 16ff. However, verse 16 does not actually comment on the amount of time which would pass before Syria and Israel would be forsaken, though it is often read this way.  

Verses 16-25 provide the explanation for why Immanuel, the central figure of the prophecy, would grow up eating “curds and honey” (7:15). The Assyrians would come against the two kings threatening Ahaz, but they would also invade Judah. Ahaz made a foolish decision while living in luxury, but Immanuel would learn moral discernment through the poverty which resulted from the coming devastation (7:22; cf. Heb 5:8). Immanuel need


108 Translating and interpreting the awkward phrase in 7:16b, “the land whose two kings you dread,” has perplexed all interpreters. First, there is no other place where two kings or kingdoms are identified by the singular noun נֵבָן, “land.” The term נב can refer to land in the political sense (e.g., 7:18), but נבנ refers to cultivated land (Kissane, Isaiah, 1:92). One possible solution is that נבנ is a reference not to Israel and Syria, but to the combined land of Israel and Judah. This is supported by the fact that Ephraim and Judah are mentioned together in Isaiah 7:17: “The LORD will bring on you, on your people, and on your father’s house such days as have never come since the day that Ephraim separated from Judah, the king of Assyria.” Isaiah also speaks of “both houses of Israel” in 8:14. The two kings then are not Pekah and Rezin but Pekah and Ahaz (Payne, “Right Questions,” 82; cf. Murray R. Adamthwaite, “Isaiah 7:16: Key to the Immanuel Prophecy,” RTR 59, no. 2 [Aug 2000]: 80). The following context of 7:17-22, as well as the parallel prophecy in 8:5-18, points to Judah as the land to be devastated by Assyria (Kissane, Isaiah, 1:92).
only be associated with the results of the Assyrian invasion which remained for a long time after the actual invasion.\textsuperscript{109} One might object that Jesus grew up long after the Assyrians had come and gone. But it is interesting to note that Matthew connects the time of the exile to the advent of Christ in the opening verses of his gospel (Matt 1:17). Indeed, Jesus grew up in a time when Israel was still under foreign dominion (Matt 2:1) which began with Ahaz’s foolish decision to reject the LORD.

In response to the second objection, scholars have offered two responses. Some believe that the Immanuel prophecy had no relevance to Ahaz because he had forfeited his right to a sign through his stubborn unbelief.\textsuperscript{110} The LORD was finished with him as indicated by the judgment pronounced upon Judah in Isaiah 7:17-25.\textsuperscript{111} Furthermore, an immediate sign would not have profited Ahaz anything since he had already decided to call upon Assyria.\textsuperscript{112} Others believe that the prophecy was relevant to Ahaz because the birth of Immanuel reassured him that the house of David would be preserved through the coming devastation.\textsuperscript{113} When Ahaz saw the Assyrians advancing against Syria and Israel, he would have reason to believe that Immanuel would coming too. In addition, an

\textsuperscript{109} Isaiah had already mentioned before he gave the Immanuel prophecy that Ephraim would be shattered within 65 years (7:8), demonstrating that his perspective is not limited to the next few years after the Syro-Ephraimite Crisis (Payne, “Right Questions,” 80).

\textsuperscript{110} E.g., Robert Govett, \textit{Govett on Isaiah} (1841; repr., Miami Springs, FL: Conley & Schoettle, 1984), 151; Freeman, \textit{An Introduction}, 206. If the sign is wrapped up in the age of Immanuel, and if the age of his moral accountability was somewhere between 12-20 years such that the prophecy and sign were fulfilled with the fall of Samaria in 722 BC, then the prophecy would have no relevance to Ahaz since Ahaz died before the fall of Samaria (Davis, \textit{Dictionary}, 333).

\textsuperscript{111} Pieper, “The Great Prophecy,” 203.


immediate fulfillment is not required for the prophecy to be relevant.\textsuperscript{114} The more remote the fulfillment of the prophecy was, the stronger the promise was of the continuation of the Davidic dynasty.\textsuperscript{115}

\textbf{V. CONCLUSION}

Although the interpretation of the Immanuel prophecy has long been the subject of heated debates, any of the abovementioned interpretations is a viable option for evangelicals since the virgin birth of Christ is firmly established in Matthew and Luke. Each interpretation has its own strengths and supporting arguments as it attempts to incorporate all of the details of this difficult prophecy, and no explanation is fully satisfactory and without difficulties. This writer favors the traditional, messianic interpretation because of the meaning of παρθένος (virgin), because of the context of Isaiah 7-12, and because of the difficulty of identifying an historical Immanuel in Isaiah’s day. Thus, Isaiah 7:14 is a messianic prophecy fulfilled in the birth of Christ who is truly “God with us.”

\textsuperscript{114} Payne, “Right Questions,” 79. Payne also points out that the promise of the Davidic Messiah was relevant to Ahaz because it meant that Ahaz could be replaced (ibid., 83).

\textsuperscript{115} Alexander, \textit{Isaiah}, 1:171.


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