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 THE MASTER’S SEMINARY JOURNAL

CONTENTS

Editorial.....	207
<i>John MacArthur</i>	
“They Were Not Serving Themselves, but You”: Reclaiming the Prophets’ Messianic Intention.....	211
<i>Abner Chou</i>	
Reverse of the Curse: An Allusion to Genesis 3:15 in Psalm 110:1	239
<i>Iosif J. Zhakevich</i>	
A Tale of Two Brothers: The Messiah in Genesis 49	255
<i>Paul Twiss</i>	
The Messiah in Isaiah 7:14: The Virgin Birth.....	271
<i>Todd Bolen</i>	
Priest According to the Order of Melchizedek.....	297
<i>Bryan Murphy</i>	
The Messiah in the Minor Prophets.....	305
<i>David Zadok</i>	
Isaiah 52: The Identity and Ministry of the Servant of the LORD.....	319
<i>Menachem I. Kalisher</i>	
Reviews	335
<i>The Destruction of the Canaanites: God, Genocide, and Biblical Interpretation</i> by Charlie Trimm.....	
Reviewed by Michael A. Grisanti	
<i>A Handbook on the Jewish Roots of the Christian Faith</i> edited by Craig A. Evans and David Mishkin.....	
Reviewed by Iosif J. Zhakevich	
<i>Our Comfort in Dying: Civil War Sermons by R. L. Dabney,</i> <i>Stonewall Jackson’s Chief of Staff</i> by R. L. Dabney	
Reviewed by William Varner	
<i>R. C. Sproul: A Life</i> by Stephen J. Nichols.....	
Reviewed by Brad Pixley	

THE MESSIAH IN ISAIAH 7:14: THE VIRGIN BIRTH

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* * * * *

Many evangelical scholars deny that Isaiah’s prophecy of a virgin giving birth to Immanuel directly predicts the birth of Jesus, arguing that the words and syntax of Isaiah 7:14 demand fulfillment in the time of King Ahaz. This article provides three arguments to support a messianic-only interpretation. First, the greater context of chapters 1–12 consistently anticipates immediate judgment upon the nation, with Judah’s hope lying beyond exile when God takes up residence with his people. Second, hermeneutical proposals of double fulfillment are shown to be unconvincing because they lack any basis in the text. Third, analysis of Isaiah 7:14–17 reveals that an 8th-century fulfillment is impossible given the nature of the sign, the meaning of almah, the syntax of the announcement, as well as the child’s name, role, diet, and character. A closer look at the timeline in Isaiah 7:16–17 shows that Immanuel could only be born after the land of Judah was laid waste, a reality that did not occur in the 8th century. This study thus concludes that Matthew and the early church exercised sound exegetical and hermeneutical principles in identifying Jesus as the sole fulfillment of the Isaiah 7:14 prophecy.

* * * * *

Isaiah the prophet had a most fitting name, for his book reveals how “Yahweh is salvation.” Though the sinful nation would be hardened in their sin through his preaching, atonement was freely offered to those who recognized their woeful condition and trusted in the Lord. The depravity of the nation began at the top, with King Ahaz rejecting Yahweh’s salvation in favor of Assyrian “salvation,” and King Hezekiah putting his trust in the Babylonians (Isa 7, 39). The salvation that Isaiah progressively revealed centered on a king who would trust Yahweh and rule over the nation in righteousness. This same king would serve his people by laying down his life to atone for their sins, and he would be raised to life to bring the scattered exiles back to the land so that the now holy people would accomplish their original purpose of displaying God’s glory to the nations.

What Isaiah then chiefly reveals is that Yahweh's salvation comes through the Servant-King, an individual who is at once markedly human yet also more than a man. His humanity is emphasized through the prophecies of his childhood, his ordinary appearance, and his suffering unto death (Isa 49:5; 53:2, 9). His deity is adumbrated through his divine names, his perfect righteousness, and his ability to atone for the sins of the nation (Isa 9:6; 11:2–5; 53:4–12). He is the “seed” who is “holy,” the child called “Mighty God,” and the one who dies yet reigns forever (Isa 6:13; 9:6–7; 52:13–53:12). The Messiah's mission was not only to restore Israel, but to be Yahweh's salvation to the ends of the earth (Isa 49:6).

This portrait of the Messiah in Isaiah is confirmed in the apostolic writings of the New Testament as well as by interpreters throughout church history. But whereas many evangelical scholars today would largely agree with this overall presentation, many would exclude Isaiah 7:14's prophecy of the virgin birth of Immanuel as directly predictive of the Messiah. Instead, they argue that this prophecy was fulfilled in some manner in the time of Isaiah. The *almah* was actually a young married woman who gave birth to a child named Immanuel as a sign to Ahaz that God was with Judah in the dark hours of foreign invasion.

The debate has been quite contentious, particularly in the 20th century. The single greatest factor behind conservatives' rejection of the Revised Standard Version (RSV) in the 1950s was the translation of *almah* in Isaiah 7:14 as “young woman” instead of “virgin.” The creation of the New American Standard Bible was one of the results of this controversy, and the RSV and its successor NRSV are only rarely found in evangelical churches. It may then be surprising to some that many evangelical scholars today believe that “young woman” is the correct translation, and that a young married woman gave birth to an Immanuel child prior to the birth of Jesus.

Some representative evangelical scholars may be cited. Eugene Merrill writes, “The lexicography and grammar certainly favor the idea that a young woman (thus *almâ*), well-known to King Ahaz and the prophet, would soon give birth to a child against all odds of it happening naturally.”¹ James Hamilton agrees: “Taken in the context of Isaiah 7, it is hard to deny that verse 14 directly predicts a child who would be born *during* rather than *after* Ahaz's life.”²

Stating the matter more strongly, Rodney Decker argues that “Isaiah did not prophesy regarding the birth of Messiah. He would not have known that his prophecy of the destruction of Aram and Israel, of the birth of a son as a sign of God's presence with his people, and of the explanatory text surrounding those statements, had any reference beyond the 8th century BC.”³ Steve Moyise is emphatic: “If this is a prediction of the birth of Jesus 700 years hence, then it makes utter nonsense of the story being narrated in Isaiah.”⁴

¹ Eugene H. Merrill, *Everlasting Dominion: A Theology of the Old Testament* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2006), 510.

² James M. Hamilton Jr., “‘The Virgin Will Conceive’: Typological Fulfillment in Matthew 1:18–23,” in *Built upon the Rock: Studies in the Gospel of Matthew*, ed. Daniel M. Gurtner and John Nolland (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 238–39; emphasis original.

³ Rodney J. Decker, “Twisted Text? The New Testament's Uses of the Old” (The Clearwater Lectures: Central Baptist Theological Seminary of Virginia Beach, VA, 2002), 50.

⁴ Steve Moyise, *The Old Testament in the New: An Introduction*, 2nd ed., T & T Clark Approaches to Biblical Studies (London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2015), 3.

The goal of this article is to prove the very opposite. In fact, the lexicography, grammar, and context of Isaiah 7 positively preclude the possibility of a child being born during Ahaz's life. Furthermore, the acceptance of an 8th-century fulfillment eliminates the possibility of the fulfillment in the birth of Jesus, and the various hermeneutical maneuvers used to justify the "both/and" approach—including double fulfillment, *sensus plenior*, and typology—are illegitimate, persuasive only to those determined to save Matthew from the charge of misreading the text.

There is no need to come to Matthew's rescue, or to that of the church who for centuries believed in a single fulfillment of the Immanuel prophecy.⁵ Matthew was not ignorant of Hebrew grammar or syntax, nor would he have expected that his Jewish audience would have permitted him some dubious hermeneutical tactic. He knew that they would be "examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so" (Acts 17:11).⁶

This article will demonstrate that Isaiah 7:14 is strictly and solely a prophecy that was fulfilled in the virgin birth of Jesus. It will do this first by examining the greater context of chapters 1–12, revealing that Isaiah's hope for the nation resided strictly and solely in salvation *after judgment* in the form of a child who will be both Israel's king and "God with us." Second, hermeneutical proposals of double fulfillment will be evaluated and shown to lack any textual basis. Third, an analysis of chapter 7 will show that Isaiah's hope for the nation was found in the miraculous birth of a child born to a virgin after judgment had fallen on the nation. Contrary to the analysis of many modern interpreters, the details of the Hebrew text, including the oft-cited references to time markers, eliminate the possibility that Isaiah 7:14 could have been fulfilled anytime before the year 586 BC.

The Book of Immanuel (Isaiah 1–12)

Including a broader survey of Isaiah 1–12 is not common in a study of the Immanuel debate, but I believe that the greater context essentially resolves the interpretive question of 7:14. In other words, the reader who is familiar with chapters 1–6 and 8–12 can predict the content of chapter 7 on the assumption that Isaiah presents a unified message. Isaiah 7:14 is indeed entirely consistent with the message of the prophet in the preceding and following chapters. To say it another way, if Isaiah 7:14 was a glorious sign of hope fulfilled in the time of Ahaz, it was a decidedly jarring prophecy unlike anything else in the context.

The common disregard for the greater context is no small matter, and it may be the single greatest factor contributing to the erroneous interpretations of Isaiah 7 over the years. Ignoring the context surely makes it easier to adopt a non-messianic interpretation of Isaiah's prophecy. In fact, this general principle may be observed from the history of interpretation of Isaiah 7: non-messianic views require atomizing

⁵ Cf. *Isaiah 1–39*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture Steven A. McKinion, ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 60–64; John Skinner, *The Book of the Prophet Isaiah, Chapters I–XXXIX. With Introduction and Notes*, The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1897), 64.

⁶ Contra John Goldingay who believes that NT authors were speaking only to those already persuaded. John Goldingay, *Isaiah for Everyone*, Old Testament for Everyone (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2015), 32.

the text, an approach popularized by higher-critical methodologies with their interest in identifying underlying sources and their resistance to the unity of the text. Evangelical scholars, perhaps to some degree unwittingly, could have been influenced by this approach, with the result that conclusions about Isaiah 7:14 are sometimes based on analysis of a few words or a few verses but without regard to the book of Isaiah as a whole, or the so-called “book of Immanuel” (chapters 1–12) more specifically. Three striking omissions illustrate this failure in numerous studies: the meaning of curds and honey, the connection to the child of chapter 9, and the theme of “God with us” from chapters 2 to 12. The fact is that the greater context precludes a non-messianic interpretation of the virgin birth prophecy.

Judgment and Hope in Isaiah 1–5

It is well-known that throughout his book Isaiah easily moves back and forth between themes. This is the case in the first five chapters, where Isaiah interweaves the themes of the nation’s guilt, judgment, and hope. The first chapter is primarily one of indictment, charging the people for false religiosity, social injustice, and defiance of God’s law. Consequently, the prophet foresees the nation being ravaged, destroyed like Sodom except for a few survivors. Yet God promises to smelt away their dross and restore their judges so that “afterwards” Jerusalem “will be called the city of righteousness” (Isa 1:26). Already in chapter 1, Isaiah’s message is clear: judgment is coming soon, but restoration will follow.

In chapter 2, Isaiah briefly develops this idea of restoration, declaring that “in the last days” all nations will stream up to Zion to learn from the Lord (Isa 2:2). Israel’s hope lies in the future, at a time when the Lord himself will reside in Jerusalem, judging between the nations and establishing peace on earth. Beyond the impending invasion of armies to destroy Israel’s land, the Lord will be with his people to fulfill their mission of being a kingdom of priests and a marvel to the world (cf. Exod 19:5–6; Deut 4:6–8).

The rest of chapter 2 and all of chapter 3 describe Israel’s pride and coming judgment. The nation is guilty of parading their sin like Sodom, and so their men will be slain, and their women disgraced. But after judgment, there is hope, for “in that day the Branch of Yahweh will be beautiful and glorious” (Isa 4:2). While the reference to this “Branch” will become clearer later in the book of Isaiah (with its messianic references to stump, shoot, and root) and be confirmed by Jeremiah and Zechariah (Jer 23:5; 33:15; Zech 3:8; 6:12), the immediate context reveals the transformation brought about in that future day. The remnant of Jerusalem will be called holy, their women’s filth will be cleansed, and Yahweh will dwell with his people as a cloud by day and a flaming fire by night (Isa 4:2–5). Once again, Israel’s hope lies on the far side of judgment when God will reside with them.

Israel’s immediate reality, however, is depicted in a song in which Yahweh’s vineyard must be made a wasteland because it is worthless. A drumbeat of six woes condemns the nation for rejecting Yahweh’s law and reveals that his angry hand is raised in righteous judgment. The Lord calls the nations to carry Judah off into the darkness of exile (Isa 5:1–30).

The message of chapters 1–5 is the message of the book of Isaiah in embryonic form. Later chapters will provide further detail about the identity of the invading

nations, the nature of the coming exile, the character of the glorious branch, and the establishment of Zion in righteousness, but the framework of Isaiah's prophecy is in place and will not be altered. It should be emphasized: Israel's hope lies on the other side of judgment. The nation's guilt demands punishment, but a remnant will be preserved and made holy so that God may dwell with his people. Nothing in the text to this point suggests that faithless Judah has any short-term hope.

Judgment and Hope in Isaiah 6

Chapter 6 is well-known for being a critical hinge chapter in the book of Immanuel, bridging the more general prophecies given in chapters 1–5 with the more specific ones of chapters 7–12. In this vision of the Lord, Isaiah's guilt is removed in a picture of the nation's future forgiveness. But Isaiah's immediate commission is to bring about the nation's hardening through his preaching, resulting in the people being deported and the land being left desolate. But though Isaiah's ministry results in the nation's judgment—the metaphorical cutting down of Israel's forest—a “stump” remains, which is the “holy seed” (Isa 6:13).

Though the identity of the seed is not clarified in the immediate context, the alert reader recalls the “seed” of the woman to crush the serpent, the “seed” of Abraham to bring blessing to the world, and the “seed” of David to reign forever (Gen 3:15; 22:18; 2 Sam 7:12–16). Furthermore, the reader of Isaiah already anticipates Yahweh's glorious branch, a purified Israel, and the nations being blessed from Zion (Isa 2:1–4; 4:2–6). That all these threads converge in one individual becomes indisputable later in Isaiah, Jeremiah, Zechariah, and in the New Testament, but we should not be surprised to see the convergence even sooner in Isaiah 7–12. The connections become more obvious if we do not overlook the descriptor “holy” used of the seed, particularly in a context where only Yahweh is holy, and where Isaiah declares himself ruined. Whoever this seed is, he is surely greater than Isaiah.⁷ With the introduction of a glorious branch and a holy seed, the prophet has prepared us well for chapter 7.

Judgment and Hope in Isaiah 7–12

In chapter 7, King Ahaz proves himself to be like the nation in its rebellion against the Lord. Faced with invasion by Aram and Ephraim, Ahaz must decide whom to trust for his salvation. Through Isaiah, Yahweh appeals to the king to stand firm in faith, or he will not stand at all. Though offered a sign of his own choosing, Ahaz refuses to trust the Lord. Second Kings 16 fills in the details: Ahaz has sought salvation not from Yahweh, but from Assyria, paying them a heavy bribe to attack his enemies and end the siege (2 Kgs 16:7–8). What Isaiah said in response to Ahaz's faithless decision is the controversial subject of this paper and will be developed below, but this much is indisputable: Ahaz chose to be saved by Assyria, and so he

⁷ One could argue that the “holy seed” here is collective, given the prophecy in 4:3 that the people will be holy. Further revelation, however, will clarify that a single holy individual brings about the atonement of his people, thereby securing their holiness (Isa 53:5–12; 59:16–62:12).

will be “saved” by Assyria.⁸ What Ahaz seeks as salvation is actually destruction, and the land of Judah will be ravaged to the point where the remnant who survives will eat a diet of curds and honey. As in the preceding chapters, Isaiah’s message is that Israel’s sin merits judgment. The only question in chapter 7 is the nature of the hope that the Lord offers through the birth of the Immanuel child.

Chapter 8 begins with the birth of a son to Isaiah whose name signifies the destruction of Aram and Ephraim. But while this may, at first glance, appear to be good news, it is only pseudo-salvation, for it is brought about by the arrival of Assyria. Isaiah explains that because Judah rejected the Lord, symbolized by the gentle waters flowing from Jerusalem’s spring, they will be inundated by the overflowing river of Assyria. But once again, judgment is not the last word, for Judah’s land belongs to “Immanuel,” and God will be with his people to shatter the invaders (Isa 8:1–10). It is important to note here that an individual named Immanuel can lay claim to the land, and that the deliverance occurs after Judah’s destruction. The hope of this passage comes not before the judgment, but after.

Given the impending judgment, the Lord directs Isaiah to prepare his disciples by teaching them to wait upon him and to guard the word of the Lord (Isa 8:11–22). The nation is about to enter its darkest hour, and the way through is by clinging to the Lord who has promised Israel’s restoration. Indeed, the darkness will remain until a great light dawns on the land of Galilee (Isa 9:1–2). The tribes that had first experienced judgment through the Assyrian invasion will be the first to be honored by the appearance of this light. The nation once reduced in territory will now be enlarged, and their sorrow will be replaced by joy, for Yahweh will defeat the enemy, destroy the battle gear, and give the nation a child who will reign on David’s throne as “Mighty God,” establishing peace and righteousness without end (Isa 9:3–7). Some readers may be inclined to identify this king with the glorious branch and the holy seed. Should he not also be identified as the “God-with-us” child?

Chapters 9 and 10 continue with four stanzas expressing Israel’s guilt and judgment, with each stanza concluding that “in spite of all this, His anger does not turn away” (Isa 9:8–10:4). But this judgment is not the last word, for the Assyrians who execute Yahweh’s judgment will themselves be completely destroyed (Isa 10:5–19). And it will be “in that day” that the remnant of Israel will finally trust the Lord and return to the “Mighty God” (Isa 10:20–21). Once again, we see salvation on the far side of exile. We also see the role of the child born to reign on David’s throne in restoring the remnant.

Chapter 11 begins with a prophecy of a shoot springing up from the stump of Jesse, reminding the reader of the glorious branch and the holy-seed stump. Though the Hebrew words here are not the same ones used in Isaiah 4:2 and 6:13, the conceptual connection is unmistakable. As is his method, Isaiah builds on ideas previously introduced, providing more detail. The glorious branch who is associated with a holy remnant in chapter 4, and the holy seed that survives the nation’s

⁸ As Peter J. Gentry observes, “The brief conversation recorded between Ahaz and Isaiah is a pivotal point in the narrative plot-structure of the Old Testament that causes the tree of the Davidic dynasty to be cut down.” Peter J. Gentry, “Isaiah 7:12–16—Cutting Down the Davidic Tree: Pivotal Point in the Israelite Monarchy,” *Journal of Biblical and Theological Studies* 4, no. 1 (2019): 54.

destruction in chapter 6, is now identified as a fruitful branch who is a new David.⁹ The righteous conditions of chapter 4, and the holy nature of the seed in chapter 6, are realized here in Yahweh's Spirit resting on this individual so that he judges the nation in absolute righteousness. This must be the same individual as the child born to establish righteousness throughout David's kingdom (Isa 9:6–7). His role in restoring his people from exile, previously seen in Isaiah 10:20–21, is developed further in 11:10–16.

The “book of Immanuel” concludes with an exuberant song in chapter 12, with the people rejoicing that Yahweh's anger has turned away and he has become their salvation. The nation has faced God's just judgment and come out on the other side. The concluding verse is exactly what we would expect, for the inhabitant of Zion is told to shout for joy, “for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel” (Isa 12:6). God will be with his people in salvation after judgment.

Immanuel in the Context of Isaiah 1–12

Isaiah's message in chapters 1–12 is a unified one: Judah is guilty of covenant treachery, displayed dramatically in choosing Assyria as her savior, and the Lord will use Assyria as the rod of his anger to destroy Judah and carry the people into exile.¹⁰ Ahaz could not save his dynasty through his works, but the Lord would preserve the house of David through his promise. Out of the exile, a child will be born to defeat the nation's enemies, restore the people to their land, and establish righteousness in David's kingdom eternally. He is the glorious branch, the holy seed, the Mighty God, and the Spirit-endowed son of David. This is the portrait that emerges even without the testimony of chapter 7.¹¹ The question now is how the prophecy of the Immanuel child fits in this greater context.

Isaiah 1–6, 8–12 Individual	Isaiah 7 Individual
Born in a devastated land (6:13; 8:10)	Born in a devastated land (7:15, 18–25)
Identified with God by his name (9:6)	Identified with God by his name (7:14)
Belongs to the royal family (9:7; 11:1)	Belongs to the royal family (7:13–14)
Emphasis on individual as child (9:6)	Emphasis on individual as child (7:14–16)
Emphasis on the child's naming (9:6)	Emphasis on the child's naming (7:14)
Able to make righteous decisions (9:7; 11:3–5)	Able to make righteous decisions (7:15–16)

⁹ The contemporary prophet Micah will also suggest that the king who arises out of exile is a new David by virtue of his birth in Bethlehem (Mic 5:2–4).

¹⁰ The baton of Judah's judgment is passed from Assyria to Babylon when Ahaz's son Hezekiah chooses Yahweh for salvation instead of Assyria, and Jerusalem and the house of David avoid conquest (Isa 36–37). But when Hezekiah trusts Babylon, Isaiah reveals that Babylon will conquer Judah and carry off the princes of the house of David (Isa 39).

¹¹ Micah's contemporary prophecy confirms this interpretation of Isaiah. He too sees an immediate destruction of Jerusalem—“Zion will be plowed as a field”—but “in the last days,” Jerusalem will be restored when the Bethlehem-born ruler from ancient times brings Israel back to the land and establishes peace (3:12–5:5).

As we come then to a careful investigation of chapter 7, we can expect one of three possible conclusions for relating the Immanuel child to the greater context of chapters 1–12: (1) the Immanuel child is the future king described in the greater context; (2) the Immanuel child has no relation to the future king described in the greater context; or (3) there is some kind of double fulfillment, with the child born in chapter 7 somehow foreshadowing or typifying the future king.

On the face of it, option one probably would be the first choice of all evangelical interpreters absent the details of 7:14–17. Indeed, those who end up preferring option three would likely agree that the greater context surely has some kind of “influence” on their interpretation of the Immanuel passage. In other words, whereas they believe that the language of 7:14–17 by itself demands a child born in the time of Ahaz, the “atmosphere” of the chapters also suggests some kind of relationship between Immanuel and the future Davidic king.¹²

The problem with some kind of double or typological fulfillment of the Immanuel prophecy in Jesus is that there is no basis for such an idea in the text of chapter 7. A considerable variety of explanations have been offered for how an Immanuel child could have been born twice, but their sheer number indicates that none of them have met with any kind of broad acceptance.¹³ They are all intended to provide evangelicals with a hermeneutical “escape hatch,” allowing them to honor their non-messianic interpretation of Isaiah 7 while still as Christians affirming the inspiration and accuracy of Matthew’s fulfillment quotation.

This double-fulfillment approach will be considered next, beginning with a brief summary of why many interpreters feel compelled to see an 8th-century Immanuel child, followed by a critique of proposed hermeneutical solutions. After that, I will show how an accurate interpretation of Isaiah 7:13–17 eliminates the possibility of an 8th-century fulfillment. Ultimately, my goal is to show that not only does any sort of double-fulfillment interpretation fail textually and hermeneutically, but that there is no need for interpreters to seek anything other than a messianic-only fulfillment.

Arguments for Contemporary Fulfillment

Christians who believe in a contemporary fulfillment of Immanuel’s birth have a variety of textual arguments, but they all agree that the specific language of Isaiah 7:14–16 demands a child born in the time of Isaiah. Their two most significant arguments are: (1) a sign would have no significance to Ahaz if not fulfilled at that time; and (2) the boy had to be born before Aram and Ephraim were destroyed. The most common identification for an 8th-century fulfillment is Isaiah’s son Maher-shalal-hash-baz, and this proposal merits further consideration. It will also be noted below that the interpretation of *almah* as “young woman” (instead of “virgin”) does not require a contemporary fulfillment, but only allows for it.

¹² Though stating that the identification of Immanuel as Maher-shalal-hash-baz is the “most attractive option,” John Oswalt also notes a “remarkable congruence” between the child of ch 9 and Immanuel and asserts that the child of ch 9 is the “ultimate fulfillment of the Immanuel sign.” John Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1–39*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 213, 247.

¹³ Oswalt, *Isaiah*, 207–208.

Scholars regularly claim that a prophecy that would not be fulfilled for more than seven centuries would have no relevance to Ahaz and his contemporaries, and such an interpretation is thus excluded. Duane Garrett provides a recent example of this argument: "It is hard to see how the birth of Jesus has any relevance for this war [against Aram and Ephraim], and it is impossible to explain how it could serve as a sign to Ahaz. By the time Jesus was born, everyone involved in this story had been dead for some seven hundred years."¹⁴

The second argument is generally considered to be even more significant in denying a messianic-only fulfillment. In this interpretation, verse 16 provides a timeline which requires that the child was born before the destruction of Aram and Ephraim, not later than 732 BC.¹⁵ The LSB translation of this verse is not significantly different than other major translations: "For before the boy will know to refuse evil and choose good, the land whose two kings you dread will be forsaken." The word translated "before" is *בְּתֵרֶם* (*beterem*), and this places Assyria's conquest of Ahaz's enemies prior to the child reaching the age of maturity.¹⁶ The chronological sequence is thus adduced as follows: (1) Immanuel is born; (2) the land of Israel and Aram is laid waste; (3) Immanuel knows to reject the wrong and choose the right. This is not a correct chronological analysis, as will be shown below, but it is a common interpretation that necessitates the fulfillment of the Immanuel prophecy during the reign of Ahaz.¹⁷

This argument is usually supported by appealing to the birth of the child in chapter 8. There we see a number of similarities with the prophecy of Isaiah 7:14, including a sign that a boy will be born, a prophecy of the child's name, and most importantly, the timing of the destruction of Israel and Aram being linked to the age of the child. Many, in fact, believe that Isaiah 8 records a fulfillment (or partial fulfillment) of the 7:14 prophecy. In this scenario, the *almah* is Isaiah's wife, and the timeframe of Israel's deliverance is within a couple of years of the baby's birth. This view is also deemed attractive because otherwise there is no mention of the prophecy of 7:14 being fulfilled.

The identification of Immanuel with Maher-shalal-hash-baz is by no means unanimous among those who hold to an 8th-century fulfillment, particularly because they recognize differences between the children that are too significant to overcome. The objections are substantial: (1) Though the Lord says that the prophesied child will be called Immanuel, and though it is in Isaiah's power to so name him, the prophet gives his child a different name. (2) The name that Isaiah gives the child has a symbolic meaning which is unrelated to the meaning of Immanuel, and which speaks of judgment, not hope. (3) The mother of the child is not identified as an

¹⁴ Duane A. Garrett, *The Problem of the Old Testament: Hermeneutical, Schematic, and Theological Approaches* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2020), 358.

¹⁵ Assyria conquered Galilee, Gilead, and Damascus by 732 BC, thereby eliminating the threat to Judah.

¹⁶ A qualification may be made: while all agree that *בְּתֵרֶם* serves as a time marker, some try to solve the problem by proposing a shift in subject in this verse, such that the boy in view is no longer the Immanuel child but another child, such as Shear-jashub. E.g., Michael Rydelnik, "Isaiah 7:1-16: The Virgin Birth in Prophecy," in *The Moody Handbook of Messianic Prophecy: Studies and Expositions of the Messiah in the Old Testament*, ed. Michael Rydelnik and Edwin Blum (Chicago: Moody, 2019), 823.

¹⁷ Proponents of this argument include the medieval Jewish commentators Rashi, ibn Ezra, and David Kimhi. Cf. Antti Laato, "Isaiah in Ancient, Medieval, and Modern Jewish Traditions," in *The Oxford Handbook of Isaiah*, ed. Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 511.

almah but as a *nevi'ah*, a “prophetess” (Isa 8:3), the wife of Isaiah; the suggestion that the *almah* was Isaiah’s second wife is pure conjecture.¹⁸ (4) Isaiah, not the child’s mother, names the boy. (5) The time frames given for the two sons are different; one refers to the age of twenty years old, while the other to about the age of two.¹⁹ (6) The reference to Immanuel as the owner of the land (Isa 8:8) would apply to the child born to the house of David, but not to Isaiah’s son.²⁰ (7) Isaiah never informs his readers that Immanuel and Maher-shalal-hash-baz are the same child. In conclusion, it seems that the text quite clearly differentiates between the two children, thus eliminating the possibility that Isaiah’s son is the fulfillment of the Immanuel prophecy. These are two distinct children who signify different prospects for Judah. Maher-shalal-hash-baz is a sign of Assyria’s destruction of Aram and Ephraim, whereas Immanuel, as will be shown below, is a sign that God will be with his people on the other side of the exile. In other words, Isaiah’s child signifies Judah’s pseudo-salvation while the virgin’s child signifies Judah’s true and ultimate salvation.

Another proposal is that the Immanuel child prophecy was fulfilled in the birth of Hezekiah.²¹ But this view is widely rejected given that Hezekiah was 25 when he ascended the throne in 715 BC, making him at least five years old when Ahaz’s reign began in 735 BC. Consequently, most of those who do not equate Maher-shalal-hash-baz with Immanuel conclude that the *almah* and her child are unknown. But, as Motyer observes, this theory “perishes by requiring for a prophecy so solemnly announced a fulfillment so drab that no-one bothered to record it!”²² The best solution is to recognize that no fulfillment was recorded because no fulfillment occurred.

The question of the interpretation of *almah* should be noted in the context of the contemporary fulfillment views, for it must be made clear that interpreting *almah* as “young woman” instead of “virgin” is not an argument for contemporary fulfillment, but only a necessary condition. That is, identifying the *almah* as a non-virgin is mandated once it is concluded that Immanuel was born in the 8th century, because no one believes that a virgin miraculously conceived in the time of Isaiah. But the belief in a contemporary fulfillment has spurred tremendous effort to deny that the Hebrew word *almah* signified a woman who never had sexual relations with a man. If this effort fails, then a contemporary fulfillment is excluded. This subject will be considered more carefully below.

¹⁸ Duane Garrett avoids this difficulty by claiming that the Lord told Isaiah to have sex with a virgin who was not his wife in order to beget this sign-child. He notes while this appears “scandalous to us,” the Lord often required his prophets to engage in behavior that was “highly unconventional and even offensive,” citing Hosea’s marriage to a prostitute and Isaiah walking about naked (Garrett, *Problem*, 362). But having marital relations with someone other than one’s spouse is fundamentally different than any other recorded prophetic act and one that makes the Lord the initiator of sin.

¹⁹ See below for an explanation of these ages.

²⁰ The greater context would suggest that this land is not the land of Judah only but the land of all Israel, for the child born to be king brings light first to Galilee (9:1–7), and a shoot from the stem of Jesse signifies a new David who gathers not only the exiles of Judah but also those of Israel, uniting them into one people to celebrate God’s salvation (11:1–12:6). Though both Hezekiah and Josiah made attempts to bring the survivors of the northern tribes into the fold and claim the land, neither were very successful (2 Chr 30:5–11; 34:6–7; 35:20–24). This indicates that the Immanuel child is greater than them both.

²¹ E.g., Walter C. Kaiser Jr., “The Promise of Isaiah 7:14 and the Single-Meaning Hermeneutic,” *EvJ* 6 (1988): 65–67.

²² J. A. Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 86.

Hermeneutical Approaches for Double Fulfillment

Many interpreters, including evangelical scholars, have been persuaded that an Immanuel child was born in the time of Isaiah. Jewish interpreters who do not embrace Jesus as the Messiah are content with a single fulfillment that occurred in the 8th century. Christians, however, believe that Jesus's birth to the virgin Mary fulfilled, in some way, the Isaiah 7:14 prophecy, as Matthew states (Matt 1:23). This requires them to explain how there can be two fulfillments. In other words, they recognize that the text of Isaiah speaks of only one virgin and one child, but by virtue of confession—affirming Jesus's virgin birth—they must also conclude that Isaiah 7:14 was somehow fulfilled in the birth of Jesus to Mary. This has led to hermeneutical proposals that are more satisfying theologically than textually.²³

A brief review of how evangelicals interpret Isaiah 7:14 is instructive in revealing the poverty of these hermeneutical approaches and the lack of a plausible hermeneutical escape hatch for those who believe in an 8th-century Immanuel. Though all of these views may be considered “double-fulfillment” since they believe in the birth of two children in fulfillment of Isaiah 7:14, they usually do not use this language. Stanley Toussaint, however, does: “The Isaiah 7:14 prophecy has a double fulfillment—a near and far accomplishment of the prediction with the ultimate being the final fulfillment in the care of the virgin Mary and the virgin birth of Jesus Christ.”²⁴ The hermeneutical weakness of this view is that there is no warrant in the text that there would be two young women and two boys named Immanuel. There was a divine prediction, but once that prediction was accomplished, there is no basis for asserting that a later event, even if exactly the same, was the intended object of the prophecy.

Another approach is to see a prophetic foreshortening of time. Robert Gundry holds to this view:

Since Isaiah goes on to speak of the near future, we are to think of his prophecy as having come to pass partly during the youth of Mahershalalhasbaz (see Isa 7:15–8:22). But the part of his prophecy having to do with the virginal conception and birth of a divine child awaited fulfillment till Jesus' nativity. The NT distinction between two advents of Christ similarly rests on the phenomenon of partial fulfillment followed at some distance by a completion.²⁵

In other words, portions of the prophecy were fulfilled in the 8th century and the remainder was fulfilled in Mary and Jesus. Gundry is correct to observe that many

²³ This would include Jewish readers who are unwilling to grant special hermeneutical concessions in order to reach a desired conclusion. To be sure, evangelical scholars who embrace some kind of *sensus plenior* or double fulfillment generally believe that this hermeneutic is required by a number of NT texts, not only Matthew 1.

²⁴ Stanley D. Toussaint, *Behold the King: A Study of Matthew* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1980), 46. Prior to his death in 2017, Toussaint told me that he no longer holds to this view, but, for hermeneutical reasons, has adopted a position similar to the one defended in this article.

²⁵ Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 25.

OT prophecies do not distinguish between aspects of Jesus's first and second comings. For instance, Zechariah 9:9–13 describes the entrance of Israel's king to Jerusalem, approaching on a donkey, before defeating the enemies and ruling “from sea to sea.” Matthew sees Jesus's entrance to the city during the week of his crucifixion as fulfilling part of that prophecy, for he ends his citation before verse 10 (Matt 21:4–5). Most Christians believe that Jesus will fulfill the rest of the prophecy when he is welcomed by his people (Matt 23:39).²⁶ Such an approach to Isaiah 7, however, is problematic. Which parts of Isaiah's prophecy were fulfilled in which century? More specifically, how does one divide the *almah* into two distinct periods of time? Theoretically, it could work if the *almah* conceived in the 8th century and gave birth in the 1st century, or if she named her child 700 years after delivery, but it is difficult to see in the text how two separate Immanuel children could together fulfill this prophecy.

A more common view is that an initial fulfillment foreshadowed a “full fulfillment” in Christ. Several statements of adherents of this view can be considered. Eugene Merrill writes:

The virgin” (*hā'almā*), already pregnant, would give birth to a son and would name him Immanuel (“God with us”) (v. 14). The lexicography and grammar certainly favor the idea that a young woman (thus *'almā*), well-known to King Ahaz and the prophet, would soon give birth to a child against all odds of it happening naturally. The Greek Old Testament (the LXX) already saw something more to the promise than a historical fulfillment, however, and translated *'almā* by *parthenos*, “virgin” . . . This is a classic example of a messianic text which, while having a limited meaning in its historical context, goes beyond that meaning in a future, Christological context. . . . The unusual—indeed, supernatural—character of the Messiah is borne out by Isaiah's further reference to him as “a child will be born.”²⁷

First, there is something appealing about an extraordinary birth to the *almah* to which “further reference” is made in Isaiah 9. However, it is unclear from the text how exactly the 8th-century birth is extraordinary and occurred “against all odds.” There does not seem to be any reason to insert a supernatural element in a birth in Isaiah's day.²⁸ Second, it must be asked how a text can go “beyond” its own meaning. At what point did the text gain more than its “limited meaning in its historical context,” and how did it make such a gain? Answers to these questions cannot be found in the text, because they are hypothesized by an interpreter seeking a solution. A more satisfying view is that the LXX and Matthew and others “saw something more” not beyond a literal interpretation, but in a literal interpretation.

²⁶ Other examples of this type of prophecy cited in the NT include Isaiah 61:1ff, Micah 5:2ff, and Malachi 3:1ff.

²⁷ Merrill, *Everlasting Dominion*, 510.

²⁸ One response to this could note that the prophecy correctly predicted that the child would be a son, not a daughter. Still, this does not seem to indicate that the birth itself was “against all odds.”

Duane Garrett affirms that Maher-shalal-hash-baz was the fulfillment of the Immanuel prophecy, down to the details of him eating curds and honey in a devastated land.²⁹ He then rightly wonders “if there is anything left of the text” that could be fulfilled in Jesus.³⁰ His answer is that the ambiguity of the terms *almah* and Immanuel suggests that Isaiah’s son does “not exhaust” the meaning of the prophecy.³¹ The eschatological son’s birth to an *almah* fulfilled the “cultural connotations of virginity . . . more absolutely,” and the meaning of his name goes beyond the “more limited sense of ‘God will help us’” fulfilled in Maher-shalal-hash-baz to now signify “the fuller sense of ‘God present among us.’”³²

But is not the idea of “not exhausting” better understood as “not fulfilling”? If Maher-shalal-hash-baz had a mother who was not an *almah* and a name that he did not live up to, should we not say that he fell short of the prophecy and did not fulfill it? We can acknowledge similarities, but it is the differences that are all-important with respect to determining a prophecy’s fulfillment. Anyone in that day tempted to see Isaiah’s son as the fulfillment of the Immanuel prophecy would have readily observed the discrepancies and looked for another son.

Robert Chisholm has suggested that the arrival of the first Immanuel guaranteed the arrival of a second Immanuel:

Matthew . . . applied Isaiah’s ancient prophecy of Immanuel’s birth to Jesus (Matt 1:22–23). The first Immanuel was a reminder to the people of God’s presence and a guarantee of a greater child to come who would manifest God’s presence in an even greater way. The second Immanuel is ‘God with us’ in a heightened and infinitely superior sense. 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.³³

It is not clear, however, how the text of Isaiah communicates the idea of a first child guaranteeing the coming of a second one. What clues can the interpreter find in the Hebrew words or syntax of Isaiah 7? How did contemporaries of the “first Immanuel” know that he was but a precursor of another? What evidence is there of a “typology intended by God”? If the answer is that this typology is revealed by the Isaiah 9 child who is the “second Immanuel,” then Jesus can only be rightly identified with the “second Immanuel” and not the first. This view would be more compelling if Matthew claimed that Jesus’s birth was the fulfillment of Isaiah 9:6–7 instead of Isaiah 7:14.

Darrell Bock is even more specific in defining the sense in which the second virgin and “Second Immanuel” are an escalated sign. He writes:

Isaiah points to a woman who is currently a virgin . . . who will give birth to a child. That child’s arrival is the sign, represents “God with us,” and starts the clock ticking on Ahaz’s judgment. The child contextually would

²⁹ Garrett, *Problem*, 360.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Garrett, 362.

³² Garrett, 364.

³³ Robert B. Chisholm Jr., *Handbook on the Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 34.

probably be Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz (Isa 8:1–4), although the exact initial referent is debated among exegetes of Isaiah. But the text as a potential pattern text points to a “type” of sign child that has a second, escalated realization in Jesus. With the type’s arrival in history comes the escalation to point to the unique culminating fulfillment. So now the woman (referent: Mary) who gives birth *is* a virgin *at the child’s birth* (here is the escalation—the anticipated birth from a current virgin has escalated to become a virgin birth), and yet the child still represents *and is* (a second escalation) “God with us.” Note how the language of the text has not changed, since Isaiah 7:14 is cited here. The referents and their force have shifted slightly (to reveal the escalation). Both women were virgins at the time of the prediction, but in the escalation, the second has a virgin birth.³⁴

There are many difficulties with this explanation. First, it separates the sign from the thing that it signifies. There appears to be nothing of “sign” quality in the woman or even in the child by themselves. The name “Immanuel” certainly has significance, but if the boy served to comfort anyone, the text ignores it. The real “sign” for Ahaz, according to Bock, is that the birth of this child “starts the clock ticking.” But if that is so, how did Jesus’s birth “escalate” the ticking of the clock? If the “First Immanuel” started the clock, how does the “Second Immanuel” bring it to a “unique culminating fulfillment”? Furthermore, the status of the woman is ancillary, and an “escalation” of her to a virgin does not contribute to the sign of a ticking clock. It simply is not necessary to the sign, on this view, that Mary was a virgin. Yet Matthew’s presentation suggests that her status as a virgin was the essence of the sign.³⁵

Second, Bock claims that he has only “shifted slightly” the referents and their force. But in the 8th-century fulfillment, the woman who conceived was not a virgin, and the woman who conceived in the 1st century was a virgin. A conception by natural means is of a different kind than a conception by supernatural means. The same might be said for the boy. The “First Immanuel” is a regular boy; the “Second Immanuel” is deity incarnate. Clearly there is an “escalation” here, but it seems difficult to maintain that the initial and later referents are not completely different things.

Third, Isaiah 7 is allegedly a “potential pattern text [that] points to a ‘type’ of sign child.”³⁶ The pointers in the text to a type are difficult to find, and Bock does not explain. Would an observer in the court who witnessed an *almah* who gave birth to a child that she named Immanuel have expected something more? What basis would he have had for expecting another child? If the Isaiah 7 prophecy was fulfilled in the 8th century, then no one should be looking for a future fulfillment of it, including the writer of Matthew. The notion of “potential pattern text” seems contrived in order to resolve what is deemed to be a contradiction between Isaiah and Matthew. But while a Christian may feel the need to embrace it, it seems unlikely to convince a Jewish reader that the meaning derives from their Scriptures rather than

³⁴ Darrell L. Bock, “Scripture Citing Scripture: Use of the Old Testament in the New,” in *Interpreting the New Testament Text: Introduction to the Art and Science of Exegesis*, ed. Darrell L. Bock and Buist M. Fanning (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), 266.

³⁵ On this approach, it is not even necessary that there is a woman or a child at all. The sign simply becomes a measure of time before Assyria arrives.

³⁶ Bock, “Scripture,” 266.

from a NT author. This seems contrary to the apostles' method of proving Jesus's identity from the OT (Acts 8:34–35; 13:23–37; 17:2–3, 11).

Bock's hermeneutical approach is more complex because he desires to honor OT authorial intention while remaining committed to NT conclusions. Ben Witherington simply gives greater freedom to the NT writer, arguing that the prophecy of a virgin birth only existed once Matthew "found" it.

The upshot of these observations is that Matthew did not likely derive the notion of the virginal conception simply by reading either the Hebrew Bible or the LXX, which he seems to cite at Matthew 1:23. It was rather the event in Mary's life that forced him to go back and re-examine Old Testament stories, seek to find what prophecy had foretold this would happen. The historical substance of the narrative is what forced such a move on the part of Matthew.³⁷

So, what Matthew could not initially find in the text of Isaiah he later discovered when the need arose. What drove Matthew's interpretation, then, was not the text of Isaiah, but an event in history.³⁸ The authority of the prophecy lies with Matthew and not Isaiah. The problem with this approach is that it contradicts Matthew's own claim that the virgin birth "took place in order that what was spoke by the Lord through the prophet would be fulfilled" (Matt 1:22). Matthew believed that the authority came from the prophet, not from himself.

Paul Wegner claims that "NT authors sometimes add new, different, or fuller meaning to an OT passage," and he likens such fulfillment to a coffee cup being filled up with new meaning being "poured" into it.

This is distinctly different from *sensus plenior*, for there is no hidden meaning in the OT that the NT author has discovered through divine inspiration. Rather, the meaning was not in the OT context. The concept here is distinct from typology in that it is not simply a general structure that the NT author picked up from the OT and applied to a NT concept. Rather, the NT author is informing the reader of his intentions by using the word *πληρώω* before adding the new meaning to the OT concept.³⁹

Again, the authority for Matthew's claim resides with Matthew, which seems precisely contrary to his statement that Mary's conception fulfilled "what the Lord had said through the prophet" (Matt 1:22). Why bother bringing Isaiah's prophecy into the discussion at all if the "meaning was not in the OT context" but was created by Matthew?

Several points need to be made before undertaking a detailed examination of Isaiah 7. First, none of the views presented above provides any *textual* basis for a

³⁷ Ben Witherington III, *Matthew*, SHBC (Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys, 2006), 41.

³⁸ Watts says something similar, but more bluntly: "Had it not been for Matthew's use of this text, it is extremely doubtful if anyone would have ever read it so." Rikk E. Watts, "Immanuel: Virgin Birth Proof Text or Programmatic Warning of Things to Come (Isa. 7:14 in Matt. 1:23)?" in *From Prophecy to Testament: The Function of the Old Testament in the New*, ed. Craig A. Evans (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 100.

³⁹ Paul D. Wegner, "How Many Virgin Births are in the Bible? (Isaiah 7:14): A Prophetic Pattern Approach," *JETS* 54, no. 3 (2011): 482.

future Immanuel. All of them believe that there was a “Second Immanuel” solely on the authority of Matthew.⁴⁰ If one believes that a contemporary of Ahaz gave birth to a boy who was named Immanuel, then the text provides no reason to believe that there would be another such boy.

Second, the implication that an OT text changes meaning on the basis of a NT text rightly brings charges that the NT is guilty of misinterpreting the OT text. If a passage can only be accurately understood in light of a new hermeneutical prism provided by the NT, then the text is actually misleading to those who lack the appropriate reading glasses. S. V. McCasland makes this point well: “Matthew’s use of Isaiah 7:14 to explain the mystery of the birth of Christ not only shows the power exercised by the ancient Scriptures in forming Christian doctrine, but how a misinterpreted passage might be just as influential as one correctly understood.”⁴¹ If one cannot find a basis for one’s views *in the text*, then one cannot persuasively refute charges that he has misinterpreted the text. The implications go further, for if Matthew twisted his OT sources, why should we doubt that he twisted his contemporary ones as well?⁴² Scholars who solve one problem with hermeneutical license may find that this escape route leads to unpleasant destinations.

In my assessment, all of the views cited here fail to honor the authorial intentions of Isaiah and of Matthew. The question that now remains is whether a historical-grammatical interpretation of Isaiah’s prophecy of the virgin birth can and must be understood as solely predicting Mary’s virgin conception of Jesus. To answer this question, we must look carefully at Isaiah 7:14–17.

A Messianic-Only Interpretation

The prophecy of the birth of Immanuel was given to the house of David following Ahaz’s refusal to trust the Lord. Isaiah had implored the king to stand firm in his faith, but Ahaz spurned the Lord’s offer of a sign. Ahaz reasoned that Assyria was a more reliable savior from his present attackers, and so he turned from the Lord, albeit in pious language.

The Sign of Immanuel’s Birth

It is very important to recognize that the sign of the virgin birth was not the sign previously offered by the Lord. When Ahaz refused the sign, the Lord did not simply move forward anyway with great blessing for a hardhearted Israelite. Actually, the

⁴⁰ As Bryan Beyer claims, “Our understanding of the original meaning of Isaiah 7 does not necessarily affect what we believe about the manner of Jesus’s conception and birth or his sinless nature.” Bryan Beyer, *Encountering the Book of Isaiah: A Historical and Theological Survey*, Encountering Biblical Studies (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 74.

⁴¹ S. V. McCasland, “Matthew Twists the Scriptures,” in *The Right Doctrine from the Wrong Texts? Essays on the Use of the Old Testament in the New*, ed. G. K. Beale (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 149.

⁴² In arguing that Matthew misinterpreted his ancient sources, McCasland claims that he is untrustworthy with his modern ones. “Since we have discovered that Matthew felt free in changing and distorting the Scriptures, it becomes a probability that he has used an even freer hand in modifying, rearranging, and shaping documents not protected by scriptural sanctity, sources of a popular character which he used in putting together his gospel. And that is just what we find on examining Matthew’s Gospel in comparison with Mark and Luke, the other synoptic Gospels.” McCasland, *Right Doctrine*, 149.

opposite was the case. If Ahaz had trusted the Lord, he would have been saved. But since he did not trust the Lord, he would not. Salvation has always been by faith, and those who do not believe are not saved.⁴³ Indeed, Ahaz was granted his wish: he would be “saved” by the object of his faith—Assyria. This is the larger point of verses 14–17, though too many miss it because of the debate over verse 14. Or it might be said this way: the sign of salvation (the Immanuel child) will come in a future day, after Ahaz has already been “saved” by Assyria. This will become clear as we proceed.

Isaiah declared that the Lord would give a sign “to you” (plural). This shift in verse 14 from the singular “you” in verse 11 reveals that it is the “house of David” (v. 13) who will receive the sign of the virgin-born child. The emphasis upon the “Lord Himself” giving the sign alerts the reader to the magnificent nature of the sign; the sign is no ordinary event. Some argue that the sign must occur in the time of Ahaz, or it would not be a sign to him at all. This is refuted by three facts: (1) the sign is not to Ahaz individually but to the house of David generally; (2) the context reveals that the child is born after the destruction of Jerusalem; and (3) nothing in the nature of a sign requires that it be fulfilled immediately.

While some signs are “present persuaders,”⁴⁴ including that given to Hezekiah in Isaiah 38:7, Ahaz has already refused to trust and is under God’s judgment. Rather than a sign to persuade, this sign is a demonstration that God’s word is true. An example of this type of sign occurs when Moses arrived at the burning bush and the Lord declared that the sign that he was with Moses was that he would bring the Israelites back to the same mountain (Exod 3:12). That sign would occur after a sequence of events in Egypt, and it would confirm what God has told Moses. That this is an appropriate way to understand the sign of Isaiah 7:14 is evident from the fact that a series of future events are described in verses 15–25, culminating in the birth of Immanuel, and no call for a decision is made. The sign of Immanuel will thus confirm that God has done as he said in judging the nation as well as in preserving the house of David.

A Miraculous Conception

The debate around the term *almah* is important for one reason. It is necessary to deny that this word means “virgin” for there to be any possibility of an 8th-century fulfillment. As noted above, if *almah* means “virgin,” the discussion is ended, for no one believes that a virgin gave birth in the time of Ahaz. To be sure, the argument has been advanced that the *almah* became pregnant (naturally) out of wedlock.⁴⁵ Such a fulfillment would be strange indeed, since it means that the sign-child named “God with us” would be illegitimate. The sense of the text is that the *almah* is virtuous, and the child is part of the divine sign, uncontaminated by an immoral beginning. The

⁴³ Seven centuries later, another son of David, when called by the Lord’s messenger to “not be afraid,” trusted the Lord, providing a sharp contrast with Ahaz’s response. Dale Ralph Davis, *Stump Kingdom: Isaiah 6–12* (Fearn, UK: Christian Focus, 2017), 44–45. It was thus Joseph to whom was given the son named “Immanuel.” The obedient son of David was blessed with God’s presence whereas the faithless son of David was not.

⁴⁴ This term is taken from J. A. Motyer, “Context and Content in the Interpretation of Isaiah 7:14,” *TynBul* 21 (1970): 120.

⁴⁵ E.g., Garrett, *Problem*, 359.

other possibility, far more popular, is that the *almah* became married, then had intercourse, and then conceived a child naturally. But upon marriage, the *almah* would no longer be an *almah*, and so it would not be an *almah* who would conceive, and the prophecy would not be fulfilled.

Can the word *almah* be used of a married woman or of a non-virgin? Many have claimed that it can. The evidence, however, conclusively refutes this idea. In every usage in the biblical text, *almah* refers to an unmarried young woman.⁴⁶ Though the idea of virginity is not the primary focus of this word, it is certainly assumed, for an unmarried young woman with sexual experience would be considered immoral and liable to death by stoning (Deut 22:23–24). The only other text where the meaning of *almah* is debated is Proverbs 30:19, but this passage makes most sense when understood as a virgin.⁴⁷ A recent book-length study on the word *almah* in Isaiah 7:14 is decisive:

From an inductive point of view (namely, from the point of view of the attested evidence), the examination of all the uses, both those found in the versions and available texts, leads the researcher to endorse the following conclusion: ‘*almā* designates a teenage girl who is a virgin. In the absence of any new elements, such is the necessary result the facts point to.’⁴⁸

Some claim, however, that the definite article “the” applied to the *almah* requires that the woman was standing before Isaiah at the moment of the prophecy. If so, this would demand an 8th-century fulfillment. Indeed, the article indicates that a specific woman was in mind, but it does not demand the woman’s presence as the article could “denote a single person or thing . . . yet unknown, and therefore not capable of being defined.”⁴⁹ In other words, Isaiah’s prophecy speaks of a particular woman, but the use of the article does not by itself indicate that she was present or even alive at the time.⁵⁰

The words that follow confirm this interpretation, though this is too often overlooked. The phrase *הָרָה וְיִלְדָה* (*harah veyoledet* “will be with child and bear a son”), with the adjective plus participle construction, is only used twice elsewhere, both of significant births. Appearing to Hagar, the angel of the Lord declared, “Behold, you are with child, and you will bear a son; and you shall call his name Ishmael” (Gen 16:11). Later the angel of the Lord told Manoah’s barren wife, “Behold, you shall be with child and give birth to a son” (Judg 13:5, 7). In both cases, a momentous conception was announced by the Lord. To one will be born a son of Abraham and to the other a barren woman will conceive.

⁴⁶ Edward J. Young, *Studies in Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 177.

⁴⁷ Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 15–31*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 492.

⁴⁸ Christophe Rico and Peter J. Gentry, *Mother of the Infant King, Isaiah 7:14: ‘almā and parthenos in the World of the Bible: A Linguistic Perspective* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2020), 167–68.

⁴⁹ GKC §126q-s.

⁵⁰ As Willis J. Beecher observes, “He was not, as some have supposed, addressing some woman then present, but was using, by quotation, phraseology that was somewhat familiar, and he used it in the grammatical form in which it had become familiar.” Willis J. Beecher, “The Prophecy of the Virgin Mother,” in *Classical Evangelical Essays in Old Testament Interpretation*, ed. Walter C. Kaiser Jr (1889; repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008), 181–82.

In the case of Manoah's wife, the woman was barren at the time the announcement was made (cf. Judg 13:3), which requires that her conception be in the future. This parallels the declaration in Isaiah 7:14, which should also be taken as a future condition. The construction $\text{וַיִּלְדָּה} \dots \text{וַיִּהְיֶה}$ (*hinneh . . . veyoledet* "Behold . . . and will bear") is what is known as a "participle of the immediate future," though it signifies not so much immediacy as certainty.⁵¹ The use of this construction in Isaiah 7:14 indicates that the virgin is not yet pregnant, but will surely conceive. The parallels with the language in Genesis 16:11 and Judges 13:7 reveal that this conception of the *almah* was a significant event in the history of God's people.⁵² As E. J. Young explains,

Isaiah, therefore, because of the tremendous solemnity and importance of the announcement which he was to make, used as much of this ancient formula of announcement as suited his purpose. His reason for so doing was to draw attention to the announcement itself. If Ahaz and others who were present were at all familiar with this commonly employed formula of the ancient Near East, they would immediately realize that an announcement of supreme importance was about to be made.⁵³

To review, the case is quite strong that the woman's conception was very significant and even miraculous. First, the conception is part of a sign, and signs are sometimes miraculous. Second, the Lord was prepared to give a miraculous sign to Ahaz initially (Isa 7:11), which prepares the reader for a potentially miraculous sign. Third, the sign comes from "the Lord himself," with emphasis on the divine origin of the sign. Fourth, the child is named "God with us," a name which has little similarity to the names of Isaiah's two sons, but has significant overtones from previous and later prophecies of God's presence with his people.

Fifth, the *hinneh* construction with the participle ("behold . . . and will bear") recalls the previous momentous birth announcements. Sixth, Immanuel is presented uniquely, "with an aura of mystery,"⁵⁴ with no mention of a father, and later as the owner of the land of Israel. Seventh, Micah 5:3 seems to allude to Isaiah 7:14, with the statement there indicating that Micah knew that the child had not yet been born. While any one item may not be conclusive by itself, when taken together these textual features form a compelling argument that the sign was the miraculous conception of a virgin mother who would name her son Immanuel. These features are not, however, compatible with the description of the birth of Isaiah's son or with some other child whose birth Isaiah did not record.

⁵¹ Despite the name of this construction as the "participle of the immediate future," the event need not occur in the near future, as is clear from its use in Exodus 34:11; Numbers 15:2; 2 Kings 4:16; Jonah 3:4. As Clendenen notes, this grammatical construction "describes an event as occurring in the imminent future . . . or with such certainty that it may be considered 'on the way.'" Richard A. Taylor and E. Ray Clendenen, *Haggai, Malachi*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2004), 290. Cf. Jan Joosten, "The Predicative Participle in Biblical Hebrew," *ZAH* 2, no. 2 (1989): 145.

⁵² As Murray Adamthwaite notes, the use of וַיִּהְיֶה (*hinneh*) in Isaiah "always presents a future phenomenon of great importance. It cannot be relegated to the category of the everyday and mundane." Murray Adamthwaite, "Isaiah 7:16—Key to the Immanuel Prophecy," *RTR* 59, no. 2 (2000): 77.

⁵³ Young, *Studies in Isaiah*, 160.

⁵⁴ Oswalt, *Isaiah*, 212.

Curds and Honey

There would probably be no debate about the preceding matters, including the interpretation of the word *almah* as virgin, were it not for the questions that circulate around Isaiah 7:15–16. These verses are often interpreted in a way that demands the birth of a child in Isaiah’s day. While interpreters vary in the particulars, several faulty conclusions often lead to this interpretation, including: (1) defining “curds and honey” as the food of prosperity; (2) taking לְדַעְתּוֹ (leda ‘to) in a temporal sense (e.g., “when”) instead of final (e.g., “in order that”); (3) understanding the boy’s age as being two or three years old; (4) relating the initial clause of verse 16 to verse 15 instead of verse 17; and thereby (5) considering verse 16 to be a positive statement of deliverance. These will each be considered in turn.

In verse 15, Isaiah declares that the Immanuel child “will eat curds and honey in order that He will know to refuse evil and choose good.” Some have understood the phrase כְּחֵם אֻדֵּי־חֵם (khem ‘ah udevash; “curds and honey”) as a depiction of a wealthy diet,⁵⁵ but this is not so. Though the phrase is sometimes used as part of a longer list of products to express the bounty of the land (e.g., Deut 32:13–14; 2 Sam 17:29), by themselves “curds and honey” reflect the opposite. These come not from the harvest of a cultivated land, but are the subsistence diet during a time of famine or agricultural devastation.⁵⁶ Verses 21 and 22 say as much, for the survivors in the land of Israel in the time after the Assyrian invasion keep alive a young cow and two goats in order to eat curds and honey. The land, once agriculturally prosperous and teeming with “one thousand vines, valued at one thousand shekels of silver” (Isa 7:23), is now filled with briars and thorns, as too few farmers survive to cultivate it, and the land reverts to grazing land.⁵⁷ The shocking picture here is that this child, though a sign to the house of David, does not grow up living in the palace and eating at the royal banquet table, but he is raised in a land that has been devastated and where the royal family struggles to survive.⁵⁸ This simply cannot be fulfilled in Ahaz’s day, for Jerusalem was not conquered for more than a hundred years.⁵⁹ This observation

⁵⁵ Otto Kaiser, *Isaiah 1–12: A Commentary*, 2nd ed., OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983), 160–61.

⁵⁶ This phrase should also be distinguished from a “land flowing with milk and honey,” which describes the prosperous, but untended, land that the Lord was giving to Israel. Much work had to be done to bring about the desirable foods described in Deuteronomy 8:8. For a helpful explanation of “milk and honey,” see Nogah Hareuveni, *Nature in Our Biblical Heritage*, trans. Helen Frenkley (Kiryat Ono, Israel: Neot Kedumim, 1980), 11–22.

⁵⁷ This conclusion is supported by the verb יָחַיָּהּ (yekhayyeh) which means “keep alive” and is only used in Scripture of desperate situations. Cf. Joseph Jensen, “The Age of Immanuel,” *CBQ* 41, no. 2 (1979): 230. Assyrian records describe the fertile Jezreel Valley making just such a transition to grazing land in the aftermath of Tiglath-pileser III’s invasion. Shawn Zelig Aster, *Reflections of Empire in Isaiah 1–39: Responses to Assyrian Ideology* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2017), 92, n. 38.

⁵⁸ The text does not explicitly state that the Immanuel child is part of the royal family, but this seems likely given (1) the sign is to the “house of David,” and (2) the present threat is the removal of the Davidic king. The Lord’s declaration assures the house of David that though Ahaz is faithless, the Lord will preserve the royal line through the birth of Immanuel. This interpretation is supported by the royal identity of the child in chapter 9 as well as the fulfillment in Matthew 1. In other words, all Christian interpreters affirm, one way or another, the royal identity of the child.

⁵⁹ The case could be made that the land of Judah was devastated by the Assyrian invasion in 701 BC, and thus the child could have been born any time after that. But this seems too early, because Jerusalem

should, by itself, be sufficient to deny the possibility that an Immanuel child was born in the 8th century, but several important questions about verses 15 and 16 remain.

Moral Discernment

The second issue in verse 15 is the misunderstanding of the word לֵדָא (leda 'to). Translators have often understood the ל (lamedh) here in the temporal sense (e.g., “when”), taking the boy’s diet as relative to the time of his moral discernment. For example, the ESV translates this verse: “He shall eat curds and honey *when* he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good.”⁶⁰ However, elsewhere in the OT, the infinitive construct of “to know,” when joined to the preposition ל (lamedh), is translated in a final sense (e.g., “in order to/that”) and there is no reason not to do the same here.⁶¹ The verse should be translated, “He shall eat curds and honey *that* he may know how to refuse the evil and choose the good.”⁶² In other words, Ahaz ate the food of royalty, but did not learn how to refuse evil (making alliances) and choose good (trusting the Lord), but this child will eat the food of poverty and this will teach him moral discernment.⁶³

The phrase מָאֹס בָּרַע וּבָחַר בְּטוֹב (“to refuse the evil and choose the good”) is found in both verses 15 and 16. Some interpreters, influenced by similarities with the account of Maher-shalal-hash-baz, take this phrase as equivalent to the age when a boy can say “Mommy” or “Daddy” (Isa 8:4). By this interpretation, a very short timeframe is in view, and this is used to support the idea that Immanuel is to be identified with Maher-shalal-hash-baz. Interpreters then may be tempted to read the significance of Maher-shalal-hash-baz’s name (Isa 8:4) into verses 15–16.⁶⁴ In fact, the prophecies associated with Immanuel and Maher-shalal-hash-baz are distinct, and one of the clues is that knowing good from evil always refers in the OT to the moral discernment associated with adults.⁶⁵ The clearest example is Deuteronomy 1:39, in

had not fallen and the royal family continued to live in prosperity (cf. Jer 22:13–15). Contra Paul D. Wegner, *Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2021), 109–11. Furthermore, as noted above, the conquest of Judah was delayed by Hezekiah’s response of faith, pushed off into the time of the Babylonians. Thus, it seems best to consider the earliest possible fulfillment of a royal child growing up in poverty conditions in the land of Israel to be after 586 BC.

⁶⁰ Emphasis added. Similarly, NASB, NIV, NRSV, JPS, CSB. Those that take it in the final sense include KJV, NKJV, NET, and LSB.

⁶¹ Jensen observes, “It is interesting to note a tendency to see the final sense as preferable as long as the verse is not tied to Isaiah’s historical situation.” Jensen, “The Age of Immanuel,” 228. It seems that they are motivated to adopt this unusual translation (as temporal) by their understanding of verse 16.

⁶² Emphasis added. Cf. Chisholm, *Handbook*, 30. A similar concept, but different wording, is found in Deuteronomy 8:3: the Lord “fed you with manna . . . that He might make you know.”

⁶³ The writer of Hebrews may have seen the fulfillment of this verse in Jesus’s experience: “Although He was a Son, He learned obedience from the things which He suffered” (5:8).

⁶⁴ A similar bias of the NET Bible translators may have influenced them, in the note on Deuteronomy 1:39, to read the phrase of 7:16 into 8:4 when it is not there.

⁶⁵ “Refusing evil and choosing good is connected to the knowledge of good and evil in Genesis 2:9, 16. It refers to making moral choices on one’s own and hence refers to the age of accountability” (Gentry, “Isaiah 7:12–16,” 65). Contra John Goldingay, who trivializes this phrase to refer to the child being able to decide what baby food he likes (Goldingay, *Isaiah for Everyone*, 34). The context, with Ahaz’s failure to refuse evil and choose good in the face of the nation’s extermination, points to a more sober interpretation, just as the prophecy of Gen 3:15 can hardly be understood at a momentous point in mankind’s history to simply describe human aversion to snakes.

which those exempted from the judgment of dying in the wilderness are those who do not know good and evil (לֹא־יָדְעוּ הַיּוֹם טוֹב וָרָע). This group is defined in Numbers 14:29–30 as those who are under twenty years of age (cf. Num 32:11).⁶⁶ This interpretation is confirmed by Isaiah’s use of מָאָס (*ma’as*; refuse) in the sense of a moral rejection, and not an aesthetic preference (Isa 5:24; 8:6; 30:12; cf. Ps 36:5).⁶⁷

The Timing of Immanuel’s Birth

Verse 16 is often taken as the determining factor for locating the birth of Immanuel in the 8th century. Watts is direct on this point: “The sign is simple. It has to do with a period by which time the present crisis will no longer be acute or relevant.”⁶⁸ What this interpretation does is to shift the sign that the Lord gives from the woman, from the child, and from his name Immanuel, and instead put the whole significance of the sign on a timeline. The birth of the child begins the countdown for deliverance. Ahaz’s hope is in the twenty years, not in the child himself. Since Ahaz’s deliverance is dependent upon the age of the child, interpreters feel compelled to see the birth of Immanuel in the 8th century. Another approach, however, is offered by Machen, who disconnects the child from the time marker, saying that *if* the child was born at that time, he would be this old when deliverance came.⁶⁹ Understanding the sign to be primarily a time marker, however, ignores the grammar. The same child is in view throughout verses 14–16, verses 16–17 are grammatically related, and the duration clause is grammatically a subordinate feature of the sign.⁷⁰

Before explaining this crucial aspect, a review of the interpretation to this point is appropriate. The sign is that a virgin will bear a son and name him Immanuel. He will eat a diet of poverty in order to learn moral discernment. The question that arises is “why?” Why does this boy eat “curds and honey,” when the land is full of agricultural produce today? Verses 16 and 17 answer that question. Verse 16 begins with the particle כִּי (*ki*), which is loosely, but accurately, rendered by the NET Bible as “Here is why this will be so.” The main clause in verse 16 is “the land will be

⁶⁶ Ahaz, interestingly enough, is twenty years old when he becomes king, which makes him accountable for his decisions (2 Kgs 16:2).

⁶⁷ An extensive and convincing discussion of this issue can be found in Jensen, “The Age of Immanuel,” 221–27. By itself, this interpretation does not automatically eliminate the possibility that the Immanuel prophecy was fulfilled in Maher-shalal-hash-baz, as one could argue that Isaiah’s later prophecy simply reduced the length of time before Judah would be delivered (from twenty years to two). Given everything else in the passage, however, it is best to recognize that these are two distinct timeframes for two different boys.

⁶⁸ John D. W. Watts, *Isaiah 1–33*, WBC (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1985), 97.

⁶⁹ J. Gresham Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ* (Cambridge: James Clark, 1930; repr., 1958), 292. See also, R. Bruce Compton, “The Immanuel Prophecy in Isaiah 7:14–16 and Its Use in Matthew 1:23: Harmonizing Historical Context and Single Meaning,” *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 12 (2007): 13–14.

⁷⁰ Michael Rydelnik argues that כִּי (*ki*) at the beginning of verse 16 should be taken not as causal but as adversative, thus dividing the passage into a long-term prophecy of Immanuel (vv. 14–15) and a short-term prophecy of his own son Shear-jashub (vv. 16–17; Rydelnik, “Isaiah 7:1–16,” 823). This is unlikely: (1) the כִּי (*ki*) is normally and naturally taken in a causal sense; (2) there are no contextual markers indicating that Isaiah is now prophesying about a different son; (3) the presence of Shear-jashub cannot be said to have no other purpose in the narrative, for he serves as a sign and symbol in Israel as well as indicating that Isaiah’s wife was not a virgin (8:3, 19); and (4) the interpretation offered here is a more cohesive explanation of the passage without requiring an arbitrary shift that seems wholly borne out of an attempt to avoid an undesirable conclusion.

abandoned.” The “land” is identified as that belonging to the two kings, and the reason why their land will be abandoned is given in verse 17. Since there is no conjunction at the beginning of verse 17, the initial imperfect verb *בָּרֵא* (“bring”) should be taken asyndetically with the imperfect *נִזְנָה* (“forsaken”) of verse 16, with the result that these two verses are tightly linked.⁷¹ The point is that the land of Aram and Israel will be forsaken because of Assyria.⁷² But Isaiah presses on, spelling out the judgment in careful detail. It is Yahweh who will cause it. He will bring Assyria upon Ahaz (you, sg.), upon Judah, and upon the house of David. The devastation will be the greatest since the ten tribes were torn away from Judah in the time of Rehoboam. This is why the boy will eat “curds and honey”: because God will judge the house of David through an Assyrian invasion. The sign of Immanuel is a sign of hope, but not to Ahaz and his contemporaries, for they will first face judgment.

The question of timing is answered in verse 16: the devastation of the land will occur before the boy is of the age of moral accountability. It usually is assumed that this requires the Assyrian invasion to occur between the conception of the boy and his moral maturity, but this is an unwarranted assumption. The focus of the sign, rather, is upon the boy who learns to refuse evil and choose good because he grows up in a land that has been devastated. Indeed, the invasion must occur before the boy’s maturity, but the timing of his birth is nowhere indicated. The fact that he grows up eating curds and honey indicates that he is born after the land is laid waste. A close look at the timeline of Isaiah 7:14–17 clarifies this point: first, Assyria destroys the land of Aram and Ephraim; then, Assyria destroys the land of Judah; and after that, Immanuel grows up eating curds and honey. The timing of the birth of Immanuel is not specifically given, and the focus of the prophecy is now most decidedly on the impending judgment, described in grim detail in verses 18–25.

Interpreters often err in reading this passage as giving hope to a king who has rejected the Lord, emphasizing verse 16’s mention of the destruction of Ahaz’s enemies. But this is not the right way to read this verse or this chapter. Ahaz had already been told (in vv. 4–9) that these enemies would be defeated. The Lord does not simply reaffirm hope to Ahaz after his faithless rejection; this would be inconsistent with the Lord’s character and method. The new word given in response to Ahaz’s rejection is how these kings will be destroyed and what that means for Judah. The Lord had offered Ahaz salvation from these enemies if he trusted him; when Ahaz refuses, the destruction of those enemies becomes a word of judgment because they will be destroyed by a greater enemy who will also lay waste to Judah. In other words, Ahaz’s refusal to trust transforms salvation into judgment. But for the house of David, all is not lost, for beyond judgment lies salvation—the virgin will give birth to Immanuel.

⁷¹ Jensen, “The Age of Immanuel,” 222, n. 7.

⁷² Adamthwaite offers another proposal, reading verse 16 as, “the land which you (*Ahaz*) are tearing apart (*by your unbelieving policies*) will be forsaken of her two kings.” This identifies the two kings not with Aram and Israel but with Israel and Judah and understands *רָרָה* to mean “tearing up” instead of “dread.” This fits with the focus of the immediate context on Israel and Judah as well as the condemnation of Ahaz for what his refusal to reject the wrong will result in. It also identifies the singular “land” not as incongruously applying to Aram and Israel, but to the land of Israel and Judah which actually belonged to Immanuel (8:8). Though not followed here, this plausible interpretation also eliminates the need for an 8th-century Immanuel (Adamthwaite, “Isaiah 7:16,” 78–80).

Careful examination of Isaiah 7 thus reveals that an 8th-century fulfillment of the Immanuel prophecy is impossible because (1) the word *almah* requires a virgin to be pregnant, an event which did not occur at that time; (2) a child born at that time could not have been forced to eat curds and honey because Jerusalem was not conquered for more than one hundred years; (3) neither Hezekiah nor any of his immediate descendants knew to refuse evil and choose good;⁷³ (4) nothing in the text indicates that the Immanuel child was a type or initial fulfillment; (5) salvation is always by faith, and the Lord did not provide salvation to a faithless king. To this can be added that an 8th-century fulfillment is unlikely given the use of the announcement formula and the reference to the “Lord himself,” both signifying a momentous birth that is incompatible either with an anonymous child or with the ordinary birth of Maher-shalal-hash-baz. Furthermore, an 8th-century fulfillment is not necessary given that the sign is made to the house of David generally and not to Ahaz specifically.

The interpretation of a messianic fulfillment corresponds precisely with the hope described in the greater context of Isaiah. The holy seed is the stump in the land where the forest has been cut down through God’s judgment (Isa 6:11–13). The child born in chapter 9 comes to a land in great darkness because it has been conquered (8:22–9:7). This individual, known as “Mighty God,” is instrumental in the remnant’s return to their land from exile (10:20–23). From the stem of Jesse springs up a branch who will be a standard for the peoples, gathering all those who have been scattered among the nations (11:1, 10–13). Likewise, the “God with us” child is born after judgment has fallen on Judah.

The sign that many want to see in Immanuel is actually found in Maher-shalal-hash-baz (Isa 8:1–8). It is he, not Immanuel, whose name, birth, and age point to a short-term “hope” through the defeat of Ahaz’s enemies through Assyria. His name signifies that the king of Assyria will carry off the plunder and spoil of Damascus and Samaria. That this occurred before the boy could say “my father” or “my mother,” roughly the age of two, was fulfilled in the invasion of Tiglath-pileser III in 734–732. But Judah’s “salvation” was illusory, for the “River” of Assyria soon overflowed its banks and swept through Judah, flooding the breadth of Immanuel’s land. But the hope of the virgin-born Immanuel child signified a more distant promise to the house of David, for out of exile, the Lord would raise up a righteous heir to reign forever.

Conclusion

The best understanding of Isaiah 7:14 agrees with the interpretation of Matthew and the view of the church for most of its history. Because of Ahaz’s refusal to trust the Lord, Isaiah prophesied judgment against him and his kingdom. Like most other prophecies against Israel, this one had a silver lining. A special child would be born

⁷³ It seems likely that every single king of Judah after Ahaz made alliances with foreign kings, including Hezekiah, Manasseh, and Josiah’s descendants. Amon’s reign is brief, though the statement that he “walked in all the way that his father had walked” implies that he was also guilty in this regard (2 Kgs 21:21). Josiah is not said explicitly to have made alliances, but his attempt to prevent Pharaoh Neco from passing through his land suggests a potential alliance or a desire to curry favor with the Babylonians fighting against Egypt (2 Chr 35:20–24).

during the time of exile and would be called “Immanuel.” This prophecy could not have been fulfilled in the time of Isaiah because the conditions did not match the prophecy, and it was fulfilled once and only once in the person of Jesus the Messiah. The historical-grammatical interpretation of Isaiah 7 eliminates the need for hermeneutical liberties, fits the greater context of Isaiah, and corresponds with the fulfillment recorded in the Gospel of Matthew. The prophecy of the virgin birth heralded the earth-shaking tidings of the coming of God to live with his people as a man, making him qualified to atone for their sins and rule over God’s kingdom in righteousness.