



## First Isaiah

### Isaiah 7: Immanuel

Isaiah chapter 7 is the most famous chapter in the book, because of the way it is reinterpreted in the New Testament.

It is set in the days of King Ahaz, about 733 BCE, in the context of the Syro-Ephremite war. Aram (Syria) and Northern Israel (Ephraim) formed an alliance to resist the advance of Assyria, and wanted Judah to join. King Ahaz of Judah did not want to join, because he knew the alliance could not withstand the Assyrian attack. So Syria and Ephraim invaded to Judah to compel him to join. We are told that when the king and his household heard this, his heart and the heart of his people were shaken “as the trees of the forest shake before the wind” (Isa 7:3). Their fear contrasts with the confidence projected in the ideology of the Davidic line, as it is articulated in Psalm 46, which declares: “we will not fear though the earth should change and the mountains shake in the heart of the sea” (Ps 46:2). The reason for their confidence was their belief that “God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved” (Ps 46:4). It was easy enough to sing that psalm in the temple in times of peace. It was a different matter when a hostile army was at the gate.

Isaiah approached the king when he was checking his water supply in preparation for a siege. He took along his son, Shear-yashuv, “a remnant shall return.” The prophet Hosea also gave his children symbolic names. To say that “a remnant shall return” was not unequivocally good news: it meant that *only* a remnant would return. This was a grim prospect, even before anyone from Judah had been sent into exile. Isaiah’s word to the king, however, was at least superficially reassuring: “take heed, be quiet, do not fear.” This is how Assyrian prophets typically spoke to their king. The reassurance was based on the promise that Syria and Ephraim would not succeed. (The gloss in 7:9: within 65 years Ephraim will be shattered, is puzzling, and must be corrupt. The northern kingdom of Israel would in fact be shattered much sooner than that, no more than 12 years after Isaiah spoke).

The fame of the chapter, however, derives from the sign that Isaiah insists on giving to Ahaz: “the young woman is with child and will bear a son and will call his name Immanuel.” The Hebrew word for “young woman” is *almah*, which means “a young woman of marriageable age,” not necessarily a virgin. It was translated into Greek as *parthenos*, a word that more typically means “virgin.” The verse from Isaiah is cited in the Gospel of Matthew, as a prediction

of a virgin birth, fulfilled in Jesus. In its original context, however, the birth of the child was supposed to be a sign to king Ahaz, and had to be intelligible to him, not a prediction of something that would not happen for more than 700 years. In the context, there are two possible candidates for identification as the “young woman,” the wife of the prophet or the wife of the king. If it were the prophet’s wife, the prophet could say what he should be called. But the wife of the king would have much greater significance for Ahaz. The name “God is with us” was virtually a slogan of the Davidic house. The birth of a child in the midst of the crisis is naturally a sign of hope. The Davidic line would survive.

To say that the child is a sign of hope is not, however, a promise of easy deliverance. We are told that the child would eat curds and honey by the time could distinguish between good and evil. The significance of this is explained in vs. 21-2, probably a later addition to the chapter: “On that day one will keep alive a young cow and two sheep, and will eat curds because of the abundance of milk that they give, for everyone that is left in the land shall eat curds and honey.” There will be no agriculture. Where there had been valuable vineyards there would now be briars and thorns, and people would live off what nature provided. The kingdoms before whom Ahaz was afraid would be no more. Judah too would be brought to its knees, but the divine promise to the line of David would not be broken.

Immanuel, then, was most probably the king’s son. In Jewish tradition he is often identified as Hezekiah, whom we will meet again in Isaiah. In Christian tradition, he is thought to be the messiah. The messiah, as we shall see, was the ideal future king who would restore the Davidic line, after it had been cut off by the Babylonians. In Isaiah 7, however, the Davidic line is intact. Immanuel might be a future king, but he is not a messiah in the technical sense of the word.

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