

**Isaiah 7:14 / Matthew 1:23**

***Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel.***

***Isaiah's writing style***

In order to understand Isaiah 7 we need to understand how Isaiah wrote. He was not worried about people temporarily misunderstanding what he said for clarity would come with time.

An example of this is found in the many passages where Isaiah refers to the Servant of the Lord:

***Isaiah 42:1 "Behold, My Servant, whom I uphold; My chosen one in whom My soul delights. I have put My Spirit upon Him; He will bring forth justice to the nations.***

***4 "He will not be disheartened or crushed Until He has established justice in the earth; And the coastlands will wait expectantly for His law."***

***5 Thus says God the LORD, Who created the heavens and stretched them out, Who spread out the earth and its offspring, Who gives breath to the people on it And spirit to those who walk in it,***

***6 "I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness, I will also hold you by the hand and watch over you, And I will appoint you as a covenant to the people, As a light to the nations,***

***7 To open blind eyes, To bring out prisoners from the dungeon And those who dwell in darkness from the prison.***

Christians understand that the Servant in this passage is Christ, but those who read it when it was written were probably wondering who the servant was, for throughout the book the prophet offered different suggestions for his readers to consider. At times, Israel is the servant (41:8-9; 42:18-20; 44:1, 2, 21, 26; 45:4; 48:20). Later, Cyrus functions as the Lord's servant though the title "servant" isn't specifically used of him (44:24-45:1). But the more Isaiah wrote the clearer it became that neither of these could fully accomplish God's divine plans. Israel, God's servant, was blind and deaf, and captive to the powers of the world (6:9-10; 42:19); the Servant of Isaiah 42 opens the eyes of the blind, and gives sight and freedom (42:7). He is a covenant to Israel (42:6). Israel couldn't be a covenant to itself. Thus, Isaiah whittles down the options so that the readers know that the only one who can serve God perfectly is an individual who can provide salvation on a universal scale (Isa. 42:1-9; 49:1-13; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12).

As Motyer says, "Isaiah is not afraid to allow false identifications to stand *pro tem* [= for the present time], (just as, for example, the writer of detective fiction casts suspicions here and there), until the telling of the whole story clears away misconceptions, and the very entertaining of the misconception itself contributes to the final understanding of the whole." *This is certainly the case with the Immanuel prophecy. As will be shown, the circumstances that surrounded the prophecy "required the possibility that some of its features would be misunderstood, but the narration of the 'whole story' made the final position clear and unequivocal"* (J. A. Motyer "Context and Content in the Interpretation of Isaiah 7:14," Tyndale Bulletin, 21 (1970); 119, 120).

## ***The historical context of Isaiah 7***

At the time Isaiah was written the nation of Israel was divided into two monarchies; the northern kingdom was composed of 10 tribes and bore the name Israel while Judah was the name of the southern kingdom; Judah consisted of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin. At that time Pekah was the king of Israel and Ahaz was the king of Judah.

Pekah and Rezin, king of Syria, had formed an alliance and had been pressuring Judah to join them in their efforts in resisting the advances of Assyria (2 Ki. 15:37). Perhaps Ahaz feared the consequences if they did not succeed; Assyria would give Ahaz a slow, painful death, and inflict as much destruction and terror as the mind can imagine on everyone else. But he also assumed that Judah would be better off by becoming a vassal state of Assyria; if he aligned himself with Assyria he might gain some security against the neighboring nations.

Thus, Pekah and Rezin came down with their armies and laid siege to Jerusalem (Isa. 7:1-2; 2 Chron. 28:5-8; 2 Ki. 15:37) with the intent of killing Ahaz and replacing him with Tabeel (Isa. 7:6). Judah lost 120,000 men in battle and 200,000 were taken captive (2 Ki. 16:5-9; 2 Chron. 28:5-21), but Jerusalem still stood. Ahaz, therefore, decided to send money to the Assyrians and asked them to attack Israel and Syria, forcing their armies to return home (2 Ki. 16:5-9). As Ahaz was considering sending his gift he was confronted with Isaiah (Wood, A Survey of Israel's History, 356). Isaiah told Ahaz that the real threat was not the two kings in the north, but Assyria itself. Instead of making an alliance with Assyria, he should trust in God, for God promised that He would get rid of the kings of the north (Isa. 7:4-9); they were like smoldering stumps whose fire was almost out. God would protect Judah and Jerusalem.<sup>1</sup> Trusting God was an absolute necessity if the nation ever hoped to be the servant of God.

God then told Ahaz through Isaiah to ask for a sign to confirm His promises. The sign could be of whatever magnitude that Ahaz wanted, as "deep as Sheol (the underworld) or high as heaven."

***10 Then the LORD spoke again to Ahaz, saying,***

***11 "Ask a sign for yourself from the LORD your God; make it deep as Sheol or high as heaven."***

***12 But Ahaz said, "I will not ask, nor will I test the LORD!"***

God was asking Ahaz to trust Him but Ahaz refused: "I will not ask, nor will I test the LORD!" Carson writes, "But under a pretense of piety Ahaz refuses to do this (Isa. 7:12), and therefore judgment must follow: Judah will shortly be attacked and overrun by the very Assyria Ahaz courts for protection (Isa. 7:17-20)" (Carson, For the Love of God, May 24).

Ahaz had already made up his mind to side with Assyria. His piety was just a religious veneer that covered his lack of faith.

Ahaz's decision had some huge ramifications to it. The first was that he was inviting Assyria into the affairs of the region and it was Assyria that was the real threat to Judah's independence. Furthermore, Assyria's help could only be procured by making a covenant with her (Oswalt, Isaiah, 197). This meant that Ahaz was admitting the lordship of the Assyrian gods. "This was probably the significance of Ahaz's

journey to Damascus and redesign of the temple altar after a Syrian plan (2 Ki. 16:10-16; 2 Chron. 28:22-24)" (Oswalt, Isaiah, 198). By trusting in Assyria, Ahaz denied God. Lastly, this became the turning point in the fortunes of the house of David. Ahaz's response to Isaiah signaled an abandonment of God by the dynasty and opened the doors to its eventual destruction.

**13 Then he said, "Listen now, O house of David! Is it too slight a thing for you to try the patience of men, that you will try the patience of my God as well?"**

**14 "Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel.**

**15 "He will eat curds and honey at the time He knows enough to refuse evil and choose good.**

**16 "For before the boy will know enough to refuse evil and choose good, the land whose two kings you dread will be forsaken.**

**17 "The LORD will bring on you, on your people, and on your father's house such days as have never come since the day that Ephraim separated from Judah, the king of Assyria."**

Isaiah had heard enough and berated the king for trying God's patience (Isa. 7:13). Ahaz may not want a sign, but God would give a sign anyway. The sign was the prophecy of Isaiah 7:14.

A sign in the OT could function in two ways. First, it could be something that was intended to encourage faith and stir someone to action. But a sign could also be "designed to *follow* a series of events, to confirm them as acts of God" (120). It confirmed an event that happened in the past.<sup>2</sup> The Immanuel prophecy fits into the latter category. This is evident for at least 2 reasons. First, according to verse 16 the land of Israel and Damascus would already be in desolation when Immanuel comes (thus, it was not a sign intended to cause Ahaz to repent). Secondly, "Immanuel as a child will eat 'butter and honey' (verse 15), which is interpreted (verse 22) as the food of a small remnant in a land sheared by the enemy (verses 19, 20)" (Motyer, 121). In other words, it appears that the coming of Immanuel would be at an unspecified time after Judah's exile. His birth would be when the kings of the north who threatened Judah were laid waste (Isa. 7:16). Babylon, not Assyria, was the nation that brought Judah into captivity, but Assyria did oppress Judah and waged war against Judah about thirty years later (Isa. 36-37; 2 Ki. 18:17-37).<sup>3</sup> The sign of Immanuel is in a context of God's judgment upon Judah for the unbelief of their king Ahaz and his refusal to turn to God. Therefore, the sign retrospectively confirmed God's *displeasure* with the nation. At the same time, the title Immanuel ("God with us") left more than a glimmer of hope.

As Carson says,

Ahaz, despite his pious language (Isa. 7:12), has utterly rejected the Lord's demand that he trust the Lord and abandon any thought of an alliance with Assyria. So the "sign" promised in 7:13-14 is not a sign inviting repentance but a sign confirming divine condemnation (as in, e.g., Ex. 3:12; 1 Sam. 2:34; Isa. 37:30). Judging by the high expectations of verse 11, the sign must be spectacular, not merely a time-lag before a young woman becomes pregnant. Despite arguments to the contrary, the word rendered "virgin" really should be taken that way. In this light, the "Immanuel" prophecy really is messianic. The title, "God with us," anticipates "mighty

God” applied to the Davidic Messiah in Isaiah 9:2-7. His coming retrospectively confirms all the judgment that has been pronounced (*ibid.*).

### ***Isaiah 7-11- “The Book of Immanuel”***

“We can only appreciate the sweep of Isaiah's thought along these lines by considering the Immanuel prophecy in the context of the pattern of Chapters 7-11” (Motyer, 122).

In the following analysis, Motyer shows the parallels between the warning and judgment of Judah and Ephraim (Israel). In each section both nations are brought to the point where they need to make a decision to turn to the Lord or face His wrath. Their rebellion ends in both being judged. But the story doesn't end there. In His gracious goodness God sends the great Davidic monarch, Jesus the Messiah, who brings salvation not only to the remnant of Israel but the entire world.

|                                  | JUDAH  | EPHRAIM (ISRAEL)  |
|----------------------------------|--|---|
| (1)<br>THE MOMENT<br>OF DECISION | 7:1-17<br>The Lord's word comes to Judah. On the king's decision hangs the future of the dynasty.  | 9:8-10:4<br>The Lord's word comes to Ephraim. A wealth of imminent divine anger awaits disobedience.                          |
| (2)<br>THE JUDGMENT              | 7:18-8:8<br>The Assyrian Invasion: Damascus and Samaria are despoiled; Judah is overwhelmed as by an all but fatal flood.  | 10:5-15<br>The Assyrian Invasion: Samaria has fallen; Judah is under threat; the punishment of Assyria is certain.            |
| (3)<br>THE REMNANT               | 8:9-22<br>The foes of God's people are doomed, but His people are secure. It is not, however, an unconditional security: those who reject His word are without hope. | 10:16-34<br>The destruction of the king of Assyria; the salvation of a remnant of Israel; the dramatic deliverance of Zion.   |
| (4)<br>THE GLORIOUS<br>HOPE      | 9:1-7<br>The birth and reign of the Davidic Prince brings victory, and peace to His people , and His reign ever extends.   | 11:1-16<br>The perfection of the Davidic Prince, and His joy reign over the Gentiles and over a re-gathered Israel and Judah. |

Thus, Isaiah 7:1-9:7 and 9:8-11:16 are to be read as two units of thought, and Isaiah 7:14 must be interpreted in light of the context. Chapters 7-11 might be called 'The Book of Immanuel' with the visionary chapters of 6 and 12 acting as prologue and epilogue respectively (Motyer, 122,123).<sup>4</sup>

## ***The Immanuel prophecy in the Book of Matthew***

It is probably a surprise to modern day readers that Isaiah 7:14 is a sign of judgment as well as blessing; from our vantage point the coming of Immanuel is the greatest blessing the world has known.

Immanuel is the heir and successor of David, and according to Isaiah 9:6 and 7 He is also unequivocally divine. He is the Prince of righteousness and peace, sovereign over a reconciled world (11:1ff). However, "Immanuel both confirms that the devastation [of Judah] was the punitive act of God— this, by being born to inherit the disestablished dynasty—and also by His name and deeds He proclaims that the promises were indeed kept, and wonderfully so (Motyer, 123, 124) . . . It is clear that Jesus alone has the credentials to claim the divine/human ancestry and nature, the righteous character and worldwide rule prophesied for Immanuel" (Motyer, 125).

Matthew clearly sees the coming of Immanuel in the same sense that Isaiah did:

In Isaiah 7-11, the coming of Immanuel is tied to Israel's exile into captivity. Matthew also ties Immanuel's coming to the captivity; in fact, the genealogy in Matthew 1 is deliberately divided into two sections (1:1-11 and 1:12-17) with the express purpose of emphasizing the exile. Matthew even mentions the exile again in Matthew 2:17-18. The mention of Immanuel is sandwiched right between these two passages.

Both Isaiah and Matthew show Jesus to be the ruler in the Davidic line that had been prophesied. The Davidic dynasty had no successors between the time that the nation was conquered by Babylon and the coming of Christ. It was no mistake that Jesus' genealogy in Matthew begins by showing that He is of the line of David for one of Matthew's chief aims is to show that Jesus is the great Davidic king who inherits the disestablished dynasty. He is the heir to the messianic promises and the one who will bring blessings to the nations. In fact, this theme of kingship brackets the whole Gospel of Matthew: Matthew 1:1 begins with "The record of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David", and Matthew 28:18 ends with Jesus saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth." Jesus fulfills Isaiah 9:7 which says of the messiah, "There will be no end to the increase of His government or of peace, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness from then on and forevermore."

The same Immanuel/messianic-king theme is closely tied to Matthew 4:15-16, as well. At the beginning of Jesus' ministry, Matthew quotes the Immanuel prophecy of Isaiah (Isaiah 9:1-2): "THE LAND OF ZEBULUN AND THE LAND OF NAPHTALI, BY THE WAY OF THE SEA, BEYOND THE JORDAN, GALILEE OF THE GENTILES-- THE PEOPLE WHO WERE SITTING IN DARKNESS SAW A GREAT LIGHT, AND THOSE WHO WERE SITTING IN THE LAND AND SHADOW OF DEATH, UPON THEM A LIGHT DAWNED." Jesus' ministry is described in the terms of Immanuel's ministry. Of course, in Isaiah this is followed by 9:6-7 that speaks of the child that would be given, upon whose shoulders the government would rest as He sits on the throne of David. In Matthew this is then followed by Jesus' announcement of the kingdom (Matt. 4:17): "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

Lastly, the coming of Immanuel is both a fulfillment and a precursor of the glorious day when God will dwell among men. Isaiah 60:19-22 predicts a great future day when God will dwell with man in all His fullness. It says, "No longer will you have the sun for light by day, nor for brightness will the moon give you light; but you will have the LORD for an everlasting light, and your God for your glory. Your sun will no longer set, nor will your moon wane; for you will have the LORD for an everlasting light, and the days of your mourning will be over. Then all your people will be righteous; they will possess the land forever, the branch of My planting, the work of My hands, that I may be glorified... I, the LORD, will hasten it in its time." Jesus was deity veiled in flesh, but was, nonetheless, God dwelling among men.

Although the Gospel of John makes it abundantly clear that God dwelled in Christ (Jn. 1:1-3, 14, 18), Matthew's mention of Jesus as "Immanuel" ("God with us") also points to the embodiment of God in human flesh, the divine presence among His people.

In conclusion, the prophecy of Immanuel is both a sign of hope and a sign that looked back as a proof of God's judgment upon Judah. When Jesus came to the nation they were still under Gentile rule and had no Davidic king. The people desperately needed a Savior to redeem them. The world desperately needed the same.

Then one clear, cold night in Bethlehem there appeared a multitude of angels praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased." They bore "good news of great joy which will be for all the people" and proclaimed that "in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."

Joy to the World, the Lord is come!  
 Let earth receive her King;  
 Let every heart prepare Him room,  
 And Heaven and nature sing. . .

He rules the world with truth and grace,  
 And makes the nations prove  
 The glories of His righteousness,  
 And wonders of His love. . .

NOTE 1: On a historical note, Syria and Israel were destroyed in 722 B.C., fulfilling God's word and leaving Judah at the mercy of the Assyrians. In time, Ahaz was succeeded by Hezekiah who also disregarded Isaiah's advice and joined a coalition with Babylonia and Egypt against Assyria. Many years later, Babylon became the new world empire and in 597 B. C. it attacked Jerusalem and captured it. A second attack followed which also ended in Judah's defeat. Captives from both campaigns were taken to Babylonia to mark the captivity of the southern kingdom and the end of a ruler on the throne of David (for a season).

NOTE 2: Examples of these two types of signs are also found in the NT. In Matthew 12:38-40, the Pharisees said to Jesus, "Teacher, we want to see a sign from you." The sign they wanted was a sign that would generate faith. Jesus answered, "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah; for just as JONAH WAS THREE DAYS AND THREE NIGHTS IN THE BELLY OF THE SEA MONSTER, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. " Jesus refused to give the sign that they wanted; but He would give a future sign that looked back to the fulfilment of His words. The sign of Jonah was the sign of His resurrection; it was a sign that demonstrated that what Jesus had said was true. And it vindicated the faith of all who believed in Christ before it happened. The resurrection didn't change the faith of those who didn't believe; they just thought of a way to explain it away.

NOTE 3: "The immediate occasion of this war against Judah was the fact that Hezekiah had shaken off the yoke of Assyria, by which his father Ahaz and the nation had suffered so much under Tiglath-pileser, or Shalmaneser 2 Kings 18:7. To reduce Judea again to subjection, as well as to carry his conquests into Egypt, appears to have been the design of this celebrated expedition. He ravaged the country, took the strong towns and fortresses, and prepared then to lay siege to Jerusalem itself. Hezekiah, however, as soon as the army of Sennacherib had entered Judea, prepared to put Jerusalem into a state of complete defense. At the advice of his counselors he stopped the waters that flowed in the neighborhood of the city, and that might furnish refreshment to a besieging army, built up the broken walls, enclosed one of the fountains within a wall, and prepared shields and darts in abundance to repel the invader 2 Chronicles 32:2-5.

Sennacherib, seeing that all hope of easily taking Jerusalem was taken away, apparently became inclined to hearken to terms of accommodation. Hezekiah sent to him to propose peace, and to ask the conditions on which he would withdraw his forces. He confessed his error in not paying the tribute stipulated by his father, and his willingness to pay now what should be demanded by Sennacherib. Sennacherib demanded three hundred talents of silver, and thirty talents of gold. This was paid by Hezekiah, by exhausting the treasury, and by stripping even the temple of its gold 2 Kings 18:13-16. It was evidently understood in this treaty that Sennacherib was to withdraw his forces, and return to his own land. But this treaty he ultimately disregarded (see the note at Isaiah 33:8). He seems, however, to have granted Hezekiah some respite, and to have delayed his attack on Jerusalem until his return from Egypt." (Barnes)

NOTE 4: Ahaz had rejected God and had chosen to trust in Assyria. As a result, the nation would suffer and the Davidic dynasty would eventually die. Yet God is not stopped by the decisions of man. He would send Immanuel to save His people. He would bring light to darkness. He would be God with us. God will ultimately destroy His enemies and save His people through His glorious Servant, Immanuel. He will establish peace. He will bring prosperity and joy.

Isaiah Chapter 12 is the epilogue of the Book of Immanuel that describes the response of the people when Immanuel comes to take possession of the earth. What a glorious response it is!

Isaiah 12:1 Then you will say on that day, "I will give thanks to You, O LORD; For although You were angry with me, Your anger is turned away, And You comfort me.

2 "Behold, God is my salvation, I will trust and not be afraid; For the LORD GOD is my strength and song, And He has become my salvation."

3 Therefore you will joyously draw water From the springs of salvation.

4 And in that day you will say, "Give thanks to the LORD, call on His name. Make known His deeds among the peoples; Make them remember that His name is exalted."

5 Praise the LORD in song, for He has done excellent things; Let this be known throughout the earth.

6 Cry aloud and shout for joy, O inhabitant of Zion, For great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.