

Isaiah 7:14

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Isaiah 7:14 is a verse of the Book of Isaiah in which the prophet Isaiah, addressing king Ahaz of Judah, promises the king that God will destroy his enemies; as a sign that his oracle is a true one, Isaiah predicts that a young woman will shortly give birth to a child whose name will be Immanuel, "God is with us", and that the threat from the enemy kings will be ended before the child grows up.^[1] The author of the gospel of Matthew used the Septuagint's translation of the Hebrew word *almah* (a young woman of childbearing age who has not yet had a child) as Greek *parthenos* (unequivocally a virgin) in support of his concept of the virgin birth of Jesus.^[2] Scholars agree that *almah* has nothing to do with virginity *per se*, but many conservative Christians still judge the acceptability of new Bible translations by the way they deal with Isaiah 7:14.^{[3][4]}

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Historical context

In the mid-8th century BCE the kingdom of Israel (called Ephraim in Isaiah) and its ally Aram-Damascus (or Syria) besieged Jerusalem to force king Ahaz of Judah into joining a coalition against Assyria, the aggressive "great power" to the north-east. Ahaz turned to Assyria itself for help, but although the Assyrians destroyed Syria and Ephraim, Judah became an Assyrian vassal. In the late 8th century Hezekiah, the son and successor of Ahaz, eventually rebelled, thinking that with Egyptian help he could regain Judah's independence; but the Egyptian aid was not forthcoming, Jerusalem was put under siege again, and Hezekiah was able to save himself only by paying tribute. By the late 7th century Assyria fell to a new "great power", Babylon, and in 586 BCE Judah was conquered by the Babylonians and its population deported to Mesopotamia. The exile lasted only a few decades, however, for in 539 Babylon in turn was conquered by the Persians and the Jews were allowed to return to Jerusalem.^[5]

Text

Prelude - Isaiah 7:1-10

Judah is faced with invasion by its northern neighbours, Israel (also called Ephraim) and Aram-Damascus (Syria), but God instructs the prophet Isaiah to tell king Ahaz that God will destroy Judah's enemies (Isaiah 7:1-10):

When Ahaz ... was king of Judah, Rezin, king of Syria, and Pekah ... king of Israel, marched on Jerusalem, they were unable to prevail against it. When the House of David was told that Syria had allied itself with Ephraim, their hearts and the hearts of their people trembled ... But the Lord said to Isaiah, "Go out to meet Ahaz, you and Shearjashub your son, ... and say to him, 'Be firm and keep calm, ... The Lord has said, 'It will not happen...'^[6]

The prophecy - Isaiah 7:11-16

Isaiah delivers God's message to Ahaz and tells him to ask for a sign to confirm that this is a true prophecy (verse 7:11). Ahaz refuses, saying he will not test God (7:12). Isaiah replies that Ahaz will have a sign whether he asks for it or not, and the sign will be the birth of a child, and the child's mother will call it Immanuel, meaning "God-with-us" (7:13-14); by the time the infant "learns to reject the bad and choose the good" (i.e., is old enough to know right from wrong) he will be eating curds and honey, and Ephraim and Syria will be destroyed (7:15-16):

7:11 יֵא שְׂאֵל-לְךָ אֹת, מֵעַם הַנְּהָ אֲלֵהֶיךָ; הֵעֲמֹק שְׂאֵלָה, אוּ הַגְּבוֹה לְמַעְלָה.

"Ask a sign from the Lord your God, from lowest Sheol or from highest heaven."

7:12 יב וַיֹּאמֶר, אֲחִי: לֹא-אֲשַׂאֵל וְלֹא-אֲנַסֶּה, אֶת-הַנְּהָ.

But Ahaz said, "I will not ask, and I will not test the Lord."

7:13 יג וַיֹּאמֶר, שְׂמִעוּ-נָא בְּיַד דָּוִד: הֲמַעַט מִכֶּם הִלָּאוֹת אֲנָשִׁים, כִּי תִלְאוּ גַם אֶת-אֲלֵהֶי.

Then he retorted: "Listen, house of David! Is it not enough to try the patience of men? Will you also try the patience of my God?"

7:14 יד לָכֵן יִתֵּן אֲדֹנָי הוּא, לָכֶם--אֹת: הַנְּהָ הֵעֲלָמָה, הָרָה וְיֹלְדֵת בֵּן, וְקָרָאת שְׁמוֹ, עִמָּנוּ אֵל.

therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign: a maiden is with child and she will bear a son, and will call his name Immanuel.

7:15 טו הַמָּאָה וְדָבַשׁ, יֹאכַל--לְדַעְתּוֹ מֵאוֹס בְּרַע, וּבַחֹר בְּטוֹב.

By the time he learns to reject the bad and choose the good, he will be eating curds and honey.

7:16 טז כִּי בְטָרֵם יִדַע הַנְּעַר, מֵאוֹס בְּרַע--וּבַחֹר בְּטוֹב: תַּעֲזֹב הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה קָח, מִפְּנֵי מְלִכֶיהָ.

For before the child knows to reject the bad and choose the good, desolation will come upon the land of the two kings before whom you now cower.^[7]

Aftermath - Isaiah 7:17-25

Isaiah 7:17 follows, with a further prophesy that at some unspecified future date God will call up Assyria against Judah: "The Lord will cause to come upon you and your people and your ancestral house such days as have not been seen since Ephraim broke away from Judah - the king of Assyria" (verse 7:17). Verses 18-25 describe the devastation that will result: "In that day every place where there used to be a thousand vines ... will be turned over to thorns and briars" (verse 23). The "curds and honey" reappear, but this time the image is no longer associated with Immanuel: "In that day a man will save alive a young cow and two sheep, and there will be such an abundance of milk, he will eat curds and honey" (verse 21-22).^[8]

Interpretation

The Book of Isaiah

The book of Isaiah was assembled over many centuries.^[9] Chapters 1-39 form a section called First Isaiah; it is made up of a number of smaller units from a variety of times.^[9] Isaiah 7:1-8:15 apparently dates from the beginning of the reign of Hezekiah (late 8th century), during the lifetime of Isaiah, and its purpose was to persuade Hezekiah not to join an alliance in rebellion against Assyria. A century later, in the time of Josiah, the prophecy was revised to present Ahaz as the "faithless" king who rejected God's promise of protection for Jerusalem and the house of David, with the result that God brought Assyria to devastate the land until a new and faithful king (presumably Josiah) would arise to restore peace.^[10]

Isaiah promises Ahaz that God will destroy his enemies and tells him to ask God for a sign that this is a true prophecy. A "sign", in this context, means a special event which confirms the prophet's words.^[11] Ahaz's sign will be the birth of a son to an *almah*. The word *almah* has no exact equivalent in English: it probably meant a young girl or woman who had not yet borne a child.^[12] So the sign is that a young girl will conceive - or possibly has conceived and is already pregnant, the Hebrew is ambiguous - and give birth to a son; she is to name the boy Immanuel, meaning "God is with us" - the grammar of the Hebrew is clear that the naming will be done by the baby's mother - and God will destroy Ahaz's enemies before the child able to tell right from wrong.^[1]

The *almah* has been identified as either the mother of Hezekiah or the daughter of Isaiah.^[13] There are, however, problems with both candidates: Hezekiah was born well before the war with Ephraim and Syria began, and although *almah* does not specifically mean "virgin" it probably does mean a girl who has not yet had a child, and Isaiah already has a son. In any case the significance of the Immanuel sign is not the identity of the child and its mother but the meaning of the name ("God is with us") and, most important, the role it plays in identifying the length of time before God will destroy the Ephraimite-Syrian coalition (before the child learns right from wrong).^[12]

Gospel of Matthew

The book of Isaiah was the most popular of all the prophetic books among the earliest Christians - it accounts for more than half the allusions and quotations in the New Testament and over half the quotations attributed to Jesus himself, and the gospel of Matthew in particular presents Jesus's ministry as largely the fulfilment of prophecies from Isaiah.^[14] In the time of Jesus, however, the Jews of Palestine no longer spoke Hebrew, and Isaiah had to be translated into Greek and Aramaic, the two commonly used languages.^[14] In the original Hebrew of Isaiah 7:14 the word *almah* meant a young woman of childbearing age who had not yet given birth and who might or might not be a virgin, but the Greek translation rendered *almah* as *parthenos*, a word which means "virgin".^[2] This gave the author of Matthew the opportunity to interpret Jesus as the fulfilment of the Immanuel prophecy: Jesus becomes "God is with us", the divine representative on earth, and Matthew further identifies Jesus with the Immanuel born to a *parthenos* by noting that Joseph did not have sexual intercourse with Mary until she gave birth.^[2] (The "virgin birth" is found only in the gospels of Matthew and Luke - it is not mentioned in Mark's gospel, nor by John, who refers to Joseph as Jesus's father, nor by Paul, who says that Jesus was "born of a woman" without mentioning that the woman was a virgin).^[15]

The King James bible translated Isaiah's *almah* as "virgin"; in 1952 the Revised Standard Version altered this to "young woman", and immediately became the centre of an intense controversy. (Senator Joseph McCarthy even accused the new translation of being a communist plot, although not because of Isaiah and the *almah*). The RSV quickly replaced the KJV in many churches across America, but fundamentalist American Christians were outraged: nowhere in the Old Testament, they argued, was an *almah* anything other than a young unmarried girl; moreover, the Greek translators of Isaiah had shown by the word *parthenos* that they believed Isaiah to predict a virgin birth for the coming Messiah, and the inspired Gospel of Matthew had endorsed their choice by quoting the Greek. Scholars agree that *almah* has nothing to do with virginity, but many conservative American Christians still judge the acceptability of new bible translations by the way they deal with Isaiah 7:14.^{[3][4]}

The following table provides the English translations of this verse from several bibles, both Christian and Jewish:

Source	Translation	Note
King James Version, 1611	Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.	shall call: or, thou, O virgin, shalt call
NRSV, 1989	Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman* is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.*	Comment : *or virgin *That is, God with us
JPS, 1917	Therefore the Lord Himself shall give you a sign: behold, the young woman shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.	
JPS Tanakh, 1985	Assuredly, my Lord will give you a sign of His own accord! Look, the young woman is with child and about to give birth to a son. Let her name him Immanuel.	Comment on "Immanuel!": Meaning "with us is God."
ArtScroll Tanach, Stone Edition	Therefore, my Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the maiden will become pregnant and bear a son, and she will name him Immanuel.	Commentary notes that either Isaiah's (per Rashi) or Ahaz' (per Radaq) young wife will bear a son and, through prophetic inspiration, will give him the name Immanuel, which means "God is With Us," thus in effect prophesying that Judah will be saved from the threat of Rezin and Pekah.
Koren Jerusalem Bible, Koren Publishing	Therefore the Lord Himself shall give you a sign: Behold, the young woman is with child, and she will bear a son, and shall call his name 'Immanu-el'.	
Judaica Press Tanach	Therefore, the Lord, of His own, shall give you a sign; behold, the young woman is with child, and she shall bear a son, and she shall call his name Immanuel.	Detailed commentary agrees with ArtScroll Tanach commentary
Soncino Press Tanach	Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, the young woman is with child, and she will bear a son, and shall call his name Immanu-El.	

See also

- Almah
- Book of Isaiah
- Immanuel
- Gospel of Matthew
- Jesus and Messianic prophecy
- Maher-shalal-hash-baz
- Pele-joez-el-gibbor-abi-ad-sar-shalom
- Virgin Birth (Christian doctrine)

Citations

1. ^{a b} Childs 2001, p. 66.
2. ^{a b c} Saldarini 2001, p. 1007.
3. ^{a b} Rhodes 2003, p. 75-82.
4. ^{a b} Sweeney 1996, p. 161.
5. ^a Coogan 2007, p. 974-975.
6. ^a Childs 2001, p. 60.
7. ^a Childs 2001, p. 60-61.
8. ^a Childs 2001, p. 61.
9. ^{a b} Coogan 2007, p. 974.
10. ^a Sweeney 1996, p. 159.
11. ^a Childs 2001, p. 65.
12. ^{a b} Sweeney 1996, p. 162.
13. ^a Coogan 2007, p. 988.
14. ^{a b} Barker 2001, p. 490.
15. ^a Ehrman 1999, p. 96.

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