

THE SIGN OF AHAZ: A THEOLOGICAL READING OF ISAIAH. 7:14-16*



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Abstract: The paper aims to answer the following key question: Is the prophecy of Isaiah of the virgin birth in Isaiah 7:14-16 limited to the immediate future, or does it refer to events in the distant future? By “near future” is meant the events that were fulfilled during the life of King Ahaz. By “distant future” is meant the events that took place at the time of the birth of Jesus Christ. The prophecy uttered by Isaiah to Ahaz is a stumbling block between Christian and Jewish theologians. Christian theologians see this prophecy as pointing to the Virgin Mary and the virgin birth of Jesus, while Jewish rabbis interpret it only in its literal sense, placing it in the time of Ahaz. For Christians this controversial passage is key for several reasons. First, it

touches on Christology and answers many questions related to the supernatural origin of Jesus. In the era of the ecumenical councils there was considerable interest in the Isaiah prophecy among Christians. Orthodox Church fathers defended Christ's virgin birth and called Mary the mother of God. Secondly, it deals with soteriology since Matthew uses it in the context of the promise of salvation from sin. Rabbis, on the contrary, in order to distance themselves from the Christological reading of the prophecy, maintain that Isaiah did not intend to prophesy about the distant future.

Keywords: Is. 7:14-16, Ahaz, sign, virgin, baby, Christology, Virgin birth

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Introduction

The main question this paper will seek to answer is the following: Is the prophecy of Isaiah about the virgin birth in Isaiah 7:14-16 limited to the immediate future, or does it reference events in the distant future? By “near future” I mean events that were fulfilled during the life of King Ahaz. By “distant future” I mean events that took place at the time of the birth of Jesus Christ.

The prophecy uttered by Isaiah to Ahaz and recorded in Isaiah 7:14-16 is a stumbling block between Christians, who see this prophecy pointing to the Virgin Mary and the virgin birth of Jesus, and Jewish rabbis who interpret it only in its literal sense, placing it in the time of Ahaz.

For Christians this controversial passage is key for several reasons. First, it touches on Christology and answers many questions related to the supernatural origin of Jesus. In the era of the ecumenical councils there was considerable interest in the prophecy of Isaiah among Christians. The Orthodox fathers defended Christ’s virgin birth and called Mary the mother of God, while heretical sects, especially the Nestorians, spoke of Mary as the mother of Christ.¹ Secondly, it deals with soteriology since Matthew quotes it in the context of the promise of salvation from sin. Rabbis, on the contrary, in order to distance themselves from the Christological reading of the prophecy, are firmly convinced that Isaiah did not intend to prophesy about the distant future.

In this study we will begin by describing the historical context of the seventh chapter of the book of Isaiah and also define the scope and limits of the prophecy. In addition, we will define key terms and the meaning of the signs. Finally we will consider the New Testament paraphrase of Isaiah’s prophecy.

Historical Background of the Prophecy

In Judah at the time of the events described, Ahaz of the dynasty of David, the son of Jotham reigned. Ahaz’s name means “he captured.”² Taking into account the way the name is written in Assyrian inscriptions, one can assume that his full name was Johanan, which translates as “The Lord took.” Ahaz became king in Jerusalem during his twenties. “In the seventeenth year of Pekah son of Remaliah, Ahaz the son of Jotham, king of Judah, became king. Ahaz was twenty years old when he became king; he reigned for sixteen years in Jerusalem. He did not do what was right in the sight of the Lord his God, as his father David had done, but he walked in the way of the kings of Israel, and even made his son pass through the fire, according to the abominations of the nations whom the Lord had driven out from before the sons of Israel” (2 Kings 16:1-3). He became co-ruler in Jerusalem in 735 BC and from 732 to 715 BC he was the absolute ruler. He was a wicked king, unlike his father Jotham.

¹ For a more detailed history of the development of the theology of the conception of Jesus, see Philip Schaff *History of the Christian Church*, Vol. 3, “Nicene and Post Nicene Period 311-590 AD.”

² Fritz Reinecker and Gerhard Maier, eds., *Bibleiskaia Entsiklopediia Brokgauza* (Paderborn: Christliche Verlagsbuchhandlung), 64. Possibly because his political direction was leading him away from Yahweh, the biblical authors dropped the reference to God from his name.

“In the second year of Pekah son of Remaliah king of Israel, Jotham the son of Uzziah king of Judah became king. He was twenty-five years old when he became king, and he reigned for sixteen years in Jerusalem. His mother’s name was Jerusha daughter of Zadok. He did what was right in the sight of the Lord just as his father Uzziah had done” (2 Kings 15:32-34). Josephus speaks negatively about Ahaz, describing his activities in his book *Antiquities of the Jews*. He states that Ahaz worshiped and served the gods whose cult was widespread in Israel and Syria, and later began to imitate the pagan cults of Assyria.³ Some details about his apostasy can be seen in the following passage: “The covered portal for use on the Sabbath that had been built inside the palace, and the outer entrance for the king, he removed from the house of the Lord. He did this because of the king of Assyria” (2 Kings 16:18). Ahaz gave orders to the priest Uriah to place in the temple of Jerusalem a replica of a pagan altar like the altar in Damascus, and he only allowed sacrifices to be made on this altar (2 Kings 16:10). He made cast images for the Baals (2 Chron. 28:2). “He sacrificed and burned incense on the high places, on the hills, and under every green tree” (2 Chron. 28:4). The high point of his apostasy came as he offered his sons as sacrifices to idols: “Moreover, he burned incense in the valley of Ben-Hinnom and burned his sons in fire, according to the abominations of the nations whom the Lord had driven out before the sons of Israel” (2 Chron. 28:3).

Even before Ahaz’s ascent to the throne, the military coalition of Syria and Israel inflicted a heavy defeat upon Judah. “In those days the Lord began to send Rezin king of Aram and Pekah the son of Remaliah against Judah. And Jotham slept with his fathers, and he was buried with his fathers in the city of David his father; and Ahaz his son became king in his place” (2 Kings 15:37-38). In all likelihood, this military coalition repeatedly invaded the territory under Jerusalem’s control. The events of 2 Chron. 28 likely took place as a continuation of this same military campaign against Judah, which began after Ahaz ascended to the throne. During this military conflict 120,000 were destroyed in one day at the hands of Israel, not counting the losses inflicted by Syria. The king’s son was killed in this battle as well as two high-ranking officials (2 Chron. 28:7): “The sons of Israel carried away captive two hundred thousand of their kin, women, sons, and daughters; and they took also a great deal of spoil from them, and brought the spoil to Samaria” (2 Chron. 28:8). At the same time Ahaz suffered defeat on another front against the invading Philistines and the Edomites, who captured Elath in Southern Judah: “At that time Rezin king of Aram recovered Elath for Aram, and cleared the Judeans out of Elath entirely; and the Arameans came to Elath and have lived there to this day”(2 Kings 16:6). “For again the Edomites had come and attacked Judah and carried away captives” (2 Chron. 28:17).

The immediate context of the prophecy about the virgin birth in Isaiah 7 begins with a description of yet another military campaign of the Syrian-Israelite coalition against Jerusalem. This campaign took place in the year 733 BC. “...Rezin the king of Aram and Pekah the son of Remaliah, king of Israel, went up to Jerusalem to wage

³ Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 9.12.1.

war against it..." (7:1). They tried to force Ahaz to join the coalition against the new military danger of Assyria (2 Kings 16:5). It was beneficial for Damascus and Samaria to bring Jerusalem into their coalition as a way to ensure safety at the rear. In order to implement their plan they had to either persuade Ahaz to join the coalition, or instead to put his son Tabeel on the throne who would agree to their terms: "Let us go up against Judah and terrorize it, and make for ourselves a breach in its walls and set up the son of Tabeel as king in the midst of it" (Isa 7:6). Their military campaign resulted in the confusion of King Ahaz and led to the confusion of all the inhabitants of Judah.

It is at this time that Yahweh God sends the prophet Isaiah with the good news that Ahaz should not be afraid of the military conflict: "Then the Lord said to Isaiah, Go out now to meet Ahaz, you and your son Shear-jashub, at the end of the conduit of the upper pool, on the highway to the Fuller's Field, and say to him, Take care and be calm, have no fear and do not be fainthearted because of these two stubs of smoldering firebrands, on account of the fierce anger of Rezin and Aram and the son of Remaliah. Because Aram, with Ephraim and the son of Remaliah, has planned evil against you... thus says the Lord God: It shall not stand nor shall it come to pass" (Isa. 7:3-5:7). As a way of proving the veracity of God's promise, the king was invited to ask a sign of God: "Ask a sign for yourself from the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven" (Isa. 7:11). However, because of his unbelief the admonition from Yahweh through prophet did not calm the king of Judah. He replied: "I will not ask, nor will I test the Lord!" (Isa. 7:12). Because Ahaz refused to ask for a sign Yahweh himself offered him a sign in the form of a virgin giving birth to a baby. God gave this sign to Ahaz so that he would believe God's prophecy concerning the futility of the military coalition against Jerusalem (Isa. 7:14-16).

Having rejected God's offer, Ahaz did not remain idle. He decided to make a political move in order to protect himself from Syrian-Israelite aggression. The king of Judah made an attempt to enter into a military alliance with Tiglath-pileser III,⁴ king of Assyria: "So Ahaz sent messengers to Tiglath-pileser king of Assyria, saying, 'I am your servant and your son; come up and deliver me from the hand of the king of Aram and from the hand of the king of Israel, who are rising up against me'" (2 Kings 16:7). Ahaz promised the king of Assyria a considerable amount of money if he would protect Jerusalem and in the meantime, as a sign of goodwill, he gave Tiglath-Pileser III gifts from the royal treasury and the temple. This made a good impression on the king of Assyria and he accepted the offer, which led to the Assyrian-Syrian military conflict. Josephus describes these events as follows: "The attack took the city of Damascus, the Syrian king killed Aras and resettled the residents of Damascus in Upper-Media, and in their place he sent several colonies of Assyrian tribes who settled in Damascus. This caused considerable damage to that country and to Israel, he captured many prisoners of war there."⁵ Ahaz ended up paying to get rid of Rezin and Pekah, which cost him all of the gold and silver from the royal treasury, as well as from the temple of the Lord: "Ahaz took the silver and gold that was found in the house of the Lord and in the

⁴ In the Russian Synodal translation of the Bible, he is called Feglaffellasar (2 Chron. 28:20).

⁵ Josephus Flavius, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 9.12.3.

treasuries of the king's house, and sent a present to the king of Assyria" (2 Kings 16:8). After the war, he personally went to Damascus to the Assyrians and paid for the help they had given him with his own independence (2 Kings 16:10).

Limits of the Prophetic Passage

After reviewing the historical context, we must look at the prophecy in order to determine its scope and define its beginning and end points. The first thing I want to draw attention to is the transition from dialogue to monologue in Isa. 7:13. When the prophet received a negative response from the king concerning the invitation ask for a sign, the prophet immediately addressed his epistle to the "house of David" (7:13), which most likely includes the entire dynasty and royal court in Jerusalem.

Beginning with v. 14 Isaiah foretells a sign that would be given by God himself. In addition to the semantic context, another important factor is the grammar of this narrative, which also serves as a confirmation of the beginning of a prophetic address in the text. The Hebrew language, in which this prophecy is written, is considered an inflected language. In Hebrew grammar as well as in Greek grammar, the use of the particular form of a given word is more important than the order of words in a sentence, and we can see this in our passage.⁶ The author of Isa. u switches from using the singular verb form to the plural form. The verbs "continue," "spoke," "he said" and "ask" in vv. 10-11 use the singular form. But starting in v. 13 we see the verb "to listen" in the plural, which clearly indicates a change in the narrative. We also see a change in the pronouns from the reflexive singular pronoun "yourself" in v. 11 to the personal plural pronoun "you" in v. 14.⁷

Third, in this text we a certain prophetic formula that indicates the beginning of a prophecy. And although it is not as clearly expressed as it is in Isa. 7:7: "Thus says the Lord God: It shall not stand nor shall it come to pass" (7:7), nevertheless, it can be seen in the expression "the Lord Himself will give you a sign" (7:14). The presence of signs directly relates to prophecy. It is interesting to note that Isaiah often used "signs" as a way of communicating to people a revelation from God. For instance there was the sign that he showed to the son of Ahaz, Hezekiah: "Now Hezekiah said to Isaiah, 'What will be the sign that the Lord will heal me, and that I shall go up to the house of the Lord on the third day?' Isaiah said, 'This shall be the sign to you from the Lord, that the Lord will do the thing that he has spoken: shall the shadow go forward ten steps or go back ten steps?' (2 Kings 20:8-9). The same sign is repeated in the book of Isaiah: "'This shall be the sign to you from the Lord, that the Lord will do this thing that he has spoken: Behold, I will cause the shadow on the stairway, which has gone down with the sun on the stairway of Ahaz, to go back ten steps.' So the sun's shadow went back ten steps on the stairway on which it had gone down." (Isaiah 38:7-8).

⁶ Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Odessa: E-AAA, 2009), 83.

⁷ In studying the Hebrew text I used as the main translation G. Branover, ed. *Proroki (Neviim)* (Jerusalem: Shamir. 5766/2006), 517.

Considering all these facts, we can confidently say that the prophetic word starts with v. 14.

The semantic load of the prophetic utterance ends with v. 16, which clearly shows the sign and its meaning. Grammar also plays an important role here. In v. 16 Isaiah returns to using the singular since the prophecy is again focused specifically on Ahaz, where it says that at the completion of the signs he will see the land forsaken by the two kings whom he dreaded (Isa. 7:16).

We can conclude from this that the prophecy begins with Isa. 7:14 and ends in v. 16 of the same chapter. This includes the signs (the virgin birth, the child eating milk and honey) and is a direct prophecy concerning liberation from invaders (the land shall be deserted).

Definition of Terms and Their Lexical Meaning

Having considered the scope of the prophecy, it is now important to clarify some of the terms mentioned by Isaiah in this passage. First, let us consider the meaning of the word “virgin” *הַמַּלְעָה* (*‘alma*). To be fair, it should be noted that this word in Isa. 7:14 is the cause of much debate between Christian scholars and Jewish rabbis. And in many ways the meaning of this word will determine how we answer the main question of this paper.

In the broadest sense, *‘alma* means a young girl.⁸ In addition to this occurrence, this word is found only six other times in the Old Testament: Gen. 24:43: “Behold, I am standing by the spring, and may it be that the maiden who comes out to draw, and to whom I say, ‘Please let me drink a little water from your jar.’” Ex. 2:8: “Pharaoh’s daughter said to her, ‘Go ahead.’ So the girl went and called the child’s mother.” Ps. 68:25: “The singers went on, the musicians after them, in the midst of the maidens beating tambourines.” Prov. 30:19: “The way of an eagle in the sky, the way of a serpent on a rock, the way of a ship in the middle of the sea, and the way of a man with a maid.” Song 1:3: “Your oils have a pleasing fragrance, your name is like purified oil; therefore the maidens love you.” Song 6:8: “There are sixty queens and eighty concubines, and maidens without number.” In the cases examined, it is clear that the word *‘alma* is never used in relation to a young married woman but is used exclusively with reference to a virgin.

However, Rabbi David Kimchi (RaDaK) states that *‘alma* refers to a young girl and says nothing about her virginity. The premise in RaDaK is based on upon Prov. 30:19 (... and the way of a man with a maid.⁹) He claims that this text is talking about the sexual attraction of a husband for his wife. The NASB does not allow us to make the same conclusion (... the way of a man with a maid). Even taking into account into the argument of RaDaK, we could assume that such a girl was immoral but we cannot assume anything about marriage or marital relations.¹⁰ Next, RaDaK focuses

⁸ J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Leicester, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 1993), 84.

⁹ Personal translation of RaDaK.

¹⁰ Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 287.

on her age, emphasizing her lack of life experience and thus distancing himself from the Christian interpretation of this prophecy, where the emphasis is on her virginity and innocence. In his thinking he claims that this young woman could be either the wife of the prophet (Isa. 8:3), or the wife of Ahaz (Isa. 8:8).¹¹ Later we will look at this in more detail.

Those who claim that ‘alma means “young girl” argue that if Isaiah really wanted to indicate that she was a virgin he could have used another Hebrew word for virgin, which could refer to a virgin of any age. He could have used the Hebrew word הַלְוִיָּהּ (betula¹²) rather than ‘alma, which has caused so much controversy and differences in understanding. However, by using the word ‘alma Isaiah was able to simultaneously indicate the age of the girl and her status; two facts which obviously do not exclude one another.

Furthermore, the LXX translates the Hebrew word ‘alma with the Greek word παρθένος (parthenos) which means “virgin, virginity, maiden.”¹³ Moreover, the translators of the Greek text of the Old Testament do not make a distinction between ‘alma and betula and translated these two words with one Greek word, παρθένος. A prime example of this is a passage from Genesis where the two Hebrew words ‘alma and betula are used in one chapter and both are translated into Greek using the one word, παρθένος: “The girl was very beautiful, a virgin (betula, παρθένος), and no man had had relations with her and she went down to the spring and filled her jar and came up” (Gen. 24:16)... “Behold, I am standing by the spring, and may it be that the maiden (‘alma, παρθένος) who comes out to draw, and to whom I say, “Please let me drink a little water from your jar...” (Gen. 24:43).

Taking into account all the above passages of Scripture that mention this word, Motier comes to the conclusion that wherever there is sufficient context allowing us to make a judgement, “virgin” is not a generic term meaning “young girl” and classifying her by her age, but rather it first of all implies her social status as a virgin.¹⁴

Secondly, in the Hebrew text, particle הַנַּי (hin-nay’) appears before the word ‘alma. This part of speech implies a particular virgin who will give her son the name “Immanuel.” Thus, those who heard Isaiah’s prophecy had a clear understanding concerning to whom the prophecy was specifically referring. These specifics can be viewed in two ways. First, Ahaz knew who the prophecy was referring to, which undoubtedly indicates the fulfillment of the prophecy in the near future. Second, in God’s plan there was a specific virgin who would give birth to Immanuel. This, in turn, implies the fulfillment of prophecy in the distant future.

If, however, the theory that ‘alma does not communicate virginity and is not a key aspect of the sign (which was indisputable and conclusive evidence for Ahaz and is emphasized by Christians and those who hold to the interpretation of a distant

¹¹ *The Book of Yeshua*, 100.

¹² Stanley Horton, *Kniga proroka Isaii* [The book of the prophet Isaiah] (Springfield, Mo.: Life, 2003), 107

¹³ Nestle-Aland, *Septuagint* (<http://manuscript-bible.ru/>)

¹⁴ Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, 85.

future fulfillment), what then is the sign of that has the power to make the king believe? After all, there is nothing extraordinary in the fact that a young woman can become pregnant and give birth to a male child. On a similar note RaDaK responds by saying that it indicates a completely different sign in this prophecy, namely the baby. The male child to be born, according to his theory, would have the ability to know good and evil from birth (Isa. 7:15). The father of David Kimchi, Iosif Ben Isaac Kimchi translated Isa. 7:15 as follows: “He will eat cream and honey, according to his understanding shunning what is bad and choosing the good.”¹⁵ On the basis of this translation, RaDaK claims that immediately after his birth the boy will eat cream and honey; knowing what is good and what is bad, he will close his mouth when they bring other food.¹⁶ However, this argument does not seem very convincing as it is based on only one translation done in the Middle Ages. For example, another reputed interpreter, Yeguda Veksler, who also does not share the Christian view of the reading of this prophecy, translates the passage differently: “He will eat cream and honey - to teach him to feel an aversion to evil and choose the good.”¹⁷ It should be added that the Septuagint, an early Greek translation of this passage, makes it impossible to come to the same conclusion as Kimchi. More recent translations of Isa. 7:15 in English (KJV, NIV), Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian do not indicate the instantaneous recognition of good and evil in the boy.

The second most important term that needs to be addressed is the name of the child. The prophecy says that he will be given the name “Immanuel,” which means “God with us,” or “God dwells with us.” The combination of these two factors, the virgin and the boy who is called “God with us” (El should not be translated God-Yahweh but rather Lord) is an allusion to Ps. 46. The psalm is titled, “Set to Alamothe. A Song”: “The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our stronghold. Come behold the works of the Lord, who has wrought desolations in the earth. He makes wars to cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow and cuts the spear in two; he burns the chariots with fire. ‘Cease striving and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth.’ The Lord of hosts is with us; The God of Jacob is our stronghold” (Ps. 46:7-11). This psalm speaks about the intercessory work of the Lord in the midst of military aggression against Israel. Perhaps for this reason, the boy’s name is Immanuel; the name is an allusion to the text of this psalm.

We also find the name Immanuel in Isaiah 8: “Then it will sweep on into Judah, it will overflow and pass through, it will reach even to the neck; and the spread of its wings will fill the breadth of your land, O Immanuel” (Isa. 8:8). Here Isaiah refers to his royal descent, when he says, “your land, O Immanuel.”

It is also remarkable that in the process of naming the baby, his father is not mentioned. The Hebrew word אָרַק (kaw-raw ‘v’karat) (“they will call”) refers to his mother, and indicates that she should give the child the name Immanuel. In the ancient Near East it was considered improper for the mother or any other woman

¹⁵ *The Book of Yeshua*, 101.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 100.

¹⁷ *Proroki (Neviim)*, 517.

to give a name to a boy.¹⁸ In this case, the lack of mention of the father seems unique. Nevertheless, RaDaK does not give this fact special attention. He believes that in ancient Israel it was not that uncommon a practice for women to name their sons. Christian commentators, on the other hand, see here a confirmation of their theological ideas, namely that at the time of birth there no mention of the baby's father, not even while naming the baby.

The identification of Immanuel is closely linked with the history of the life of Ahaz, and the Southern Kingdom of Judah. As king, Ahaz did not please God, and as we have said before he brought one of his sons as a sacrifice, imitating the pagan abominations. RaDaK suggests that the child Immanuel was to be born to the "virgin" who was either in a relationship with Ahaz, or with himself, Isaiah. The premise that the father of the child could be Isaiah must be rejected immediately, as in the immediate context of the book Isaiah, speaking about his sons specifically says: "Behold, I and the children whom the Lord has given me are for signs and wonders in Israel from the Lord of Hosts, who dwells on Mount Zion" (8:18). He says nothing about Immanuel as his son.

It is also hard to imagine that Immanuel could be Hezekiah, the legitimate son of Ahaz, as suggested by Roth.¹⁹ History tells us that Ahaz appointed Hezekiah as co-regent in 728 BC (729 BC)²⁰ and he became the autonomous ruler of Judah at the age of twenty-five in 715 BC: "He was twenty-five years old when he became king, and he reigned twenty-nine years in Jerusalem; and his mother's name was Abi the daughter of Zechariah" (2 Kings 18:2). Therefore, he should have been born by the time Isaiah uttered this prophecy in 733 (732) BC.²¹ It is also hard to imagine that the mother of Hezekiah was a "virgin"; it is simply impossible to come to that conclusion. It is also difficult to imagine what the "virgin" had to do with a future wife of Ahaz, because we do not know that he had other children besides those he brought as sacrifices. According to Stanley Horton, the idea that Immanuel might be the son of Ahaz by an unknown "virgin" is unfounded. He believes that milk and honey speak of poverty in the child's origins.²²

For those who support the idea that the prophecy had a distant future fulfillment there is the question: Did Ahaz live to see the birth of the child or not? If Ahaz lived to see Immanuel, then this prophecy refers to the near future; if he did not, how could this prophecy be a sign for the king that would result in him believing in the truthfulness of God's word? The rabbis are united in saying that Ahaz saw firsthand the birth of the boy Immanuel and that the boy was present when this prophecy was fulfilled: "The land whose two kings you dread will be forsaken" (Isa. 7:16). However, according to Horton, this prophecy can be interpreted in the sense that Immanuel would not be present during the destruction of the enemy; the main witness of the fall of Damascus

¹⁸ Horton, *Kniga proroka Isaii*, 107.

¹⁹ Wolfgang Roth, *Isaiah*, 46.

²⁰ Siegfried Horn, *The Divided Monarchy*, 129, 131.

²¹ Horton, *Kniga proroka Isaii*, 108.

²² *Ibid.*

would be Ahaz.²³ In this reading, King Ahaz represents the whole “house of David,” and he is opposed to the Liberator Immanuel under whose rule peace would come.

Use of the Prophecy in the New Testament

We will now consider this prophecy in the New Testament texts. In particular we will analyze how the evangelist Matthew understood the fulfillment of the prophetic signs. In this section we will focus exclusively on the Christian interpretation and will not touch upon the near future fulfillment position.

Matthew describes how an angel appeared in a dream to the Virgin Mary’s fiancé and convinced him to not break off the engagement. Apparently it became obvious to all that Mary was expecting a child while she was still engaged to Joseph. The appearance of an angel and his message about the virgin conception convinced Joseph to keep his relationship with Mary. However, John Chrysostom understood that the reason for Joseph’s faith was not in the words of the angel, as it might seem at first glance, but rather in Isaiah’s prophecy. Chrysostom, in his talks on the Gospel of Matthew says, “The angel sends Joseph to Isaiah so that, when he awakens, if he forgets [the angel’s] words as something completely new, [because of] being nourished by Scripture he would remember the words of the prophet and together with [those words], he would be able to recall [the angel’s] words.”²⁴

After this narrative text Matthew adds his commentary about what was happening, seeing the fulfillment of ancient prophecies about the birth of a child from a virgin. “‘She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.’ Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ‘Behold, the virgin shall be with child and shall bear a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel,’ which translated means, ‘God with us’” (Matt. 1:21-23). Matthew references several passages from the Old Testament, using the exact same words, in particular 1:18: “be with child”; 1:20 “an angel”; and 1:21: “... will bear a Son.” These words are taken from the lines of Isa. 7:14. Furthermore, we can trace Matt. 1:23 back to quotes from Gen.16:11; 17:19. Some scholars have suggested that Matthew wanted readers who know the Old Testament to be reminded of the wives of the Patriarchs who were childless and through the miraculous intervention of God were able to conceive and give birth to children: Sarah (Gen. 21:1-7); Rachel (Gen. 30:22-24); and Anna (1 Sam. 1:20). Taking into account the above, we can see some parallels between Joseph and Ahaz. Both of them were in a difficult situation. Both received a message from the Lord in the form of an angel, “a sent one,” and both are given the sign of a “virgin with child.” However, Ahaz rejected the will of God but Joseph agrees and obeys. Moreover, Joseph belonged to David’s dynasty, as did Ahaz. “But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, ‘Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit’” (Matt. 1:20). This is seen

²³ Ibid., 109.

²⁴ Ioann Zlatoust, *Besedy na Evangelie ot Matfeia* [Talks on the Gospel of Matthew], (https://azbuka.ru/otechnik/Ioann_Zlatoust/tolk_51/5).

as an allusion to Isa. 7:13 where the prophecy is said to be for the “house of David.” Perhaps it is for this reason that Matthew quotes an ancient prophecy describing the events of the birth of Jesus Christ.

However, in Matt. 1:23 the baby is named Jesus according to the instructions of the angel, while in Isa. 7:14 the boy is named Immanuel according to the instructions God gave. Not once do we see in the New Testament that Jesus is called Immanuel. The name of Jesus as used by Matthew is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew name Joshua, which means “God is salvation.”

Matthew quotes the Greek translation of the Old Testament in which the first part of the prophecy is the same: “A virgin shall conceive and bear a son.” However, further on there are some differences. The Masoretic text reads, “And she will call him.” The Septuagint reads, “and you shall call him.” Matthew reads, “And they shall call him.” Beale and Carson came to the conclusion that Matthew was guided in his writing exclusively by the Greek text of the Old Testament, which uses the third person plural. Since Matthew probably wrote in a Semitic variation of the Greek language, where the third person plural is similar to the indefinite personal form, we can assume that the text should be read, “And he shall be called...”²⁵

Conclusion

Thus, having examined the historical context of the prophecy, the meaning of certain terms and words, and analyzing the sign, we can conclude that the Immanuel who was born in the days of Ahaz fulfilled that part of the prophecy, which included the birth of a child in the near future. This conclusion, upon which the rabbis insist, is not contrary to the Christian view of the sign. Indeed, the prophecy must be seen first of all as being fulfilled in the near future. In this case, the word ‘alma is understood as an indication of the age of the mother with reference to the near fulfillment of the prophecy. There was nothing extraordinary in this birth of a child in the days of Ahaz, even if we do not know whose son Immanuel was.

However, it seems impossible to ignore the wider context, which speaks of the virgin and her son, which are types that are not limited to Immanuel and his mother who lived in the 8th century BC. It is clear that this part of the prophecy was fulfilled in Jesus Christ, born of the Virgin Mary. This explains Matthew’s paraphrase and the use of the word ‘alma in Hebrew and παρθένοϋς in Greek to mean “virgin.”

²⁵ G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, eds., *Vetkhii zavet na stranitsakh Novogo* [Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament], Vol. 1, (Cherkassy, Ukraine: Kollokvium, 2010), 48.

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