

## **IMMANUEL: GOD WAS ONE OF US?**

“Therefore the LORD Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin (Hebrew *almah*; Greek *parthenos*) will be with child and bear a son, and she will call his name Immanuel” (Isaiah 7:14 NASB).

Our Jewish friends insist no Jew in the First Century CE ever expected the Messiah to be virginally begotten. They allege the story of the virgin birth entered Christianity via a mistranslation of the Hebrew word *almah* in Isaiah 7:14. *Almah*, meaning maiden or young woman, is not the specific Hebrew word for “virgin” (*betolah*). But when *almah* was translated into the Greek text as *parthenos* (which does always mean ‘virgin’), the way was opened up for the Christian ‘myth’ of the virgin birth of Jesus. This has been the consistently held narrative of Jews down to this present day.

It is also suggested this process ---either knowingly or innocently --- was assisted and

abetted by surrounding Gentile culture that abounded with many legends of miraculous births of their own superheroes such as Achilles and Hercules and Atlas *et al.*

So, are we the victims of scribal corruption that has altered the sacred text? I am the first to acknowledge the disastrous infiltration Hellenistic (and therefore pagan!) philosophy has had on the Christian Church. Within the first couple of centuries this parasitic process was well and truly under way. So, it is an excellent question to ask whether the Virgin Birth may not be another case where Gentile doctrine has been smuggled into the Jesus story. (1)

We have to be alert to the possibility that our received "traditions" may be contrary to the word of God. Jesus himself warned of the possibility of "invalidating the word of God by your tradition which you have handed down" (Mark 7:13). These objections to the virgin birth of Jesus therefore need to be taken seriously and with respect.

## **Immanuel the Signature Name**

Isaiah 7:14 does not sit in glorious isolation. It is embedded in historical context. It was a prophecy delivered by Isaiah to king Ahaz at a time of threatened national calamity around 735 BC. Let's take a look at this background.

An unholy alliance between Syria and the apostate northern kingdom of Israel (Samaria) had just failed to capture Jerusalem (Is. 7:1). But Ahaz feared a fresh attack from his enemies. Indeed, the king's heart and the hearts of the people of Jerusalem "shook as the trees of the forest shake with the wind" (v. 2). So God sent Isaiah to give the people of Judah an encouraging prophetic word: God was with Ahaz; God was on Judah's side ...

"Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, 'Ask for a sign from the LORD your God; let it be as deep as Sheol or high as heaven.' But Ahaz said, 'I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test!' Then he

[Isaiah] said, 'Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little a thing for you to weary man, that you weary God also? Therefore the LORD Himself shall give you a sign: Behold a young woman [Hebrew *almah*] will be with child and bear a son, and she shall call his name Immanuel. He will eat curds and honey at the time He knows enough to refuse evil and choose good. For before the boy will know enough to refuse evil and choose good, the land whose two kings you dread will be forsaken. 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 7:10-17).

Isaiah's prophecy was meant to reassure king Ahaz that the kings of Syria and Samaria would be defeated. But how soon would this be? Well, God gave king Ahaz a timeline, a benchmark, a sign to look out for. A child would be born to an *almah* and

this young mother would call him by the name "Immanuel". The birth of this child would give Ahaz the timeline to confidently estimate when the prophecy of his enemies' demise would be fulfilled.

Scholars have debated as to whether he was the son of Ahaz but this is not critical, for Immanuel is a symbolic name given to a boy born at that time to an *almah*. And before this child would be old enough to say "mama" or "dada", Ahaz's enemies would be defeated, and Ahaz would know that God was with him.

The story continues into chapter 8 (where incidentally Immanuel's name appears again in verses 8 & 10). Remember there are no chapter breaks in the original scripts. And chapter 8 reveals there is to be another child born, also with a symbolic name. This second baby will be born to the prophet Isaiah himself! When he understood God's programme, we read that Isaiah "approached the prophetess" his wife, (a

euphemistic way of saying they 'made love') and "she conceived and gave birth to a son" (Is. 8:3). Make sure your false teeth are firmly in when you come to pronounce this little fellow's name: Maher-shalal-hash-baz! (Aussies would have just called him 'Bazza'!) This boy's name means, 'haste-spoil, speed-booty' (Isaiah 8:1).

Thus, there were two boys with prophetically significant names. Each boy's name functioned as a sign of the reverse fortunes of the two sides in the conflict. On Judah's side, Immanuel would be the sign God was with Ahaz and certain deliverance was his. On the enemies' side, "Bazza" (forgive me!) was the sign of God's judgment against Ahaz's enemies. The lads' names symbolised God's promise that the calamity about to befall the kings of Syria and Samaria would be the exact opposite of the good outcome awaiting Judah and Jerusalem.

All this background means we can now ask the big question in context: Is Isaiah 7:14 also a

prophecy of Christ's virgin birth as claimed in Matthew 1:22-23? Jewish commentary says no. Their objection is based in large measure on the meaning of the Hebrew word *almah*. Should it be translated 'virgin' when its primary meaning is 'young woman'? It is argued that Hebrew has a specific word for 'virgin' (*betolah*) and it is not the word Isaiah uses.

When *almah* is used in the Hebrew Bible (Gen. 24:43; Ex. 2:8; Prov. 30:18; Ps. 68:25; Song of Sol. 1:3; 6:8), it speaks of young women of sexual maturity and marriageable age. But does this mean they cannot be virgins as well? I would encourage you to read all these references and see which nuance best fits the contexts; 'young woman' or 'virgin'? As always, context is king, and should determine the best fit. But on purely linguistic grounds, it is true that none of these instances *demand*s the meaning 'virgin', but neither do they deny it. Remember too, that young unmarried women in ancient Hebrew culture were assumed to be virgins on their wedding night.

## **The Septuagint.**

In the 2nd and 1st centuries BCE, the Hebrew Scriptures were translated into Greek for the first time by Jewish rabbis. The Septuagint (LXX for the Roman letters for the 70 translators) was the result. The rabbis translated *almah* as *parthenos*, i.e., "virgin." With no inherent belief in a "virgin birth," Jewish rabbis translated *almah* in Isaiah 7:14 as "virgin," not "young woman"! This proves "virgin" is a possible, even likely, meaning of *almah*.

All NT writers frequently quoted the Greek Septuagint in support of their writings. It's been estimated that 75% of the Old Testament quoted by the apostolic writers was from the Septuagint. Indeed, when specifically writing to Jewish Christians in danger of denying their faith in Messiah, the writer of the book of Hebrews appealed to the Greek LXX every single time he cited an OT Scripture!

Matthew in his Gospel is no exception. When he quoted Isaiah 7:14 to explain the miraculous birth of Jesus he used the Greek Septuagint.

Matthew said Mary was a *parthenos* --- a virgin --- not just a young unmarried maiden. (Many young maidens are not necessarily virgins!) Thus the Septuagint was many decades before Messiah's birth and was properly quoted by Matthew. There is therefore, no linguistic or contextual ground for thinking 'virgin' is an inaccurate reading of the Isaiah text. (2)

### **Double *Entendre*?**

Back to Isaiah 7:14: Is this an instance of prophecy having a double fulfillment? Could it have primarily referred to the situation King Ahaz was facing, but secondarily to the coming Messiah who would be the ultimate deliverer?

No matter how our Jewish friends may dismiss this possibility, they must know of the extensive practice in their own tradition called Midrash. Midrashic narration is a common rabbinic homiletical tool used to search out the inner significance and principles of their Bible. So, why cannot Matthew who was in the inner circle of the Twelve under Rabbi Yeshua, not be allowed to make his own eye-witness

midrashic commentary? Indeed, why not?

"Dual prophecies" are common in Scripture and they are called "near fulfillment" and "far fulfillment." The "near fulfillment" in view here is that the sign of a lad called Immanuel was fulfilled in the days of Ahaz. In fact, a brief timeframe is given to assure king Ahaz.

"He will eat curds and honey at the time he knows enough to refuse evil and choose good. For before the boy will know enough to refuse evil and choose good, the land whose two kings you dread will be forsaken" (Isaiah 7:15-16).

It is quite clear a "near fulfillment" will take place during the reign of King Ahaz. And this first lad was *not virgin-born!* He was born of a natural union of a man and a young *almah*. So is it a case of special pleading to say Jesus was born of a virgin in the "far fulfillment"?

Furthermore, once it is realized that the birth of this first child will occur during the life of Ahaz, it should also be clear that it is **impossible** to

interpret Immanuel, "God with us," to mean that the God of Israel would Himself come down from heaven to be located geographically in that little body of flesh and blood. The child born during the days of Ahaz was not called "Immanuel" because he was God Himself. No. The child with the symbolic name Immanuel signified God was with them in plan, promise and purpose and power to save.

It is perfectly clear the first and "near fulfillment" of Isaiah 7:14 must refer to the birth of a child contemporaneous with King Ahaz. That child will be named "Immanuel" or "God with us." Note, Immanuel does not mean, "God one of us"! The child named Immanuel was a *sign, a symbolic name* guaranteeing salvation, that is, deliverance for king Ahaz.

### **God With Us.**

The idea of God being "with" someone in a functional sense rather than a spatial sense is a common expression in the Scriptures (e.g. 2 Chronicles 15:2; 20:17; 32:8, Psalm 46:7,11).

For God to be with Israel meant He was with them in plan and purpose as opposed to being against them or abandoning them to their fate.

When it comes to the "far fulfillment" in Matthew 1:23, we are told *how* Jesus fulfills God's plan and purpose: He will save Israel from their sins through Jesus the Messiah (Matt. 1:21). As Simeon so vividly declares to the God of Israel as he holds the baby Jesus in his arms, "Mine eyes have seen Your salvation" (Luke 2:30). And Zachariah proclaimed:

"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited us and accomplished redemption for His people, and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of David His servant" (Luke 1:68-69).

It should be quite clear what is intended by the name, "God with us." The Lord God of Israel is with his people by giving them a son from the House of David to redeem them from their sins. This exegesis is taken straight from Isaiah's definition of Immanuel:

"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***. Be broken, O peoples, and be shattered; And give ear, all remote places of the earth. Gird yourselves, yet be shattered; Gird yourselves, yet be shattered. **Devise a plan**, but it will be thwarted; **State a purpose**, but it will not stand, For ***God is with us***" (Isaiah 8:8-10).

Obviously the name Immanuel was intended to mean "God with us" in plan and purpose. Definitely not that God Himself *was* the human child born for Ahaz!

David the psalmist says that although he walks through the valley of the shadow of death he fears no evil, because God is "with him" (Ps 23:4). These references all mean that God is with His people in plan, promise, purpose, power and presence.

When we come to the New Testament, and

explore what it has to say concerning Jesus, this becomes even more abundantly clear. Nicodemus remarks that God was "with" Jesus as his miracles attested (Jn. 3:2).

Peter also tells us plainly that *God* preached the good news and did miracles *through* Jesus, for "God was with him" (Luke 8:39; 24:19; Acts 2:22; 10:36,38). Or, to put it in the apostle Paul's words, "God was **in** Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself". Definitely not, "God was **as** Christ reconciling the world to Himself" (2 Cor. 5: 19).

So, God was with Israel in the sense that he was with them in plan and purpose through the activity of His agent and Son, Messiah Jesus. There isn't any reason whatsoever to think Matthew did not intend this meaning either. The name "Immanuel" or "God with us" refers to what *God was doing* rather than where *God Himself was Personally located*.

## **Conclusion**

The name Immanuel primarily applied to a child contemporaneous with Ahaz and Isaiah. It is impossible to interpret this child's name to mean the child was God locating Himself "in the flesh" in the days of Ahaz. Or perhaps Jesus was born in history *twice*? My "orthodox" Christian friends can't have that cake and eat it too!

On this score Jews are right to deny the Virgin Birth proves Jesus is "God in the flesh". You can search the entire NT record but you won't find the apostles believed that Jesus was God because he was born of a virgin. That part of the 'Christian' story is a pagan myth, no doubt. The apostolic witness was that Jesus is the Messiah, God's anointed one, Israel's king, to bring salvation. In good midrashic style Matthew says Jesus' birth is the fuller fulfillment of Isaiah 7:14.

Finally, the precious Hebrew Bible has neither been wittingly nor innocently

mistranslated at Isaiah 7:14. The Jewish charge that it was Gentiles who invented a pagan myth of Jesus' virgin birth is patently wrong. It was Jewish rabbis long before the birth of Jesus who translated their own Hebrew *almah* as *parthenos*. The young maiden of the "far fulfillment" was going to be a virgin!

The immediate context of Isaiah chapters 7 & 8, the linguistics of *almah* and *parthenos*, and the overall tenor of Scripture, demand we understand the name Immanuel, "God with us", in the sense of *plan and purpose*. Immanuel speaks of God's *modus operandi*, not His own geographic *location*.

The Jewish apostles of Jesus were convinced Jesus was born of the virgin (*parthenos*) Mary. They believed he is the Messiah through whom God is with us. The question left for today's Jewish friends is whether this was by the holy Spirit's inspiration or by unholy scribal corruption.

## FOOTNOTES

1. In *They Never Told Me This in Church!* I have devoted an entire chapter to the 'Trojan Horse' (i.e. Hellenism) that Christianity imbibed into the Church. See the chapter *Another Cover Up*.
2. Some scholars would debate this point. Some allege the LXX before Christ only consisted of the first 5 books of the OT (the Tanak) with snippets from some of the Prophets and Writings. They argue the rest of the LXX was probably not translated until the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE. However, we have evidence that by 132 BC the entire translation was complete, for when the grandson of Ben Sirach wrote the Prologue to the apocryphal book Ecclesiasticus he wrote, "the law and the prophets and the rest of the Bible" existed in Greek translation. (*Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* under sub-heading 3 in main article on "The Septuagint").