

SUPPLEMENT TO SESSION SEVEN

THE IMMANUEL PROPHECY

Isaiah 7:14

Any attempt to understand Matthew's use of Isa 7:14 in Mt 1:23 must successfully resolve problems at the lexical, contextual and hermeneutical levels.

LEXICAL ISSUES

Certainly, the text poses a lexical problem. Those who object to the translation "virgin" would point out that (1) *ʿalmāh* does not have to mean "virgin;" (2) there is a more specific Hebrew word for virgin (namely, בְּתוּלָה); and (3) the following context suggests that the fulfillment is in Isaiah's own day.

A lexical study of the term *ʿalmāh* and its cognates does reveal that the term *can mean* a young sexually ripe woman, whether or not she is a virgin (e.g., Ex 2:8; Ps 68:25 [Heb 26]).¹ However, we must be careful, because *ʿalmāh* is something of a *fluid* term. In certain contexts, it can imply (or carry the connotation of) *virginity*. This seems to be the case in Gen 24:43 where the woman in view is clearly a virgin. Furthermore, the LXX (written prior to the New Testament and therefore unbiased in regard to a virgin birth of Jesus), chose to translate *ʿalmāh* by the Greek word παρθένος, the most common Greek term for "virgin." The use of *ʿalmāh* in Isa 7:14 *can* certainly mean "virgin."

Those who would argue that if Isaiah had intended the nuance of "virgin," he would have used the Hebrew term בְּתוּלָה would do well to note that the origin of this term is not necessarily "virgin" (although that nuance did become associated with the term at some point).²

CONTEXTUAL FACTORS

As for the following context (Isa 7:15-16), we must readily admit that these verses imply a fulfillment in Isaiah's day. A son born of an *ʿalmāh* in Ahaz's day would become a *sign* to the house of David. But if this is true, how can Matthew use this verse to claim a fulfillment with the virgin Mary giving birth to Jesus?

What was Isaiah's intention by the prediction in 7:14? Was this entirely a remote prophecy to be fulfilled only with the coming of Jesus Christ? Did it have any historical fulfillment in Isaiah's day, so that Ahaz was able to see the sign for himself? If so, who was the *ʿalmāh* in Isaiah's day, and who was the son?

¹For a more detailed study, see J. Paul Tanner, "Preliminary Studies Concerning The *ʿalmāh* Passage of Isaiah 7:14" (Unpublished paper, The University of Texas, 1988).

²See Bruce K. Waltke's article on בְּתוּלָה in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, volume I, 137-139.

Consider these words from the following context (Isa 7:15-16):

"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."

This is a clear statement that the son of the *'almāh* will be a sign of good news to the nation and the house of David (including Ahaz). Within a short time (before the boy is very old at all), the nations threatening Judah (i.e., Syria and Israel) will be neutralized/judged by the LORD. When that happens, this will serve as a *sign* to the inhabitants of Judah that "God is with us." This security would come by the agent of Assyria who would be used to judge Syria and Israel. Yet this sign was not entirely good news, for Assyria, which eliminated Judah's problem with her neighbors, would also bring problems for Judah. Although Judah would not "fall" to Assyria, invasion of Judah by Assyria would threaten her sovereignty and result in the payment of tribute. This is spelled out in Isa 7:17ff.:

"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."

HERMENEUTICAL MATTERS

Therefore, I do see a near fulfillment of Isa 7:14 in Ahaz's and Isaiah's day. But what about Matthew's use of this verse? The solution, as I see it, is not really at the lexical level (where the debate has often focused) but at the hermeneutical level.³ As with other cases involving the "fulfillment" of Old Testament verses, I would not see just one fulfillment of Isa 7:14. Rather, I would see one fulfillment in Isaiah's day and a more significant fulfillment in Matthew's day (i.e., progressive fulfillment).

Isaiah instructed king Ahaz that this birth would be a *sign* to him, but the Hebrew term for sign (אֵימָנָה) does not have to mean a supernatural event. Instead, it can mean a "confirmatory" sign (as is the case with Ex 3:12). Therefore, the birth from the *'almāh* will end up being a confirming sign to Ahaz and the house of David. The woman is indeed a virgin, but the birth is not of a supernatural kind. That is, she is a virgin at the time of the prediction, but then has normal sexual relations in bringing forth this child. The sign aspect comes with YHWH's use of Assyria to afflict Judah's enemies within a couple of years of the child's birth. This was a confirming sign that YHWH's word was indeed with the prophet Isaiah.

Yet the LORD meant for the verse to have more fulfillment than this. In Matthew's day, a more significant sign would be given to the house of David. In this case, however, it would not only be a confirming sign but a supernatural sign as well. A young virgin woman would actually give birth *as a virgin* (hence, supernaturally), and this event would be a testimony that "God is with us." The "house of David" was skeptical of YHWH's word in Isaiah's day, and the same would be true in Matthew's day. But YHWH would use the sign in both cases to validate His activity in the affairs of the nation.

³For elaboration, see my paper "Preliminary Studies Concerning The *'almāh* Passage of Isaiah 7:14."