
"The Virgin Shall Conceive"

Isaiah 7:14

(George Battey)

Questions:

- 1) What four things cause Isaiah 7:14 to be a difficult passage to interpret?
- 2) What kind of king was Ahaz (good or bad)?
- 3) Why did Syria and Israel want to attack Judah and King Ahaz?
- 4) If Ahaz and the royal family are killed, what happens to the promises of God made to king David?
- 5) Why wouldn't Ahaz ask for a sign from God like he was instructed to do?
- 6) What are short-term prophecies and long-term prophecies and how are they related to one another?
- 7) What kind of shift occurs in the text between Isaiah 7:15 and Isaiah 7:16?
- 8) Are "*curds and honey*" the foods of royalty or the foods of oppression?

Introduction

Isalah 7:14-16

¹⁴ Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel.

¹⁵ Curds and honey He shall eat, that He may know to refuse the evil and choose the good.

¹⁶ For before the Child shall know to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land that you dread will be forsaken by both her kings.

Matthew quotes v14 and applies this to the birth of Jesus:

Matthew 1:18-23

¹⁸ Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: After His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Spirit.

¹⁹ Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not wanting to make her a public example, was minded to put her away secretly.

²⁰ But while he thought about these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit.

²¹ And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name JESUS, for He will save His people from their sins."

²² So all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the

prophet, saying:

²³ "Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel," which is translated, "God with us."

It turns out the prophecy of Isa 7:14 is more controversial than you might think.

Michael Rydelnik:

In my experience, Isa 7:14 is the most controversial of messianic prophecies.¹

Q: Why is this so controversial?

A: There are at least four difficulties.

Four Difficulties

1) The King Ahaz problem.

What I mean by this is: The prophecy was given to King Ahaz (king of Judah) in 734 BC.²

¹ Michael Rydelnik, *The Messianic Hope (New American Commentary Studies in Bible & Theology—Book 9)*. Kindle p. 147. To this book I owe this entire sermon. What a wonderful and masterful presentation of Isa 7:14. No other presentation comes close.

² *NKJV Thompson Chain Reference Bible*, Kirkbride, p. 887.

The prophecy says:

Isalah 7:14

¹⁴ Therefore **the Lord Himself will give you a sign:**
Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son,
and shall call His name Immanuel.

According to Mt 1:23, the prophecy came true 730 years after Ahaz.

Q: How could this be a sign to King Ahaz if he never lived to see it?

This makes the passage controversial.

2) The "age of accountability" problem.

Isalah 7:16

¹⁶ For before the Child shall know to refuse the evil
and choose the good, the land that you dread will
be forsaken by both her kings.

Two kingdoms were threatening the nation of Judah:

- The kingdom of Syria.
- The kingdom of Israel.

The prophecy of 7:14 appears to be saying: The threat coming from these two kings will be over before the son of the virgin is

old enough to know right from wrong.

The threat coming from Syria and Israel ended within 2 years.³

Q: How can this refer to Jesus Who would not be born for 730 years?

This makes the passage controversial.

3) The "Isaiah's wife has a baby" problem.

In the very next chapter, after Isaiah prophesies of the virgin birth we read this:

Isaiah 8:3-4

³ Then I went to the prophetess, and she conceived and bore a son. Then the LORD said to me, "Call his name Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz;

⁴ for before the child shall have knowledge to cry 'My father' and 'My mother,' the riches of Damascus and the spoil of Samaria will be taken away before the king of Assyria."

Here the kingdom of Syria is predicted to fall to the Assyrians before Isaiah's son becomes old enough to say the words, "Mama" and "Daddy."

³ The prophecy of Isa 7:14 is dated at 734 BC (*NKJV Thompson Chain Reference*). The Assyrians besieged Israel and carried them away captive in 732 BC (2 Kings 17) (*NKJV Thompson Chain Reference*, p. 500).

This looks like the child born to Isaiah's wife fulfills the prophecy of 7:14.

Furthermore, some think this baby born to Isaiah's wife is called "Immanuel" in 8:8:

Isaiah 8:8

⁸ He will pass through Judah,
He will overflow and pass over,
He will reach up to the neck;
And the stretching out of his wings
Will fill the breadth of Your land, **O Immanuel.**

The problem is:

- Isaiah's wife is not a virgin.
- The baby is not the Messiah.

So Isaiah's wife having this baby is all a problem.

4) The "Scrabble" problem.

Scrabble is a word game. I hate it. To my way of thinking:

- If you have to work, it's not fun.
- Scrabble requires work (thinking).
- Therefore: It's not fun.

Furthermore: If you play a game that requires thinking and you

lose the game it means you're stupid! But if you play a game that involves chance and you lose you were just unlucky.

- It's not a shame to be unlucky,
- But it is a shame to be stupid.

(This is why I don't like chess and checkers.)

I digressed: Scrabble is a word game where people form words with letters they have on little wooden squares.

- Sometimes words are formed which everyone thinks is a made-up word (it's not real).
- Someone gets a dictionary to prove that the word does not exist.

The "*scrabble problem*" in Isa 7:14 is when people take the word for "*virgin*" in the Hebrew and look it up in the lexicon:

- Some say it doesn't mean "*virgin*" at all and it's mistranslated.
- They say it should be translated simply "*young woman*."

The RSV is one of the first English translations (1946) to translate it as "*young woman*":

Isalah 7:14 (RSV)

¹⁴ Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, **a young woman** shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.

So the definition of the word "*virgin*" is a problem.

The Context of Isaiah 7:14

To address all these problems, let's look at the context of Isa 7:14.

First: Look at the players involved in this drama.

There are four kingdoms and kings involved in this story:

- **Tiglath-Pileser III** was the king of Assyria and he is about to invade Syria, Israel, and Judah in order to grow his empire.
- **Rezin** is the king of Syria.
- **Pekah** is the king of Israel.
- **Ahaz** is the king of Judah.

Those are the four players in this drama.

NOTE: All of these are evil and wicked kings—every one of them.

ILL: It's like many political elections where every candidate is bad and no one knows who to vote for because they're all awful. (That's what you have here.)

Ahaz was one of the worst kings Judah had.

2 Chronicles 28:1-4

¹ Ahaz was twenty years old when he became king, and he reigned sixteen years in Jerusalem; and he did **not** do what was right in the sight of the LORD, as his father David had done.

² For he walked in the ways of the kings of Israel, and made molded images for the Baals.

³ He burned incense in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, and **burned his children in the fire**, according to the abominations of the nations whom the LORD had cast out before the children of Israel.

⁴ And he sacrificed and burned incense on the high places, on the hills, and under every green tree.

Rezin and Pekah make an alliance.

They want Ahaz to join their alliance and together they will all fight Tiglath-Pileser and his army.

But Ahaz refuses to join in the alliance.

Rezin and Pekah decide to invade Judah to force the issue.

2 Chronicles 28:5-6

⁵ Therefore the LORD his God delivered him into the hand of the king of Syria. They defeated him, and carried away a great multitude of them as captives, and brought them to Damascus. Then he was also delivered into the hand of the king of Israel, who defeated him with a great slaughter.

⁶ For Pekah the son of Remaliah killed one hundred and twenty thousand in Judah in one day, all valiant men, because they had forsaken the LORD God of their fathers.

Here, then, is Rezin and Pekah fighting against Ahaz and it appears they're winning.

- It looks like Judah will fall to Syria and Israel.
- Rezin and Pekah plan to install their own king in place of Ahaz.

A Tremendous Problem

All of this is a tremendous problem.

- If Ahaz and the royal family is killed,
- And if a new king of Rezin and Pekah's choosing is enthroned over Judah,

- Then: The house of David will no longer exist and the promise of a Messiah will be defeated.

God had promised the Messiah (Who would save the world) would come thru David's family.

Psalms 89:3-4

³ "I have made a covenant with My chosen,
I have sworn to My servant David:

⁴ 'Your seed I will establish forever,
And build up your throne to all generations.' "⁴

Ahaz has really gotten himself, his family and the hope of the world in a real jam.

Reading the Entire Text

Let's read the entire text and see all of this story unfolding:

Isalah 7:1-6

¹ Now it came to pass in the days of Ahaz the son of Jotham, the son of Uzziah, king of Judah, that Rezin king of Syria and Pekah the son of Remaliah, king of Israel, went up to Jerusalem to make war against it, but could not prevail against it.

² And it was told to the house of David, saying,

⁴ Read all of Ps 89:28-37 for the entire context.

"Syria's forces are deployed in Ephraim." So his heart and the heart of his people were moved as the trees of the woods are moved with the wind.

³ Then the LORD said to Isaiah, "Go out now to meet Ahaz, you and Shear-Jashub your son, at the end of the aqueduct from the upper pool, on the highway to the Fuller's Field,

⁴ and say to him: 'Take heed, and be quiet; do not fear or be fainthearted for these two stubs of smoking firebrands, for the fierce anger of Rezin and Syria, and the son of Remaliah.

⁵ Because Syria, Ephraim, and the son of Remaliah have plotted evil against you, saying,

⁶ "Let us go up against Judah and trouble it, and let us make a gap in its wall for ourselves, and set a king over them, the son of Tabel"--

Isaiah confirms what the Book of 2 Chronicles records.

- Rezin (king of Syria)
- Pekah (king of Israel) are threatening Ahaz and Judah.
- They plan to install their own king once they conquer Ahaz.
- Things look very dark for Ahaz and Judah.

Isaiah Comes

But Isaiah is sent with a message of encouragement. The threat of these two kings will come to nothing.

Isalah 7:7-8

⁷ thus says the Lord GOD: "[*Their plan*] shall not stand,

Nor shall it come to pass.

⁸ For the head of Syria is Damascus,

And the head of Damascus is Rezin.

Within sixty-five years Ephraim [i.e. Israel] will be broken,

So that it will not be a people.

The "Sign"

The Lord is so gracious He invites Ahaz to ask for a sign that this prediction will truly come to pass.

Isalah 7:10-11

¹⁰ Moreover the LORD spoke again to Ahaz, saying,

¹¹ "Ask a sign for yourself from the LORD your God; ask it either in the depth or in the height above."

Ahaz is invited to ask for a stupendous miracle to confirm the prophecy will come true.

But Ahaz has no faith in God:

Isalah 7:12

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

Q: Why doesn't Ahaz ask for a sign?

A: Because he thinks the situation is so terrible, there is no way on earth things will change for the better.

- There is no way (he thinks) that Syria and Israel will be broken.
- There is no way such a dramatic change of events could occur.

Ahaz will not test the truthfulness of the Lord's prophecy because he is so confident and sure it will NOT happen.

ILL: Someone says to me, "*Write the President of the United States and invite him to come to Oklahoma to have supper with you and your wife.*"

I say, "*No ... I'm not even going to write such a letter because (a) he won't even get the letter to begin with and (b) even if he does get it, he's not going to come to my house for supper.*"

In the same way: Ahaz was so certain nothing could change the present situation—he refused to believe in God and refused to ask for a sign.

"I'm not even going to waste my time asking for a sign and looking for its fulfillment because I know it can't happen."

Ahaz was a true unbeliever.

The Sign Given

God becomes angry:

Isalah 7:13-14

¹³ Then he said, "Hear now, *O house of David!* Is it a small thing for you to weary men, but will you weary my God also?"

¹⁴ Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel.

God is here speaking to the entire house of David (the royal family). He is not speaking to King Ahaz alone.

"the Lord Himself will give you a sign" = the "you" here is plural. In the South this verse would sound like this:

¹⁴ Therefore the Lord Himself will give ya'll a sign:

...

This prophecy is being given to the house of David (the royal family)—not to King Ahaz.

NOTE: This answers "*The King Ahaz problem*" concerning this passage.

Ahaz will not live to see this sign fulfilled, but the royal family will survive and see the prophecy fulfilled.

- God will keep His word.
- The royal family will survive.
- The Messiah will be born to the royal family.

The "Long-Term" Prophecy

Isa 7:14 is **a "long-term" prophecy**. It will not be fulfilled for a very long time—many, many years into the future.

When true prophets made long-term prophecies, they also made short-term prophecies so that people would be assured that the long-term prophecy would surely be fulfilled.

Deuteronomy 18:21-22

²¹ And if you say in your heart, 'How shall we know the word which the LORD has **not** spoken?'--

²² when a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the thing does **not** happen or come to pass, that is the thing which the LORD has **not** spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously; you shall not be afraid of him.

Long-term prophecies and short-term prophecies work together.

- Short-term prophecies prove a man is a true prophet.
- When the short-term prophecy comes to pass, the long-term prophecy can be trusted.

Q: Does Isaiah do that here? Does he make a short-term prophecy in order to verify the long-term prophecy?

A: Yes he does.

We will notice this in just a moment.

Curds & Honey

Not only will David's Son be virgin-born, His diet will reveal something.

NOTE: You can tell a lot about a person by what he eats.

- If someone eats **filet mignon**—he's rich.
- If someone eats **caviar**—he's rich.
- BUT ... if someone eats **Vienna sausage**—he's poor.

Isalah 7:15

¹⁵ Curds and honey He shall eat, that He may know to refuse the evil and choose the good.

Some mistake "*curds and honey*" to mean the "*food of royalty*."

(Some think curds-and-honey are equivalent to filet mignon or caviar.)

No. This is the food of oppression.

Notice:

Isalah 7:17

¹⁷ The LORD will bring the king of Assyria upon you and your people and your father's house--days that have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah."

Judah has more than Syria and Israel to worry about. They also have Assyria to worry about.

Assyria is going to oppress Judah:

Isalah 7:20

²⁰ In the same day the Lord will shave with a hired razor,
With those from beyond the River, with the king of Assyria,
The head and the hair of the legs,
And will also remove the beard.

In other words: The king of Assyria is going to "*skin you alive.*"

After the land has been "*shaved*" there won't be the planting of crops. There will just be uncultivated pastures which a few cows can graze on.

Isalah 7:21-22

²¹ It shall be in that day

That a man will keep alive a young cow and two sheep;

²² So it shall be, from the abundance of milk they give,

That he will eat curds;

For curds and honey everyone will eat who is left in the land.

"curds and honey" = symbolize the food of oppression (when no crops are being planted and the only food is provided by some cows grazing in uncultivated pastures and honey produced by wild bees).

The point: The virgin-born Son of David will be born when Israel is being oppressed by a foreign nation.

This is the long-term prophecy.

A Shift

Now ... to prove his long-term prophecy will indeed come true, Isaiah gives **a short-term prophecy**.

NOTE: A shift occurs between v15 and v16 which you can't see because you're reading the text in English: **The pronouns change from plural to singular.**

"the land that YOU dread will be forsaken by both her kings" = the "you" is singular (only King Ahaz is being addressed here).⁵

The NIV recognizes this shift:

Isalah 7:16 (NIV–1978 edition)

¹⁶ **BUT** before the boy knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, ...

So: V16 introduces a shift in the story.

- Isaiah stops speaking to the royal family,
- And begins speaking to Ahaz alone,
- And ... a different child is now under consideration.

⁵ To see the distinction between Ahaz (singular) and the entire nation of Judah see Isa 7:17, "you ... and your people." God is speaking to just Ahaz in v16.

NOTE: The word "child" should not be capitalized (as per NKJV).

Q: Who is this new boy in v16?

A: **Shear-Jashub** (Isaiah's own son which he brought with him to speak to Ahaz).

Isaiah 7:3

³ Then the LORD said to Isaiah, "Go out now to meet Ahaz, **you and Shear-Jashub your son**, at the end of the aqueduct from the upper pool, on the highway to the Fuller's Field,

Q: What is the purpose of Isaiah taking his son with him to go speak with the king?

A: This son is a very young boy and he's going to be used to make a short-term prophecy.

- Isaiah took his little boy with him to go speak with King Ahaz.
- Pointing to his own son (Shear-Jashub) Isaiah predicts: "***BUT*** before ***THIS***⁶ child gets big enough to know right from wrong, the two kings (*Rezin and Pekah*) who threaten you will be removed."

⁶ Rydelnik, op cit., p. 157. Rydelnik points out the near-demonstrative pronoun "this" appears in the Hebrew text.

The fact that Isaiah is using his own son as a sign to Ahaz is emphasized in the next chapter:

Isaiah 8:18

¹⁸ Here am I and **the children** whom the LORD has given me!

We are for signs and wonders in Israel

From the LORD of hosts,

Who dwells in Mount Zion.

So:

- Shear-Jashub is used as a sign to make a short-term prophecy to King Ahaz.
- The virgin-born Son is a long-term prophecy made to the house of David (the nation of Judah).
- The nation of Judah can be certain the long-term prophecy will come true because the short-term prophecy came true.

The "Short-Term" Prophecy

The fulfillment of this short-term prophecy was so important because it signified that Isaiah was a true prophet and the royal family could depend on the long-term prophecy being fulfilled.

The likelihood that Syria and Israel would NOT overthrow the kingdom of Judah seemed so unlikely that Ahaz would

not even request a sign from God to show that it would truly occur.

When the short-term prophecy actually DID come to pass, it was impressive enough for the royal family to be assured that the long-term prophecy of the virgin-born-Son would occur.

Isaiah's Wife Has A Son

This answers two more of the problems involved with this passage.

- 1) We answered the "King Ahaz" problem and noticed the virgin-born Son was not a sign to Ahaz, but to the house of David (the royal family).
- 2) The "*age of accountability*" problem is solved because the child under consideration in v16 is Isaiah's son (Shear-Jashub).
- 3) The "*Isaiah's wife has a child*" problem is solved because the child she bore in Isa 8 is not the child promised in 7:14.
 - The second son Mrs. Isaiah bore (Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz) is going to be used for another short-term prophecy.

"The Scrabble Problem"

This leaves only "*the Scrabble problem*" left to solve.

Q: Does the word "*virgin*" mean virgin in every sense of the word or does it simply mean "*young woman*" (RSV)?

The Hebrew word being translated in 7:14 is '**almāh**'. There were two Hebrew words Isaiah could have used:

- **bētūlāh** (Bet-uh-lay) = a virgin of any age.⁷
- '**almāh** (Al-may) = a virgin who has just reached puberty; a maiden in the truest, purest sense.⁸

When the LXX was translated, the translators used the Greek word **παρθένος** and this word certainly means "*virgin*."

Furthermore, think of the word "*sign*":

Isalah 7:14

¹⁴ Therefore the Lord Himself will give you **a sign**: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel.

A "*sign*" is something unusual.

⁷ Rydelnik, op cit., p. 155.

⁸ Ibid.

In fact, Ahaz was invited to ask for a stupendous sign:

Isalah 7:10-11

¹⁰ Moreover the LORD spoke again to Ahaz, saying,
¹¹ "Ask a sign for yourself from the LORD your God;
ask it either in the depth or in the height above."

In other words: "*Make the sign as astonishing as you wish.*"

Q: Would a "*young woman*" having a son fulfill this picture of a "*sign ... either in the depth or in the height above*"?

A: Of course not. Young women have babies every day!

But a virgin having a baby indeed fulfills the definition of a "*sign ... in the depth [and] in the height above.*"

Conclusion

Think of all which this passage tells us about the Lord:

- He will be from **the family of David** (the royal family).

(Hence: Matthew gives *the royal lineage* in the beginning of his book.)

- He will be **born of a virgin** (truly the Son of God).
- He will be **Immanuel** ("*God with us*") = His divine nature is revealed.
- He will be born when Judah is **under the oppression** of a foreign nation (having to eat "*curds and honey*"—the foods of oppression).

Truly no one in Judah had an excuse for not recognizing Jesus as the promised Messiah when He came.

- Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah
- of the royal family of David
- the virgin-born Son of God.

He is worthy of your praise and obedience.