

The Sign of the Virgin

*Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign:
Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son,
and she will call His name Immanuel.*

Isaiah 7:14 (NASB)

The Controversy

Isaiah 7:14 is a prophecy concerning a very specific sign from God: that a virgin would be found with child and give birth to a son. This is perhaps the most controversial of the messianic prophecies and therefore requires a closer textual analysis than others. The exact meaning of this verse is disputed by rabbis, liberal theologians, and even by some evangelical theologians. There are two areas of controversy here:

1. *The sign*

In the context of the chapter, it would seem that this sign of verse 14 was given to King Ahaz and therefore it was a short-range prophecy, something he would live to see fulfilled. So, how can Matthew 1:22-23 say this sign was fulfilled by the birth of a child some 700 years later?

2. *The Hebrew word “almah”*

In verse 14, Isaiah used the Hebrew word *almah*. It is translated as “virgin.” Does it really mean “virgin” or does it simply refer to a young unmarried woman?

The Sign

As Isaiah 7:14 seems to be a sign to King Ahaz and Matthew 1:22-23 says it was fulfilled by the birth of Jesus, many evangelicals have taken this verse to be a prophecy with a “double fulfillment.” This principle states that a prophecy may have more than one fulfillment. This verse may, accordingly, be both a sign for King Ahaz and have been fulfilled by the birth of Jesus.

This author does not accept the principle of double fulfillment, either here or in any other place in the Bible.

There is another, better, principle of biblical interpretation, and it is called “double reference.” This principle states that one block of Scripture dealing with one person, one event, and one time may be followed by another block of Scripture dealing with a different person, place, and time, yet there is no clear distinction between the two blocks indicating that there is a gap of time between them. The gap of time is known only from other Scriptures. There is, therefore, not one prophecy but two separate prophecies side-by-side, each having its own fulfillment but with only one fulfillment per prophecy. “Double fulfillment” states that one prophecy can have two fulfillments. “Double reference” states that the one piece of Scripture contains two prophecies, each having its own fulfillment.

Isaiah 7:13-17 contains two separate prophecies with different purposes, each prophecy having its own fulfillment at different times. Verse 13 makes it quite clear whom Isaiah is addressing: *Then he said, Listen now, **O house of David***. In the following verse, Isaiah is still addressing the house of David, not King Ahaz. This becomes clear in the Hebrew text. The personal pronoun “you” is plural (not singular), thus referring to the house of David (not King Ahaz). Unfortunately, this is not clear in an English translation since the personal pronoun “you” can be both singular and plural:

¹³ *Then he said, Listen now, **O house of David**: Is it too slight a thing for **you** [plural] to try the patience of men, that **you** [plural] will try the patience of my God as well?*

¹⁴ *Therefore the Lord Himself will give **you** [plural] a sign: . . .*

(NASB, emphasis and comments added)

The sign to King Ahaz is found in verses 15-17. Since it does not have anything to do with the birth of the Messiah, it lies beyond the scope of the discussion in this pamphlet. The sign to the house of David, that a pregnant virgin will *bear a son*, is in verse 14.

The Hebrew Word *Almah*

The major debate, of course, is over the exact meaning of the Hebrew word *almah*, translated here as *virgin*. In surveying the Hebrew Scriptures, there are three words that Isaiah could have used to describe a young woman:

1. *Na'a'rah*

Na'a'rah means “damsel” and can refer to either a virgin (as in I Kings 1:2) or a non-virgin (as in Ruth 2:6).

2. *Betulah*

This is commonly considered to mean a virgin, exclusively. It is argued that if Isaiah had really meant to say a virgin would give birth, he would have used this word. It is true that *betulah* is often used to mean “virgin,” but not always. For example:

a. In Joel 1:8, it is used in reference to a widow.

b. In Genesis 24:16, the writer adds the phrase “had never known a man” to the word *betulah* in order to clarify what he means.

c. In Judges 21:12, the phrase “had not known a man” was also added to give the precise meaning.

3. *Almah*

Almah means “a virgin,” “a young virgin,” a “virgin of marriageable age.” This word is used seven times in the Hebrew Scriptures, and not once is it used to describe a married woman. This point is not debated.

a. Genesis 24:43. In contrast to 24:16 mentioned above, verse 43 requires no additional qualifying remarks since the one word alone is sufficient to mean “virgin.” Furthermore, it is used of Rebekah who was obviously a virgin at the time of her marriage to Isaac.

b. Exodus 2:8. Used in reference to Moses’ sister Miriam, who was a virgin.

c. Psalm 68:25. Used in reference to the royal procession of virgins. Since the king in this context is God Himself, absolute virginity is required; it is unthinkable that God would allow unchaste, unmarried women in His procession.

d. Song of Songs 1:3. The context here is purity in marriage.

e. Song of Songs 6:8. The word is used here in contrast to wives and concubines who would obviously be non-virgins.

f. Proverbs 30:18-19. The word is used in verse 19 in contrast to an adulteress in verse 20.

g. Isaiah 7:14. Since all of the above six verses use *almah* for true virgins, what reason is there for making Isaiah 7:14 the only exception?

Thus, the Hebrew word *almah* means “virgin of marriageable age.” If the woman in Isaiah 7:14 was unmarried but not a virgin, then God would be promising a sign involving fornication and an illegitimate birth. It is unthinkable that God would sanction sin. Furthermore, what would be so unusual about an illegitimate baby that could possibly constitute a unique sign from God? Illegitimate babies are born every day.

Is there any other biblical evidence that it is correct to interpret *almah* as referring to a virgin—an unmarried, chaste, young woman? There is. The Septuagint is a Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures. It is the work of Jewish scholars and was finished about 200 B.C. The Jews who made this translation, living much closer to the time of Isaiah, translated Isaiah 7:14 using the Greek word *parthenos*, which very clearly and exclusively means a virgin. So, 200 years before the birth of Jesus, there was no dispute as to what Isaiah meant by the word *almah*.

There can therefore be no doubt that the unique event that God is promising as a sign in Isaiah 7:14 is the miraculous conception of a young, unmarried girl who is still a virgin.