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Proclaiming Jesus: Essays on the Centrality of Christ in the Church in Honor of Joseph M. Stowell

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PROCLAIMING JESUS FROM THE HEBREW BIBLE

T h e V i r g i n B i r t h a s P r e d i c t e d i n t h e H e b r e w S c r i p t u r e s

by Michael Rydelnik

How important is the virgin birth of the Messiah Jesus to authentic biblical faith? When “modernism” in biblical and theological studies began to erode the rudiments of orthodox Christianity, some of the leading American Protestant thinkers articulated “the five fundamentals of the faith” in the early 1900s.¹ In so doing, they established the five essentials of doctrine, namely, the inerrancy of the Scriptures, the virgin birth and deity of Jesus Christ, the substitutionary death of Christ and salvation by God’s grace through faith, the physical resurrection of Jesus, and the personal and visible return of Christ.² At that time, the virgin birth was included among the absolutes that Christians must believe.

THE VIRGIN BIRTH IN QUESTION

It appears that postmodern Christianity has evolved to such an extent that affirming absolutes of faith is disconcerting. In his book

Velvet Elvis, Rob Bell compares doctrine to springs on a trampoline. Doctrines are not God, merely a means of “fuller, deeper, richer understanding of the mysterious being who is God.”³ While Bell sees the value of these “springs,” he does not view them as essential. According to him, when we view certain doctrines as essential we are treating them like bricks and not springs. Here’s how he illustrates this point:

Somebody recently gave me a videotape of a lecture given by a man who travels around speaking about the creation of the world. At one point in his lecture he said if you deny that God created the world in six literal twenty-four-hour days, then you are denying that Jesus ever died on the cross. It’s a bizarre leap of logic to make, I would say.

But he was serious.

It hit me while I was watching that, for him, faith isn’t a trampoline; it’s a wall of bricks. Each of the core doctrines for him is like an individual brick that stacks on top on the others. If you pull one out, the whole wall starts to crumble. It appears quite strong and rigid, but if you begin to rethink or discuss even one brick, the whole thing is in danger. Like he said, no six-day creation equals no cross. Remove one, and the whole wall wobbles.

What if tomorrow someone digs up definitive proof that Jesus had a real, earthly, biological father named Larry, and archaeologists find Larry’s tomb and DNA samples and prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that the virgin birth was really just a bit of mythologizing the Gospel writers threw in to appeal to the followers of the Mithra and Dionysian religious cults that were hugely popular the time of Jesus, whose gods had virgin births? But what if, as you study the origin of the word *virgin*, you discover that the word *virgin* in the gospel of Matthew actually comes from the book of Isaiah, and then you find out that in the Hebrew language at that time, the word *virgin* could mean several things. And what if you discover that in the first century being “born of a virgin”

also referred to a child whose mother became pregnant the first time she had intercourse?

What if that spring was seriously questioned?

Could a person keep jumping? Could a person still love God? Could you still be a Christian?

Is the way of Jesus still the best possible way to live?

Or does the whole thing fall apart?⁴

After this discussion, Bell does affirm the historic Christian faith, including the virgin birth. But then he asks, “But if the whole faith falls apart when we reexamine and rethink one spring, then it wasn’t that strong in the first place, was it?”⁵

While Bell rightly distinguishes between God Himself and the doctrines that teach us about Him, his illustration falls flat. The reason is that the two doctrines he uses in his illustration are really not comparable. While six-day creationism has its merits, most evangelicals would not consider it an essential of the faith. On the other hand, most would deem the virgin birth an absolute.

Bell’s conjecture regarding “Larry, the human father of Jesus” is troublesome, not because he believes it, but rather because evangelicals have accepted some of the presuppositions involved in spinning it. For centuries Christians understood Isaiah 7 to be a prediction of the virgin birth. Now it is not uncommon for evangelicals to assert that the Hebrew word Isaiah used merely means “young woman” and does not contain the nuance of “virgin.” Moreover, some view the passage not as a prediction of Messiah’s birth but rather of a child born in Isaiah’s day. These positions are taken not to deny a biblical essential but to affirm biblical scholarship. Furthermore, evangelicals are not only failing to see Isaiah 7 as a messianic prediction but also minimizing the significance of other traditional messianic prophecies.

Such positions can potentially lead to a spiritual disaster because so much of the identification of Jesus of Nazareth as Messiah relies

on His being the fulfillment of messianic prophecy. For example, when the doubting John the Baptist sent his disciples from prison to ask Jesus, “Are You the Expected One, or shall we look for someone else?” (Matthew 11:3), Jesus replied by quoting from Isaiah 35 and 61 to show that He was the Messiah because He had fulfilled messianic prophecy.

Plainly, Jesus considered the messianic hope to be the central message of the Old Testament. Jesus revealed His view of Old Testament messianic prophecy in two post-resurrection encounters recorded in Luke 24:25–27 (teaching the two disciples on the Emmaus Road) and Luke 24:33, 44–46 (teaching in the gathering of the eleven). On those two occasions, Luke intended to demonstrate that Jesus understood the Old Testament to point to the Messiah.

That Jesus believed the whole of the Old Testament predicted the Messiah is evident in His emphasis on the word “all” in both encounters. Jesus rebuked the men on the road to Emmaus for being slow to believe in *all* that the prophets spoke (Luke 24:25); He explained the Scriptures about the Messiah beginning with Moses and *all* the prophets (Luke 24:27); He interpreted the message about the Messiah in *all* the Scriptures (Luke 24:27); to the eleven remaining disciples He affirmed that He had to fulfill *all* that was written about Him in the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings (cf. Luke 24:44). This emphasis on “all” shows that Jesus saw the Messiah not merely in occasional isolated texts, but in all the Scriptures.⁶ Ellison has correctly observed, based on this passage, “The whole Old Testament, and not merely an anthology of proof passages, was looked on as referring to Christ Jesus.”⁷

In reviewing these two encounters, it becomes evident that Jesus believed that the messianic prophecies were sufficiently clear that the two disciples on the Emmaus Road should have understood their meaning. He chided them for being “foolish men and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken!” (Luke 24:25). The

implication was that the disciples should have recognized the events of the crucifixion and the reports of the resurrection as fulfillments of Old Testament prophecy. The prophecies were not so unclear that the disciples could be excused for their failure to understand. (He did not say, “O poor men of faith, you could not understand what the prophets had spoken of Me because they had not yet been given their full sense of meaning [their *sensus plenior*] until this very moment as I am explaining them to you!”) As A. T. Robertson remarked, “Jesus found himself in the Old Testament, a thing that some modern scholars do not seem to be able to do.”⁸

The book of Acts also demonstrates the evidential value of messianic prophecy. In that book, the central message of the apostles was that Jesus was both Lord and Messiah (Acts 2:36). According to F. F. Bruce, the apostles substantiated their claim with two arguments, one from prophecy and the other from miracles. They proclaimed that “the prophetic Scriptures which foretold Messiah’s coming have been fulfilled by the ministry, suffering and triumph of Jesus, and the mighty works which He performed were so many ‘signs’ that in Him the messianic age had arrived.”⁹ Both of these arguments were brought together in their proclamation of the resurrection of Jesus, which was both a mighty work of God and a direct fulfillment of messianic prophecy.

Peter’s second sermon is a prime example of the apostolic message as it relates to messianic prophecy. At Solomon’s Colonnade, after the healing of the lame man (Acts 3:11–26), Peter proclaimed: “But the things which God announced beforehand by the mouth of all the prophets that His Christ would suffer, He has thus fulfilled” (Acts 3:18). Having called on the crowd to believe in Jesus as the eschatological Prophet like Moses foretold by Moses himself, Peter further claimed, “all the prophets who have spoken, from Samuel and his successors onward, also announced these days” (Acts 3:24).

For now, postmodern evangelicals can maintain their faith in Jesus even if they, in Rob Bell’s words, question a spring or two. But ultimately,

without this primary foundation of faith, the bricks will indeed collapse. Before too long, without messianic prophecy, how can we even affirm that Jesus is truly the promised Messiah? And when we can no longer maintain that, our faith will cease to be recognizably Christian.

Just as Rob Bell cited Isaiah 7 in his example, it seems that if we are to proclaim Jesus from the Old Testament, it will be necessary to address this seemingly troublesome passage. Is it possible to view Isaiah's prophecy as a direct messianic prediction while still practicing sound exegesis? In this next section, that is precisely what I propose to do.

THE VIRGIN BIRTH IN PROPHECY

In my experience, Isaiah 7:14 is the most controversial of messianic prophecies. Disputes revolve around a variety of issues, chiefly, the meaning of the word *almah*, the relationship of Isaiah's "sign" to the context, the way the original readers of the prophecy would have understood it, and Matthew's citation of this verse in support of the virgin birth.

As a result, interpreters have divided into three primary views of the passage, and even among these views, expositors present their own unique perspectives. The first view, held by many traditional Christian interpreters, is to see the prophecy as a *direct prediction* of the virgin birth of the Messiah. Taking different approaches as to how the prophecy relates to the original context, they each conclude that the word *almah* means "virgin" and refers to the mother of Jesus. Another position, frequently held by critics and Jewish interpreters, is that of a purely *historical interpretation*. It takes the fulfillment of Isaiah's promise to be that a young woman in the eighth century BC would have sexual relations and then give birth to a child, and this event would serve as a sort of hourglass for Judah: Before that child reached a certain age, the two kings threatening Judah would be removed.

Third, a common approach by contemporary Christian scholars is to view the prophecy as having some sort of *dual or multiple fulfillments*. It would see Isaiah referring to the natural birth of a child in his own day to function as a sign to Judah. Nevertheless, these interpreters would contend that this does not exhaust the meaning. Rather, by double fulfillment (*sensus plenior* type), a later rereading, progressive fulfillment, or even by the use of first-century Jewish hermeneutics, the prophecy also refers to the virgin birth of Jesus.

I believe that by placing the prophecy in context, through a careful reading of the text of Isaiah 7 and by relating it to inner biblical interpretations of the passage, a view that supports a direct prediction of the virgin birth makes the most sense. That would explain Matthew's reason for citing Isaiah 7:14 as a prediction of the virgin birth.

The Context of the Prophecy

The historical setting of the prophecy was a threat against Judah around the year 734 BC. At that time, Rezin, king of Syria (Aram) and Pekah, king of the northern kingdom of Israel, formed an anti-Assyrian alliance. They, in turn, wanted Ahaz, king of Judah, to join their alliance. When he refused, they decided to make war against Ahaz to force the issue (7:1). The northern alliance against Ahaz caused great fear (7:2) in the royal family of David because the goal was not just to conquer Judah but also to "set up the son of Tabeel as king" in the place of Ahaz (7:6). Their plan would place a more pliable king on the throne and also put an end to the Davidic house. This threat provides a significant detail in understanding the passage. While some have contended that there would be no reason to foretell the coming of the Messiah, the danger to the house of David explains the messianic concerns of the passage. It was the Davidic covenant (2 Sam. 7:12–16; 1 Chron. 17:11–14) that led to the expectation of a future Messiah who would be a descendant of David. Therefore, if Ahaz and the entire royal house were to be destroyed, it would bring an end to the messianic hope. A long-term

prophecy of the birth of Messiah would assure the Davidic house and the readers of the scroll of Isaiah that the messianic hope was indeed secure.

With this threat looming, the Lord sent Isaiah to give assurance to Ahaz, telling the prophet to meet Ahaz at “the end of the conduit of the upper pool, on the highway to the fuller’s field” and specifically to bring his son, Shear-jashub (7:3). Frequently, commentators overlook this command to bring the boy as if it were an unnecessary detail. Nevertheless, it seems strange to think that Isaiah would include this precise requirement without it having any significance. As we will see, this seemingly minor detail plays a significant role in understanding the passage.

At the conduit of the upper pool, Isaiah gave Ahaz his God-directed message: “It shall not stand nor shall it come to pass” (7:7). The Lord, through Isaiah, promised that the attack would not succeed and the alliance would be broken. In fact, Isaiah predicted that within sixty-five years, the northern kingdom of Israel would no longer be recognized as a people (7:8). This prediction came true in three phases: First, when Tiglath-pileser, king of Assyria, conquered Israel in 732 BC, sending many captives back to Assyria (2 Kings 15:29). Second, when Assyria destroyed the northern kingdom in 721, deporting much of the Israelite population to Assyria and settling the land of Israel with other peoples (2 Kings 17:24ff). It was completely fulfilled in 669 when Ashurbanapal enacted the final population transfers between Israel and Assyria (Ezra 4:2, 10). Thus in 669, sixty-five years from the date of the events described in Isaiah’s prophecy, the northern kingdom was indeed shattered so that it was “no longer a people” (7:8), and the land was inhabited by Samaritans, a people of mixed ethnicity.¹⁰

To confirm the promise that the attack on Judah would not succeed, the Lord offered a sign of to Ahaz of his own choosing.¹¹ The king was told to make the sign as “deep as Sheol or high as heaven” (7:11). This is an obvious merism,¹² calling Ahaz to ask God to provide a

sign that would be stupendous enough to provide faith. Although the Hebrew word for “sign” does not necessarily require a miracle, it does include the supernatural within its range of meaning (cf. Deut. 6:22). In light of the nature of the offer, it appears that Ahaz was to ask for a miraculous sign.

Nevertheless, Ahaz, with false piety, refused to test God. The disingenuous nature of his response is plain in that this is a king who had so little regard for the Lord that he practiced idolatry, even offering his own son as a child sacrifice to Molech (2 Kings 16:3; 2 Chron. 28:3). While he might claim biblical justification (Deut. 6:16) for his refusal to ask or to test the Lord (7:12), this seems ridiculous because the Lord Himself had just called upon him to do so. So, when Ahaz was under his greatest threat, he refused the Lord’s comfort and rejected the offer to ask for a sign. In response, Isaiah declared that nonetheless, the Lord would give a sign—one that would become a source of controversy for generations.

The Contents of the Prophecy

The most significant difficulty in interpreting the prophecy is that on a cursory reading, it appears that the sign would be fulfilled within just a couple of years of Isaiah’s meeting with the king and not more than seven hundred years later with the birth of Jesus. The reason for this difficulty is the failure to read the prophecy carefully and pick up the clues the author has left. A close reading of the text will disclose that there is not one prophecy but two different prophecies—a long-term prediction addressed to the house of David (7:13–15) and a short-term prediction addressed to Ahaz (7:16ff).

The Long-Term Prophecy to the House of David— The Birth of Messiah (Isaiah 7:13–15)

Since the northern alliance was threatening to replace Ahaz with the son of Tabeel, the entire house of David was endangered. Were Syria

and Israel to succeed, the messianic promise of a future son of David who would have an eternal house, kingdom, and throne (2 Sam. 7:16) would be demolished. This prospect provided the need for a long term sign of hope, that despite the menace to the Davidic line, the Messiah would be born, with the sign of His coming being His virgin birth. The details of this prophecy are as follows:

“Listen now, O house of David.” Isaiah’s declaration of the Lord’s sign shifts the direction of the prophecy away from Ahaz to the whole house of David. This is evident not only from the vocative “O house of David” but also from the change of the pronoun “you.” In 7:10–11, when addressing Ahaz alone, the second person *singular* pronoun was used. However, in 7:13–14, Isaiah used the second person *plural*. This is not an obvious change in the English Bible which translates both the singular and plural as “you,” but it is plainly so in the Hebrew text.¹³ The reason for the shift is that God was clearly fed up with this wicked and sanctimonious king, so Isaiah addressed the royal house he represented. Moreover, it was not only Ahaz that was being threatened but also the entire house of David.

“Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign.” Although Ahaz, as the head of the house of David, has tried God’s patience, Isaiah promised that the Lord Himself would still grant a sign—but one which would now be of God’s own choosing. As mentioned above, the Hebrew word for *sign* can refer to the miraculous or the non-miraculous. However, in light of the previous offer of a sign “as deep as Sheol or high as heaven” it would appear that the sign to follow would be of a miraculous nature. Moreover, this is how Isaiah uses the same word in the parallel situation with Hezekiah (Isa. 38:1–8). There, as a “sign” that Hezekiah’s life would be extended, the shadow on the stairway would miraculously retreat ten steps (38:7–8).¹⁴

“Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son.” The Lord called special attention to the ensuing sign with the word “behold.” When used in similar constructions in the Hebrew Bible (Gen. 16:11; 17:20;

Judg. 13:5–7), the word “behold” serves to bring attention to a birth of special importance.¹⁵ The sign that the Lord promised the house of David is that of a pregnant *almah* who would bear a son. The use of the article (frequently untranslated in modern English versions) with the word *almah* indicates that the Lord has a specific woman in mind. It is not some generic woman in the court of Ahaz but one whom the prophet sees in particular.

Controversy has surrounded the word *almah* since the second century, when Aquila substituted “young woman” (Greek, *neanis*) in his Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible for the LXX translation of “virgin” (*parthenos*). Was Isaiah speaking of a virgin or merely a young woman?¹⁶ Various arguments have been put forward to make the case for translating the word as virgin.

Etymologically, *almah* is derived from a word that means “to be sexually strong, sexually mature, sexually ripe or ready.”¹⁷ This would seem to emphasize the age of the woman (pubescent) rather than indicating whether she was sexually active. Cyrus Gordon has argued that ancient (pre-Mosaic) Ugaritic, which is a cognate of Hebrew, used the parallel word for *almah* of a virgin goddess. Since the Ugaritic announcement formula used a very similar construction to Isaiah 7:14, Gordon concluded that *almah* should rightly be translated “virgin.”¹⁸ Furthermore, many have maintained that the Septuagint translation of *almah* with the Greek word *parthenos* (virgin) is evidence that in the pre-Christian era, the word was understood as referring to virginity.¹⁹

The best way to determine the meaning of the *almah* is by examining its usage throughout the Hebrew Bible. If there were one place in Scripture where *almah* were to refer to a non-virgin, it would dismiss the translation of the word as “virgin.” However, in every situation, the word is used either of a virgin or in an indeterminate, neutral sense.

- **Genesis 24:43.** Here Rebekah, the soon-to-be wife of Isaac, is called an *almah*. This chapter of Genesis describes Rebekah, as a

“girl” (24:14—*nā'arah*), a virgin (24:16—*bethulah*), and a maiden (24:43—*almah*). These three synonyms are used to describe a virginal young woman.

- **Exodus 2:8.** In this passage, Miriam, the sister of Moses, is called an *almah*. As a young girl, still in the home of her parents, we may imply that it includes the idea that she was a virgin.
- **Psalms 46:1.** In this verse, the superscription uses the word as a musical direction. So it is indeterminate, not supporting or contradicting the meaning virgin.
- **Psalms 68:25.** This verse refers to a musical worship procession in which *alamot* (plural of *almah*) play the timbrels. Perhaps this verse is indeterminate, not speaking to the virginity of the maidens. But possibly it hints at virginity because it calls to mind Jephthah's daughter who lamented her being offered as a sacrifice to the Lord (Judg. 11:34–40). While some commentators believe that Jephthah's daughter was an actual human sacrifice, others maintain that Jephthah gave her to lifelong service in the tabernacle. Thus, she was never to marry, and she went with her friends to mourn her virginity. If this is the case, then perhaps it indicates that serving in the temple was restricted to virgins. Therefore, the damsels in the temple worship procession, spoken of in Psalm 68:25, would be virgins.
- **1 Chronicles 15:20.** Once again, the word is used as a musical direction. So it is neutral, not supporting or contradicting the meaning virgin.
- **Song of Solomon 1:3.** This verse refers to the love of the *alamot* for Solomon. These are not married women but maidens who wanted husbands but have not yet been married. Therefore, the word would imply the concept of virginity.
- **Song of Solomon 6:8.** This description of the king's harem includes three categories: sixty queens, eighty concubines, and *alamot* without number. The queens are those whom the king has

married, the concubines are those with whom he has had sexual relations, and the *alamot* are the virgins who will one day be elevated to either concubine or queenly status. If these *alamot* were not virgins, they would be in the concubine category. Hence the use of the word here is of virgins.

A final verse, in Proverbs, is the most controversial of the usages, since it describes “the way of a man with a maid [*almah*]” (30:19). The entire proverb is found in 30:18–19 and refers to four wonderful and incomprehensible things: an eagle in the sky, a serpent on a rock, a ship in the sea, and a man with an *almah*. Some have maintained that what unites these four is in each one something disappears. A soaring eagle is easily lost from sight. A serpent quickly slithers off the rock, disappearing from sight. A ship can be lost in a fraction of time. And a virgin can lose her virginity to a young man very quickly. Even if this were the true interpretation of the proverb, the word *almah* would indeed be virgin. But since there is no moral evil in the first three examples, it seems unlikely that the fourth would call extramarital sex “wonderful.” Moreover, the contrast with the adulterous woman in 30:20 would imply that the *almah* in the previous verse was not engaged in illicit sex.

Probably the best way to understand this proverb is as referring to the mysterious and wonderful qualities of youthful attraction.²⁰ Thus, it once again would refer to a virgin.

In every use in the Hebrew Bible, the word *almah* either refers to a virgin or has a neutral sense.²¹ Based on this study, it appears that Isaiah chose his words with precision. While the Hebrew *bethulah* could refer to a virgin of any age, *almah* would refer to a virgin who has just arrived at puberty. She is a maiden in the truest and purest sense. So, there does not seem to be cause to abandon the traditional interpretation of *almah* as a “virgin” except for an anti-supernatural or anti-messianic bias.²²

This virgin, according to the translation, will be with child. However, the Hebrew in the verse is even more emphatic. It uses the feminine singular adjective *harah* (“pregnant”), which would more accurately be translated “the virgin is pregnant,” or “the pregnant virgin.” Were it not for the context calling for a sign as deep as sheol or high as heaven, such a translation would seem impossible. However, the prophet, by vision, sees a specific pregnant virgin before him,²³ who would be the sign of hope for the house of David. This indeed would meet the qualification of being “deep as Sheol or high as heaven.”

“And she will call His name Immanuel.” The virgin mother of the child will recognize his special nature. Therefore, she will give Him the title “Immanuel” which means “God with us.”²⁴ The message to Judah was that God would be with them in a special way through this child. The title hints at the divine nature of the boy. Even clearer is Isaiah 8:8, in which the prophet, describing the Assyrian conquest of Judah, says that the Assyrians will sweep over Judah “and the spread of its wings will fill the breadth of your land, O Immanuel.” Were the child Immanuel not divine, Isaiah would not identify the land as belonging to Him. Moreover, in the next great vision of the coming Davidic king (Isa. 9:6), the child receives other divine throne titles including Mighty God and Father of Eternity (“Eternal Father”).²⁵ Isaiah was not merely promising a future Davidic king who would secure the line of David; he was not only promising that He would have a supernatural birth. Ultimately, the prophet has revealed that the Messiah would be God in the flesh, Immanuel.²⁶

“He will eat curds and honey” (v. 15). The Lord continues His description of the virgin-born Davidic Messiah, giving a clue to the situation into which He would be born. Many mistake the curds and honey He would eat as the food of royalty, ignoring the context in Isaiah 7 itself. Later in the chapter it speaks of the coming Assyrian oppression, when Assyria would shave the land (7:20). At that time, fields would not be cultivated and would become pastures for oxen and

sheep (7:23–25). The effect of this will be an overabundance of dairy (or curds) because of the pasturing of livestock and an excess of honey, because bees will be able to pollinate the wild flowers. Therefore, because of the “abundance of the milk produced” a man “will eat curds, for everyone that is left within the land will eat curds and honey” (7:21–22). So, in this passage, curds and honey does not represent the food of royalty, but rather the food of oppression.

The point, then, of 7:15 describing the future virgin-born Davidic king eating curds and honey is to emphasize that He would be born during a time of political oppression. In other words, the prophecy of Messiah concludes with a hint that He will be born and grow up (“know[ing] enough to refuse evil and choose good”) at a time when Judah is oppressed by a foreign power.²⁷

With this Isaiah has completed his first prophetic message. With the northern confederation of Syria and Israel threatening to remove Ahaz with a substitute king, the entire house of David was imperiled, and with it, the messianic hope. Isaiah has come with a message of hope—the future Son of David would indeed be born someday. The supernatural sign that would reveal His identity is that He would be born of a young virgin and have a miraculous divine nature. Moreover, He would grow up during a time of oppression over the Jewish people and their land. With the assurance that the house of David and the messianic hope are both secure, the prophet turned his attention to the immediate threat and gave a near prophecy to wicked King Ahaz.

The Short-Term Prophecy to Ahaz—

The Sign of Shear-jashub (Isaiah 7:16ff)

While many have considered verse 16 to be a continuation of the prophecy in 7:13–15, they miss the point as revealed in the grammar of the passage. The opening phrase in Hebrew reflects a strong adversative, showing an obvious disjunction between the child described in 7:13–15 and the one described in verse 16. *The New International*

Version and the *New Living Translation* are two recent English versions that have caught this nuance, beginning 7:16 with the words “*but before*” to indicate the contrast. There is a different child in view in this verse.²⁸

So who is the child in 7:16? In light of Isaiah being directed to bring his own son to the confrontation with the king at the conduit of the upper pool (cf. 7:3), it makes more sense to identify the lad as Shear-jashub. Otherwise there would be no purpose for God directing Isaiah to bring the boy. Thus having promised the virgin birth of the Messiah (7:13–15), the prophet then points to the very small boy whom he has brought along and says, “But before *this* lad [using the article with a demonstrative force] knows enough to refuse evil and choose good, the land whose two kings you dread will be forsaken” (author translation).²⁹ In this way, Shear-jashub functioned as a sign to the king. Appropriately, Isaiah could tell Judah in the very next chapter, “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).

To whom does Isaiah make this prediction? What is not evident in the English text is plain in the Hebrew. The prophet returns to using the second person singular pronoun in 7:16 (“the land whose two kings *you* dread”). In 7:10–11 he used the singular to address King Ahaz. Then, when addressing the house of David with the prophecy of Messiah, he shifted to the plural. But in 7:16, he addressed King Ahaz, using the singular pronoun once again and giving him a near prophecy: before Shear-jashub would be able to discern good from evil, the northern confederacy attacking Judah would fail. Within two years, Tiglath-pileser defeated both Israel and Syria, just as the prophet had predicted.

Having completed his long-term prophecy, Isaiah gave a short-term prophecy. In doing so he followed a frequent pattern in his book. He consistently did this so his readership could have confidence in the distant prediction by observing the fulfillment of the near one.³⁰

The Confirmation of the Prophecy

The messianic interpretation of Isaiah 7:13–15 does not only stand strongly through a careful reading of the text itself, but it is also confirmed by inner-biblical allusions to the prophecy. While some have argued that only Matthew 1:23 reads Isaiah 7:14 as a messianic prophecy, that is really not the case. Isaiah himself substantiates the messianic reading with two passages that follow, as does Isaiah’s contemporary Micah.

Isaiah 9:6–7

After giving hope to the house of David that the promise of the Davidic covenant was secure—as would be seen in the birth of Immanuel (7:13–15)—Isaiah proceeded to identify when the Son of David would come. He described the time of judgment to fall on Judah (Isaiah 8) when Judah would be “hard-pressed and famished” and in “distress and darkness” (8:21–22). At that time “the people who walk in darkness will see a great light; those who live in a dark land, the light will shine on them” (9:2). This light was the Son of David described in Isaiah 7:13–15. He was the child who would be born and given four glorious, twofold titles, “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace” (9:6). He would sit “on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and uphold it with justice and righteousness from then on and forevermore” (9:7). Just as this future king would be called Immanuel, indicating His deity, so also would the other throne titles reflect His divine nature.³¹ The point of Isaiah 9:1–7 was to alert the house of David that the virgin-born king for whom they were to look would come only after a long period of darkness. Nevertheless, He would indeed come, possessing a divine nature, to establish a righteous and eternal kingdom.

Isaiah 11:1–10

Although Isaiah 9 clarified that the Son of David would come after a time of darkness, Isaiah 11 elucidated even further that Immanuel,

the virgin-born Child, on whose hopes the entire house of David rests, would come in the distant future. Only after the mighty tree of David had been cut down with “a terrible crash” (10:33) and the Davidic dynasty had become a mere stump, then a shoot would “spring from the stem of Jesse” (11:1). This king from David’s line would be empowered by the Spirit of God and establish a righteous reign (11:2–5). His kingdom would be so peaceful that it would even alter the nature of predatory animals (11:6–9). He would not just be the king of Israel, but when He comes all “the nations will resort to the root of Jesse” (11:10). This description is an inner-textual clarification of the king as described in Isaiah 9, giving further details of His peaceful and righteous reign.

Robert Culver has conceded that perhaps Isaiah 7:13–15 is a difficult passage and hard to identify as messianic without careful reading. However, it becomes clearly messianic “when one continues to the final verses of the prophecy,”³² referring to Isaiah 9 and 11. He adds that reading Isaiah 7:13–15 within the context of these other passages would cause a reader to “understand that a virgin was someday to bear a very human baby whose very character would be divine.”³³

Certainly, the prophet has included these passages in the book of Immanuel, as Isaiah 7–12 is frequently called, to clarify in whom it is that the house of David should pin their hopes. It was the child written about in Isaiah 7:13–15, namely the future, Davidic Messiah who would be “God with us.”³⁴

Micah 5:3

The prophet Micah, a contemporary of Isaiah, provides an intertextual confirmation of the messianic reading of Isaiah 7:13–15. Located in the well-known prophecy of the Messiah’s birth in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2–5), this prophecy is clearly related to Messiah’s birth. It identified His human origin (“But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, . . . from you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel”), His

eternal nature (“from long ago, from the days of eternity”), and the time of His coming (“when she who is in labor has borne a child”). This last phrase has long been recognized as an inter-textual reference to the virgin birth in Isaiah 7:13–15.³⁵

The passage indicates that Israel will be abandoned (referring to the captivity and exile) until she who is in labor has given birth to the Son of David. Only after this birth will the remnant of Messiah’s brethren reunite as a nation (they will “return to the sons of Israel.”). The reason they will be able to return is the glorious reign of the Messiah of whom it says, “This One will be our peace” (5:5).

Micah 5:2–5 has multiple allusions and references to the book of Immanuel. Both Micah 5 and Isaiah 7 refer to the Messiah’s birth. Both refer to the pregnant woman giving birth. Both allude to His divine nature (Micah saying He comes from long ago and the days of eternity and Isaiah calling Him Immanuel, Mighty God, and Father of Eternity). Both Micah (“He will arise and shepherd His flock in the strength of the Lord” 5:4) and Isaiah (9:7; 11:1–10) refer to the glorious reign of the Messiah. Both point out that Messiah will be the source of peace for Israel. (Micah: “This One will be our peace.” Isaiah: “His name shall be called . . . the Prince of Peace.”)

These many intertextual references are significant. If a plainly messianic passage like Micah 5:2–5³⁶ cites Isaiah 7:13–15, it shows that the earliest interpretation of Isaiah 7:14, and no less an inspired interpretation, recognizes the messianic prophecy of the virgin birth.

Matthew 1:23

Matthew’s use of Isaiah 7:14 in his narrative of the virgin birth has been regarded in a variety of ways. Some have taken it as a double fulfillment, or *sensus plenior*, while others view it as an example of typical fulfillment. Yet others consider it as nothing more than a midrash pesher interpretation, i.e., creative exegesis under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Some see it as a misuse of Isaiah who, they allege, was

not referring to the virgin birth in any way at all. However, it appears to me that Matthew was following a careful and close reading of Isaiah³⁷ and recognized that the prediction given to the house of David had found its fulfillment in the virgin birth of Jesus of Nazareth. Immanuel had come just as prophesied eight centuries earlier. God was with Israel.

THE VIRGIN BIRTH IN PROCLAMATION

We end where we began. What if Jesus did indeed have a human father named Larry? What if the Gospel writers were merely mythologizing to make their message more palatable to pagans? What if Isaiah's prediction referred to a young woman giving birth to a child via natural means in eighth-century-BC Judah? According to postmodern Christianity, these are insignificant questions. This approach says that faith in Jesus is still the truth and works even if the virgin birth is questioned or even rejected. But truth is foundational to faith. We must believe in Jesus not because "it works" but because it is true. In fact, He is the truth.

It appears that, according to prophecy, the Messiah's virgin birth was an essential to be believed for two reasons. One, the virgin birth was to be a major sign to confirm Messiah Jesus' position as the messianic Son of David. If Jesus of Nazareth had a human father named Larry or Joseph, it would prove that He really was not the Messiah. No matter how good a life one could lead by believing in Jesus, such a life would be a sham, because that belief would not save anyone. Following Jesus changes our lives because He truly *is* the Messiah.

Two, the virgin birth is in some way related to Jesus' deity. The prediction foretells that the Messiah would be Immanuel or "God with us." Luke, when recording the virgin birth, records the angel's message to Mary: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy

Child shall be called the Son of God” (Luke 1:35). Just as Isaiah related the virgin birth to Messiah being God with us, so Luke associates the virgin birth as the basis for Jesus being the Son of God, or deity. Foundational to our faith is that God became a man in order to redeem us. Without the virgin birth we deny the doctrine of Messiah’s deity and lose the truth of His atonement.

To go back to Rob Bell’s analogy, he would say that the doctrine of the virgin birth should not be viewed as a brick but as a spring, important but nonessential. In a world where truth has become relative and absolutes unacceptable, it is still necessary to proclaim the virgin birth as not a brick or a spring, but as a foundation. Without it our confidence that Jesus is Messiah and God would indeed crumble.

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NOTES

1. Initially, “fundamentalism” was a theological movement, affirming certain fundamentals of the faith. By the middle of the twentieth century, it became associated with forms of sociological separatism that were, in reality, trivial and not fundamental. In 1979, when Islamic students captured the United States embassy in Teheran, news media began to call the Iranian captors Islamic “fundamentalists.” As a result, the term “fundamentalist” has now developed a pejorative meaning, associated with extremism and radicalism.
2. William W. Sweet, *The Story of Religion in America* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 407–09.
3. Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 22.
4. *Ibid.*, 26–27.
5. *Ibid.*, 27.
6. I. Howard Marshall, *Commentary on Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text, The New International Greek Testament Commentary*, ed. I. Howard Marshall and W. Ward Gasque (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 897.

7. H. L. Ellison, *The Centrality of the Messianic Idea in the Old Testament* (London: Tyndale, 1957), 6.
8. A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, vol. 2. (Nashville: Broadman, 1930), 294.
9. F. F. Bruce, *The Defense of the Gospel in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 13–14.
10. Cf. John J. Davis and John C. Whitcomb, *A History of Israel* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 429–34.
11. John H. Walton has speculated that Isaiah 7:10 (“Then the Lord spoke again to Ahaz . . .”) begins a new setting for the prophecy at a later time and that Isaiah and his son Shear-jashub were no longer present at the conduit of the upper pool. He also cites a number of sources both supporting and rejecting this conjecture in “Isaiah 7:14: What’s In a Name?” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 30, no. 3 (September 1987): 289. John Oswalt correctly affirms that 7:10 is a continuation of Isaiah’s meeting at the upper pool. He writes that the word “again may merely indicate a second part of a single conversation, vv. 3–9 being the promise and vv. 10, 11 the challenge (cf. Gen. 18:29, etc.). There being no evidence of a change in time or location, it seems best to see the paragraph as a direct continuation of vv. 1–9” in *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1–39, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament*, ed. R. K. Harrison (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 204.
12. A merism is a figure of speech in which “the totality or whole is substituted by two contrasting or opposite parts”; cf. Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor, 1991), 151.
13. English cries out with the need for a distinct second person plural. Hence the southern colloquialism “y’all” or the Brooklynese “youse.”
14. See the discussion of the word *sign* [Heb. *’ot*] in David L. Cooper, *Messiah: His Nature and Person* (Los Angeles: Biblical Research Society, 1933), 136–37.
15. Note that E. J. Young not only cites these verses but also shows that the Ras Shamra literature does the same in *Studies in Isaiah*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 159–60.
16. Evangelical John H. Walton has made the case for translating *almah* as “young woman” in the *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*. His strongest argument is that when used as an abstract noun in Isaiah 54:4, *’alumim* is used with “a metaphorical attribution of this term to Israel, she is also described as having a husband (v. 5) and being barren (v. 1). In parallel phrases the ‘shame’ of her *’alumim* is paired with the shame of her widowhood.” He maintains that this “would suggest a close connection with childbearing,” thus concluding that the word does not indicate virginity. However, a closer look at Isa. 54:4 will demonstrate that while Israel is indeed being spoken of figuratively as a woman, the promise the Lord is making is that “you will forget the shame of your *youth* (*’alumim*) and the reproach of your widowhood you will remember no more.” The contrast is between Israel’s youth (before she married, hence a virgin) and when she was a widow (again with no husband, after she married). Isaiah’s use of the abstract noun *’alumim* would seem to indicate virginity.
17. Francis Brown, S. Driver and C. Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon* (1952; repr., Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1996), 761.

18. Cyrus H. Gordon, "Almah in Isaiah 7:14," *Journal of the Bible and Religion* 21, no. 2 (April 1953): 106.
19. For example, cf. Edward E. Hindson, *Isaiah's Immanuel* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1978), 67–68. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Gerhard Kittel, Gerhard Friedrich, eds., Geoffrey W. Bromiley, trans., has maintained that the word *parthenos* did not yet mean "virgin" when the LXX was translated. While this is questionable, it is certainly incorrect about the Isaiah translator's understanding of the term. The translator understood *almah* as virgin and so rendered the feminine singular adjective *harab* ("pregnant") as a feminine singular verb ("will conceive"). Surprisingly, most interpreters miss what has long been seen as an attempt by the translator to come to terms with the "difficulty" of a "pregnant virgin" in Isaiah 7:14.
20. This is the view of Hindson, *Israel's Immanuel*, 38–39, and David Hubbard, who translates it "the way of a man with a virgin and describes it as "the positive picture of romance" in contrast "with the warnings against illicit relations" in *Mastering the Old Testament: Proverbs* (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1989), 465–66. William McKane, while denying that '*almah* means "virgin," interprets the proverb as referring to the "irresistible and inexplicable attraction which draws together the man and the woman." Cf. McKane, *Proverbs: A New Approach* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), 658.
21. For a more thorough discussion of the meaning of *almah* see Richard Niessen, "The Virginity of the '*almah* in Isaiah 7:14," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 546 (April–June, 1980): 133–50.
22. The anti-messianic bias is readily apparent in the great Jewish biblical commentator Rashi, who interprets *almah* as "virgin" in Song of Solomon 1:3 and 6:8 but argues for "young woman" in Isaiah 7:14. This same bias motivated Aquila in his second century Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, changing the LXX *parthenos* to *neanisis* (young girl).
23. This explains why he speaks of a future event in the present tense.
24. Some have objected to Matthew's use of this passage in the birth narrative (Matt. 1:23) because Mary did not name the child "Immanuel." However, "Immanuel" is not the given name of the Messiah. Rather, it was to be seen as a symbolic, descriptive throne title. Similarly, David's son was given the name Solomon but his descriptive royal title was "Jedidiah" or "Beloved of the Lord" (2 Sam. 12:24–25).
25. Translating '*avi* as "Father of Eternity" is preferable because it is the more literal rendering. Moreover, it avoids the Christological problem of calling the Son the Father. Thus, in Isa. 9:6 this Son is the Author of Time or Creator.
26. Cf. Robert L. Reymond, *Jesus: Divine Messiah: The Old Testament Witness* (Fearn, Ross-shire, U.K.: Christian Focus, 2003), 31–34.
27. The "curds and honey" serve as figures for an oppressed land: natural rather than cultivated products; cf. vv. 22–23. "Fulfillment: the moral growth of Jesus, learning to distinguish between good and evil (cf. Luke 2:40, 52), yet in a land that was afflicted—as it worked out historically, by the Romans—and no longer ruled by the dynasty of David." J. Barton Payne, *The Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973), 293.
28. John Calvin and more recently Robert Vasholz ("Isaiah and Ahaz: A Brief History of Crisis in Isaiah 7 and 8," *Presbyterian: Covenant Seminary Review* XIII:2 (Fall 1987): 82–83.) recognized the adversative phrase *ki b'erem* as signaling a new and different

- boy under discussion. Although Oswalt writes, “It is not necessary to separate v. 16 from v. 15; in fact, the opening *ki* of verse 16 can be taken as causal, indicating why the child will eat curds and honey: Judah will be delivered from her neighbors’ threat” (213). This neglects the strong adversative nuance of the first two Hebrew words when used together. Moreover, the causal nuance makes no sense if the curds and honey represent the food of oppression as they plainly do in the next paragraph.
29. Calvin and Vasholz (“Isaiah and Ahaz,” 83) maintain that 7:16 begins a second prophecy but that it is not a particular boy, rather a generic child, leading to the idea “but before for the boy will know enough to refuse evil and choose good.” To come to this view, they must claim a generic use of the article, which is not supported by the context. Cooper, *Messiah: His Nature and Person*, 150–51, and Arnold Fruchtenbaum, *Messianic Christology* (Tustin, Calif.: Ariel Press, 1998), 37, have recognized that the boy is Shear-jashub but mistakenly and without syntactical warrant begin his description in 7:15, seeing only 7:13–14 as referring to the Messiah. To my knowledge, only William Kelly in *An Exposition of the Book of Isaiah* (London: Paternoster, 1897), 144–45, has written that 7:16 begins a second distinct near prophecy and identified the lad as Shear-jashub. (He states that others hold this view, but he does not give attribution to anyone.)
 30. Vasholz, “Isaiah and Ahaz,” 82.
 31. While some have objected to finding the deity of the Messiah in the Hebrew Bible, it appears that this is purely circular reasoning. It begins with the presumption that the Hebrew Scriptures do not reveal a divine Messiah. Then every passage that appears to indicate the deity of the future Messiah is dismissed because “the Hebrew Scriptures do not reveal a divine Messiah.” The classic defense of taking Isaiah 9:6 as referring to Messiah as God is John D. Davis’s, “The Child Whose Name Is Wonderful,” *Biblical and Theological Studies* (New York: Scribners, 1912). For another authoritative defense of Messiah’s deity in the Hebrew Scriptures see Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, “The Divine Messiah in the Old Testament,” *Christology and Criticism* (New York: Oxford, 1921).
 32. Robert D. Culver, “Were the Old Testament Prophecies Really Prophetic?” *Can I Trust My Bible?* ed. Howard Vos (Chicago: Moody, 1963), 104.
 33. *Ibid.*
 34. Moreover, the author also provides an inner-textual reference between the Messiah of Isaiah 11 and the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 52:13–53:12. Just as the Messiah would spring from the “root of Jesse,” He would also be compared to a “root out of parched ground” (Isa. 53:2). When all the inner-biblical dots are connected in Isaiah, it serves to inform the reader that: (a) the future son of David would be the virgin-born Immanuel (Isa. 7:13–15); (b) He would be God in the flesh (Isa. 9:6); (c) He would reign over a righteous and peaceful, eternal kingdom (Isa. 9:7; 11:1–10); and (d) He would accomplish this only after His substitutionary death and resurrection (Isa. 52:13–53:12).
 35. Norman Snaith, while denying the messianic interpretation of both Isaiah 7:13–15 and Micah 5:2–5, has recognized that Micah is indeed referring to the Isaiah passage in *Amos, Hosea, and Micah* (London: Epworth Press, 1960), 95. Snaith admits that Micah 5 is referring to the birth of a great king, who, as heir to the Davidic throne, would be endowed with remarkable qualities.
 36. Certainly some have disputed that Micah 5:2–5 is messianic and have regarded it as

nothing more than hope for the restoration of a Davidic king. Nevertheless, the messianic interpretation is ancient and well established. It is only those interpreters with a presumption that the Old Testament has no messianic hope at all who seem to reject the messianic interpretation of Micah 5:2–5.

37. Some might object that the careful reading available to Matthew was not understandable to Ahaz, who might be considered “the original audience” of this prophecy. This objection fails to understand the nature of the Bible as a text. While Ahaz did receive this prophecy in a particular time and place, all we have of it is a textual record of that event in the composition known as the book of Isaiah. Thus, Ahaz is not the original audience of the book of Isaiah but a character in the inspired narrative written in the book. The audience of the book is eighth-century-BC Judah, to whom a careful reading of the visible compositional strategies was available. They could read it in context with Isaiah 9 and 11 just as any reader of the book of Isaiah can after them. In other words, what was available and understandable to Matthew was also available and understandable to the original readers.