

## THE VIRGIN BIRTH AND ISAIAH 7:14<sup>1</sup>

Charles L. Feinberg, Th.D., Ph.D.  
Former Dean and Professor of Old Testament  
Talbot Theological Seminary – La Mirada, CA

*Isaiah 7:14 continues to be one of the most debated texts in the Bible. After surveying various scholarly opinions, two key Hebrew words, ‘almâ (young woman) and b’tûlâ (maiden) are discussed as to the immediate historical and prophetic intent of Isaiah. After also consulting the LXX version and Matthew’s use (1:23) of Isaiah 7:14, it is concluded that the passage is a signal and explicit prediction of the miraculous conception and nativity of Jesus Christ.*

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No student of the Old Testament need apologize for a treatment of Isaiah 7:14 in relation to the doctrine of the virgin birth of the Lord Jesus Christ. From earliest times to the present the discussions which have centered about this theme have been both interesting, varied, and at times even heated. Lindblom characterizes Isaiah 7:14 as “the endlessly discussed passage of the Immanuel sign.”<sup>2</sup> Rawlinson maintains: “Few prophecies have been the subject of so much controversy, or called forth such a variety of exegesis, as this prophecy of Immanuel. Rosenmueller gives a list of twenty-eight authors who have written dissertations on it, and himself adds a twenty-ninth. Yet the subject is far from being exhausted.”<sup>3</sup> Barnes emphasizes the obscurity of the passage: “Who this virgin was, and what is the precise meaning of this prediction, has given, perhaps, more perplexity to commentators than almost any other portion of the Bible.”<sup>4</sup> Again, he insists, “Perhaps there is no prophecy in the Old Testament

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Charles Lee Feinberg (1909–1995), longtime Dean of Talbot Theological Seminary and highly esteemed Old Testament scholar, served as Dr. MacArthur’s mentor and favorite seminary professor during his study for ministry at Talbot. This essay was published by Dr. Feinberg in *Is the Virgin Birth in the Old Testament?* (Whittier, CA: Emeth Publishing, 1967), 34–48 and is used by permission of the *Charles Lee Feinberg Family Trust*. This article appears essentially in its original form.

<sup>2</sup> Johannes Lindblom, “A Study on the Immanuel Section on Isaiah vii, 1–ix, 6,” *Scripta Minora* 1957–58:4 (Lund, Sweden: Lund CWK Gleerup, 1958), 15.

<sup>3</sup> George Rawlinson, “Isaiah: An Exposition,” in *The Pulpit Commentary*, ed. H. D. M. Spence and Joseph S. Excell (1892; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 10:129.

<sup>4</sup> Albert Barnes, “Isaiah,” in *Notes on the Old Testament: Explanatory and Practical*, ed. Robert Frew (1853; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1950), 1:148.

on which more has been written, and which has produced more perplexity among commentators than this. And after all, it still remains, in many respects, very obscure.”<sup>5</sup> Skinner seeks in a general way to pinpoint the source of the difficulties. He states: “Probably no single passage of the Old Testament has been so variously interpreted or has given rise to so much controversy as the prophecy contained in these verses. The difficulties arise mainly from the fact that while the terms of the prediction are so indefinite as to admit a wide range of possibilities, we have no record of its actual fulfillment in any contemporary event.”<sup>6</sup> In view of these statements concerning the difficulties in the passage, one may scarcely expect unanimity among either liberals or conservatives in theology.

The logical point at which the investigation should be initiated is a careful treatment of the immediate context. It was in the reign of Ahaz, king of Judah,<sup>7</sup> that a coalition was formed between Rezin, king of Syria, and Pekah, king of Israel, against Ahaz. Their avowed objective (Isa 7:5–6) was the dethronement of Ahaz and the setting up in his place of a Syrian pretender, a vassal king, Tabeal. When the fact of the confederacy was made known to the royal house, the consternation was great indeed. The text states it (v. 2) under a strong figure. But God had not been consulted in the matter, and He made known that the plottings of Judah’s enemies would be frustrated. Moreover, in yet sixty-five years the northern kingdom of Ephraim would be no more. In that dark hour it required faith to lay hold of this pronouncement of Isaiah, and he warned that if God’s word through him were not believed, there would be no establishment of the king and his people.

Then it was that God, out of His boundless love and mercy to the Davidic house, wishing to confirm the strong assurances already made, invited Ahaz to ask for a sign in attestation of these predictions. Ahaz was not to feel in the least confined, for he was allowed a latitude of request from heaven above to Sheol below. Any request within these extensive areas was permissible. But Ahaz in a hypocritical display of sudden piety refused to put God to the test. This was an affront to God to disobey in so peremptory a manner. Isaiah’s patience had long since been exhausted with the vacillating, faithless monarch. Will Ahaz now wear out God’s patience as well?

In spite of the king’s disobedience and without his co-operation, the Lord Himself promised a specific sign: a virgin with child was to bring forth a

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

<sup>6</sup> J. Skinner, *The Book of the Prophet Isaiah, Chapters I.–XXXIX*, The Cambridge Bible (Cambridge: The University Press, 1900), 60. See also: Robert W. Rogers, “Isaiah” in the *Abingdon Bible Commentary*, ed. Frederick Carl Eiselen (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1929), 643–44; W. Fitch, “Isaiah” in *New Bible Commentary*, ed. F. Davidson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), 569; and Emil M. Kraeling, “The Immanuel Prophecy,” *JBL*, 50, no. 4 (1931): 277–95.

<sup>7</sup> Edwin R. Thiele, *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1951), 104. He places his accession date at 722 BC, at the age of twenty.

son whose name would be Immanuel. Before certain stages of growth were reached in the life of the child, both Syria and Ephraim would no longer be threatening powers to Judah. How is this passage to be understood in the large? Is it a prediction of an ominous nature? Is it a prophecy of a salutary character? Or is it composed of both elements?<sup>8</sup> In order to determine this basic question it will be necessary to treat the individual terms of the passage.

What is meant by the word *'ôt* (*sign*)? If there were agreement here among interpreters of the prophecy, one could feel he were off to a good start. But the variety of views is disconcerting, to say the least. Brown has counted seventy-nine occurrences of the word in the Old Testament, forty-four times in the singular and thirty-five in the plural. He understands the usages in our passage as relating to a sign which "takes place before the promised event happens, and serves as a pledge to those to whom it is given that the event suggested by it will come to pass. We shall expect, then, to find in the sign given to Ahaz something which occurred prior to the deliverance foretold in the same passage, and became a pledge to him of that deliverance."<sup>9</sup> Fitch holds that the sign was "not necessarily miraculous."<sup>10</sup> Gray feels that the sign has in view something which was previously foretold, but has now actually happened.<sup>11</sup>

But the traditional position that a miracle is demanded by the context is not without its able exponents. Barnes unequivocally maintains that the sign is "a miracle wrought in attestation of a Divine promise or message. This is its sense here."<sup>12</sup> Kraeling concludes that something unusual is to be looked for, "so that the ancient virgin birth interpretation was not without a good psychological basis when viewed from this angle."<sup>13</sup> J.A. Alexander reasons that "it seems very improbable that after such an offer, the sign bestowed would be merely a thing of everyday occurrence, or at most the application of a symbolical name. This presumption is strengthened by the solemnity with which the Prophet speaks of the predicted birth, not as a usual and natural event,

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<sup>8</sup> Kraeling, "Immanuel," 281, ably sets forth the three groups of interpretation.

<sup>9</sup> Charles R. Brown, "Exegesis of Isaiah VII. 10-17," *JBL*, 9, no. 1 (1890): 119.

<sup>10</sup> Fitch, "Isaiah," 569.

<sup>11</sup> George B. Gray, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Isaiah I-XXVII*. ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1912), I:121. Also Skinner denies that an objective miracle is here called for (*Isaiah*, 60). See also Cuthbert Lattey, "The Term *Almah* in Is. 7:14," and "Various Interpretations of Is. 7:14," *CBQ* 9 (1947): 95 and 147-54, who would appear to take the same position.

<sup>12</sup> Barnes, "Isaiah," 155.

<sup>13</sup> Kraeling, "Immanuel," 280.

but as something which excites his own astonishment, as he beholds it in prophetic vision."<sup>14</sup>

Those who insist that Isaiah must be speaking of an event already past or one on the contemporary scene are not giving the interjection *hinnēh* (Behold) its proper force. Delitzsch maintains: "*hinnēh* with the following participle (here participial adjective; cf. 2 Sam xi. 5) is always presentative, and the thing presented is always either a real thing, as in Gen. xvi. 11 and Judg. xiii. 5; or it is an ideally present thing, as is to be taken here; for except in chap. xlvi. 7 *hinnēh* always indicates something future in Isaiah."<sup>15</sup> We are indebted to Young for bringing to bear upon the term the light from Ras Shamra literature. After pointing out similar constructions to Isaiah 7:14 in Genesis 16:11; 17:19; and Judges 13:5, 7, he states: "At present it is sufficient to remark that the phrase introduced by *hinnēh* is employed in the Scriptures to announce a birth of unusual importance. It is therefore of particular interest to note that this formula has been found upon one of the texts recently excavated at Ras Shamra."<sup>16</sup>

The storm center of the text is, of course, the word *'almā* (young woman). Reams have been written upon it and, doubtless, reams will be written on it in the future. What is the exact translation of this important and pivotal word? Is there an element of ambiguity in it, or has the vagueness been imported into the discussion by interpreters? Here the exegete of Isaiah has a splendid opportunity to go slowly and plough deeply. To be accurate in one's conclusions all the evidence available must be weighed properly. First of all, it must be noticed that the noun has the definite article. For many this phenomenon is without significance, but Lindblom affirms: "The most natural explanation is that a definite woman is in view."<sup>17</sup> Hengstenberg is even stronger when he declares: "In harmony with *hinnēh*, the article in *ha-'almā* might be explained from the circumstance that the Virgin is present to the inward perception of the prophet—equivalent to 'the virgin there.'"<sup>18</sup> The better interpretation of the passage would see a significance in the prophet's use of the definite article, pointing to a specific person.

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<sup>14</sup> Joseph A. Alexander, *Commentary on Isaiah* (1865; repr., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1953), 167.

<sup>15</sup> Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on The Prophecies of Isaiah*, trans. James Martin (1879; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), 1:206.

<sup>16</sup> Edward J. Young, *Studies in Isaiah* (London: Tyndale, 1955), 159. His conclusion is: "Isaiah, therefore, because of the tremendous solemnity and importance of the announcement which he was to make, used as much of this ancient formula of announcement as suited his purpose." (160).

<sup>17</sup> Lindblom, "Immanuel," 19. Also A. R. Faussett, "Hebrews," in *A Commentary: Critical, Experimental and Practical* by Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown (1893; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 3:586.

<sup>18</sup> E.W. Hengstenberg, *Christology of the Old Testament* (1892; repr., Grand Rapids, Kregel, 1970), 2:44. Young explains it thus: "More natural, however, is the generic usage in which the article serves to designate some particular unknown person." (*Studies*, 164).

But what is the precise meaning of *‘almâ*? There are numerous scholars who are noncommittal as to whether the term signifies a virgin or a married woman. Rogers states his position clearly: “First of all, it must be said that the Hebrew word *‘almâ* may mean ‘virgin,’ but does not necessarily mean anything more than a young woman of marriageable age. Had the prophet intended specifically and precisely to say ‘virgin,’ he must have used the word *b<sup>e</sup>tûlâ* (maiden), though even then there would be a faint shade of uncertainty.”<sup>19</sup>

It is in place here to indicate that many reputable scholars have held and do hold that the Hebrew term in this context means virgin. Gray affirms that “*‘almâ* means a girl, or young woman, above the age of childhood and sexual immaturity...a person of the age at which sexual emotion awakens and becomes potent; it asserts neither virginity nor the lack of it; it is naturally in actual usage often applied to women who were as a matter of fact certainly (Gen 24:43; Ex 2:8), or probably (Song 1:3; 6:8; Ps 68.26), virgins.”<sup>20</sup> Gordon, an able Jewish Semitic scholar, presents an interesting sidelight on the problem. He maintains: “The commonly held view that ‘virgin’ is Christian, whereas ‘young woman’ is Jewish is not quite true. The fact is that the Septuagint, which is the Jewish translation made in pre-Christian Alexandria, takes *‘almâ* to mean ‘virgin’ here. Accordingly, the New Testament follows Jewish interpretation in Isaiah 7:14. Little purpose would serve in repeating the learned expositions that Hebraists have already contributed in their attempt to clarify the point at issue. It all boils down to this: the distinctive Hebrew word for ‘virgin’ is *b<sup>e</sup>tûlâ*, whereas *‘almâ* means a ‘young woman’ who may be a virgin, but is not necessarily so. The aim of this note is rather to call attention to a source that has not yet been brought into the discussion. From Ugarit of around 1400 B.C. comes a text celebrating the marriage of the male and female lunar deities. It is there predicted that the goddess will bear a son.... The terminology is remarkably close to that in Isaiah 7:14. However, the Ugaritic statement that the bride will bear a son is fortunately given in parallelistic form; in 77:7 she is called by the exact etymological counterpart of Hebrew *‘almâ* ‘young woman’; in 77:5 she is called by the exact etymological counterpart of Hebrew *b<sup>e</sup>tûlâ* ‘virgin.’ Therefore, the New Testament rendering of *‘almâ* as ‘virgin’ for Isaiah 7:14 rests on the older Jewish interpretation, which in turn is now borne out for *precisely this annunciation formula* by a text that is not only pre-Isaianic but is pre-Mosaic in the form that we now have it on a clay tablet.”<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Rogers, “Isaiah,” 643–44. For the same approach compare: Lindblom, “Immanuel,” 18; C.W.E. Naegelsbach, “The Prophet Isaiah,” in *Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Critical, Doctrinal and Homiletical* by John Peter Lange (1869; repr., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1960), 6:121–23; and Conrad von Orelli, *The Prophecies of Isaiah* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1899), 53. Skinner holds that *b<sup>e</sup>tûlâ* is not wholly free from ambiguity, while contending that *‘almâ* does not necessarily connote virginity (*Isaiah*, 56).

<sup>20</sup> Gray, *Isaiah*, 126–27.

<sup>21</sup> Cyrus H. Gordon, “Almah in Isaiah 7:14,” *JBR* 21, no. 2 (April, 1953): 106. Some have overlooked or minimized the fact that Joel 1:8 indicates a *b<sup>e</sup>tûlâ* has been married and lost her

The position espoused here has been ably set forth by many, but not more cogently than by Machen who contended: "The question, we think, cannot be settled merely by a consideration of the meaning of the Hebrew word *'almâ*. It has been urged, indeed, on the one hand that the Hebrew language has a perfectly unmistakable word for 'virgin,' *b<sup>e</sup>tûlâ*, and that if 'virgin' had been meant that word would have been used. But as a matter of fact there is no place among the seven occurrences of *'almâ* in the Old Testament where the word is clearly used of a woman who was not a virgin. It may readily be admitted that *'almâ* does not actually indicate virginity, as does *b<sup>e</sup>tûlâ*; it means rather 'a young woman of marriageable age.' But on the other hand one may well doubt, in view of the usage, whether it was a natural word to use of anyone who was not in point of fact a virgin."<sup>22</sup>

The reference is undoubtedly to the virgin Mary, a fact clearly attested by Matthew 1. Those who cannot interpret *'almâ* as a virgin present a variety of views as to the identity of the young woman. Some assert it was the consort of Ahaz, any contemporary young woman, Isaiah's wife, one of Ahaz' harem, or a princess of the court of Ahaz. Manifestly, these do not meet the requirements of the context for a miraculous occurrence.

If there is divergence of thought on the identity of the mother of the child, there is no less agreement on the child himself. One position is that the child is an unknown one born in that day to confirm the prophecy of Isaiah. Others hold that the son is the son of Isaiah. Still others maintain that the child is Hezekiah, not realizing or overlooking the chronological difficulty here. A number of expositors contend for a double or multiple fulfillment, one in Isaiah's day and one in the life of Christ Himself. Alexander states a valid refutation: "It seems to be a feeling common to learned and unlearned readers, that although a double sense is not impossible, and must in certain cases be assumed, it is unreasonable to assume it when any other explanation is admissible. The improbability in this case is increased by the want of similarity between the two events, supposed to be predicted in the very same words, the one miraculous, the other not only natural, but common, and of everyday occurrence."<sup>23</sup>

Against the view that verses 14–16 relate wholly and entirely to the virgin birth of the Lord Jesus Christ, the position maintained here, has been leveled the charge that it gives the prophecy no relevance to the day in which it

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husband. See the interesting reference of William S. LaSor in his "*Isaiah 7:14—'Young Woman' or 'Virgin'?*" (Altadena, CA: By Author, 1953), 3–4; especially the larger issues involved at the end of his treatment.

<sup>22</sup> J. Gresham Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ* (New York: Harper, 1930), 288.

<sup>23</sup> Alexander, *Isaiah*, 170. In order to avoid some of the difficulties involved here, the view has been taken that verse 14 refers to Christ, whereas the rest of the passage, that is, verses 15 and 16, relate to Shear-jashub, son of Isaiah. See William Kelly, *Lectures on Isaiah* (London: Morrish, 1871), 125.

was uttered. This is a serious matter, for the prophet must speak to his own generation as well as to future ones. To many a fulfillment centuries later would be worthless to Ahaz and his contemporaries in their distress. But the exact opposite is true. Ahaz and his courtiers were fearful of the extinction of the Davidic dynasty and the displacement of the king by a Syrian pretender. However, the longer the time needed to fulfill the promise to the Davidic house, the longer that dynasty would be in existence to witness the realization of the prediction. It is well stated by Alexander: "... The assurance that Christ was to be born in Judah, of its royal family, might be a *sign* to Ahaz, that the kingdom should not perish in his day; and so far was the remoteness of the sign in this case from making it absurd or inappropriate, that the further off it was, the stronger the promise of continuance of Judah, which it guaranteed."<sup>24</sup> The conclusion, then, is inescapable that "...there is no ground, grammatical, historical, or logical, for doubt as to the main point, that the Church in all ages has been right in regarding this passage as a signal and explicit prediction of the miraculous conception and nativity of Jesus Christ."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>Alexander, *Isaiah*, 171.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, 172.

