

# The Immanuel Prophecy of Isaiah 7:14 at the Crossroads of Exegesis, Hermeneutics, and Bible Translation

STEFAN FELBER

## Abstract

In this study of the Immanuel prophecy of Isaiah 7:14 and its reception, I will show how the relation of exegetical, hermeneutical, and translational decisions influences the process of understanding before any translation is done. I wish to maintain that Matthew's use of Isaiah 7 is coherent with its wording and logic. I would like to invite translators and exegetes to determine textual and exegetical matters under theological premises, that is, under a biblical hierarchy of authority.

---

“All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet ...” (Matt. 1:22)

## I. *Significance and Dimensions of the Prophecy*

**T**he Immanuel prophecy is the first literal quotation of an Old Testament passage in the New. It is also the first out of five by which Matthew depicts Jesus's early history. These quotations determine not only the selection of the story materials but also their wordings. Memories of the childless matriarchs whose

womb the Lord opened (Gen 29:31; cf. 30:2) are present in conventional vocabulary:<sup>1</sup> initial barrenness, divine promise, pregnancy, birth, and naming (and an etymological explanation) are recurring elements in the narratives of Sarah, Rachel, and Hannah.<sup>2</sup>

As for Christology, the evangelist attributes fundamental importance to Isaiah's prophecy, since he substantiates the angel's message to Joseph by referring to Isaiah 7:14. He stresses that the connection is not arbitrary and manmade but God given. Matthew does not customize the passage to his purposes, but rather lets God speak and act according to his predicted will in Isaiah:

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us). (Matt 1:22–23 esv)

For Matthew, the name Immanuel and the divine sonship of Jesus, which became apparent in the virgin birth, belong inseparably together. Immanuel indicates that it is God himself who is with us in the incarnate Son. At the end of his gospel, Matthew picks up the same point: Christ, sending his disciples to all nations, solemnly declares: "*I am with you* always, to the end of the age" (Matt 28:20).

"Immanuel" did not become Jesus's first name but identifies his essence: He bears God's name because he is God with us and for us.<sup>3</sup> Dogmatically speaking, Christology and soteriology are knit together.<sup>4</sup> If Matthew had ascribed him God's name merely for rhetorical purposes, we could not pray to him, and if we were to, we would be idolaters.

It is often overlooked that as an interpretation of Isaiah 7:14, Luke 1 is as important as Matthew 1. According to Luke 1:27, the angel Gabriel is sent to a virgin, Greek *parthenos*. The precision with which Isaiah speaks of her

<sup>1</sup> Craig L. Blomberg, "Matthew," in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. Gregory K. Beale and Donald Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker 2007), 3; Ulrich Wilckens, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments I/4* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2005), 94.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Samson's birth and the nameless son of the Shunammite (2 Kgs 4).

<sup>3</sup> Robert L. Reymond, "Who Is the עִלְמָה [*Imh*] of Isaiah 7:14?" *Presbyterion* 15 (1989): 7.

<sup>4</sup> The church fathers (Ireneaus, Theodoret, Tertullian, Chrysostom, and others) hold this connection as well; see Johannes Bade, *Christologie des Alten Testaments* [Münster: Deiters, 1850], 60. For them, the prophecy (Isa 7:14–16) announces the virginal birth of Jesus Christ, describes the circumstances of this birth (Isa 8:1–4), and expresses its joy (Isa 9:1–6); cf. Marius Reiser, "Aufruhr um Isenbiehl oder: Was hat Jes 7,14 mit Jesus und Maria zu tun?" in *Bibelkritik und Auslegung der Heiligen Schrift*, ed. Marius Reiser (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 297. As to the entanglement of Christology and anthropology, cf. my contribution on Psalm 8: Stefan Felber, "Anthropologie und Christologie: Der 8. Psalm und die Salzburger Erklärung," in *Erkennen und Lieben in der Gegenwart Gottes*, ed. Stefan Felber (Wien: LIT, 2016), 57–67.

(using the article *ha-‘almah*), is now revealed: “And the virgin’s name was ... Mary.” This answers the question, Who is the virgin?<sup>5</sup> Then, the angel greets Mary: “The Lord is *with you!*” (v. 28), which links to the meaning of Immanuel. Verse 31 repeats Isaiah 7:14 (as well as Judg 13:5) almost verbatim: “And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.” She is told to name her son Jesus instead of Immanuel. Later, Elizabeth, “filled with the Holy Spirit,” refers to the unborn Jesus as her Lord (Luke 1:41–45).

According to Matthew 1 and Luke 1, the Immanuel prophecy is foundational not only for Christology but also for hermeneutics. Whoever tries to grasp this more precisely stirs up a hornet’s nest. Many take issue with the idea that Matthew 1 is an adequate, exemplary, and authoritative exegesis of Isaiah 7. Feminist or historicist critics renounce the idea of virgin birth. Others insinuate that Matthew manipulated an Old Testament quote for his purposes. Others still argue that through a translation error, Matthew made the narrative a virgin story. I will pass over unaesthetic recent interpretations (e.g., of Margot Käßmann or Maria Jepsen, both former bishops in Germany). As early as the nineteenth century, Franz Delitzsch complained that some read the virgin narrative as a myth woven out of Isaiah 7:14. However, he respected church tradition, receiving Matthew 1 as a fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy.<sup>6</sup> Since early Christianity three hermeneutical paradigms have contended with each other.

The *first* paradigm follows Matthew and builds upon the evangelists and church fathers. Here, the Immanuel prophecy is messianic and a direct reference to Christ in its *literal sense*. Throughout the Middle Ages, the Reformation, and into the early modern period, this notion was retained. Even in the nineteenth century, it was defended against Jewish and rationalist critiques.<sup>7</sup> Christian and Jewish exegetes respected each other’s arguments even if they did not share their results.<sup>8</sup> In the last decades, this paradigm became a minority position.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup> The older Rabbis had expected the Messiah to be borne by a virgin, without father (R. Simeon Ben Jodai, R. Jehuda Haqodesch, R. Hadarsan, R. Barachias). Therefore, according to Bade (Bade, *Christologie des Alten Testaments*, 64), some, who claimed Messiahship, had called their mother a virgin (e.g., Simon Magus).

<sup>6</sup> Franz Delitzsch, *Messianische Weissagungen in geschichtlicher Folge* (Leipzig: Faber, 1890), 100. The term “Immanuel!” also became root of the French term for Christmas: *noël*.

<sup>7</sup> For example, the Lutheran Abraham Calov, the Calvinist Campegius Vitringa, and the later Lutheran confessionalist Ernst Hengstenberg (Jesus “not the highest, but the only fulfillment,” *Christologie des Alten Testaments* [Berlin: Oehmigke, 1855], 2:58), and the Catholic scholar Laurenz Reinke.

<sup>8</sup> Reiser, “Aufruhr um Isenbiehl,” 305, 314.

<sup>9</sup> Edward J. Young, John Motyer, and Pope Benedict XVI.

In the *second* paradigm, the direct reference becomes indirect. A person from the time of Ahaz fulfills the prophecy as a type of Jesus Christ. It includes a messianic prediction in a duplication of the literal sense and results in a secondary typological or allegorical interpretation. The proponents of this paradigm are quite diverse. As early as the second century, Justin Martyr argued with Tryphon, a Jew, who identified the son of Ahaz as the Immanuel (i.e., Hezekiah).<sup>10</sup> Jerome also knew “one of ours” (*quidam de nostris*) teaching this way. Both, however, rejected this interpretation, since Hezekiah was nine years old when Isaiah came to meet Ahaz.<sup>11</sup> Later others identified Isaiah’s son as Immanuel of 7:14.<sup>12</sup>

The *third* paradigm cuts the connection entirely. In the mid-seventeenth century the European intellectual climate changed dramatically. Predictions concerning distant future events were no longer credible. Academic theologians aimed at an exegesis ever less dependent on the New Testament and tradition and more focused on the presumed communication between Isaiah and Ahaz. Thus, Immanuel is identified with either Ahaz’s son (Hezekiah),<sup>13</sup> Isaiah’s next son (Isa 8), or someone unknown, at any rate without intentional reference to Jesus. Approaches like this were first found in Jewish exegesis in early Christian times; in the Christian realm, Wilhelm Gesenius established this paradigm. Once immanent reasoning was accepted, the third paradigm became predominant. Ulrich Luz openly acknowledges this in his widely used commentary on Matthew 1:

The traditional Christian interpretation of the Messiah Jesus is untenable. Matthew 1:22–23 paradigmatically confronts the church with the problem of Old Testament hermeneutics. We can no longer speak about a God-performed fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. What we can say is that there was some *faith* in this fulfillment. God’s acting in history has been—I exaggerate—replaced by the faith in this acting. And these words of Scripture, which the church used against the Jews, are replaced by embarrassment.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Justin, *Dialogue with Tryphon* 43.8; 67.1.

<sup>11</sup> Reymond, “Who Is the עִלְמָה [*Imh*] of Isaiah 7:14?” 6, reckons 19 years.

<sup>12</sup> Johann Albrecht Bengel (*Gnomon* [1742]), Wilhelm Vischer, Theodor C. Vriezen, and Walter Kaiser followed this line. Cf. Walter C. Kaiser, *The Messiah in the Old Testament*, Studies in Old Testament Biblical Theology (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1995), 158–62. Craig Blomberg, Gleason Archer, Ray Ortlund, Robert Chisholm, and John Joseph Owens identified Isaiah’s son as Immanuel of 7:14. Cf. Blomberg, “Matthew,” 4.

<sup>13</sup> E.g., Ronald E. Clements, “The Immanuel Prophecy of Isa. 7:10–17 and Its Messianic Interpretation,” in *Die hebräische Bibel und ihre zweifache Nachgeschichte*, ed. Erhard Blum and Christian Macholz (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1990), 225–40.

<sup>14</sup> Ulrich Luz, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus*, EKK I/1, 5th ed. (Zurich: Benzinger, 2002), 152, quoted according to Reiser, “Aufbruch um Isenbiehl,” 292 (my translation).

A changing of the guard had occurred. Exegesis under such principles acts like Ahaz, who declared himself a servant of the foreign superpower (2 Kgs 16:7). Scholars following the third paradigm have, in my view, stepped outside the realm of the church, bound and defined by the apostles and prophets. Isaiah 7:14 raises a problem of Old Testament hermeneutics that can only be decided on the authority of modern standards. Does not the array of interpretations turn into a pluralism without boundaries?

The development of these paradigms influences Bible translation, which exerts a formative influence on the next generations. The link between the Testaments is cut. The virgin birth, the credibility of holy Scripture, and the nucleus of Christology are lost.<sup>15</sup>

<b>Hermeneutical paradigms concerning the Immanuel prophecy of Isaiah</b>	<b>Translation of 'almah in Isaiah 7:14</b>	<b>Statement on Mary's virginity</b>
1. The Immanuel prophecy applies <i>directly</i> to Jesus's incarnation.	<i>virgin</i>	Orthodox: biological virginity
2. The Immanuel prophecy applies <i>indirectly</i> by means of a type to the incarnation. The type is a contemporary of Ahaz.	<i>young woman</i>	Orthodox: biological virginity
3. The Immanuel prophecy is not to be understood <i>messianically or as referring to a distant future</i> . Typology reduced to analogy, done retrospectively.	<i>young woman</i>	Liberal: no virginity. Popular or feminist: Believing in biological virginity is <i>the</i> result of a translation mistake.

<sup>15</sup> The inconsistency can be found in a footnote of the Living Bible. Its main text still reads “virgin,” but on the same page it states, “The controversial Hebrew word used here sometimes means ‘virgin’ and sometimes ‘young woman.’ Its immediate use here refers to Isaiah’s young wife and her newborn son (Isaiah 8:1–4). This, of course, was not a virgin birth. God’s sign was that before this child was old enough to talk (verse 4) the two invading kings would be destroyed. However, the Gospel of Matthew (1:23) tells us that there was a further fulfillment of this prophecy, in that a virgin (Mary) conceived and bore a son, Immanuel, the Christ. We have therefore properly used this higher meaning, ‘virgin,’ in verse 14, as otherwise the Matthew account loses its significance.”

## II. *Isaiah's Path to the Immanuel Prophecy*

There was a fratricidal war between Israel and Judah at the time of Ahaz king of Jerusalem. It was not the first conflict, but the consequences were more far reaching than before. Against the northern tribes and the Syrians, Ahaz had sought help from Assur (2 Kgs 16; 2 Chr 28). By doing so, he contributed decisively to the northern tribes' exile (722 BC, cf. 2 Chr 28:23), brought his own country into lasting dependence on Assyria, made the divorce of the northern and southern kingdoms permanent, proved his unbelief to be a result of hardening of his heart (Isa 6:9–10), and rendered the southern kingdom's way into exile unavoidable (though 150 years later), with the loss of Elath as a harbinger (2 Kgs 16:6).

In about 734 BC, when Ahaz inspected Jerusalem's defenses and its water supply, Isaiah gave him a word of comfort about the end of his enemies (Isa 7:1–2, 4–5). Would Ahaz heed the message or harden his heart (Isa 6:9–10)?<sup>16</sup> Isaiah 7:1–9 and 10–17 work as opposed warnings to the house of David: Because of your unbelief, you will not stand in this crisis—but the Lord himself is offering you a sign of confirmation. Following Isaiah's call, "If you are not firm in faith, you will not be firm at all!" (v. 9)—a word aimed at renewal or hardening—Ahaz at first remains quiet (vv. 9–10).<sup>17</sup> His mind was set. "In his heart, there was a secret better comfort than the word of the prophet."<sup>18</sup> Amidst his reservations, the Lord prompts him to ask a sign: "Let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven" (v. 11). Man cannot provoke a God-given sign designed to expose unbelief or strengthen weak faith (vv. 10–11). What was Ahaz's unbelief? He did not rely on Yahweh but on Assur. Moreover, he did not wait for the intervention of the superpower but sought to encourage it. Instead of believing in his privileged state, grounded in the unbreakable covenant with David (2 Sam 7:12–14), he confessed allegiance to Tiglath-Pileser III's son and servant.<sup>19</sup> The son of David, the son of God declares himself servant of a heathen king—what discouragement for the faithful remnant!

Ahaz has to decide whether to ask for a sign or not. This is risky because if God does give a sign, Ahaz has to abandon his proud unbelief, and his

<sup>16</sup> With Edward J. Young, *Studies in Isaiah* (Grands Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 153.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 152, commenting on verse 10: "It is more natural to regard these words as a continuation of the preceding, introduced to show the reader the solemnity of the occasion."

<sup>18</sup> Franz Delitzsch, *Jesaja*, 4th ed. (1889; repr., Gießen: Brunnen, 1984), 139.

<sup>19</sup> Probably, this event was before the meeting with Ahaz, contrary to Antti Laato, *Who Is Immanuel? The Rise and the Foundering of Isaiah's Messianic Expectations* (Åbo: Åbo Academi University, 1988), 123, and Erling Hammershaimb, but with Johann J. Stamm, "Die Immanuel-Weissagung: Ein Gespräch mit E. Hammershaimb," in *Vetus Testamentum* 4.1 (1954): 24.

covenant with the Assyrians. Or, if no sign follows, he has to condemn the prophet and get rid of him—also a risk. That Ahaz decides not to ask for a sign shows he formally acknowledges the living God, though weakly. In unbelief, he declines the sign and remains under Baal, Marduk, and Tiglath-Pileser.

Verses 11 and 13 do not differentiate between God and Isaiah as the speaker. God, not man, speaks, asserting that no other can help. Ahaz should ask for a sign in the depth or on high: for example, a resurrection from the dead, an earthquake, or a mountain cast into the sea. Ahaz refuses to admit that he does not want to change, and he resorts to pseudo-theology (v. 12), with a devout statement that points to Deuteronomy 6:16: “You shall not put the LORD your God to the test” (*lo thenassu*, לֹא תִנְסֶהוּ, likewise *nsh* in the Piel).<sup>20</sup> The highest level of unbelief reasons theologically: this is being hardened! “Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary men, that you weary my God also?” (v. 13).

The king of the chosen people ought to know God’s power, but his apathy reveals the opposite, trying God’s patience. It is surprising that unbelief wearies the God who called the universe into being by not to taking him at his word.

In the exposition of Isaiah 7, some overlook that Isaiah expands the audience to include the whole house of David (vv. 13–14) not only Ahaz (v. 10). This point is important because the relevance of the sign for Ahaz stretches until the incarnation of the Son of God (Matt 1:1–17).<sup>21</sup>

### III. *The Immanuel Prophecy*

Therefore the LORD himself will give you a sign. Behold, *the virgin* shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel (Isa 7:14 ESV).

The sentence construction and content resemble Genesis 16:11 or Judges 13:3, 5, 7, addressing expectant mothers. These passages announce a natural, not a virginal act of procreation, without divine naming (cf. Gen 17:19). The address is given in the plural, like “house of David” (v. 13), expanding the relevance beyond Ahaz’s contemporaries (from v. 16 going back to the singular).

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Young, *Studies*, 154.

<sup>21</sup> With Origen, Theodoret, Laurenz Reinke (Reiser, “Aufruhr um Isenbiehl,” 300); Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, NICOT (1965; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 1:284, cf. 1: 286: “We must be guided [by] not how we think Ahaz would have been affected, but only by the text itself.”

Isaiah often uses “therefore” (*lakhen*, לָכֵן) to introduce a word of judgment.<sup>22</sup> After providing evidence of guilt (v. 13) he follows it with an announcement of penalty. “The Lord himself will give you a sign” (v. 16). He is not too weary to prove himself! The sign of the virgin corresponds to the divine offer. It simultaneously links heaven and earth. Young captures the message:

“A sign has been offered to you for your benefit, but you through your unbelief have refused to ask for such a sign and have consequently wearied my God. Therefore, since you have thus wearied God, he himself will give you a sign.” The matter is thus taken out of Ahaz’s hands.<sup>23</sup>

Since Ahaz refused to choose a sign, God chooses. The subsequent verse 14 is both a word of judgment and salvation.

Will the sign be given in the present or the future?<sup>24</sup> The Septuagint’s use of the future is confirmed by the quotation of verse 14 in Matthew 1:23 and the content of the prophecy: The birth will be a future event, in months or centuries.<sup>25</sup> Interpretation has to take seriously the responsibility the prophet lays upon the house of David with the promise and threat (vv. 14–25). Even if the time between the present and a prophecy’s fulfillment gets longer, the prophecy is not rendered useless.

For Ahaz and his house, the sign consisted not only in the person of Immanuel and the virgin birth, but also in the events of the following verses. It is not necessary to differentiate between the son of verse 14 and the one of verse 15. Rather, the early period of the child becomes a limiting measure of Judah’s affliction.<sup>26</sup> About twelve years go by until he reaches legal age (“refuse the evil,” “choose the good,” vv. 15–16; the time of pregnancy has to be added). The time includes the meeting of Isaiah 7, the conquest of Damascus (732 BC), and Samaria’s exile (722 BC).

It is difficult to see a change of times between verse 14 and verses 15–16. For our prosaic Western mindset used to sorting precisely in categories of time and space, the difficulty is greater than for the Hebrew mindset. But why should the prophet not be allowed to point to a distant future in one verse and a nearer future in the next, even if both are linked with the same person? Is not the Immanuel, even though he is going to become man only later, the same person at any time?<sup>27</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Young, *Studies*, 155.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 156–57.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Hengstenberg and Dillmann.

<sup>25</sup> In the parallels in Judges and Genesis 17, procreation acts are clearly future.

<sup>26</sup> Young, *Isaiah*, 1:283, 291; Reymond, “Who Is the עלמה [*lmh*] of Isaiah 7:14?,” 12–13.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Delitzsch, *Jesaja*, 112–24; Young, *Isaiah*, 1:293–94.

The mother of the child was visible only to prophetic eyes. Nevertheless, this does not free Ahaz from his responsibility to accept and believe God's word<sup>28</sup>—the only way he could have maintained a just kingdom was by doing this (Isa 7:9).

Who, then, is to be identified as the 'almah (עַלְמָה)? Whose pregnancy was going to be part of the divine sign? A "virgin" or a "young woman"? A survey of the entries for 'almah (used in Isa 7:14) and *bethulah* (בְּתוּלָה) in common Hebrew lexicons, from Wilhelm Gesenius (18th ed., 2013) to David Clines (1993–2016), shows how the authors try to avoid strict definitions of virginity in both cases.<sup>29</sup> In the earlier editions of Gesenius's lexicon (*Handwörterbuch*, 16th ed. [Leipzig: Vogel, 1915], 594), 'almah designates a young girl, married or unmarried, not a virgin (*bethulah*). To indicate "virgin," *bethulah* is used.

For Isaiah 7:14, exegetes predominantly favor "young woman" as a translation.<sup>30</sup> At the same time, Young,<sup>31</sup> Walther Eichrodt,<sup>32</sup> and others stress that the word 'almah is never used in Scripture to point to a married woman. Referring to Jerome, Martin Luther thought that Isaiah had used 'almah because he wanted to point to youth, virginity included; in contrast, a *bethulah* could have reached 50 or 60 years or be barren.<sup>33</sup> Post-Christian Jews mostly identified the Immanuel with Hezekiah<sup>34</sup> and later Jewish Greek recensions preferred to translate *neanis* rather than *parthenos*. However, already Cyril of Alexandria declared correctly, "Whether *neanis* or *parthenos*, virginity is not excluded."<sup>35</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Young, *Studies*, 163.

<sup>29</sup> For an overview of lexicon entries, see Carsten Ziegert, "Die unverheiratete Frau in Jes 7,14: Eine Anfrage an die hebräische Lexikographie," in *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 93.2 (2017): 271–72. He summarizes the lexicographical problem: "The meaning of both lexemes, especially in contrasting each other, cannot be determined by the help of lexicons" (*ibid.*, 272, my translation).

<sup>30</sup> E.g., Bratcher, "A Study of Isaiah 7:14," 101. At Isaiah 7:14, most translations using "virgin" employ a footnote to hint at the other meaning "young woman." In recent translations, such footnotes are increasingly frequent, and even "young woman" ends up in the main text. Maybe a new consensus emerges: One should, for lexical reasons, put "young woman," but actually render "virgin," considering the weight of Matthew, his use of the Septuagint, and not to let the Testaments get too far apart.

<sup>31</sup> Young, *Isaiah*, 1:287.

<sup>32</sup> Walther Eichrodt, *Der Heilige in Israel: Jesaja 1–12*, BAT 17.1 (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1960), 88.

<sup>33</sup> Martin Luther, *Daß Jesus Christus ein geborener Jude sei* (That Jesus Christ Be Born a Jew), (1523), quoted by Reiser, "Aufbruch um Isenbiehl," 309, cf. 298.

<sup>34</sup> Jerome argued against this: Hezekiah, at the time of the prophecy, was already nine years old (cf. 2 Chr 28:1 and 29:1). Cyril asks, "Who has ever named Hezekiah Immanuel?" And Origen: "Whoever, in Ahaz time, has been born, on whom the 'Immanuel' had been declared?" Thereto Reiser's poignant answer: "To these questions, until today, Old Testament scholars can answer only by vain conjectures" (Reiser, "Aufbruch um Isenbiehl," 299, my translation).

<sup>35</sup> Quoted by Reiser in "Aufbruch um Isenbiehl," 298.

In order to clarify the meaning, I reviewed the Old Testament occurrences. It is indeed conspicuous that there is no place where *‘almah* indicates a married woman,<sup>36</sup> except perhaps Proverbs 30:19.<sup>37</sup> All relevant references have a young woman in view, but until proven otherwise, the combination of “young” and “unmarried” always entailed virginity. If not, she was under threat of stoning or social exclusion. John Motyer concludes,

Thus, wherever the context allows a judgment, *‘almā* is not a general term meaning “young woman” but a specific one meaning “virgin.” ... There is no ground for the common assertion that had Isaiah intended *virgo intacta* he would have used *b’tūlā*. In fact, this is its meaning in every explicit context. Isaiah thus used the word which, among those available to him, came nearest to expressing “virgin birth” and which, without linguistic impropriety, opens the door to such a meaning.<sup>38</sup>

This is exactly what Matthew understood when quoting Isaiah 7:14, and by his threefold emphasis on Mary’s virginity: “before they came together” (Matt 1:18); “for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit” (v. 20); and “knew her not until she had given birth to a son” (v. 25).<sup>39</sup> Mary remained a virgin until she gave birth to her first child, as part of the fulfillment of the Immanuel prophecy.<sup>40</sup>

Matthew took Isaiah 7:14 as being appropriate to express the miracle sign of virgin birth by a young woman and, at the same time, to express the links within the Old Testament.<sup>41</sup> Matthew and Luke designed the childhood narratives of Jesus and John the Baptist after prophetic words. Hans-Olav Mørk notes,

<sup>36</sup> The same applies to *glmt* (*‘almah*) in Ras Shamra texts (Young, *Studies*, 166–70; Young, *Isaiah*, 1:285).

<sup>37</sup> Bade, more sharply: “All places mean a chaste virgin” (Bade, *Christologie des Alten Testaments*, 55). Cf. Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 66.

<sup>38</sup> John A. Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press: 1999), 85. Considering Hebrew alternative words for *‘almah* (*yaldah* [יַלְדָה]) and *na’arah* [נַעֲרָה] for “girl”, *bethulah* for “virgin”), it becomes clear, that none of them unambiguously conveys the idea of Immanuel’s mother being unmarried and young. None of these terms seemed suitable for Isaiah to communicate the sign of a virgin birth.

<sup>39</sup> Reymond, “Who Is the עַלְמָה [‘*lmh*] of Isaiah 7:14?,” 6.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 10. Thus, Isaiah 7:14 has no duplicate fulfillment.

<sup>41</sup> The Jewish scholar Cyrus Gordon considers that Matthew’s view is based on early Jewish tradition, mainly the Septuagint (Cyrus H. Gordon, “Almah in Isaiah 7:14,” *The Journal of Bible and Religion* 21.2 [1953]: 106; see Young, *Studies*, 177, and Reymond, “Who Is the עַלְמָה [‘*lmh*] of Isaiah 7:14?,” 5). Ugaritic texts (ca. 1400 BC) also use the root. The etymological equivalents of *bethulah* and *‘almah* are to be found in exact parallelisms; see Donna Morley, “The Prophecy of Isaiah 7:12,” *Faith and Reason Forum*, 2006, <https://www.faithandreasonforum.com/index.asp?PageID=31&ArticleID=412>.

The vocabulary of Lxx Gen 17 and 24 as well as Isa 7 reappears in Matthew's story of the annunciation to Joseph. In Luke's account of the annunciation to Mary the Rebekah motive is even clearer. There she is called *parthenos* twice (1:27) and responds to the angel's proclamation of motherhood with the words that she has "known no man" (v. 34), echoing the exact wording of Lxx Gen 24:16b. Finally, the angel blesses her with the blessing of Sarah: "For nothing is impossible with God" (v. 37; cf. Gen 18:14). But here, the birth oracle about the Messiah is transformed into a double statement of new, undefiled creation and epiphany. When seen in light of this background, the annunciation story in Luke become a "grand finale," combining a host of OT motifs in the single motif of Mary giving birth to the Messiah and thereby fulfilling the promises both to David and to Abraham and his *sperma* in a completely innovative way (Lk 1:32f., 55).<sup>42</sup>

It is permitted to make four conclusions on this subject:

Firstly, translating Hebrew *'almah* in Isaiah 7:14 by "virgin" remains without a valid alternative in light of semantics, exegesis, and the relationship between the Testaments. Reading "young woman" obscures not only this relationship but also distorts intertextual links within the Old Testament, and, not least, Isaiah's perspective.

Secondly, the *sign* for the house of David, whether present or timeless, consists of events in a distant miraculously emerging pregnancy *and* a near future removal of Judah's enemies. The unusual name is just one part of the sign.

Thirdly, the *name* Immanuel corresponds closely to the miracle of the virgin birth, revealing the supernatural characteristics of the child. The name is not just a name of trust<sup>43</sup> or a cry for help from a mother in her labor pains<sup>44</sup>—or some particular sign of consolation for eighth-century Judah. Immanuel is a title and not a name. Likewise, the titles in Isaiah 9:6 indicate divine nature and tasks directed at humans (save, judge, reign eternally). Isaiah 8:8 confirms this understanding: Immanuel is the owner of the holy land.

Finally, the portrait of Immanuel is developed in the subsequent chapters of Isaiah.<sup>45</sup> As the landlord, the virgin's son frustrates the plans of the nations (Isa 8:9, cf. Ps 2). He is the God-given child and son of the house of David (Isa 9:5). His royal titles point toward the divine realm (v. 6). Thus,

---

<sup>42</sup> Hans-Olav Mørk, "The Interpretation of Old Greek Isaiah 7:14," in *Yearbook on the Science of Bible Translation*, ed. Gunnar Johnstad and Eberhard Werner (Nürnberg: Verlag für Theologie & Religionswissenschaften, 2017), 42–43.

<sup>43</sup> Kaiser, *Messiah*, 158.

<sup>44</sup> Bernhard Duhm compares the situation to the birth of Ichabod (see Young, *Studies*, 185–87).

<sup>45</sup> Childs, *Isaiah*, 68.

Isaiah continues the long-standing Davidic messianic tradition in which the divine sonship of the king,<sup>46</sup> if not his divinity,<sup>47</sup> is foundational. According to Motyer, “Heaven and earth will truly be moved. Isaiah foresaw the birth of the divine son of David and also laid the foundation for the understanding of the unique nature of his birth.”<sup>48</sup>

#### **IV. The Battle for Translation of Isaiah 7:14 in Recent Times**

##### **1. The Introduction of the Revised Standard Version**

For many years, in rival translations, Isaiah 7:14 was one of the first places to be checked when new translations or revisions came on the market. Guided by Matthew, are we to translate “virgin,” or is “young woman” enough? In 1952, when the popular Revised Standard Version was published, in the United States of America, about 3400 church celebrations took place. The first edition hit a record sales of one million. The media response was huge, and many commented on Isaiah 7:14, which read “young woman” (but not in Matthew 1:23). There was a public outcry in a Southern Baptist church in late 1952, when a pastor publicly ripped out and burned the page with this passage, and exclaimed: “This has been the dream of modernists for centuries, to make Jesus Christ the son of a bad woman.”<sup>49</sup>

What inflamed passions only a few years ago nowadays does not cause us to bat an eyelid. The translators and theoreticians of the “dynamic equivalence” camp have made a substantial contribution to this shift. Let me give two examples.

##### **2. Modern Communication Theory Guiding Our Understanding of the Prophecy**

Two early representatives of communicative Bible translation are Robert Bratcher, who was influenced by Eugene Nida, who translated the New Testament entitled *Good News for Modern Man* (1966). Bratcher also supervised the Old Testament translation, and the full Bible was published in 1976 as the *Good News Bible*. Secondly, Nida himself, as the father of modern translation theory, with his writings and instruction to Bible translators, has

---

<sup>46</sup> 2 Sam 7:14–16; Ps 2:7; 89; 132.

<sup>47</sup> Ps 45:7.

<sup>48</sup> Motyer, *Prophecy*, 86.

<sup>49</sup> See my book, Stefan Felber, *Kommunikative Bibelübersetzung: Eugene A. Nida und sein Modell der dynamischen Äquivalenz*, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2016), 112–13.

been hugely influential worldwide.<sup>50</sup> Both left comments on the Immanuel prophecy.

In the 1958 issue of the journal *The Bible Translator*, Bratcher wrote a lengthy study on the Immanuel prophecy, still remembered at his death.<sup>51</sup> His stance can be classified in our second paradigm above. He took the idea of a virgin birth to be absent from the Old Testament and later Jewish thought.<sup>52</sup> He does not discuss links within the Old Testament, for instance, to 2 Samuel 7. For Bratcher, the communicative setting in which prophecy works should inform our hermeneutics. He thinks that it is a “fact that the prophecy had an immediate historical purpose, being relevant to the contemporary situation.”<sup>53</sup> He is aware of the distance between the New Testament and modern hermeneutic methods:

It should be made clear that we are not here contesting or repudiating the truths which the New Testament authors proclaim in their use of the Old Testament Scriptures. We are simply demonstrating what is quite evident, namely, that the authors of the New Testament books, in accordance with the accepted *hermeneutical standards of their time*, were not bound by the text or context in the use which they made of the Scriptures quoted. In this, of course, they *differed from the modern interpreter* who ascertains first what is the exact text and, secondly, what is the original meaning of the text in its context, before further applying it. *Today's principles* of the grammatico-historical interpretation of Scriptures did not prevail at the time of the New Testament, and it is well we recognize the fact. *This means* that in determining the precise meaning of an Old Testament passage, in its historical and literary context, *we cannot adopt as ours the hermeneutical standards used by the New Testament writers*. And the primary task of the translator, inasmuch as he also is an interpreter of Scripture, is to interpret, that is, to translate, the text in such a way as to convey to the reader the precise meaning it had in its original setting. In doing this he will faithfully translate the Old Testament, in its context, and the New Testament in its context.<sup>54</sup>

Bratcher recognizes the difference between his perception of Scripture and the one held by the evangelists. For them it was common to identify “purpose and result,” and for Matthew, a verbal or assigned parallel was important—“independent of meaning, in order that the passages meet his

---

<sup>50</sup> For more, see *ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> Bob Allen, “Good News Translator Dies; Opposed Inerrantists: Robert Bratcher Supported Dynamic Equivalence,” *The Christian Century*, August 3, 2010, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2010-08/good-news-bible-translator-dies-opposed-inerrantists>; cf. “Dr. Robert G. Bratcher,” *Legacy.com*, July 2010, <https://www.legacy.com/obituaries/newsobserver/obituary.aspx?n=robert-g-bratcher&pid=144069874>.

<sup>52</sup> Bratcher, “A Study of Isaiah 7:14,” 109–12.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 117–18, emphasis added.

purposes.”<sup>55</sup> For Bratcher, however, we cannot expect the evangelist to conform to modern standard, and, “by the same token,” ancient standards cannot be required from a modern exegete.<sup>56</sup> Is that not patronizing? Bratcher closes his study:

From what has been set forth it follows that the use of LXX Isa. 7:14 in Mt. 1:23 does not compel one to force upon Isaiah 7:14 in the Hebrew Bible the meaning that the Evangelist found in it, particularly in light of the fact that the crucial word in Hebrew, *‘almah*, means one thing while *parthenos* in the LXX means another.

All this means that we are not to translate the Hebrew passage Isa. 7:14 to make it conform to the way in which the Evangelist used the Greek Isa. 7:14 in his Gospel. One need only consider what a semantic and hermeneutical shambles would result from the attempt to translate, in the Old Testament, all passages which are cited in the New Testament, in accordance with the meaning attributed to them by the New Testament writers! So it is with Isaiah 7:14.

The record of the virgin birth of our Lord does not depend upon Isaiah 7:14; it is narrated by two Evangelists, and stands as a part of the accounts, completely independent of the Old Testament passage. As David Smith says: “The history was not adapted to the prophecy; on the contrary, the prophecy was adapted to the history” (*The Days of His Flesh*, 8th ed., p. 528). Should the Gospel of Matthew not have quoted LXX Isa. 7:14, the virgin birth of Jesus would still remain a matter of record in his Gospel. To put it succinctly: *the virgin birth of Jesus does not at all depend upon the Old Testament, no more than do His divine Sonship, His resurrection, ascension and glorious session at the right hand of God; there [sic] are all part of the Christian Gospel.*<sup>57</sup>

Mary’s virgin birth, according to Bratcher, is not based on a quotation. That seems logical, but it is an underdetermination, in light of not only Matthew 1:22 (“all this took place to fulfill ...”), but also of 1 Corinthians 15:3–4 and similar biblical passages. The New Testament events of salvation *had to* happen just the way they did, in order to fulfill and to confirm the prophetic word of the Old Testament. Evangelists and apostles, even Jesus himself, did not just draw upon analogies and did not just compare events and texts. Rather, there is an *ontological connection* between them, grounded in God as the author of history and the inspiration of the prophets. God freely sent his Son to earth in such a way as to comply and fulfill every word of the Old Testament. “But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law” (Gal 4:4).

As shown above, it is possible to translate *‘almah* in Isaiah 7:14 without harming the context, and Matthew is a case in point. In my view, it is not feasible for a Christian translator to place his authority above Matthew’s

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 124–25.

with the translation “young woman.” For whatever a later exegete or translator identifies as “grammatico-historical meaning,” for spiritual and historical reasons, he will never be able to understand the Old Testament better than evangelists and apostles.

Finally, Nida wrote in 1986,

Since New Testament writers regarded the New Testament as simply the fulfilment of the Old Testament, there was a converse tendency to interpret the Old Testament in light of the New Testament. In Isaiah 7:14 the Septuagint translation of the Hebrew *‘almah* as *parthenos* led New Testament writers to see the relationship between this passage and the New Testament miracle of the virgin birth, but *reading a virgin birth back into Isaiah 7:14 would mean either that the text was completely irrelevant for Ahaz* (even though the context indicates clearly its immediate significance) *or it would be necessary to postulate two virgin births for the Scriptures*. In fact, in the Isaiah text both the Hebrew and its Greek equivalent mean “young woman,” whereas Matthew 1:23 uses *parthenos* in a restricted sense.<sup>58</sup>

Here, too, the ontological connection is broken. The father of modern translation theory justifies “young woman” as a valid rendering. It is not surprising that in recent times the virgin birth itself has been discredited. If it was not revealed by Scripture beforehand—but Matthew maintains that it had to occur “because the Scripture had to be fulfilled”—the virgin birth sinks to faulty reasoning or a simple mistranslation.

## **V. Conclusion: Decision in Translating with Biblical Responsibility**

Firstly, translating *‘almah* “virgin” in Isaiah 7:14 does not contradict the book of Isaiah or the Hebrew usage. Admittedly, “virgin” is a limitation of “young woman,” but is linguistically legitimate, pre-given by Jewish tradition, sanctioned by Matthew.

Secondly, according to Matthew’s claim, in Isaiah’s prophecy virginity was *included*, and *therefore* he quoted Isaiah 7:14. He did not bend a semantic potential for his purposes or use an argument from a citation based on a tangential meaning. Rather, guided by the Spirit, he detected the sense intended by the same Spirit (cf. 1 Pet 1:10–12).

Thirdly, the guidance Matthew received to understand Scripture should be a guide and model for Christian understanding, regardless of minority or majority positions.

Fourthly, the translation and interpretation of Isaiah 7:14 are dependent on a proper understanding of the links between and within the Testaments

<sup>58</sup> Eugene A. Nida and Jan de Waard, *From One Language to Another: Functional Equivalence in Bible Translating* (Nashville: Nelson, 1986), 23 (emphasis added).

and their theological relevance. Is New Testament hermeneutics normative for ours? Are we able, on the grounds of our linguistic level of knowledge, to establish a better understanding and thus criticize Matthew?

Fifthly, Bratcher argues it would create a “shambles” to translate the way the New Testament renders the Old.<sup>59</sup> This is, in my view, not a valid counterargument. Where the Hebrew text implies a reading other than what the New Testament quotes, then readers should have both readings at hand. In such cases, a good translation has to show awareness of the existing incoherence, and where the Hebrew is open for the sense given in the Greek, we should respect the coherence and seek to be faithful to both. This might be studied further in Galatians 3:16 and Hebrews 10:5–7.

Sixthly, it seems that the unity of the Bible is undermined by those who translate “young woman,” not “virgin”: the unity of its theology, and of the thought and being of God, its first Author.

Ireneus sums it up well:

God, then, was made man, and the Lord did Himself save us, giving us the token of the Virgin. But not as some allege, among those now presuming to expound the Scripture, [thus:] “Behold, a young woman shall conceive, and bring forth a son” [Isa 7:14] .... The Ebionites, following these, assert that He was begotten by Joseph; thus destroying, as far as in them lies, such a marvellous dispensation of God, and setting aside the testimony of the prophets which proceeded from God. For truly this prediction was uttered before the removal of the people to Babylon .... But it was interpreted into Greek by the Jews themselves, much before the period of our Lord’s advent, that there might remain no suspicion that perchance the Jews, complying with our humour, did put this interpretation upon these words. (Ireneus, *Against Heresies* 3.21.1 [ANF 5:351–52])

---

<sup>59</sup> Bratcher, “A Study of Isaiah 7:14,” 125.