Immanuel
December 21, 2014

Immanuel (im-man’yō-əl; Heb., ‘God is with us’), the name of a child whose birth is symbolic of God’s guiding and protecting presence among his people (Isa. 7:14; 8:8; Matt. 1:23). The name was first used by the prophet Isaiah as a sign given to King Ahaz of Judah during the Syro-Ephraimitic war (ca. 734 B.C.). At that time, Syria and Israel declared war on Judah because of her refusal to join their alliance against Assyria. Ahaz in turn appealed to Assyria for help. During his preparations for the impending conflict, Ahaz was warned by Isaiah not to rely upon the military might of Assyria, but instead to put his trust in the Lord (Isa. 7:1-9). Ahaz, however, did not heed Isaiah’s advice. Shortly after, Isaiah encouraged Ahaz to ask a sign of the Lord that would assure him of God’s presence and protection. Ahaz refused, taking recourse in a religious subterfuge in order to mask his lack of faith (Isa. 7:12). Despite that refusal, the prophet Isaiah gave him a sign in the form of the Immanuel prophecy (Isa. 7:13-17).

While this text is beset with a number of problems about its exact interpretation, its essential meaning appears to be something as follows. A young woman, who either already was or soon would be pregnant, would give birth to a son who would be named Immanuel. Before the child was old enough to know the difference between good and evil, the two nations of whom Ahaz was afraid would be destroyed. But in their stead, a much more formidable threat against Judah would materialize in the rising power of Assyria (Isa. 7:17; 8:1-10).

In the NT, Isa. 7:14 was used by Matthew as scriptural support for his belief in the virginal conception of Jesus, a conviction arrived at independently on other grounds. It is clear, however, that in its own eighth-century B.C. context, Isa. 7:14 did not speak of the miraculous birth of Jesus centuries later. Neither the virginity of the woman, nor the miraculous birth of the child received any special emphasis. The sign of Immanuel offered by the prophet to Ahaz had to do with the imminent birth of a child, of a mother known to Ahaz and Isaiah, and signified God’s presence with his people and the royal Davidic line during the turbulent years of the Assyrian invasions that were soon to engulf the kingdom of Judah. As such it did not so much initiate a novel theological insight, as it gave symbolic expression to a conviction widely held in the OT, namely, that God was present with his people, guiding their destiny (Gen. 28:15; Num. 23:21; Deut. 31:8; Isa. 43:5) and protecting them from danger (Deut. 20:1, 4; 1 Sam. 18:14; 2 Chron. 32:8; Ps. 46:7, 11). See also Isaiah, The Book of. W.E.L.¹

IMMANUEL [יְמַמְלָה יְוֹם אֱלֹהִים; Heb. ʾimmānū ʾêl; Gk. Emmanouēl “with us [is] God”).† The symbolic name of a child whose birth, foretold by the prophet Isaiah, would be a sign to King Ahaz that the Lord would deliver Judah from its enemies (Isa. 7:14; 8:8; cf. v. 10). The New Testament identifies the name with Jesus (Matt. 1:23, “Emmanuel”).

The prophecy of Immanuel came ca. 735 B.C. during a crisis in Ahaz’ reign. Judah had been threatened by kings Rezin of Syria and Pekah of Israel, who wished to make Ahaz an ally against the Assyrians. But Ahaz preferred to side with Assyria, and subsequently did so (cf. 2 Kgs. 16:5–9; 2 Chr. 28:16–21). Isaiah assured Ahaz that he need neither fear the exhausted strength of Rezin and Pekah, nor align himself with Assyria. He offered a sign from God of Ahaz’ own choosing to authenticate this. Ahaz, perhaps feigning piety to mask his unbelief, refused to ask God for the sign. Therefore Isaiah announced that God would give a sign in spite of Ahaz: the birth of a child, during whose early years (Isa. 7:16) the northern allies would be destroyed. Tiglath-pileser III of Assyria did indeed deliver Judah from the threat of the allies, destroying Damascus in 732 (2 Kgs. 16:9) and Samaria in 722, but at the cost of making Judah his vassal.

The identity of the child Immanuel and his mother has been the subject of continuing controversy among biblical scholars, owing in part to exegetical difficulties in the Isaiah passage and in part to the lack of corroborating historical evidence. The exegetical difficulties revolve around several ambiguities in the Hebrew text. (1) Most scholars now agree that Heb. ʾālmâ (KJV, NIV “virgin,” following LXX; RSV, NJV “young woman,” following MT; JB “maidens”) means a young woman of marriageable age. Heb. b’tūlā, often cited as the ordinary word for virgin, has been shown to be ambiguous, sometimes also designating a married woman (Joel 1:8), and therefore unsuitable here if “virgin” is the intended meaning. The presumption of virginity is therefore valid, but not strictly necessary. Further, the article used here with ʾālmâ may be definite (“the young woman”), indefinite (“a young woman”) or generic (“young women”). If the sign was to have any meaning to Ahaz, it must have had a specific reference. (2) The verb hārā, “shall conceive” may also be rendered “is pregnant” (cf. RSV mg., JB, NJV). Conservative scholars generally prefer the future tense as more appropriate to the context. (3) Textual variants exist that support translating wq̄r. t as either “[she] shall call,” “you [singular] shall call,” or “he shall be called” (passive). The majority of scholars prefer the first construction, following the MT. (4) The “sign” may be seen as a promise, or a threat, or both. Here the interpretation depends on the relationship between Isa. 7:14 and the broader context of the so-called “book of Immanuel” (7:1–12:6), and the weight attached to the New Testament use of v. 14. Isaiah’s original intent, to assure Ahaz that he had nothing to fear from the allies, indicates that the sign was first to be a promise of deliverance. Subsequent verses, however, include elements of both promise and threat (especially 7:15–8:15), which is characteristic of many prophetic pronouncements: God’s actions and the instruments of his will constitute both a threat to the unrighteous and a promise to the righteous. The New Testament identification of Immanuel with Jesus, linked with such other messianic sections of the book of Immanuel
as 11:1ff., suggests that the ultimate nature of the sign is promise.

Such considerations do not solve the problem of the identity of Immanuel and his mother. The solutions offered to this riddle fall into four basic options.

(1) A collective immediate reference. This solution, characteristic of some nineteenth- and twentieth-century critical scholars, interprets the article with ḫămâ as generic and thus suggests that “Immanuel” is to be a general indication that deliverance could be expected during the early years of the new generation. This approach ignores the New Testament evidence, divorces the prophecy from the messianic content of other related passages, and fails to see the need for a specific fulfillment.

(2) A single immediate reference. Two figures have been proposed most often as immediate fulfillments of the prophecy: a son of Isaiah or a son of Ahaz. On the former hypothesis Immanuel is identified with Isaiah’s second son Maher-shalal-hash-baz, and the name Immanuel is linked to the aspects of promise in the sign whereas the name Maher-shalal-hash-baz (“the plunder hastens, the prey speeds”) represents the aspects of threat. In this case Immanuel’s mother could not have been Isaiah’s first wife, the mother of Shearjashub, but may have been a posited second wife (called “the prophetess” in 8:3) to whom Isaiah was about to be married at the time of the prophecy and who thus qualifies as a virgin Further support for this position is found in the New Testament’s typological use of Isaiah’s children (Heb. 2:13; cf. Isa. 8:18). Other scholars propose that the young woman was a wife of Ahaz; thus the son would most likely have been Hezekiah. This interpretation is supported by the broader context of the messianic character of the royal line of David. Also, like the rival theory, it makes sense of the dual nature of the sign as promise and threat, where Hezekiah represents the ultimate survival of the royal line. This theory, however, runs into serious difficulties with regard to chronology. On the evidence of 2 Kgs. 16:2; 18:2, Hezekiah would already have been nine years old when the prophecy was uttered, and a judgment on the validity of this solution then becomes a question of the reliability of the 2 Kings chronology.

(3) A single future reference. This possibility is based on the New Testament identification of the young woman with the Virgin Mary and of Immanuel with Jesus (Matt. 1:22–23). Some scholars maintain that Heb. ḫămâ necessitates a supernatural birth, since the subject of the sign could hardly have been the child of an immoral unmarried woman. This solution takes seriously the authority of the New Testament interpretation of Old Testament prophecies, but ignores the consideration that Isaiah’s words to Ahaz must have had some recognizable contemporary meaning for the king.

(4) A double (typological) reference. A serious regard both for the contemporary situation of Ahaz and for the Matthean interpretation of Isa. 7:14 seems to demand a double fulfillment, wherein Immanuel and his mother are viewed typologically; i.e., the young woman is proximally Ahaz’ or Isaiah’s wife and the Virgin Mary prospectively, and Immanuel is proximally Hezekiah or Maher-shalal-hash-baz and prospectively Jesus.

The lack of other historical evidence for the contemporary identity of Immanuel does not prejudice the need for such an identification; lacking such evidence, any solution to
Immanuel’s immediate identity must be tentative. This solution, however, does full justice to the messianic and Davidic context of the Immanuel prophecy. The birth of Jesus is thus seen as the ultimate fulfillment of the meaning of Immanuel—“God with us,” the culmination of this theme which is a constant in the covenantal history of God’s dealings with his people—and as the sign of humanity’s deliverance from sin and death.

IMMANUEL (Ĭm mānʿ ĕl) Personal name meaning “God with us.” Name of son to be born in Isaiah’s prophecy to King Ahaz (Isa. 7:14) and fulfilled in birth of Jesus (Matt. 1:22–23).

When King Ahaz refused to show his faith by asking God for a sign (Isa. 7:10–12), Isaiah gave him a sign of the birth of Immanuel, using the traditional form of a birth announcement (7:14; cp. Gen. 16:11; Judg. 13:3, 5). The Hebrew language apparently indicates that the prophet and king expected an immediate fulfillment. Recent study has pointed to Ahaz’s wife as the woman expected to bear the child and show that God was still with the Davidic royal dynasty even in the midst of severe threat from Assyria. Such a sign would give hope to a king who trusted God but would be a constant threat to one who followed his own strategy. The double meaning of the Immanuel sign appears again in Isa. 8:8. The Assyrian army would flood the land until Judah was up to its neck in trouble and could only cry out, “O Immanuel”; a cry confessing that God is with us in His destructive rage but at the same time a prayer, hoping for divine intervention. Isaiah followed this with a call to the nations to lose in battle because of Immanuel, God with us (8:10).

The Bible says nothing else about the effects of the Immanuel prophecy in the days of Isaiah and Ahaz. It does announce the great fulfillment in Jesus Christ (Matt. 1:22–23). Jesus’ birth showed all humanity that God is faithful to fulfill His promises in ways far beyond human expectations, for Jesus was not just a sign of God with us. Jesus was God become flesh, God incarnate, God with us in Person.

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