

The Great Prophecy of the Virgin's Son in its Historical Setting Isaiah 7:10-16

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[*"Die grosse Weissagung vom Jungfrauensohn in ihrem historischen Rahmen,"* by August Pieper. Quartalschrift, October, 1904, p 219ff. Translated by John Jeske, with some minor updating.]

Once again we're approaching the holy festival of Christmas. It's particularly at this season of the year that we speak and sing of the great mystery of godliness: God appeared in a human body (1 Timothy 3:16). To present this clearly we draw on Old Testament prophecy. We contrast prophecy and fulfillment and proclaim to God's people:

Abraham's promised great Reward,
Zion's Helper, Jacob's Lord,
Him of twofold race behold,
Truly came, as long foretold.

We reach especially into the book of the prophet Isaiah, the evangelist of the Old Testament. None of God's prophets prophesied about Christ and his royal rule of grace so abundantly and so clearly and so precisely and so enthusiastically as did Isaiah. Twenty-two of the 66 chapters of his book are messianic. In the second cycle of his prophecies (ch 7-12) Isaiah's proclamation deals exclusively with the coming Savior. After the New Testament conversion of the heathen has been prophesied (ch 2), and the preservation of the believing remnant of Israel as a fruit of the "Branch of the LORD" (ch 4), the Savior appears on the scene. He appears as the great Immanuel born of a virgin, who as the mighty King of righteousness brings his needy subjects deliverance and the peace of God. The high points of this segment of Isaiah's prophecy are the following: chapter 7:14: "The virgin will be with child"; chapter 9:6: "To us a child is born"; and chapter 11:1: "A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse."

The first of these three prophecies will be the subject of our exegetical study. This passage is every bit as significant theologically as it is controversial exegetically. Its theological significance is clear from Matthew 1:22f. According to St. Matthew, the conception of Christ took place in fulfillment of this prophecy. The virgin with child of whom Isaiah spoke is none other than Mary, and the son she was to bear is none other than the promised Savior Jesus Christ. This conclusion is, however, contested by many exegetes, even by many believing exegetes.

The disagreement revolves around three points in particular:

- 1) What does the word "virgin" mean here, and to whom does it refer?
- 2) What is expressed by the name "Immanuel"?
- 3) In what way is the virgin's pregnancy to be a sign from the LORD for the people whom Isaiah was addressing?

Anyone willing to make the effort to examine this passage thoroughly in an attempt to address these three questions will be rewarded with rich theological dividends. His study will give him new strength of faith as well as fresh enthusiasm for proclaiming the precious message of Christmas.

To understand the prophecy we need to be aware of the historical framework surrounding it.

One fact above all must be clearly recognized if the mighty thrust of this prophecy is not to be lost. When the prophet told King Ahaz, "Ask the LORD your God for a sign," the decisive moment had come for Ahaz and the royal house of David, a moment which would determine the fate of Judah as God's earthly dwelling place and God's people. This decisive moment marked the high point in the development of the kingdom of Judah and of the Old Testament theocracy. At this critical moment in their history, Ahaz's unbelief set the fate of the covenant people on a course that would inevitably lead to their destruction. To help us see this point clearly, we need to reach farther back into history than just to the events described in verses 1-9.

Viewed externally, Israel's call from God was to proclaim God's plan of salvation to the nations of the earth. Until God's mighty Champion appeared, Jerusalem was to be God's spokesman on earth, to prepare the heathen to receive the coming Savior. Israel was "the people I formed for myself that they may proclaim my praise," (Isaiah 43:21). Israel could fulfill this mission only by remaining faithful to God, by obeying his ordinances, and by following his guidance implicitly. Even Israel's outward success as God's covenant people would be measured by her faithfulness to God. Unfaithfulness, on the other hand, would surely bring about the collapse of the theocratic system of government and of Israel's very existence as a nation.

God wanted his chosen nation of Israel to enjoy peace. The theocracy was to develop peacefully, until the time God would appear in human form. Unfortunately, however, Israel did not recognize the way of peace. Beginning with its first great apostasy at Sinai, it continued to corrupt its way more and more. God had nothing but grief with this rebellious and stiff-necked people. During the period of the Judges Israel's history was an unbroken chain of shameful relapses into sin and of divine retaliation in judgment.

Israel then chose for herself a new form of the theocracy, the monarchy. But that proved to be only a further step in the nation's inward separation from God—apostasy, followed by divine judgment. In spite of this, God maintained the loyal love he had sworn to his chosen people. During the reigns of David and Solomon Israel's prosperity reached its peak. The Spirit of God was mightily active among his people. Even the nation's outward glory reached new heights.

Israel's glory years, however, also marked the nation's turning point toward ruin. Solomon himself yielded to the temptation to sensuality and to the idolatry of his heathen wives and drew the nation after him into unfaithfulness and ungodly living. It was then that God stepped in with a new judgment which had foreboding consequences for the entire nation. Because of Solomon's sin, God tore ten tribes away from the house of David. This not only broke the kingdom's political power, but provided fertile soil for civil strife between the northern and southern kingdoms, in which the fleshly spirit of both segments could flourish, to their own destruction.

After the kingdom split, the falling away from God increased both in Israel-Ephraim and in Judah-Jerusalem. Jeroboam, founder of the northern kingdom, introduced apostasy officially, and with a vengeance. The recurring reference to the "sin of Jeroboam, son of Nebat, who caused Israel to sin" runs like a scarlet thread through the books of Kings and Chronicles. For political reasons he put an end to his subjects' worship life in Jerusalem and in its place established shrines at Dan and Bethel for sacrifice and worship. Separation from worship in the temple at Jerusalem led to worshipping at the high places as well as at the calf-shrines, and this in turn spawned heathenish idolatry with all of its abominations. Ahab and Jezebel subse-

quently introduced the worship of Baal and Astarte alongside the perverted Jehovah-worship practiced at the calf-shrines and actually made it the state religion. Baal-worship became so firmly entrenched in the north that neither the unwholesome and violent activity of King Jehu, nor the powerful divine testimony of Micaiah and Elijah and Elisha, could eradicate it permanently.

Moral and ethical deterioration went hand in hand with spiritual deterioration. The point of no return was reached during the reign of mighty Jeroboam II, after which Israel-Ephraim was irretrievably headed for destruction. Amos and Hosea called the kingdom's citizens, royal house, and nobility to repentance, but in vain, and God's judgment struck Israel. With a single exception [Menahem], each of the kings reigning in Samaria was succeeded by his assassin. From the time of Menahem's reign Israel was forced to pay tribute to Assyria. Despite a political alliance with her former enemy Damascus, Israel was unable to escape Assyrian dominance. The energetic royal assassin Pekah, together with King Rezin of Damascus, tried to organize a coalition of kingdoms in the west to oppose Assyrian supremacy. The light of Israel's former glory flickered briefly, but was permanently extinguished under the assault of Tiglath-pileser. Shalmaneser and Sargon brought about the downfall of the kingdom (724-722 BC) and led the ten tribes into captivity in Mesopotamia and Media. Finally Esarhaddon destroyed any remaining traces of Ephraim's glory.

In the kingdom of Judah conditions were much more favorable for a peaceful development of the theocratic state. The royal house of David—chosen by God, blessed with the promise of continuing rule, respected by its subjects—remained in power and gave Judah a number of pious kings. (By contrast, every last one of Israel's kings was godless). Judah had the sanctuary in its midst, with a priesthood instituted by God and worship that was pleasing to him. And while the voice of prophecy was heard only sporadically in Israel, in Judah God's revelation flowed in an uninterrupted and mighty stream. God's prophetic messengers were almost always supported in their ministry by the priests, and often by the kings.

In spite of all of these blessings, however, the ungodly and stubborn spirit of the people of Judah steadily pushed the nation toward a catastrophe that would destroy it. A development which proved especially detrimental to Judah—spiritually and politically—was the intermarriage King Jehoshaphat introduced between the royal house of David and the idolatrous royal family of the heathen Jezebel. Under the influence of his wife Athaliah, daughter of Ahab, Jehoshaphat's son Jehoram murdered his brothers and flooded Judah with Baal-worship. A fearful judgment of God followed; Philistines and Arabs ravaged Judah and plundered Jerusalem, but this failed to bring people and king to their knees in repentance. A powerful impetus for reformation was provided when God-fearing Joash was snatched by his aunt Jehosheba out of the murderous hands of his grandmother Athaliah and crowned king by the godly priest Jehoiada. After Jehoiada's death, however, Joash permitted Baal-worship to be reestablished. In judgment God permitted King Hazael and his Aramean army to invade the land and bring about the unhappy end of Joash, but this divine judgment had little effect on the people of Jerusalem. Joash's son and successor Amaziah even introduced into Jerusalem the worship of the gods of Edom. Once again, however, God's judgment, which permitted Israel's king Jehoash to invade Jerusalem, break down her wall, plunder temple and palace, and take hostages, failed to have any salutary effect on a hardened people. Two pious kings followed, Uzziah and Jotham. The public worship of idols was stopped, the temple was restored and temple worship reinstated. But the godless, idol-worshiping bent of the people could no longer be restrained. Judah's economic prosperity and a feeling of national well-being only magnified her pride and accelerated her apostasy and her fleshly-mindedness, which paraded as piety. Injustice toward the underprivileged in the land was rampant.

This was the situation that confronted Isaiah. In the year Uzziah died he came upon the scene as the LORD'S great preacher of repentance (Isaiah 6:lff). Because the majority of the people were stiff-necked and impenitent, he became for them instead the prophet of judgment and hardening. It was only to a small handful, the remnant of Israel, that Isaiah could preach the message his name implied: the salvation of Jehovah (6:9-13).

Isaiah 1 offers a brief summary of the message which Isaiah delivered from God to the rebellious, evil-minded nation during the reign of Jotham, a message which he would again preach during Hezekiah's reign.

Just before Jotham became king, his royal neighbor to the north, Pekah, had taken over the throne of Israel by assassinating his predecessor Pekahiah. For two decades Pekah held the reins of government with a firm hand. He made a military alliance with Rezin, king of Aram (Syria), and together with him invaded the land of Judah during Jotham's last years (2 Kings 15:37). When Jotham died, his son Ahaz succeeded him on the throne. Of all Judah's kings, Ahaz was by far the most godless. He followed the detestable ways of the heathen; he desecrated the LORD'S house; he shut down the temple at Jerusalem and in its place filled the city with altars dedicated to false gods. He served Baal and even offered one of his sons to Molech in the valley of Hinnom as a human sacrifice. "He offered sacrifices and burned incense at the high places, on the hilltops and under every spreading tree," (2 Chronicles 28:4). During Ahaz's reign Judah filled her cup of iniquity to the brim. In the entire nation only an insignificant remnant remained faithful to its God.

Isaiah 7 now takes us to the beginning years of Ahaz's reign. Pekah of Israel and Rezin of Damascus had been waging a vigorous military campaign against the southern kingdom, and God had granted them major victories. Rezin carried off many of Judah's citizens to Damascus as hostages. In a campaign to the far south he captured the port of Elath on the Red Sea. Meanwhile, Pekah attacked in the north and in a single day killed 120,000 soldiers of Judah. To make matters worse, attacks by Philistines from the west and Edomites from the south devastated the territory of Judah. King Ahaz had no choice but to order what was left of his army to flee behind the walls of Jerusalem. His situation was desperate.

Your country is desolate,
 your cities burned with fire;
 your fields are being stripped by foreigners
 right before you,
 laid waste as when overthrown by strangers.
 The daughter of Zion is left
 like a shelter in a vineyard,
 like a hut in a field of melons,
 like a city under siege (Is 1:7f).

Isaiah 7 picks up the story at this point. The armies of Rezin and Pekah were advancing on Jerusalem to begin the siege. When this news reached the palace, "the hearts of Ahaz and his people were shaken, as the trees of the forest are shaken by the wind" (verse 2). The king knew his throne was at stake. Verse 6 informs us that what Rezin and Pekah really wanted was to topple Ahaz from his throne, to wipe out the royal dynasty of David once and for all, and to install Tabeel's son (probably some Aramean official) as puppet-king in Jerusalem.

Instead of turning to God in his hour of need, Ahaz did no more than any apostate, unbelieving, idol-worshipping ruler would have done. He tried to bolster Jerusalem's defenses, and he looked about for an ally. He quickly dispatched envoys, with silver and gold from both the temple treasury and the royal treasury in their hands, to King Tiglath-pileser of Assyria, pleading as a vassal for help from the great king (2 Kings 16:7f). Jerusalem's gates and walls were readied for the siege. A matter of special concern to the king was to protect Jerusalem's water supply, which lay outside the city walls, against the enemy. While Ahaz was busily engaged with this work, the prophet Isaiah was directed by God to go to meet Ahaz at the Upper Pool. Isaiah ("the LORD is salvation") and his son Shear-Jashub ("a remnant will return") were to go to meet the king. These two people with their symbolic names were to be a sermon not just in words but in action, calling the king to repentance. They were to demonstrate to him that even at this time of crisis there was sure help for him and his

people with the LORD, if only they would turn to him, like the believing remnant in Judah. God even gave his prophet the exact words with which he was to bring this message of deliverance to the faithless king.

Say to him, "Be careful, keep calm and don't be afraid. Don't lose heart because of these two smoldering stubs of firewood—because of the fierce anger of Rezin and Aram and of [Pekah] the son of Remaliah. Aram, Ephraim, and Remaliah's son have plotted your ruin, saying, 'Let us invade Judah; let us tear it apart and divide it among ourselves and make the son of Tabeel king over it.' Yet this is what the Sovereign LORD says: 'It will not take place; it will not happen. For the head of Aram is Damascus, and the head of Damascus is only Rezin. Within sixty-five years Ephraim will be too shattered to be a people. The head of Ephraim is Samaria, and the head of Samaria is only Remaliah's son. If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all.'"

That was God's message for Ahaz, and its meaning was clear. God told Ahaz to keep calm. The evil plan of Rezin and Pekah, the two threatening but powerless enemies, would fail. They would not be able to extend their rule beyond their own borders; they would not win control over Judah. As a matter of fact, in sixty-five years Ephraim itself would cease to exist as a nation. The closing words: **אם לא תאמינו כי לא תאמנו** told the king: "If you [king and people] refuse to believe this sure message from God, you will be rejected by God and perish, even though for the moment Jerusalem is secure against the attack of Rezin and Pekah. As long as you remain faithful to your God, no danger coming from your enemies can threaten you. But unbelief will bring you to ruin."

What was Ahaz's response to the LORD'S gracious offer of help? Not a single word. He simply could not bring himself to rest his hope of safety for himself and his country on a promise such as he had received. For him that was no certain guarantee, and he was unwilling to give up his freedom of action by accepting the LORD'S offer. Ahaz was confident that Assyria's Tiglath-pileser could help him out of his trouble, and paying tribute to Assyria didn't seem nearly as objectionable to him as subjecting himself to the LORD. In the face of God's offer, Ahaz's response was dispassionate but well-developed unbelief: calm, cold, despicable rejection.

God's patience, however, had not run out. He resolved to make one final attempt to lead the king and his officials, the house of David and the house of Judah, back to faith and to safety. Although Ahaz maintained his icy silence, the prophet raised his voice once more in a new and greater offer of divine mercy.

At this point our text begins:

¹⁰Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz [namely through the prophet, at the same place, in response to the king's silence], ¹¹"Ask the LORD your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights." ¹²But Ahaz said, "I will not ask; I will not put the LORD to the test." ¹³Then Isaiah said, "Hear now, you house of David! Is it not enough to try the patience of men? Will you try the patience of my God also? ¹⁴Therefore the LORD himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. ¹⁵He will eat curds and honey when he knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right. ¹⁶But before the boy knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, the land of the two kings you dread will be laid waste."

Verses 14-16 describe the solemn consequences of the prophet's message, which was occasioned and determined by what is described in verses 10-13 and which is properly connected to those verses by "therefore." Since Ahaz had refused to ask for a sign, *therefore* the LORD *himself*, i.e., unasked, by his own decision, would give Ahaz a sign, whether he wanted one or not.

Let us take a closer look at verses 10-13. "Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz," at the aqueduct of the Upper Pool, where Isaiah had brought the king God's message about Rezin and Pekah and where Ahaz had responded with silence. It was because of the king's despicable silence that the LORD through the prophet spoke to him a second time. Ahaz had responded to God's offer with calculated unbelief and with an insolent turndown. At that point God could have withdrawn his hand from this disobedient, apostate king and abandoned him. But God's patience had not yet been exhausted; his mercy had not yet run out. This was the moment which would determine the entire future of the chosen people. If Ahaz persisted in his impenitence, God would have to pronounce his decree of rejection over him, over the royal house of David, and over Judah. That's why God's mercy went to such great lengths to rescue his chosen inheritance.

There is one more thing here that calls for our attention, something expressed in the prophet's words: "Ask the LORD your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights." To prove his power and his faithfulness, God actually allowed Ahaz to put him to the test. He was to request a sign, a miraculous sign from the "LORD," i.e., from Israel's covenant God, who remains forever faithful. Ahaz was to request a sign from the LORD, "*your* God," who was willing once again to prove to the king that he was his almighty Helper. The king could even choose the particular kind of sign he wanted to see. He could have chosen one from *Sheol*, from the underworld—an earthquake perhaps, or having the earth open its mouth as it had at the time of Korah's rebellion. Or he could have requested a sign from heaven—thunder and lightning, or the sudden appearance of a blinding light. God would have granted the sign, so that the king could see with his own eyes and hear with his own ears and be persuaded by his own senses that God could and would keep his word.

God actually gave Ahaz the opportunity to demonstrate publicly the reliability of God's word of promise, or publicly to brand it as a lie.

It is apparent that God could not have condescended any further; there was nothing more he could have done to bring Ahaz to faith. If the king rejected this final overture, all means would have been exhausted, along with God's patience and longsuffering. In that case, the final judgment would have to fall on the house of David and Judah, judgment which God had up to now repeatedly postponed.

Ahaz, however, persisted in his impenitence. He responded: "I will not ask; I will not put the LORD to the test." Ahaz refused to take the LORD up on his offer, alleging that he was afraid that by so doing he would be tempting God. What miserable hypocrisy! As if he, rebellious idol-worshiper that he was, was at all concerned about committing one sin more or less! As if accepting God's promise in faith is tantamount to tempting God! A person tempts God when in unbelief, without any divine promise, he demands that God perform a specific miracle. The real reason for the king's refusal was his persistent unbelief. Ahaz was a polytheist. He worshiped and offered sacrifices to all the gods of the nations around him. He had not totally rejected the God of Israel, but neither did he consider him the only true, almighty God the prophets proclaimed him to be. To Ahaz Jehovah counted for no more than Baal or Molech. He admitted God might be able to give him some supernatural sign, but he refused to believe God would be a reliable defense against Judah's enemies in the future. He certainly was not minded to commit himself to such an unreliable God and to break the treaty he had already negotiated with Assyria.

"I will not ask!" This declaration of the king had some sobering consequences. What they were is evident from God's reaction, which the prophet now reported to Ahaz.

"Then Isaiah said, `Hear now, you house of David! Is it not enough to try the patience of men? Will you try the patience of my God also?'" With the expression שְׁמַעוּנָא "Now listen!" "Hear this!"—the prophet lifted up his voice in solemn pronouncement. With the word the king had just spoken he had effectively severed his connection with God. In response God solemnly renounced him. With his words Ahaz had spoken not just for himself. The entire royal house—the house of David—and the whole nation of Judah (except for the believing remnant) shared the king's attitude and his guilt. God's declaration of renunciation, therefore, applied to them as well.

"Isn't it enough for you to weary people—like me and the other spokesmen God has sent to you? We have expended considerable effort in calling royal house and nation to repentance, and you long ago exhausted our patience, while God was being patient with you. But that wasn't enough for you. You have frivolously exhausted the immeasurably greater patience of my God (from now on he is no longer your God). He has shown you kindness beyond description; he has patiently supported you; he has again and again called you to repentance; he has condescended to come to you as he has to no one else. Now you have maliciously severed the last thread on which God's patience hung. Now it's all over between you and him!"

And now, in verses 14-16, follows the great prophecy itself: "Therefore the LORD *himself* will give you a sign." That word *himself* characterizes the entire declaration that follows as a prophecy of judgment on the apostate royal house of David and the nation of Judah. "You don't want a sign from God. Well, then, you're going to get one, whether you want it or not. Because it seems good to him, God will give you a sign even without your asking for one. But what was intended to be a sign of God's grace to you will now be a sign announcing God's judgment on you."

The sign is this: "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel." The Hebrew verb forms are the so-called prophetic present, which has future meaning; both the Septuagint and Matthew 1:23 translate with future verb forms.

The introductory words "Therefore the LORD himself will give you a sign" make it clear that the sign God here offered was a miraculous sign, the same sort of sign Ahaz had been invited to ask for. The commentator who sees here no more than a symbol or a token, while interpreting the earlier sign as miraculous, is interpreting capriciously. The context makes it clear that God resolved to give the house of David precisely that which it did not want: tangible proof of the supernatural power of the LORD. It is exegetical arbitrariness when contemporary commentators, e.g., Strack, see in the sign promised by the LORD no more than that "the various periods of a child's life illustrate the rapid change which is going to overtake the land of Judah in the years just ahead." One dare not select a single point of comparison; the sign is miraculous in every respect. The Immanuel-nature of the child is a miracle. His eating curds and honey is a miracle, as is the fact that before he reaches the age of discretion the land would be devastated. Above all, the miracle consists in this, that the virgin would become pregnant and bear a son.

"The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son." Opinions differ regarding the significance of the definite article "the." One cannot, from either dogmatic or exegetical grounds, object to viewing the definite article as generic, indicating the category of "virgin." Such usage is common in Hebrew. It emphasizes "virgin" in contrast to wife, widow, older woman. That would be a ready explanation for Luther's translation "a virgin." One would then interpret: a virgin, namely, not a married woman, but precisely a virgin, from whom pregnancy cannot normally be expected.

It is, however, a sound exegetical principle not to depart from the most common meaning of a word without compelling reason. There are no such compelling reasons here. The immediate meaning of the definite

article is the same in Hebrew as in German. The definite article identifies more definitely; it individualizes the noun. The sense of the passage would then be: "the one particular, identifiable virgin." But was she known to those who first heard Isaiah's prophecy? Not likely, although that was not an impossibility. Isaiah could have prophesied about her previously, and his written record may have been lost to us. Or his contemporary Micah could have done that; he also knew about this woman who would bear a son (Mi 5:2). However that may be, this virgin who would bear a son was through divine revelation well known to the prophets as the particular person chosen by God. This was clear to the prophets, and they described her as *the* virgin.

We come now to the first of our three important questions: *What does the word "virgin" mean here, and to whom does the term refer?*

For as long as Christians on the basis of Matthew 1:23 have maintained that Isaiah here speaks of a pure virgin, Jewish scholars (including the revisers of the Septuagint, Aquila, Theodotion, and Symmachus), as well as contemporary rationalistic interpreters, have claimed that **עלמה** does not mean "virgin," but "young woman" in general, perhaps even a married young woman. Actually the exact opposite conclusion can be demonstrated exegetically, with little effort. Apart from references **עלמות**, (cf 1 Chronicles 15:20 and the heading of Psalm 46) where the precise meaning of the term cannot be determined, the term is used six times in the Old Testament.

In Genesis 24:43 Abraham's servant calls Rebekah an **עלמה** (and verse 16 had described her as a virgin with whom no man had ever lain). Any possibility of marriage or of sexual intimacy is therefore completely ruled out—whether that lies in the etymology of the term or not. In Exodus 2:8 the sister of Moses who got her mother to nurse the baby is called an **עלמה**. Since the girl can hardly have been much older than ten, marriage and marital relations are again clearly excluded. In Psalm 68:25 the **עלמות** are maidens playing tambourines. For their sacred calling as temple servants virginity was a prerequisite.¹ In the debate over the meaning of **עלמה**, Proverbs 30:19 (the way of a man with an **עלמה**) is a text which many orthodox interpreters have conceded to the opponents. But here, too, the term, taken by itself as well as in context, rules out a woman who has had a sexual relationship. The sacred writer cites the sexual sin of a girl who had previously been a virgin and the sin of a habitual adulteress. First of all he places the two in contrast, and then in parallel, to make the point that the one-time sin of the former is not easily discerned, just as the frequent sin of the latter is not easily discerned. A young woman who was no longer a virgin would not have provided a contrast to the adulteress.

The term is used twice in the Song of Songs. In 1:3: "Your name [namely, that of the royal bridegroom] is like perfume poured out. No wonder the **עלמות** love you." And in 6:8: "Sixty queens there may be and eighty concubines and **עלמות** beyond number..., but my perfect one is unique." It is clear that the social standing and position of the maidens as companions of the bride, perhaps even royal brides in the future, made it obvious that they were virgins.

With regard to the etymology of the term **עלמה**, it has become customary to derive it from the Semitic root **עלם**, which is said to mean "to mature sexually," "to be sexually ripe." But the verb root with this meaning is found only in Arabic and Syriac, not in biblical Hebrew. In the Old Testament the verb root **עלם** is used only

¹There is no clear scriptural proof for this statement. Consider the case of Anna. (Ed.)

in the sense of "to separate," "to conceal," "to hide." The few derivatives of this verb root, without exception, go back to this meaning.² That includes the **עלם** of 1 Samuel 17:56 and 20:22, as well as the **עלמה** in Isaiah 7 and other passages. Accordingly, the primary meaning of **עלמה** is not a young woman who is sexually mature but a young woman who has lived at home, separated from public life and especially from contact with men, and with whom sexual purity is taken for granted (although this does not receive special emphasis). Only this derivation of the term renders Isaiah 54:4 intelligible: "You will forget the shame of your youth (**עלומים**) and remember no more the reproach of your widowhood" (**אלמנות**). Here virginity is placed in parallel to widowhood and in contrast to the woman who has a husband (the **בתולה** of verse 1). **עלמה** carries with it the idea of aloneness, of lowliness. For this reason Isaiah used this term in preference to **בתולה**.

In the term **עלמה**, therefore, we have the concept of an unmarried young woman, untouched by a man. We're glad to learn that the translators of the Septuagint, who stood closer (historically and linguistically) to the time of Isaiah than we, rendered this Hebrew term not with the indefinite *νεανις* but with the more definite *ἡ παρθενος*. Our exegesis is raised to the level of godly certainty through the exegesis supplied by the Holy Spirit, who in Matthew 1:23 adopted the wording of the Septuagint. It is of little consequence that the Hebrews had a special term (**בתולה**) to emphasize that a young woman had not been touched sexually. The broader term **עלמה** can also include this particular emphasis.

Who is this **עלמה**, this young woman of unimpaired virginity? Jewish, rationalistic, and unbelieving exegetes have offered widely differing answers to this question. It cannot be denied that, when you read verse 14 in close connection with what follows, your immediate impression is that the entire prophecy is to be fulfilled within a few years. To many exegetes, therefore, the pregnant woman who is to bear a son must have been some woman living at the time the prophecy was first spoken. Some have identified her as the wife of Ahaz, others as the wife of the prophet Isaiah. The former fail to remember that at that time Ahaz's son Hezekiah was already nine years old. The opinion of the latter falls because (among other reasons) a mere son of a prophet could hardly claim ownership of Palestine as his land, as 8:8 announces.

It might also be mentioned that other scholars see a reference here to some future wife of the king, or to a second wife of the prophet. Still others maintain that the passage does not describe an actual historical occurrence at all, but is merely a figurative representation of a particular period of time. Hofmann and others understand the virgin to be not an individual human being, but "the house of David," which was not "married" until the great Son of David was given to it. But enough of these fantasies! They all stem from the desire to find a rational explanation for the virgin's pregnancy, as well as to place Immanuel's birth into the time period of Ahaz and the boy's coming to his years of discretion into the period shortly after Assyria defeated the armies of Syria and Ephraim.

The Scripture itself has decided the matter of who is referred to here. Matthew 1:18-23 declares that the prophesied virgin is Mary and that the Immanuel foretold here is her son Jesus. In an effort to present the birth of Immanuel as a sign for Ahaz and his contemporaries, some have even argued for a preliminary or representative fulfillment of the prophecy at the time of Ahaz. But Matthew 1:22 does not grant this opinion

²Recent research in Semitic languages cautions against such general etymologizing. See TWOT, p 672. (Ed.)

legitimacy. There we're told: "All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet, 'The virgin will be with child.'" Accordingly, Mary became pregnant for the purpose of fulfilling precisely this prophecy. Up to that time, Isaiah's prophecy had essentially remained unfulfilled. In God's design, Isaiah's prophecy pointed to what was going to take place through Mary: a pregnancy through the special intervention of the Holy Spirit, without the participation of any male. Only the child so conceived is in fact Immanuel. Whoever wants to find a fulfillment prior to the one God intended and accomplished empties the prophecy of its essential content. Then the concept of "virgin" is lost, as is her conceiving a child through the power of the Holy Spirit. Then the truly miraculous element is gone from the passage. Then the Son of the "virgin" is an altogether different kind of son, and not Immanuel in the sense God intended. To summarize: some have felt compelled to inject a double sense into the prophecy, which nullifies Matthew 1:18-23. There can be only *one* fulfillment of verse 14, and that is the one Matthew documented.

Let us turn our attention now to the *second* great question: *What does the name Immanuel given to the virgin's Son express?* Specifically: In this passage is the name Immanuel ("God with us") a reference to the mystery of the person of the God-Man, to the personal union of the divine and human natures in the virgin's Son? Or is the name intended merely to express the general truth that through this child's activity and work and ministry God would be with us in an especially tangible way?

It was the latter sense which was commonly conveyed by the names Old Testament people (and especially men of God) bore. As is well known, Isaiah means "God saves"; Jeremiah "the one whom God establishes"; Ezekiel "the one whom God makes strong"; Obadiah "God's servant"; Zechariah "the one whom God remembers"; Malachi "God's messenger"; etc. These names all designate the nature, the characteristics, the sending, or the office of the person who bears the name. If one looks only at this text, it is difficult to see any reason to take the name Immanuel in any other sense. The name itself (here spelled as one word Immanuel; in chapter 8:10 as two, Immanu El) does not indicate anything of the kind. Neither dare one confidently draw conclusions about the child's divine nature simply from the fact that his conception was a special miracle of God, without the participation of a human father. With a simple Creator-act God could have formed a child in the womb of a mother, without having that child be God himself.

The parallels to our passage, however, declare unmistakably that the virgin's Son is God himself. Look first at Isaiah 9:6. The subject there is clearly the same as in our passage, the virgin's Son. "The virgin will be with child—and will give birth to a son—and will call him Immanuel." This triple prophecy is echoed as Isaiah anticipates its threefold fulfillment: "To us a child is born—to us a son is given . . . and he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." The passage clearly proclaims the deity of the virgin's Son. We see the same thing in Micah 5:2-3. There we are told that the child whom "she who is in labor" (v.3) will bear is one "whose origins are from of old, from days of eternity." That description rules out any and every creature. There can be little doubt, therefore, that the child's name describes not only his saving work, but at the same time his mysterious divine-human nature *dens in terra, theanthropos*, God in human flesh. The Old Testament clearly reveals the essential, eternal deity of the Messiah, alongside of his human nature.

We want now to look at the last two, closely connected verses of our text, and by so doing answer our *third* question, *"In what way is the virgin's pregnancy a sign to Isaiah's contemporaries?"* "He will eat curds and honey when he knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right. But before the boy knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, the land of the two kings you dread will be laid waste."

What kind of food is indicated by "curds and honey"? Surely not rich man's food, the food of abundance, but rather poor man's food, a survival diet. That becomes quite clear from the verses that follow (vv 17-22). In close connection with his description of the desolation of the two northern countries, the prophet foretold also

the total devastation of the land of Judah. The superpower that destroyed Damascus and Ephraim would also depopulate Judah, destroy its culture, and turn the land into grazing and hunting ground. Verses 21-22 state specifically: "In that day, a man will keep alive a young cow and two goats. And because of the abundance of the milk they give, he will have curds to eat. All who remain in the land will eat curds and honey." In other words, the few inhabitants left in the land will no longer be able to farm the land. To keep themselves alive they will keep a few cattle to provide milk and curds for their table—no bread. Their food will also include honey from wild bees. Curds and honey, therefore, are the food of a ravaged and ruined land that had reverted to its wild state, the food of poverty. Here we see another miracle (though not the same kind of miracle as the virgin's supernatural pregnancy). Upon reaching the age of independence the virgin's Son, the Immanuel, the God-Man, who is to bring salvation to Judah and to the whole world, will eat curds and honey, the food of a desolate land, poor people's food. This is obviously spoken figuratively. The sense is that the Savior will share the pitiful, disgraceful situation of his impoverished people. The desolation of the land described in vv 17-25 is also to be understood figuratively. At the time the Messiah appeared on earth the glory Judah had once enjoyed was long gone, as were also the glory days of Ephraim and Damascus. Heathen nations would have devastated it, so that what little was left in the land could provide only a meager existence.

The words "He will eat curds and honey" indicate that when the Son of the virgin reached the age of discretion, he would share the disgrace and poverty of his people. The splendid Son of the virgin, the Immanuel, God and man in one person, humbled himself. "Though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor" (2 Corinthians 8:9). "Being in very nature God, he did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant" (Philippians 2:6f).

The greatest difficulty for the person interpreting this passage confronts him in verse 16: "Before the boy knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, the land of the two kings you dread will be laid waste." This verse is connected to what precedes with the particle כִּי, which gives the reason why the boy Immanuel, after reaching the years of understanding, would eat poor man's food. The reason is that by the time the Immanuel reached that age Syria and Ephraim would be desolate. Doesn't it seem as though the prophet placed the devastation of Syria-Ephraim in the same time frame as Immanuel's entrance upon his years of discretion? Very obviously. That gives the interpreter two possible options. The first is that Immanuel would have to reach his years of discretion within a few years from the moment when Isaiah spoke these words (since Assyria devastated Syria Ephraim in the years immediately following). The alternative interpretation is that the prophet was referring not to this devastation of the two northern nations, but to one that would have taken place some seven centuries later, by the time Jesus was born.

Interpreters have tried in various ways to solve this dilemma. Calvin assumed that verse 16 no longer speaks about Immanuel, but is simply a parenthesis which one must translate: "For before a boy learns to reject the wrong . . . the land . . . will be laid waste." But this solution is ruled out by the introductory כִּי, even though one takes the article in הַנֶּעַר ("the boy") to be the generic article ("a boy"). The כִּי ("because"), which in verse 16 gives the reason for Immanuel's meager diet (verse 15), namely the desolation of the country, would be rendered meaningless. Verse 15 then loses its documentation, and verse 16 appears unexpectedly, like a bolt out of the blue.

Other exegetes allow the two verses to stand in their natural connection, so that verse 16 refers to Immanuel, but offer this explanation: in verse 16 the prophet's only reason for mentioning Immanuel is to make the point that the period of the boy's maturation is the measure of the time period until Syria and Ephraim would be destroyed (Vitranga, Hiengstenberg, et al) This solution, however, does greater violence to the passage than the former. Like the former, it accuses Isaiah of speaking unclearly.

Drechsler offers quite a different solution. He appeals to the lack of perspective in prophecy generally, which views events far removed in time as though they were contemporary. "To be sure," he admits, "the subsequent carrying out of this principle (that the prophets see the entire future with all its individual developments telescoped into a unit) finds its most severe and decisive test in this passage. But this explanation is nonetheless valid." Drechsler cites as parallel instances of prophetic perspective Matthew 24; Matthew 1:28; Mark 9:1; Luke 9:27. In and of itself, this solution is admissible. But it will have to be rejected in this instance, if the interpreter assumes (as Drechsler does) that God's purpose in giving Ahaz the sign of the promised virgin's son was to confirm the fact that the devastation of the two northern countries would take place in the immediate future. Then everything depended on a specific time designation, by which Ahaz could determine the fulfillment of the prophecy and would be able to recognize Immanuel when he came.

But it is right here—and now we come to the answer to our *third* question—that interpreters make what in our opinion is the fatal mistake which causes all sorts of problems. They understand Isaiah's sign announcing the virgin's pregnancy as a sign given to Ahaz as guarantee for the fall of Rezin and Pekah, announced in verses 4-9.

They also assume that the desolation of the two countries mentioned in verse 16 must necessarily be the one initiated by Tiglath-pileser in the years immediately ahead, which was continued by Shalmaneser and Sargon and completed by Esarhaddon. With these assumptions they tie the knot so tight that nobody can loosen it.

But our passage, including its connection with what precedes (v 19) and with what follows (v 17-25), does not compel us—indeed it doesn't even give us reason—to establish a connection (temporal or logical) between the devastation of the two countries to the north, which preceded Immanuel's childhood years (v 16), and what is prophesied about Rezin, Pekah, and Ephraim (v 4-9). Apart from verse 8b (where the onset of Immanuel's years of discretion simply does not fit), verses 4-9 do not even speak of the devastation of the two countries. Those verses simply emphasize that the evil plan of the two kings—to capture Jerusalem and to topple the Davidic royal line—would not be successful. To say that verse 16 refers to Tiglath-pileser's devastation of Syria-Ephraim (which at the time of the prophecy lay only a year and a half away) is to import an element from secular history into this text.

It is going too far when one concludes from verse 11 ("Ask the LORD your God for a sign.") that God was thereby offering Ahaz a sign to assure him specifically that he would fulfill his promise regarding Rezin and Pekah. The closing words of verse 9 ("If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all") suggest that God's primary concern was to convince unbelieving Ahaz of his omnipotence and his faithfulness to the house of David and Judah.

Ahaz simply did not trust either the LORD'S power or his faithfulness. To confirm these God offered him his choice of a sign. As soon as Ahaz rejected this ultimate evidence of God's grace, however, and cut himself off from God fully and finally—how can anyone believe the nonsense that God was now, through the sign of the virgin's Son, somehow offering the king a token of his grace, a guarantee of his help against Rezin and Pekah, the assurance of their fall and of the imminent devastation of their countries! No, with this sign God was renouncing the king and announcing his judgment. For Ahaz and the house of David and Judah hardened in sin, the whole sign of the virgin's Son contained not a trace of mercy. For them it was completely a sign announcing their final rejection. Whoever does not understand this important truth is going to introduce confusion into the interpretation of this passage.

In what way, then, was our prophecy a sign of the ultimate rejection of the hardened house of David and Judah?

The future Son of the virgin who is prophesied here as Immanuel is in himself the personification of God's deliverance, for which pious Israel waited with longing. He would come and in glorious fashion carry out God's magnificent rescue operation, despite the fact that the apostate house of David and Judah had severed their connection with God. Only for the pious remnant would he be a sign announcing salvation. What would his appearance signify for the rejected royal house and for faithless Judah? First of all, that the royal house of David would fall. Immanuel would be born not of a noblewoman, not of the wife of the reigning monarch from David's dynasty, not of real a princess, but of a poor *עלמה*, despised in the line of David, to whom nobody gave the honor due royalty, because the house of David had long since collapsed and gone to ruin. Immanuel "grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of a dry ground" (Isaiah 53:2). By a special miracle of God he would be born of a virgin, a woman alone, who had never known sexual union, who in and of herself was unfruitful and incapable of becoming pregnant.

And so this promise of the virgin's pregnancy was for the house of David a sign announcing the very development which the Lord (by making the offer in verses 4-9) had sought to prevent. Rezin and Pekah had sought to topple David's royal line. Their evil plan would not succeed. But since the house of David had rejected the Lord's help, he himself would bring David's royal house down. Of that the coming Immanuel would be a sign, through his birth of a poor virgin from that rejected royal family.

In the second place, Immanuel's outward form and appearance was a sign that the royal house of David would remain in its fallen state. Curds and honey, food of the poorest in the land, is what Immanuel would eat, from the time that he would be old enough to choose his own food. He would be born of an insignificant virgin, and from that lowly beginning he would never ascend to the glory of David's throne, eat royal food, and enjoy royal privilege. Even when grown to adulthood, he would remain poor and despised. The fallen house of David would not be rebuilt outwardly by him; David's dynasty had been rejected and would remain so. Immanuel's eating curds and honey signaled that to the house of David.

Thirdly, Immanuel's lowly lifestyle is to be viewed not as an act of defiance to conditions existing among his people, but as being in harmony with the conditions among which his people lived. Even before Immanuel reached maturity and contemporaneously with him Israel's national glory would have departed, crushed once for all by the heathen, and never to return. This divine judgment would be carried out first on the region to the north (the area which was the cause of Ahaz's fear, verse 16), the very region where Immanuel would spend his childhood (Galilee and the surrounding area). But God's judgment would subsequently fall also on Judah to the south. This, Immanuel's true homeland, would become a wilderness, uncultivated range land for cattle, able to provide only curds and wild honey for its inhabitants (verses 17-25).

In this threefold way the sign of the virgin's Son was for the apostate house of David a token of the wrath of God which would fall upon it. To announce this to the royal house God gave them this prophecy. Viewed in this light, all exegetical problems disappear.

How this prophecy came to fulfillment is known to us all.

We will refrain from adding to this study any formal suggestions for treating the passage homiletically. The preacher who understands this great prophecy correctly and who has permitted its message to work on his own heart will find the proper form and the right words to convey its message, just as the prophet Isaiah did.

Through the Holy Spirit he proclaimed the Savior in his divine majesty and his deep humiliation—a sign of judgment to impenitent and hardened sinners, but to all the penitent, a sign of God's salvation.