

Isaiah 7: God's Sign to Judah, the Virgin Birth

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In 730 BC, the nation of Assyria was the most powerful nation in the Near East. Operating from their capital of Nineveh in Mesopotamia they spread their domination in all directions. One of their ambitions was Egypt, but between them and Egypt lay smaller nations like Syria, Israel, and Judah. The kings of these nations spent much of their time and wealth dealing with the Assyrian threat. By 730 much of the northern land of Israel had been taken by Assyria. Israel and Syria joined in a coalition to oppose Assyria. Ahaz, the king of Judah, weighed his options of joining the coalition or being attacked by Syria and Israel. Ahaz foolishly chose to ask Assyria for help. This was like three mice having a fight and one of them asks the cat for help. One important choice never occurred to Ahaz, to trust and obey the Lord God. Therefore, God sent His representative, Isaiah, to warn him and prophesy the future plan of God. The Lord loves His people and desires to help, but rebellious idolaters like Ahaz refuse to humble themselves and repent. Therefore Isaiah told him and all of Judah that God would give them a sign of both impending doom, but ultimate hope. The sign was that only through a virgin who would be with child could help come to Judah and Jerusalem. His point was that only through supernatural intervention could all the promises of God to bless them come true. The New Testament confirms that the virgin birth of Christ is the fulfillment of that supernatural intervention.

Historical Setting

We can refer to the book of 2 Kings 16:1-19 and 2 Chronicles 28:1-25 to get a feel for what was going on in the days of King Ahaz in Jerusalem. Remember that after Solomon, Israel broke into two nations—Israel in the north with Samaria as the capital, and Judah in the south with Jerusalem as the capital. King Ahaz was an idol worshipping corrupt and evil king who “did not do what was right in the sight of the Lord”. How bad was he? He was so bad that he even sacrificed his first born son according to the abominations of the evil nations. The Kings of Syria (Aram) and Israel brought their armies to Judah to attack Jerusalem. Isaiah 7:2 tells us that all Jerusalem shook with fear at this threat. God's spokesperson Isaiah told them not to fear, but to trust the Lord to save Jerusalem, but instead King Ahaz sent messengers to the king of Assyria asking for help (2 Kings 16:7). Ahaz even went so far as to loot the Temple of God in order to send large quantities of silver and gold trying to buy Assyria's help.

Isaiah's Confrontation with King Ahaz

In Isaiah 7:4, we read that God sent Isaiah to King Ahaz to deliver a message—“have no fear”, instead trust God when He says, “It shall not stand nor shall it come to pass” (referring to the feared invasion). Isaiah even went so far as to assure them that within 65 years Israel (Ephraim) and Syria would be shattered and no longer even be. This prophecy was fulfilled when Assyria took Damascus and Samaria, and then Assyria resettled both Syria and Israel with foreigners. Then in Isaiah 7:10-25, the Lord sent Isaiah out to confront King Ahaz again with another appeal to repent. Since Ahaz was so stubborn, Isaiah told him to ask God for a sign, but Ahaz refused, using as an excuse a misuse of Scripture. Ahaz said he would not ask or “test the Lord”. This was a referral to Israel in the wilderness after the Exodus in Deuteronomy 6:16. Israel rebelled in Exodus 17:7, and threatened God saying, “If you don't give us better food and water, we are going back to Egypt”. This ridiculous threat tested God's patience, but clearly had nothing to do with God's offer to King Ahaz. God was offering visual confirmation that Isaiah spoke the truth, but Ahaz wanted none of it.

Isaiah was clearly frustrated at the King's response, so Isaiah gave him a sign anyway. It was a sign to all of Judah that should have blown their minds, “Behold a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel (God with us).

Matthew 1:23

Isaiah's prophecy of a future sign to the nation of Judah of a virgin being with child seems cryptic, and might lead to much debate, but Matthew 1:23 interprets it clearly for us. Matthew tells us that the angel appeared to Joseph and told him that the Holy Spirit had come upon his wife to be, Mary, and she was pregnant with a son. Then we are told that this fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah 7:14. The birth of Jesus Christ was the fulfillment of Isaiah 7:14. Naturally the critics jump through hurdles

trying to disprove this by saying that the Hebrew word translated "virgin" in Isaiah 7 could mean just an unmarried young woman; but not only is it usually translated virgin but when the Jews themselves translated it into Greek 200 years before Christ, they used the clear Greek word for virgin. As Christians, we have no problem believing Matthew's New Testament version that Isaiah was referring to Christ's miraculous birth.

The cool thing about Old Testament prophecy is that it quite often had both a near view and fulfillment, but also a far view that applies to us today. In Isaiah's near view, he may have been saying in Isa.7:16 that before a child conceived could reach accountability, the two nations threatening Judah would be destroyed. In Isa.8:3, Isaiah had a son and before the boy was able to make his own decisions, Syria and Israel would no longer be a threat. This fits with the fact that both Syria and Israel fell by 722 BC. The more important far view that Matthew says was fulfilled by Christ was that since Judah had rejected God, the only sign they will get is the virgin birth of the Messiah who would be the only remedy for their sin. Only through a virgin could help come to the house of David. Only through God's intervention could all the promises of God to bless the world come true.

ISAIAH 8-9

Isaiah chapter 8 is a confirmation of what Isaiah told King Ahaz that before a child could grow up, Syria and Israel would be no more. Assyria would attack and destroy both Damascus and Samaria, the two capitals of Syria and Israel, and then repopulate the lands with foreign settlers. In Isa.8:4, we read that at the time Isaiah made the prophecy, a prophetess conceived and gave birth to a son, but before the boy grew up "the wealth of Damascus and the spoil of Samaria will be carried away". Isaiah went on to say that Assyria would also attack Judah, but God would protect Jerusalem. Isaiah 9 is a prophetic Messianic prediction of God's future dealings with Judah. He begins in 9:1 by saying that in the past the area around the Galilee got no respect, but in the future God "shall make it glorious". In that future day the people will see "a great light". The people had lived in darkness but "the light will shine on them". In John 1:4-5, the Apostle tells us that in Jesus we have "the light of men" and the "light shines in the darkness". Since most of Jesus' ministry was around the Sea of Galilee, we can conclude that Isaiah's prophecy was about Jesus. Before, God humbled the land of the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali around the Galilee, but in the future God would honor that area with the ministry of Christ. In Isa.9:4-5, he uses symbols of winning the battle as Gideon did with Midian to symbolize God's liberation of Judah. How could this be? Isaiah 9:6-7 gives us the Messianic prophecy that explains it. "For us a child will be born, a son shall be given...and His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace". He will rule forever on the throne of David, and bring eternal justice and righteousness. God alone will accomplish this for us. In this passage we read at least five facts about the promised Messiah: 1. He will be born a child, a Son, 2. He will rule the Kingdom of God, 3. Four descriptive names tell us He will be a great teacher, He will be God in the flesh who is eternal and He will bring peace for the first time, 4. He will rule forever from David's throne in Jerusalem, 5. This will all be accomplished by the zeal of the Lord (not by human effort).

The Virgin Birth

For the last 2000 years, Jesus' humanity has been disputed or His deity denied. Clearly the religious leaders in Jesus' day knew He was claiming deity as we read in John 5:18, "The Jews were seeking to kill Him because not only was He breaking the Sabbath but he was...making Himself equal with God." Therefore the New Testament authors and Isaiah before them devoted their writing to establish both the humanity and the deity of Christ. The supernatural incarnation of Jesus sets the foundation for the nature of Christ being 100% man and 100% God in the same person. By being both, only Jesus was qualified to die a perfect vicarious sacrifice for our sins, and thus reconcile us to God. At this point we might ask the same question as Mary asked in Luke 1:34 when she asked the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The answer the angel gave was simple but beyond our understanding, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High God will overshadow you". By giving Isaiah the prophecy of this great sign of the virgin birth in Isaiah 7:14, and by Matthew 1:23 quoting Isaiah as being fulfilled by the virgin birth of Jesus Christ, the Scriptures are telling us that God supernaturally intervened to send into the world that completely unique person of Christ who alone is capable of redeeming mankind. The virgin birth is the sign God gave that God is with us and God loves us so He sent His Son to save us.

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