

Who is this “Immanuel” anyway?

Some of you may be aware that this passage in Isaiah 7—along with Matthew's citation in Matt. 1—has stimulated a lot of discussion among pastors and scholars for many years. I don't think this is really just an academic issue, though, so I thought I'd take some space to offer some thoughts that couldn't quite fit in the sermon.

Here's a breakdown of the issues involved:

1. Most scholars and pastors are not content to say that Isaiah is simply referring to Jesus. After all, Isaiah says this will be a “sign” for Ahaz and the leaders of Judah (the “you” in v. 14 is plural). How could a baby born over 700 years later be a sign to them?

2. So, who is Isaiah referring to? Is it the faithful King Hezekiah (Ahaz's son who would have been about 6-10 years old at the time)? Is it one of Isaiah's sons (see ch. 8)? Another?

3. And if this isn't immediately referring to Jesus, why does Matthew quote from it when telling about Mary's conception and Jesus' birth?

4. In addition, the word that has sometimes been translated “virgin” is difficult. Hebrew has another word that specifically means “virgin.” This word really means, “a young woman of marriageable age.” When the Hebrew Scriptures were translated into Greek a couple hundred years before Jesus, however, the Greek word used was specifically the word for “virgin.”

So these are the main issues. Let me offer some suggestions on how we might respond to these questions:

1. First, we can look at what prophecy is. Instead of thinking that every prophecy has one specific fulfillment, we might think of prophecy as a growing, blooming promise. As the prophet communicates a promise, we get glimpses over time of how God is fulfilling that promise. So King Hezekiah or Isaiah's son do give us a glimpse into this promise, but Jesus is the ultimate evidence and reality of “God With Us.” It was a promise whose fulfillment grew until it bloomed in Jesus. The language throughout this section of Isaiah even seems to point us beyond all the temporary glimpses into a more cosmic, universal, and eternal fulfillment.

2. Second, it is true that Isaiah wasn't emphasizing the mother's virginity. He was emphasizing the reality the child would symbolize. Virginity is, however, in the scope of the word, and those who translated the Scriptures into Greek knew that. In fact, at the time Jesus was born and because of this interpretation, some Jews were expecting a virgin mother of the Messiah. In other words, while Isaiah was not emphasizing virginity, he was not excluding it as part of the promise's ultimate fulfillment.

3. What the New Testament writers (like Matthew) found in Jesus was a whole new way of understanding the prophets and the Old Testament as a whole. In it, they saw again and again, realities and promises of God that were glimpsed in figures like Abraham and Moses, King David and King Hezekiah. When they looked at Jesus, they didn't just glimpse, but saw these realities fully. God needed to remind Ahaz and whoever else would lead his people Israel that Yahweh was the God of Israel, and this child Immanuel did this for a time. This promise was fully lived out, though, when he came to be with us, walk among us, and give his life for us in the person of Jesus.