

Isaiah 7:14

I heard a Jewish anti-missionary say that Isaiah 7:14 has been purposefully mistranslated with “virgin” in Christian Bibles, to fit a pagan concept of a virgin giving birth, specifically to Jesus.¹

Refuting the virgin birth of Yeshua is a common practice of liberals in Christianity, who often doubt anything supernatural, and consequently anti-missionaries have joined the bandwagon by claiming Isaiah 7:14 is not a prophecy of the Messiah to come, that the Gospels have misapplied this word, and even that the concept of a virgin giving birth is “pagan.” Messianics who are unfamiliar with the Isaianic expectation of one to be born find themselves very easy to be manipulated.

It is undeniable that Isaiah 7:14 plays a role in the Messianic expectation of the Apostolic Scriptures. Matthew 1:22-23 attests, “Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ‘BEHOLD, THE VIRGIN SHALL BE WITH CHILD AND SHALL BEAR A SON, AND THEY SHALL CALL HIS NAME IMMANUEL,’ which translated means, ‘GOD WITH US’” (NASU). Here as a prophetic support for Yeshua’s Messiahship and Incarnation, Isaiah 7:14 is quoted. When the Revised Standard Version was originally published in 1952, it caused quite a stir rendering Isaiah 7:14 as “Behold, a young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.” Consequently, since then, the subject of the virgin birth and how Isaiah 7:14 should be viewed has been quite a debate.²

The original backdrop of this word concerns an alliance between Rezin, king of Aram (Syria), and Pekah, king of the Northern Kingdom of Ephraim, who prepare to attack the Southern Kingdom of Judah (Isaiah 7:1-2). If this alliance is successful, and Judah is destroyed, so is all hope of God being faithful to His covenant promises. The Prophet Isaiah and his son Shear-Jashub are directed by God to go to King Ahaz of Judah (Isaiah 7:3-6), and are specifically told to tell him “It shall not stand nor shall it come to pass” (Isaiah 7:7). Isaiah asks Ahaz to request of God a sign that He will be faithful to His promises, and although Ahaz refuses (Isaiah 7:12), the Prophet tells him what the sign will be:

“Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, a young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel” (Isaiah 7:14, RSV).

It is at this point that the anti-missionaries stop. Matthew has misapplied a word that was given to King Ahaz in ancient times that only speaks of the conception of a child called Immanuel. People are then easily led to conclude that the whole “Christian” idea of a so-called virgin birth is wrong.

First to take notice of is the first clause: *yitten Adonai hu l'khem ot* (יִתֵּן אֲדֹנָי הוּא לְכֶם אוֹת), literally “will give the Lord Him to you a sign.” The most overlooked part of this clause is how *l'khem* or “to you” appears in the **plural**, not the singular,³ thus indicating that the sign of which Isaiah speaks regards the entire nation of Israel and not just King Ahaz as an individual.

The second clause indicates what is going to happen: *hineh ha'almah hara v'yoledet ben* (הִנֵּה הַיְלֵמָה הַרְהוּ וְיֹלְדֵת בֶּן), literally “behold the young woman/virgin look and bearing a son.” There is endless controversy as to how *ha'almah* (הַיְלֵמָה), either “the young woman/maiden” or “the virgin,” should be translated. Note that it is insufficient for us to just consider *almah* here; the definite article “the” in *ha'almah* is what is used in the text, and is intensified by being prefixed with the imperative *hineh* or “behold.”

¹ This has been adapted from the article “Answering the ‘Frequently Avoided Questions’ About the Messiahship of Yeshua” by J.K. McKee.

² For a summary of this debate, consult the article “Virgin Birth of Christ” in Norman L. Geisler, ed., *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), pp 759-764.

³ The LXX follows suit, rendering *l'khem* with the plural *humin* (ὑμῖν).

Is the scope of Isaiah's prophecy here just limited to a young woman conceiving and having a child? Indeed, the most common anti-missionary tactic is to say that if Isaiah were truly speaking of a virgin, then the word *betulah* (בְּתוּלָה), used to describe Rebekah in Genesis 24:16, would have been used. However, when one examines varied Tanach usages of the word *almah* and weigh them into the equation, this is not the conclusion that a responsible interpreter can draw.

It is very true that Rebekah is described as a *betulah* or "virgin" in Genesis 24:16, but later in Genesis 24:43, as an unmarried woman, she is also called an *almah*. The usage of *betulah* is unclear, necessitating the addition of the clause "no man had had relations with her" in Genesis 24:16, whereas the usage of *almah* requires no such clarification. Miriam, the sister of Moses, is referred to as an *almah* in Exodus 2:8, being called by the daughter of Pharaoh to fetch Moses' mother to nurse him, and we should surely not expect for Miriam to have had sexual relations at such a young age.

The pre-Christian Septuagint translators undoubtedly understood the difference between *betulah* and *almah*, and thus they were able to render *almah* as *parthenos* (παρθένος), "female of marriageable age w. focus on virginity" (BDAG).⁴

But we need not disconnect Isaiah 7:14 from the verses following in Isaiah 7:15-17:

"He will eat curds and honey at the time [h]e knows *enough* to refuse evil and choose good. For before the boy will know *enough* to refuse evil and choose good, the land whose two kings you dread will be forsaken. The LORD will bring on you, on your people, and on your father's house such days as have never come since the day that Ephraim separated from Judah, the king of Assyria" (NASU).

It needs to be noted how *ha'na'ar* (הַנְּעָר) or "the lad/boy," with the definite article, is what appears in Isaiah 7:16, which would need to refer to some specific person. Is this specific lad or boy, the child to be born who would be known as Immanuel? An excellent answer is provided by Michael Rydelnik, in that the boy being referred to in Isaiah 7:16 is actually Isaiah's young son Shear-Jashub, who accompanied the Prophet to witness what was said to King Ahaz. He eloquently addresses some of the difficulties seen in Isaiah 7:13-16:

"While many have considered v. 16 to be a continuation of the prophecy in 7:13-15, the grammar of the passage suggests otherwise. The opening phrase in Hebrew [*ki b'terem*, כִּי בְּתֵרֵם] can reflect an adversative nuance, allowing for a disjunction between the child described in 7:13-15 and the one described in verse 16. There is a different child in view in this verse.

"*The Identity of the Child.* So who is the child in 7:16? In light of Isaiah being directed to bring his own son to the confrontation with the king at the conduit of the upper pool (cf. 7:3), it makes most sense to identify the lad as Shear-Jashub. Otherwise there would be no purpose for God directing Isaiah to bring the boy. Thus having promised the virgin birth of the Messiah (7:13-15), the prophet then points to the very small boy that he has brought along and says, 'But before *this* lad (using the article with a demonstrative force) knows enough to refuse evil and choose good, the land whose two kings you dread will be forsaken.' In this way, Shear-Jashub functioned as a sign to the king. Apparently, Isaiah could tell Judah in the very next chapter, 'Here I am with the children the LORD has given me to be signs and wonders in Israel from the LORD of Hosts who dwells on Mount Zion' (8:18).

"*The Identity of the Addressee.* To whom does Isaiah make this prediction? What is not evident in the English text is plain in the Hebrew. The prophet returned to using the second-person singular pronoun in 7:16 ('the land of the two kings *you* [sg. {Heb. *atah*, אַתָּה}] dread'). In 7:10-11 he used the singular to address King Ahaz. Then, when addressing the house of David with the prophecy of Messiah, he shifted to the plural. But in 7:16, he addressed King Ahaz, using the singular pronoun once again and giving him a near prophecy: before Shear-Jashub would be able to discern good from evil, the northern confederacy attacking Judah would fall. Within two years, Tiglath-Pileser defeated both Israel and Syria, just as the prophet had predicted.

"Having completed his long-term prophecy, Isaiah gave a short-term prophecy. In doing so, he followed a frequent pattern of his book. He consistently did this so his readership could have confidence in the distant prediction by observing the fulfillment in the near one."⁵

Ultimately, the answer that the House of David and King Ahaz would have sought to all the problems of Judah, Israel, and even the nations at large—was only to be found in the far future by a miraculous birth of one who would be called "Immanuel" or God with us. This is a Child who would live in a time when there would be

⁴ BDAG, 777.

⁵ Michael Rydelnik, *The Messianic Hope: Is the Hebrew Bible Messianic?* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2010), pp 157-158.

“curds and honey” (Isaiah 7:15) present, which Rydelnik takes to represent “the food of oppression” (cf. Isaiah 7:21-22), in that “the prophecy of Messiah concludes with a hint that He will be born and grow up...at a time when Judah is oppressed by a foreign power,”⁶ which would surely be the case with Judea dominated by Rome in the First Century. The One prophesied to be born is a different kind of king who has never before been seen. Indeed, as Isaiah 9:6-7 further describes,

“For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; and the government will rest on His shoulders; and His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. There will be no end to the increase of *His* government or of peace, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness from then on and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will accomplish this” (NASU).

For Matthew, Isaiah 7:14 clearly spoke of the Messiah to come, and the text can certainly be understood from this point of view. Indeed, many passages that appear throughout Isaiah 7:1-12:6 can only be applied to a figure to come, including: the wonderful ruling son (Isaiah 9:1-7) and the reign of Jesse’s son (Isaiah 11:1-16), **not** someone from Ahaz’ contemporary period. Michael L. Brown concludes, “as Matthew looked back at these prophecies hundreds of years later, it would have been apparent to him that (1) these chapters were clearly linked together, and (2) the promises of a worldwide, glorious reign of the promised Davidic king were not yet realized.”⁷ Isaiah 7:14, as applied to the birth of Yeshua, would not have been provided isolated from other Isaianic expectations considered by Matthew.

The second criticism from anti-missionaries is that the virgin birth—perhaps more correctly termed the virgin conception—is “pagan.” This line of reasoning used to attack the Messiahship of Yeshua can find many who are eager to embrace it, primarily because of the influence of certain “Messianic” publications and ministries who during the past decade (1996-present) have directed a great deal of spiritual venom against the Christian Church. It has been widely asserted by these publications and ministries that the Christian Church is “totally saturated” with paganism (and often *their* subjective views of paganism at that). Rather than choose a constructive way to dialogue with Christians about issues such as Torah observance and the Hebraic background of Yeshua’s life, in a quest to be Biblical, damning all Christians and the Church is the method that is preferred. So, we should not be surprised that when all the rhetoric regarding “paganism” is unleashed that anti-missionaries find a great opportunity to attack a significant area of Apostolic doctrine.

It is not impossible to find some possible parallels between a virgin conceiving by supernatural means, as depicted in the Gospels, and what one sees in pagan mythology. In fact, significant parallels exist between the crucifixion and resurrection of Yeshua and the play Prometheus Bound by Aeschylus. If a misguided person wants to use these criteria to reject the Messiahship of Yeshua, and indeed the gospel, one can choose to do so. But I would severely warn the person who takes this course of action **to be consistent in what he rejects** on the basis of “paganism”—something that anti-missionaries *fail* to do.

If the virgin conception of Yeshua is indeed “pagan,” then could it not also be true that the Creation account and Noahdic Flood are likewise borrowed from paganism? The Sumerian Epic of Gilgamesh strongly mirrors the story of the Flood described in the Bible. How do we know that the Epic of Gilgamesh is not a prototype for what is described in the opening chapters of Genesis?⁸ Anti-missionaries are certainly not going to answer these questions, yet they are perfectly valid because liberals who deny Yeshua’s virgin birth likewise deny that the opening chapters of the Bible, the Exodus, the Conquest, and possibly even the monarchy of Israel is not valid history and is largely mythology.⁹ How far are we willing to go? Will one be consistent with how much of the Bible

⁶ Ibid., 156.

His specific reason for this is that “fields will not be cultivated and [they] will become pastures for oxen and sheep (7:23-25). The effect of this will be an overabundance of daily (or butter/curds) because of the pasturing of livestock, and an excess of honey because bees will be able to pollinate the wild flowers” (Ibid.). Assyria is said to have shaved the land of people (Isaiah 7:20), and a similar situation would be in place at the arrival of the Messiah during the Roman era.

⁷ Michael L. Brown, *Answering Jewish Objections to Jesus, Volume 3: Messianic Prophecy Objections* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003), 25.

⁸ Cf. Jon D. Levenson, “Genesis,” in Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Study Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp 8-11.

⁹ These, and other viewpoints, are examined and refuted in the book *A Biblical History of Israel* by Iain Provan, V. Philips Long, and Tremper Longman III (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2003).

could in actuality be “pagan”? Or, will one have the discernment to see that the enemy has always had a counterfeit to God’s truth?¹⁰

¹⁰ For a further discussion, consult the article “Is the Story of Yeshua Pagan?” by J.K. McKee (appearing in *Confronting Critical Issues*).