

The Remnant

An interpretation of Isaiah 7:14-16

by Lynn Andrew

- 14 Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign:
Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son
and shall call his name Immanuel.
- 15 Curds and honey shall he eat,
that he may know to refuse the evil
and choose the good.
- 16 For before the child shall know to refuse the evil
and choose the good,
the land that you dread shall be forsaken of both her kings.

The “you” is King Ahaz of Judah, an idol-worshiping young man barely in his twenties who is being threatened by the kings of Northern Israel and Syria in that they have formed a military alliance to depose him. The prophet Isaiah has informed Ahaz that the alliance will not last, and therefore not to be hasty in purchasing help from powerful Assyria. When Ahaz discounts Isaiah’s advice, the Lord makes him an astounding offer: “Ask for a sign—any sign you choose [in order to establish your faith in the true God and the reliability of the prophet’s prediction].” Ahaz mockingly brushes off that offer, to which Isaiah responds that the court wearsies his God (a mild and roundabout rebuke in light of Ahaz’s crimes, quite possibly designed to avoid the king’s wrath and preserve the prophet’s neck). Isaiah then declares: “Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign: Behold”

Professor Wolf¹ remarks that verse 14 "has suffered greatly at the hands of interpreters." He notes that conservatives point to the messianic aspect but fail to explain the verse in its context, while liberals look only for historical fulfillment. His own interpretation is that the son of the virgin is Isaiah's second son, the son of a prophetess he is about to marry who would become his second wife (8:1-3 he says concerns that). Dr. Wolf does not explain how the boy's name, Maher-shalal-hash-baz, meaning "quickly plunder, quickly loot," referring to the Assyrian army, relates to *Immanuel*, "God is with us," but declares that Isaiah's future son may be the one meant when *Immanuel* is again mentioned in 8:8. At any rate this son was to be a sign for Ahaz and his generation. Dr. Wolf notes too that in order for the sign to function it would have to be consummated within a few years, which means that something in addition to a prediction of Jesus' birth must present be in it. His interpretation he says fulfills that requirement since "Ahaz would have realized that soon after the birth of Isaiah's son the prophecy would be fulfilled." That agrees with the fact that the two kings who had terrified Ahaz were pulled back to defend their own territories against plundering by the Assyrian army. Thus the alliance was dead either just before or soon after Quickly-Plunder-Quickly-Loot was born. Prof. Wolf interprets verse 16 as giving the time frame: "Before the boy would know the difference between right and wrong, Ahaz's two enemies would be destroyed by Assyria."

Professor Oswalt² favors a similar view, but as is his manner he takes plenty of space to present various options. He notes that in contrast to Isaiah's two sons, who have nothing unusual about them other than their names, "there is an aura of mystery about the Immanuel figure." Dr.

1 Wolf, Herbert M., *Interpreting Isaiah: The Suffering and Glory of the Messiah*, Academe Books, Zondervan

2 Oswalt, John N., *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1-39*, Eerdmans

Oswalt points out that Immanuel's father is not identified, and Immanuel himself is "touched upon" only briefly and then reappears "suddenly in 8:8 as a possessor of the land." He confesses that the "enigmatic nature of the references make it extremely difficult to identify the child of Ahaz's time." But then he says that the possibility that "no particular child was intended is even less attractive." Oswalt considers that a literal and particular child would be "significant to the framework of the sign." This is due to the literal time frame of the political issue the sign refers to. Therefore the child must be born "in a certain time frame, and its specific existence in that time frame is intrinsic to the function of the sign." He declares however that "it would not be necessary that Ahaz know of the birth, only that at some point he became aware that the promised child had been born." Finally Dr. Oswalt concludes that "perhaps the most attractive option is that Immanuel and Maher-shalal-hash-baz are one and the same." Of the possible interpretations of verse 15, Oswalt presents two, and they both relate to a measure of time that would coincide with the political misfortunes of Samaria and Damascus: 1) the length of time before a child would develop moral discrimination, or some twelve years; and 2) the length of time before a child is able to speak, or about three years. He considers verse 16 to be essentially one with verse 15.

Dr. Buksbazen,³ a Hebrew scholar, disagrees. He notes that some Jewish commentators have identified the child with Isaiah's second son, but to him it is clear that Isaiah would never have referred to his wife using a term that was never applied to a married woman. In other words he does not even consider the possibility that the prophetess could have been Isaiah's second wife. He agrees with Oswalt's remark that Isaiah's son did not resemble "even approximately the exalted figure [of

3 Buksbazen, Victor, *The Prophet Isaiah: A Commentary*, The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry

Immanuel] ... so majestically depicted by Isaiah." Dr. Buksbazen is one who minimizes the need for an interpretation that is directly significant to the contemporary political situation. That position fails to account for the obvious contemporary reference in 16. He gives his interpretation of verses 15 and 16 as referring to the "primitive conditions which will prevail during the early life of Immanuel," whom he says "fits only Christ of the New Testament."

Professor Goldingay⁴ agrees that a literal woman must be in view, but that "Isaiah need not have a particular woman in mind; she could be any woman who will soon marry and conceive in the ordinary way." The functioning of the sign is that when the baby is born, the threat from the alliance will have disappeared. Then by the time he knows the difference between good and bad food there will be good food available and the land of the enemy conspiracy will be devastated. "Thus his mother will call him 'God is with us' out of gratitude for God's amazing faithfulness." The latter part of this interpretation and the reason he gives for the *Immanuel* title depend on a minority opinion that "curds and honey" refers to the blessing of good food and prosperity.

Dr. Motyer⁵ sets the stage by noting that "the sign is no longer a matter of invitation but of prediction, no longer persuading to faith but confirming divine displeasure." He then prescribes the form that the sign must take as something that would "confirm all that the Lord said through Isaiah to Ahaz," namely that Ahaz had failed in his "moment of decision," and divine retribution would be the consequence of his unbelief. Thus by Motyer's own ground rule the sign is necessarily tied to the issue of Ahaz's apostasy and not necessarily tied to the political context. Dr. Motyer then notes that *Immanuel* is a title, and while it is peculiar to Isaiah, it belongs to the "Davidic-Messianic fabric." Therefore it must

4 Goldingay, John, *Understanding the Bible Commentary Series: Isaiah*, BakerBooks

5 Motyer, J. Alec, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction & Commentary*, IVP Academic

be much more than "the pious affirmation or prayer of a mother in Judah in the envisaged troubles." He goes on to propose that we test the literal-woman hypothesis by imagining a young woman becoming pregnant and calling her child Immanuel. "Where is the 'sign' quality in this—especially after Isaiah has spoken the name and set the idea in motion?" In other words, how could an intentional enactment of Isaiah's words prove anything? He considers that "such naming would be cynically dismissed in the palace as the product of female hysteria." It would be a "depressing anticlimax" after the Lord's dramatic offer and "Isaiah's dramatic outburst about the Sovereign himself giving a sign!" Dr. Motyer insists that something more than this is called for, and he finds it in 8:8 where *Immanuel* is mentioned in connection with the land. After a careful analysis of the Hebrew words he concludes that "Immanuel cannot be simply any child whatever." Then in view of the obvious reference to "the Davidic king whose birth delivers his people" he concludes that we have a "sign that lives up to its promise. ... Isaiah foresaw the birth of the divine son of David and also laid the foundation for the understanding of the unique nature of his birth." He too omits giving a specific exegesis of verse 16, which is the verse that anchors the prophecy to the political context. Thus Dr. Motyer cuts loose the contextual issue, allowing it to float up to a level where no identification of the son is needed other than Jesus Christ, the son of the virgin and the son of God. Motyer's discussion of verse 15 leads into a further critique of the contemporary-son theories. He explains how "curds and honey" is properly interpreted as a symbol of poverty, agreeing with Buksbazen about its signifying that "the divine child is to be born into the poverty of his people." Then he summarizes the various proposed meanings of evil and good in verse 15 as ranging from bad and good fruit to moral evil and good. Thus it could mean that the child could distinguish tastes of food at an early age, "but it could equally mean 'years of discretion' and the

faculty of moral choice." He declares that "the time factor is probably decidedly vague," but he does admit that the implication is that Immanuel's birth is imminent and that Isaiah's audience would have understood that some girl, presently a virgin, "would marry and in due course bear Immanuel." To explain how this could have been fulfilled, he mentions the second-son-of-Isaiah theory as one that could be taken seriously except for the "fatal difficulty" in that Quickly-plunder-quickly-loot and *Immanuel* are distinct in the text and the sense of it; therefore the two names could not refer to the same boy. Then he goes on to elaborate his theory that no definite time factor is meant, and he does it by attempting to separate the "threat" from the "promise." The sign is given in the context of the contemporary threat; but the promise is about the coming Messiah, which before Christ was a matter of imminency and not connected to any definite measure of time. "The promise awaited its time but the threat was immediate." So Motyer makes nothing substantial of verse 15 outside of its messianic reference while allowing verse 16 to carry a contemporary meaning relative to the threat. While Prof. Motyer is a conservative scholar who does not support the two-Isaiah movement, he does seem to be applying the saw at verse 15 and making the son of the virgin two.

Professor Alexander,⁶ whose voluminous work dates back before the year 1850, fills seven pages on verse 14, summarizing the positions of dozens of other commentators. He does not entirely discount the possibility of a dual meaning (that both the Messiah and a contemporary son are included in the best interpretation), but he favors a messiah-only version which nevertheless retains a "connection with a promise of immediate deliverance" directed at Ahaz. Regarding the efforts to identify a particular woman and a particular son of Isaiah's day, he charges them

⁶ Alexander, Joseph A., *Commentry on Isaiah*, Kregel Classics

with "gratuitously assuming facts of which we have no evidence ... such as the second marriage of ... Isaiah." He criticizes the contemporary-son theories as being inadequate signs since "although they may afford a sign in one of the senses of that term ... they do not afford a sign such as the context would lead us to expect." Ahaz had been given the opportunity to pick any sign of his own choosing. Had he actually devised one, it would have to have a certain property: in order for it to be significant of divine authority it would not have been something in the ordinary course of nature. So it seems improbable that "after such an offer the sign bestowed would be merely a thing of everyday occurrence, or at most the application of a symbolical name." Dr. Alexander also notes that "the solemnity with which the prophet speaks of the predicted birth, not as a usual and natural event, but as something which excites his own astonishment," leads one to expect something quite out of the ordinary. Regarding verse 15 he says, "the simple sense of the prediction is that the desolation of Judah caused by the invasion by [the kings of Samaria and Damascus] should be only temporary. This idea is symbolically expressed by making the new-born child subsist during his infancy on curds and honey, instead of the ordinary food of an agricultural population." He summarizes the meaning of verses 15 and 16 as "Judah shall lie waste for a short time, and only a short time, for before that short time has expired its invaders shall themselves be invaded and destroyed." Although Prof. Alexander's reasoning is not straightforward, he does address all of the elements in these three verses while insisting that they form an integrated whole. Primarily it is a prophetic promise of the virgin birth of Christ, but there is a "connection with a promise of immediate deliverance" relative to the contemporary political crisis in Jerusalem. Although he manages to make the relevance to the context nontrivial in a sense, in a more practical sense it is hard to see how it would function as a sign to Ahaz, whose immature mental capacity was

evidently far below that of Prof. Alexander's.

Dr. Webb⁷ takes a different approach. He observes that the tenor of the passage is theological, having to do with belief and unbelief. Therefore he says that the sign must be understood from "the perspective of faith," and refers to the previous chapter where the final verse "speaks of a righteous remnant, a 'holy seed,' that would survive the coming judgment." Isaiah is not without a witness when he goes to meet Ahaz on this occasion; the Lord has told him to take his son, Shear-jashub (whose name means "a remnant shall return" or "a remnant will repent") with him when he goes to "challenge Ahaz to repent and join the remnant who believe." Thus Ahaz is given "a veiled message of judgment." Earlier in the book of Isaiah "Zion was pictured as a woman (literally, 'daughter of Zion') in 1:8." Now she is depicted as a young woman in the pains of childbirth. "The central statement of verse 14 is literally: 'The young woman who has conceived and is giving birth to a son' If the young woman is Zion, then her son is the faithful remnant who will emerge from her sufferings. ... God will be with the faithful remnant who gather round Isaiah (cf. 8:16), not with the unbelieving Ahaz and the rebellious nation as a whole."

After reviewing what these learned scholars have to say, we can go back to the text and note that if nothing else demands contemporary political significance, verse 16 does: while it was literally true that those kings would be dead before the Messiah came, there is a definite time element that refers to the context. Matthew the Gospel writer and all conservative commentators agree that verse 14 has a messianic reference, so the correct interpretation must have that in view too. But verse 14 has to belong to the contemporary situation as well because the same child, whether literal or figurative, is the subject of all three verses. To

⁷ Webb, Barry G., *The Message of Isaiah*, IVP

insist that the sign must not be a trivial or commonplace thing is also quite logical, which rules out Isaiah's son in spite of—if not because of—his fancy name. That leaves Dr. Webb's interpretation as the only one that really works, and it has the further advantage of featuring a metaphor worthy of Isaiah's poetic art—or shall we say of the Holy Spirit's art?

It is not easy to find an interpretation that satisfies all of the requirements at once: 1) it must be a sign with some practical meaning to Ahaz; 2) it must be miraculous or extremely unlikely in order to be convincing; 3) it must represent a concern of the Lord's that transcends Ahaz's concerns—such as faith and trust in the true God; 4) it must be expressible in terms of a virgin bearing a son; 5) its salient characteristic must be Immanuel, "God is with us"; 6) it must involve a maturing process; 7) it must integrate all three verses and cement the poetry to the rest of the chapter.

Dr. Webb's theory is good, but there is a simpler way to look at it: the son *is* Immanuel. The developing child is the fledgling and growing faith of the remnant. Their faith is that God is with them. The virgin daughter of Zion says, "God is with us!"—that *is* her faith. The "son" is a personification not of the holy remnant but of the infant faith of the remnant, and the remnant herself is the virgin who in God's eyes is holy because of her faith—which faith himself is the miraculous offspring of the daughter of Zion.

Let us see if we can locate two or three witnesses for this interpretation.

For the first witness we should look up the first appearance of "virgin," to see how the particular Hebrew word in 7:14 is first used in the Bible. It happens to be in Genesis 24:43, referring to Rebekah. She is not a daughter of Israel, but her son is Israel. In Isaiah 7:14 the virgin's

son is not Israel, he is Immanuel, "God is with us." Put the two offspring together and you have something that sounds like the faith of Israel. Someone objects that that particular witness is not the most reliable type: for one thing Rebekah is far removed from the scene and for another Northern Israel is out of the picture, so the issue is not about all of Israel. Isaiah's son, Remnant-Will-Repent, is right here on the spot. He need not say anything; Isaiah made sure of that. His name says it all.

As a second witness we call on Isaiah's other uses of the word in 7:14 translated "virgin." He is absent; there is none. In fact *almah* is used only seven times in the Bible, and this is the last appearance of it. In three out of the seven instances it is translated "maid" or "damsel" in the KJV, and it literally means young woman, though virgin is often implied. The other word commonly translated virgin, *bēthuwlah* (the literal meaning of which is virgin), appears four times in Isaiah but only once in connection with Israel or Zion. That is in 37:22: "The virgin, the daughter of Zion, hath despised thee, laughed thee to scorn; the daughter of Jerusalem hath shaken her head at thee." This happens to be the word of the Lord spoken in reply to blasphemies against himself that were hurled at the citizens of Jerusalem by a representative of Assyria, the very evil power that Ahaz had turned to and trusted in. The Lord is declaring that these particular citizens of Zion have vigorous faith in him—30 years or so after he had told Ahaz that there would come such a revival of faith. We might ask the virgin daughter of Zion how it is that she is now a virgin by the more definite term, but I am afraid she would laugh at our slowness to perceive the miracle that has taken place.

The third witness is actually several, the audience that had gathered around Isaiah and the king. It was a public place where the Lord told Isaiah to go find the king and deliver the oracle. According to a translator's note in the New English Translation, "It is very likely that Isaiah

pointed to a woman who was present at the scene of the prophet's interview with Ahaz. Isaiah's address to the 'house of David' and his use of second plural forms suggests other people were present, and his use of the second feminine singular verb form ('you will name') later in the verse is best explained if addressed to a woman who is present." This would apply just as well if Isaiah were using "woman" in a figurative sense, waving his hand toward the people present, in which case Ahaz would understand the virgin to mean the citizens of Jerusalem, whom Isaiah calls daughters several times in other places. Hence the NET renders "[you] shall call his name Immanuel" as "you, young woman, will name him Immanuel." Now if we translate that metaphor, we get "you, people of Zion, will be saying "God is with us." Ahaz would understand this as a rebuke against his policy of eradicating faith in the God of Israel from the hearts of his subjects.

Someone is complaining that the second witness is not acceptable since according to the progressive scholars of the church that claims to be the new Israel, chapter 37 was not written by Isaiah. To answer this we call on a peculiar witness in chapter seven: the apparently excessive and prosaic description of the spot where Isaiah delivered the Lord's promise, saying that he would increase faith in Zion. We are told it was "at the end of the conduit of the upper pool on the road to Washer's field." Why does it not say simply, "in a public place"? It so happens that when the enemy comes to hurl that challenge to the faith of the people of Zion, he stands on precisely the same spot: "by the conduit of the upper pool on the road to Washer's field," using exactly the same words. (36:2) The citizens of Zion have turned away from Ahaz's evil religion and chosen the good and true faith that Isaiah preached, thus exercising and proving their faith. A nice touch is that the people who were formerly outside the city proper are now inside the walls (though some are on the wall—some are always on the fence).

What is this? Another witness? Hezekiah's call to Isaiah on that occasion of the enemy's hurling threats at them reveals the king's focus on faith and his fear of a miscarriage: "Children are come to the point of birth, and there is not strength to bring them forth ... therefore pray for the remnant that is left." (37:3,4)

That something so dear to the heart of God would be involved in his sign to the house of David makes perfect sense. Thus the faith of the remnant of Israel is the son begotten by God. That a metaphorical virgin conceived the child means it is of God's doing, not man's. Ahaz's devil-inspired reign of unfaithfulness would install a demon altar at the temple of God. Out of that abominable culture which the king was promoting, there was being born the faith of the remnant by the sovereign will of the Creator. It was not that Israel was a virgin; the point is that the birth of the exceptional faith of Israel was God's doing, just as a son born of a virgin would have to be an exceptional act of God. This is a perfectly legitimate poetic device: the subject is not the literal subject; some arresting attribute of the poetic subject is a metaphor for something of importance concerning the real subject.

God offered to let Ahaz test him by any means as high as heaven or as low as the grave. Ahaz in his unbelief chose a lonely grave for himself (he was buried in dishonor, in a place separate from the other kings). "A virgin shall conceive" is a poetic way of saying that the sign given by the Lord was from heaven, out of this world, about something extraordinarily important. In the context of the pagan myths that Ahaz was all too familiar with, a virgin deity did bear a son. Thus it pointed to the supernatural while denying a connection to false gods by means of the name Immanuel, which implies the God of Israel.

Bearing in mind that the virgin's child is a poetic code for God-given faith, verse 15 can be interpreted various ways: 1) the former poverty of

her faith will not last long; 2) the burden of impoverished faith is the mechanism that will teach her to turn away from pagan religious ideas and embrace the truth about God; 3) unlike the faithless king (who benefited from a royal diet yet refused good and chose evil—therefore God is not with him) the faith-child would learn to refuse evil and choose good even on a meager diet *because* God is in him. The sarcasm of the third interpretation may be subtle enough that the king did not get it, especially when it merges with the favorable prophecy of the next verse, which Ahaz could take to be the essence of the sign if he chose to ignore the unfavorable judgment against him.

It would be just like Isaiah to be making a play on words with the double meaning of sour and sweet experiences leading to rejecting error and choosing truth and then in the next verse applying the same words to further the jab at Ahaz that it would be the remnant who would learn the lesson, not him, implying that the prophesied relief from the threat of the enemy conspiracy was undertaken by God for his own sake and that of the throne of David in spite of Ahaz's choosing evil. If verse 14 is the gemstone, verses 15 and 16 are the carefully-crafted setting.

In another sense the poor fare of curds and wild honey is symbolic of the remnant's hunger for the written Word. The remnant has seldom been favored by any political or religious regime, yet by the grace of God their faith flourishes in spite of being deprived of access to the Scriptures or even of access to error-free teaching.

With the metaphor of the child firmly established—and perhaps the insult to the king accomplished—verse 16 cleverly uses the length of time it takes a human child to grow up into understanding right from wrong to indicate a time period of about two or three years. It was two or three years later that Syria fell to the Assyrians.

This is what trips up interpreters: The assumption is made that the

sign, in order to be significant to Ahaz, must in some way mirror the prophesied dissolution of the Ephraim-Syrian alliance. But when Ahaz's son was later given a sign to confirm the prediction of his recovering from illness, it had no obvious resemblance, literal or figurative, to the question at hand. So the association of the sign here with the timing of the demise of the enemy is a bonus feature, not a requirement. The sign only has to prove that God is in it. And it must have been obvious to Ahaz that God was in this one: his son Hezekiah for example. Hezekiah reopened the temple doors in the first month of his reign. Quoting Nelson's Bible Dictionary, "That an ungodly man like Ahaz could have such a godly son can only be attributed to the grace of God." Thus in another metaphorical sense Ahaz's wife Abijah, mother of Hezekiah, was the young woman who had the son of faith by a miracle of God. Her name means "God is my father"; hence the faith of Hezekiah would be "God is with us." Hezekiah too is a daughter of Zion in the figurative sense of that phrase. This is reminiscent of the traditional rabbinical interpretation which holds that Hezekiah was the son of the virgin. If Ahaz did not notice the sign being fulfilled in the failure of his efforts to stamp out faith in the true and living God among the populace, he must have noticed it in his own household.

Isaiah was saying to Ahaz: "Your reign of sin, leading Judah further into unfaithfulness, will have an effect opposite to your intention. You consort with foreign gods in order to win favor with Assyria, and you intend to stomp out what little faith in the God of your fathers is left in Israel. But the Lord, in spite of your efforts, is bringing true faith to life in Judah, as unlikely as a child conceived in a virgin. This will be a sign to you of the Lord's sovereign power. You were given an opportunity to have your faith reinstated by any miracle of your choosing. You weary him with your stupidity. Now he will perform a greater sign than you could have asked for. You may despise Immanuel, but you will not kill

him. The Lord will preserve Zion during your reign not because of anything you have done rightly, but on account of the son of her virgin daughter. In the next few years, even during the infancy of their faith, I will have taught them to turn away from idolatry and learn the ways of the Lord God, which you, with all of your advantages, would not learn."

Notice how this metaphor also pictures Jesus Christ: his birth was announced by a messenger from God; he was conceived by a miracle; his infancy was in poverty; he was protected from King Herod by his stepfather, growing in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man until they called him Immanuel. It seems that what we have before us in Isaiah 7:14 is one of those Old-Testament types treasured like gold by students of Scripture because they were pictures of Jesus Christ before he was ever known to the world. But this one did not have to be discovered by digging; it lay on the surface, an outcropping so obvious that Christian theologians who were not attuned to the poetry seized it without recognizing that it fit into the larger class of types. They thought it was unique; they lusted after it; they ripped it out of its setting, stole it from the Jews, and deeded it to the church, thus starting another battle in their war with Judaism. As with all Old-Testament types, it belongs to the remnant of all ages, not only to the church: to the faithful Jews first and then to the Gentiles. These are the people God is most concerned about, and they are the ones who will rule and minister in his future Kingdom on earth, which Israel's enemies within Christendom deny.

God has always had a remnant to whom he speaks and in whom is conceived the faith and for whom he is preparing a rewarding place in time and eternity. When he punishes Israel, he makes provision for the remnant, as Isaiah mentions in other places. The ranks of the holy remnant had become thin by the time Satan's man Ahaz came along, and it looked as though the truth was about to be smothered. But God's plan

was to save Jerusalem for a certain length of time in order to raise up this precious son of his. Eventually Nebuchadnezzar would take slaves before destroying Jerusalem, but that was a hundred years later, and by that time the faithful remnant had produced servants of the stature of Daniel and his friends who would carry the scroll of Isaiah with them; and their influence would spread throughout the Babylonian and Persian empires. When Jesus was born, it was Persians who knew that he was the King of the Jews. They knew when and where to find him by calculations handed down from Daniel who became the chief of the magi in Babylon, and so this remnant from the past supported the child Christ when the remnant in Judea under Roman rule had again become thin.

God used Isaiah to nurture the remnant's faith under Ahaz as he used Joseph to nurture and protect Jesus in the days of Herod. In that sense the son of the virgin was Isaiah's son as Jesus was Joseph's son. Oswalt *et al* were on the right track, but since their sense of poetry was unequal to the challenge, they took to be literal what is figurative and so were driven to make Isaiah a polygamist, thereby hurting this beautiful type of Christ.

Isaiah was instrumental too in bringing the captives back. The prophecy in which he wrote of the future Medo-Persian king by name was preserved by the faithful remnant. Later that scroll would so impress Cyrus the Great that he would be persuaded to send a remnant back to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple. The dates of those transactions are preserved in history and together with Daniel's famous prophecy of the weeks provide the data from which the day of Immanuel's visitation to Jerusalem in the manner of a king, in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, could be calculated. But when it came to pass, the child of the virgin daughter of Zion had died at the hands of the scribes in Jerusalem, and they failed to apply the information they carried in their Scriptures.

What our Lord encountered as he entered the city on what we call "the triumphal entry" was not a welcome by apostate Israel who, like Ahaz, feared the enemy more than God; it was a welcome by a believing minority who had the son alive in their hearts and so were willing to pave his way with the coats off their backs. But they were only a small minority, and their voices were despised by the religious leadership. God always maintains a remnant, and if their voices are quieted, the rocks will cry out. Their voices days later were drowned out by the majority when official Israel condemned their son Immanuel to death. Then the rocks did cry out.

There is more yet to come in the book of Isaiah about the faith of the virgin daughter of Zion. In chapter 35 we see the holy remnant coming back to Jerusalem after the deportation; but in that chapter, even more so than in chapter seven, the imagery is too grand to be limited to that historical happening. The ultimate fulfillment must be in the future, along with 7:16, which the Holy Spirit placed there in order to prepare the remnant who trust the Scriptures and are thereby informed of God's methods and purposes.

No sign could be as significant to religious people as the prophecy of the remnant: the understanding that only a fraction of those who count themselves as followers of Christ possess the miraculous offspring of Israel. The rest maintain the natural children of the world who side with Satan in generally opposing Israel, as the world and apostate Christianity always has. Jesus warned his own about persecution, and he heads the bloody line of martyrs who lead the congregation of the remnant.

What constitutes the remnant, and who does it include? The theme of repentance (turning away from evil and toward good) runs through Isaiah's chapter seven, from the name of Isaiah's son who witnessed the giving of the sign, to the refusal of Ahaz to turn from evil and choose

good, to the child who *does* turn from false religion to true, to the turning back of the two kings who were intent on doing evil to Jerusalem. In order to be counted among the remnant we must turn from the sourness of our inherited sinful nature and choose to embrace the provisions that God has made for salvation: the sweetness of Jesus Christ; sweet fellowship in the Holy Spirit; and the promise of a land of sweet milk and honey to them who believe and desire to be made holy.

Ahaz shunned God's offer to have the gift of faith bestowed on him. He, like most people in Jerusalem, Judea, and throughout Israel, had widened their perspectives and broadened their experiences, experimenting with the thrill of evil and adopting what were to them new ideas about divinity and the attainment of power over nature and the achievement of wealth. They went their own way, sowing to the world, the flesh, and the devil and reaping destruction. But God by his sovereign will turned some of them around, becoming the father of their faith through the unnatural means of election. Eventually what else was meant by the virgin and her child would shake the world and rend the temple veil to admit Jews and Greeks who adopt the sweet child, being converted not only in mind but having Immanuel born in them too.

King Hezekiah could say "Immanuel, God is with us," for his kingdom recovered and prospered again after Sennacherib went home. But there was a day when he got sick and was at the point of death. In fact Isaiah told him to get his house in order because he would not recover. Hezekiah was like his father, Ahaz, in some ways. Ahaz was not willing to accept Isaiah's prophecy, and neither was his son; but Hezekiah, instead of sacrificing to a pagan god for deliverance as his father had done, turned his face to the wall and asked the Lord to remember his faithfulness. Hezekiah's prayer was answered before Isaiah got halfway home; the Lord sent Isaiah back to administer medicine for healing with

the updated prophecy that Hezekiah would be well enough to "go up to the house of the Lord on the third day." This would have been impressive enough to anyone else, but to the son of the man to whom the Lord had given an opportunity to ask for a sign as high as heaven, it seemed like there should be more. So he asked Isaiah if the Lord could not give him some sign that he would be able to go to the temple to give thanks for his healing on the third day. Isaiah knew what the son of Ahaz had in mind: that he might be given a choice of signs as his father had, or perhaps a choice of blessings as Solomon had been given. So Isaiah went ahead and presented Hezekiah with a nominal choice; nevertheless, the sign was that of a miracle in the heavens on that very afternoon: the unnatural movement of the sun's shadow over a space of ten steps.⁸

It was a buoyant king who emerged from this frightful experience with a miracle to boast about. Though God blessed him greatly during his extended lifetime, Hezekiah became more and more like his father. He foolishly extended a welcome to the envoys of an ungodly king. Perhaps Hezekiah thought he was showing them how the God of Israel blessed those who were called by his name, but we see it as pride and perhaps fear, and the report that went back to Babylon of Judah's wealth was not forgotten when the Babylonian empire expanded.

The remnant had assumed that the blessings of the Lord were automatic; they gradually forgot that Immanuel required turning away from evil and choosing good, which did not mean simply health and wealth. Isaiah had to deliver a woeful prophecy to Hezekiah that his wealth and his offspring would one day be carried away to Babylon. Perhaps it would have been better if Hezekiah had not recovered from his illness. It seems that he was not too concerned about the future as long as it brought peace to him during the remainder of his own lifetime. †

⁸ See the Lynn Andrew essay "Tricks of Nature."