

A ~~WOMAN~~ VIRGIN SHALL BEAR A CHILD

Isaiah 7:14

Did Matthew “twist” the Scriptures as suggested in a well-known Adventist journal?

Some years ago in a prestigious theological journal an article appeared entitled “Matthew Twists the Scriptures.”¹ The author insists that Matthew repeatedly misinterpreted Old Testament passages, “twisting” them to mean something entirely foreign to the original. One of his prime examples is Matthew’s interpretation of Isaiah 7:14. “It is now well known,” the author writes, “that this saying of Isaiah refers to an event of his own time, and that the Hebrew word *’almah*, for the mother of the child, does not mean a virgin but only a young woman.”² This assessment of Matthew’s “Scripture twisting” is still a common view within

current critical scholarship. According to this view, Jesus and the New Testament writers often took Old Testament passages out of context, reinterpreted and reapplied them in light of the Christ-event, and thus imposed a New Testament meaning upon the Old Testament that was foreign to the original meaning.

A recent article in a well-known Adventist journal arrives at the same conclusion: “these [biblical] writers often interpreted the scriptural texts in ways that deviated radically from

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their obvious meanings in the original Old Testament settings.”³ The authors of this article also use Matthew's alleged [mis]interpretation of Isaiah 7:14 as a case study to prove their point.

Did Matthew really twist the Old Testament Scriptures? I used to believe he did. But I have become convinced by the biblical evidence that modern interpreters have not looked closely enough to see the deeper meaning of Isaiah's message that is *already present* in the Old Testament text. Let's take that closer look!

Isaiah 7:14 is one of the most studied texts in biblical scholarship.⁴ It is not possible here to delve into all the exegetical issues in this passage. Rather, our focus is upon the question: Does Matthew remain faithful to the Old Testament context of this passage when in chapter 1:23 he cites it as a prediction of the virgin birth of the Messiah?

The interpretations of Isaiah 7:14 fall into three major categories: those which maintain only a local fulfillment in the time of Isaiah;

those which posit a reference in the text only to the virgin birth of the Messiah; and those that argue for a dual focus.

A careful look at the immediate context of Isaiah 7:14 does seem clearly to reveal a local dimension to the fulfillment of the prophecy. The historical setting is the time of the Syro-Ephraimite War of ca. 734 B.C. The northern kingdoms of Syria and Israel have united to attack their southern neighbor of Judah (Isa. 7:1, 4-6). Ahaz, king of Judah, is terrified of the impending invasion, but God sends Isaiah with the comforting word that the northern coalition will not succeed in their plans to overthrow Ahaz (Isa. 7:2, 3, 7-9). In this situation God gives Ahaz a sign through Isaiah: “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel” (vs. 14, NKJV).⁵

The succeeding verses give the time frame of the local fulfillment of this sign: “For before the child shall know to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land that you dread will be forsaken by both her kings”

(vs. 16). The child clearly would be born in the time of Ahaz, and before it reached the age of accountability, the Syro-Ephraimite coalition would be dissolved. This local interpretation is confirmed in the succeeding chapter. Isaiah refers to “the prophetess,” who conceives, and bears a son (Isa. 8:3). The link between this son and the prophecy is

made in Isaiah 8:4 by a statement clearly parallel with Isaiah 7:16: “for before the child shall have knowledge to cry “my father” and “my mother,” the riches of Damascus and the spoil of Samaria will be taken away before the king of Assyria.” The time elements implied in Isaiah 7:16 and 8:4 were fulfilled precisely: in 732 B.C. (within two years of the



prophecy of Isaiah 7:14, before the child could say “father” or “mother”) Damascus fell, and in 722 B.C. (before the child was 12 and had reached the age of accountability), Samaria fell.

Thus Isaiah 7:14 does have a local dimension of fulfillment. But is this all that is implied in the text, and in the larger context? Let us look more closely. We note, first of all, that the prophecy of Isaiah 7:14 is not addressed only to Ahaz, but also to the “house of David” (vs. 13). When Isaiah records that “The Lord Himself will give *you* a sign,” the word *you* is in the plural, not singular, implying a wider application than just to Ahaz.

Furthermore, in Isaiah 7:14 the Hebrew word *almah* (“virgin, young woman”), translated in the LXX (Septuagint) and Matt 1:23 by *parthenos* or “virgin,” means more than just “virgin.” There is another Hebrew word that means “virgin,” namely *bethulah*. But *bethulah* does not specify the age or marital status of the virgin. The word *almah*, however, means “young woman of marriageable age, sexually ripe,” who in the Old Testament usage normally was unmarried, and therefore a virgin.⁶ Thus *almah*, much like the English term *maiden*, has “overtones of virginity about it” even though this is not the main focus. If it did not have such overtones, the LXX translation would be inexplicable. In this

prophecy, Isaiah utilizes a term that does not stress the virginity, and thus could have significance for Ahaz’ situation with a local, partial fulfillment; at the same time the term has connotations of virginity, thereby pointing beyond the local setting to the ultimate sign in the virgin birth of the Messiah.

What is hinted at in the text is made explicit in the larger context. Scholars generally agree that Isaiah 7:14 is part of a larger literary unit in the book, encompassing Isaiah 7-12, which is often called the “Volume of Immanuel.” While scholars recognize this larger unit of Isaiah, they have often failed to view Isaiah 7:14 within this larger setting. When Isaiah’s son was born, he was not named “Immanuel” as the prophecy of Isaiah 7:14 predicted. God told Isaiah to name him Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz, “Speed the spoil, hasten the booty.” The name “Immanuel” is used later in chapter 8 in a context that seems to move from the local to the cosmic level (see verse 8).

Also in chapter 8 Isaiah and his sons are said to be “signs” in Israel (vs. 18) for future events to be brought about by God. These events move from the local level at the end of Isaiah 8 to the eschatological Messianic level in Isaiah 9. The land which was in “gloom” and “darkness” (8:22) will become a land where the “gloom” is removed (9:1) and “the people who walked in dark-

ness Have seen a great light” (9:2). Most significantly, Isaiah’s son was a sign to Israel, but in the Messianic age, Isaiah predicts that the greater Son, the ultimate fulfillment of Isaiah 7:14, will appear: “For unto us a Child is born, Unto us a Son is given, And the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (Isa. 9:6). This Messianic motif is further expanded in Isaiah 11:1-9, with the description of the coming and work of the Messiah.

Thus within the wider context of Isaiah 7:14, Isaiah himself, under divine inspiration, indicates that although the prediction will have local fulfillment in the birth of a son in the time of Ahaz, yet this local fulfillment is a type of the ultimate Messianic fulfillment in the divine Son, Immanuel. We may diagram the typological relationships in Isaiah’s volume of Immanuel as following:

1. **Type.** Isaiah 7:14 (Immanuel prophecy)

Isaiah 8:1-4 (local fulfillment of Isaiah 7:14)

2. **Antitype.** Isa. 9:1-7 (ultimate fulfillment in the Messiah)

Isa. 11:1-9 (further description of the Messiah)

Matthew, therefore, far from taking Isaiah 7:14 out of context, has recognized the larger Messianic context of Isaiah 7-12, which critical scholarship has usually ignored. Did

Matthew twist the Scriptures? No! He saw the dual focus of the prophecy, with the ultimate fulfillment climaxing in the virgin birth of the Messiah. This is just one of the many alleged New Testament “twistings” of Old Testament Scripture, where I have found upon closer inspection that the New Testament writers consistently remained faithful to the original passages in their immediate and wider Old Testament contexts. □

NOTES AND REFERENCES

¹ S. Vernon McCasland, “Matthew Twists the Scriptures,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 80 (1961): 143-148.

² *Ibid.*, p. 144.

³ Warren C. Trenchard and Larry G. Herr, “The Interpretation of the Old Testament in the New: Isaiah, Matthew and the Virgin,” *Spectrum* 28:1 (Winter 2000): 16.

⁴ For a representation of the immense bibliography, see John D. W. Watts, *Isaiah 1-33*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, Texas: Word, 1985), Vol. 24, pp. 95-103.

⁵ All Bible texts quoted in this article are taken from the New King James Version.

⁶ The eight other occurrences of *’almah* in the Old Testament are in the following passages: Genesis 24:43; Exodus 2:8; 1 Chronicles 15:20; Psalm 46:2 (English vs. 1); 68:26 (English vs. 25); Proverbs 30:19; Song of Songs 1:3; 6:8. Numerous scholars have cogently argued that in none of these passages does *’almah* refer to a married woman or one who is no longer a virgin. See John Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1-39*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1986), pp. 210-212.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 210.