CONTEXT AND CONTENT IN THE INTERPRETATION OF ISAIAH 7:14*

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It is a problem common to the study of all prophetic texts how to make a legitimate appeal to the work of editors and insertionists in order to understand the meaning of a passage or section. Regarding the passage in hand, for example, Duhm proposes that verse 17 is a glossator's clumsy attempt to link Isaiah 7:1–16 with 18–25, and considers verses 18–25 to be the work of 'a collector of Isaianic fragments'.[1] Kissane, however, urges that 'the problem here is really one of interpretation' and further comments: 'Various critics omit 15 or 16 or 16b or 17; but the sole reason for the omission is the difficulty of interpretation.'[2]

The matter may be put thus: it is not that the concept of the editing of a prophetic text or book is itself at fault, but that it appears not to be taken with sufficient seriousness by those who appeal most frequently to it. The 'editor' must not be made a scapegoat. Rather than treat him as one who juxtaposed two passages which seemed to him to be coherent but are easily seen by us not to be so, we should and must assume him to be an intelligent publicist of the mind and matter of his subject. And if, as seems to be the case, there is increasing readiness to allow that the prophets could and did act as their own editors, then all the more must we seek to implement the principle of the priority of exegetical considerations.

It is not unrelated to our present task to pursue this principle briefly in connection with the 'Servant passages'. It is notorious that they have suffered through detachment from their contexts, their similarity of style and content and their alleged non-relatedness to foregoing and following sections being held

* A paper read at the Old Testament Study Group of the Tyndale Fellowship, at Tyndale House, Cambridge, July, 1969.

[1] B. Duhm, *Das Buch Jesaia,*[4] Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen (1922) *ad loc.*

[2] E. J. Kissane, *The Book of Isaiah,* Browne & Nolan, Dublin (1960) 81.

https://doi.org/10.53751/001c.30667

up in justification. Out of this have flowed the monumental complications of the question of the identity of the Servant of the Lord. With a brevity which mocks the magnitude of the subject, we may summarize the whole section as follows: the Lord's purposes of grace for His people raise the problem of the plight of the remaining major portion of humanity (*e.g.* 41:28, 29). To this, the Lord's reply is the universal commission of His Servant (42:1ff.). But this Servant cannot be national Israel, for though this Israel bears the honoured title (42:18, 19) it does so in dishonourable fashion, having been given into the power of the nations in punitive divine action (42:24), and even at that unrepentant (42:25). Yet the Lord's purposes for His people have not failed. The enslavement will be reversed and they will return home, but on their return they are still unreconciled to God (48: 20–22). Therefore the Servant's task must be rephrased to include the nation along with the Gentiles in a vast, universal work of reconciliation (49:1–6). Far from being in any sense identifiable with the nation, or even with the best of the nation, the Servant, by contrast to their faithless despondency (49:14ff.) displays buoyant and confident obedience (50:4ff.), and they are called on to play the role of spectators (52:13) while he performs the individual and vicarious role of sin-bearer.

If we were to ask the time-honoured question: Who is the Servant? we could say that in these chapters the prophet tries out a series of indentifications: first with Israel (41, 42), then with Cyrus (43–48), then with the remnant (49–51) until, all having failed, the Servant necessarily remains a coming individual with soteriological aims and accomplishments on a universal scale. It is germane to our more immediate purpose to notice that Isaiah is not afraid to allow false identifications to stand *pro tem* (just as, for example, the writer of detective fiction casts suspicions here and there), until the telling of the whole story clears away misconceptions, and the very entertaining of the misconception itself contributes to the final understanding of the whole.

This is certainly the case with the Immanuel prophecy. As will be shown, the very circumstances of the communication of the prophecy required the possibility that some of its features would be misunderstood, but the narration of the

https://doi.org/10.53751/001c.30667

'whole story' made the final position clear and unequivocal.

The Immanuel prophecy is presented as a divinely given 'sign'. We need to notice at once the ambivalence of the use of the 'sign' in the Old Testament. Firstly, the sign is used in the sense of a 'present persuader', *i.e.* it is designed to promote some action or reaction in the immediate present. With such signs Moses was sent to the people in Egypt (Ex. 4:8, 9). With such a sign the false prophet of Deuteronomy 13 would move the people to adopt his novel theology. Just such a sign was offered to Ahaz (Is. 7:10, 11): a magnificent divine gesture which would reassure him of the Lord's power and goodwill and promote policies based on faith in the Lord as thus revealed. The balancing phrases 'ask a sign' (verse 11) and 'the Lord will give you a sign' (verse 14) have led to the supposition that Immanuel is also a sign of this order. Is this supposition correct?

The alternative understanding of 'sign' is that it is a 'future confirmation', *i.e.* it is designed to follow a series of events, to confirm them as acts of God and to fix a stated interpretation upon them. Exodus 3:12 is a sign of this order. The gathering of Israel on Sinai seals the divine commission to Moses and confirms as from God the forecast of the course and significance of the events leading up to the sign.

There is a *prima facie* case for saying that Immanuel must have been immediately recognized as a sign of this second order: firstly, because on any interpretation his birth would be too late to prompt Ahaz to the desired position of faith in the Lord: the die would have been cast already; and secondly, because his involvement in a situation yet to come—the desolation of the lands of the treaty powers (verse 16)—shows that he can only act as a subsequent verification of the present word from God.

We may take this matter further by asking whether, as a sign, Immanuel sets forth hope or threatening—or, in order to be more exact, whether hope or threatening occupies the foreground of the prophecy, for if we are speaking of the God of Israel neither can be wholly absent and certainly hope cannot be omitted.

Three features suggest that the aspect of threat and foreboding fills the foreground of the prophecy. In the first place,

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there is the distinct change from the gracious offer of a sign from 'Yahweh your God' (verse 11) to the unasked imposing of a sign by a wearied 'Sovereign' God (verses 13, 14). Secondly, we are informed that Immanuel as a child will eat 'butter and honey' (verse 15), which is interpreted (verse 22) as the food of a small remnant in a land sheared by the enemy (verses 19, 20) and luxuriating in unchecked wild growth (verses 23ff.). It looks again as if Immanuel comes to confirm as from the Lord an act and state of judgment.

The third factor which suggests that Immanuel is a sign of divine displeasure is the general tenor of the whole passage as summed up in verses 8, 9. Contrary to the opinion in many commentaries, there is no need to find intrusive material in these verses. In fact, to withdraw any part of them is to destroy the balance which they possess as they stand. In two matching lines ('. . . the head of Syria . . . Damascus . . . the head of Ephraim . . .') the members of the confederacy hostile to Judah are mentioned; and in the two associated lines ('Within . . . If you will not believe . . .') the future of the two sister nations of the people of God is sketched.

The two matching statements about the confederate powers, Syria and Ephraim, are certainly intended to comfort and reassure Ahaz. Either they affirm that the kings mentioned will never reign over any but their allotted territory: *i.e.* so to say, Rezin is the head of Damascus—of that and nothing else! Or, alternatively, we may find an implication that Ahaz should apply a similar reasoning to Jerusalem, Judah and himself: that is to say, the head of Judah is Jerusalem, and the head of Jerusalem is the Davidic king, underwritten by divine guarantees—or even that the head of Jerusalem is the royal Yahweh, the true King of Isaiah's vision (6:1).

The perplexity of the commentators regarding the interwoven statement that within sixty-five years Ephraim will be broken arises from the supposition that the word of comfort is here continued. They rightly ask, in such a case, what comfort it would be to the beleaguered Ahaz to know that over half a century ahead all will be well! But this is a misunderstanding of the line. Rather we ought to understand the two halves of verse 8, taken together, as raising the question of the use and outcome of foreign alliances: Ephraim, trusting in its alliance

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with Syria, will pay for it by national extinction. The word is a word of warning and it aptly finds its parallel in the straight threat to Ahaz: 'If you do not believe, certainly you will not be established' (verse 9b). For Ahaz was faced with strict alternatives: trust in Yahweh's promises or alliance with the king of Assyria.

Thus Immanuel is deeply implicated in a situation of threatening, and it looks as if his birth will confirm as from God a condition of unparalleled loss and devastation. In what dimensions is this threat foreseen by Isaiah? The answer is, not just a threat to Ahaz as the reigning monarch but to the dynasty of David of which he is the current representative. This can be traced through the whole section and is one of its uniting features. Thus, in verse 2, the 'house of David' is brought before us, though the singular pronoun 'his heart' shows that the individual king Ahaz is in mind: he is in mind, that is, not simply in his own person but as the current embodiment of the dynasty. In verse 9, as we have seen, the 'disestablishment' of Ahaz lies in parallel with the disintegration of Ephraim as a national unit, and thus points to some termination of the Davidic–Judahite state. Furthermore, in verse 13, the address is not to the unbelieving Ahaz but to the 'house of David' caught up by implication in his faithlessness, and this passage terminates with a sinister reminiscence of the greatest Davidic tragedy to date, the schism of the northern tribes (verse 17).

So far our enquiry may be said to have elicited three facts: first, Immanuel's birth follows at least the presently coming events; second, he will be born at a time when the Davidic dynasty will be 'disestablished'; and third, because he is called Immanuel, the situation cannot be devoid of hope. We can only appreciate the sweep of Isaiah's thought along these lines by considering the Immanuel prophecy in the context of the pattern of chapters 7–11. They work out as a prophetico–historical meditation on the times of the Assyrian Crisis, and the two amazingly parallel sections focus attention respectively on Judah and Ephraim:

(1) THE MOMENT OF DECISION	7:1–17 The Lord's word comes to Judah. On the king's decision hangs the future of the dynasty.	9:8–10:4 The Lord's word comes to Ephraim. A wealth of imminent divine anger awaits disobedience.

(2) THE JUDGMENT	7:18–8:8 The Assyrian Invasion: Damascus and Samaria are despoiled; Judah overwhelmed as by an all but fatal flood.	10:5–15 The Assyrian Invasion: Samaria has fallen; Judah is under threat; the punishment of Assyria is certain.
(3) THE REMNANT	8:9–22 The foes of God's people are doomed, but His people are secure. It is not, however, an unconditional security: those who reject His word are without hope.	10:16–34 The destruction of the king of Assyria; the salvation of a remnant of Israel; the dramatic deliverance of Zion.
(4) THE GLORIOUS HOPE	9:1–7 The birth and reign of the Davidic Prince brings victory, joy and peace to His people, and His reign ever extends.	11:1–16 The perfection of the Davidic Prince, and His reign over the Gentiles and over a re-gathered Israel and Judah.

This display of chapters 7–11 might now be completed into what could be called 'The Book of Immanuel' by showing how the visionary chapters 6 and 12 act respectively as prologue and epilogue, but the immediate purpose of the exercise has been to demonstrate that the Immanuel passage belongs to a closely and cleverly integrated setting from which it must not be severed and without which it cannot be understood.

One fact is immediately clear: it is impossible to confine the Immanuel prophecy to any long-forgotten 'fulfilment' in the time of Ahaz. The content of Isaiah 7:14 does not dwell in isolation. It belongs to a connected and indeed interwoven series. Immanuel is the possessor of Judah (8:8); he is the ultimate safeguard against the machinations of the nations (8:10) —Isaiah could not have used the reassuring words 'God is with us' unless with a direct reference to the child whose name this was; Immanuel, consequently, is the great 'prince of the four names', the heir and successor of David (9:6, 7), and in the light of 10:21 the interpretation is irresistible that the one born in David's line is also unequivocally divine, 'the mighty God'; he is additionally the Prince of righteousness and peace, sovereign over a reconciled world (11:1ff.). Seen in this light, not only does the name Immanuel receive its full meaning, but one of the tensions within chapter 7 is resolved. The paradox of chapter 7 is that Ahaz is called to rest himself confidently upon the promises of the Lord as being absolutely

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reliable and irrevocable, and yet, consequent upon his unbelief, the promises are apparently abrogated. Immanuel both confirms that the devastation was the punitive act of God—this, by being born to inherit the disestablished dynasty—and also by his name and deeds he proclaims that the promises were indeed kept, and wonderfully so.

Secondly, seen in the light of its total context, the Immanuel prophecy is found to be interlaced with tensions on the topic of the time of its fulfilment. On the one hand, it has as its context the times of the Assyrian (see 7:17ff.; 8:8; 9:1ff.; 10:34–11:1). But equally it seems to belong to the undated future. Thus 9:1 looks back to the darkness of the Assyrian times and forward to the 'latter time' in which the birth will take place. Again, 11:1 belongs to a time when Judah as well as Israel will have been re-gathered from world-wide dispersal (verses 11, 12), yet according to 8:8 and 10:33 the Assyrian overran but did not destroy Judah. What a genuine tension this is may be seen by the fact that the two elements in it are found straining away at each other in the same verses and sub-sections.

We will try to put ourselves into the situation in which Isaiah was placed. At least three important factors were involved. Firstly, Isaiah proceeded, from the start, from the knowledge of the ultimate fall of Judah and Jerusalem and the captivity of the people (see 6:9ff.). This, coupled with his awareness that the Assyrian was not to be the instrument of this destruction, would necessarily involve the projecting of the ultimate hope into the undated future.

Secondly, Isaiah was fully aware of the crucial seriousness of the coming Assyrian threat—contrary to the political speculations of Ahaz. It was for this reason that he introduced the second child into the sequence of prophecies (8:1–4), allowing Maher-shalal-hash-baz to take over from Immanuel the task of providing a time-schedule for the immediately coming events. Indeed, it is essentially right to see the relationship of these two children as follows: either we must identify Maher-shalal-hash-baz with Immanuel, or we must project Immanuel into the undated future. These are real alternatives, but the first of them is self-evidently impossible.

Isaiah, thirdly, was involved in the necessity of facing Ahaz with the devastating implications of his choice. Ahaz belonged

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to a situation of expectation. He was the Davidic king, both heir and transmitter of the promises of God. Isaiah chooses to try to force him to see that he can put and indeed is putting the promise into jeopardy by the apparently bald statement that he is the immediate precursor of the prince Immanuel, and that because of Ahaz and the faithless decision to rely on Assyria the Messianic Immanuel will inherit a defunct dynasty and a pauperized, overrun and captive land.

The biblical claim that the Immanuel prophecy was fulfilled in Jesus Christ is not only and obviously justified, but also by its own terms helps further to illuminate Isaiah's forecast and to substantiate the main lines of the foregoing exposition. It is clear that Jesus alone has the credentials to claim the divine-human ancestry and nature, the righteous character and world-wide rule prophesied for Immanuel. Clearly also in Him the full implications of Immanuel's birth of the עַלְמָה are realized. As an examination of biblical usage will show, עַלְמָה is the only Hebrew word which *without qualification* means an unmarried woman—however marriageable she may be. Its rival in this discussion, בְּתוּלָה, too often requires some such additional description as 'neither had man known her' (*e.g.* Gn. 24:16; Jdg. 11:37–39; *etc.*) to merit serious consideration as a quasi-technical term for *virgo intacta*. Matthew, therefore, performed no exegetical sleight of hand in translating Isaiah 7:14 with the word *parthenos*.[3]

Finally, Jesus inherited what Ahaz initiated. The summoning of the Assyrian king to the aid of Judah turned out to be that moment of final heart-hardening which Isaiah had been forewarned that he would live to see and would indeed bring to pass by his prophetic work (6:9ff.). From that moment onwards, and apart from brief respites which in the sweep of history are but candle-flickers of the glory that once was, the Davidic house had lost its sovereignty, and so it was destined to remain until He should come to whom the kingdom and the kingdoms belong, and whose right it is to reign.

[3] *Cf.* E. J. Young, *Studies in Isaiah*, Tyndale Press, London (1954) 164–185.

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