

EXEGESIS OF ISAIAH VII. 10-17.*

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IN preparing this paper, my purpose has been to ascertain as nearly as I may what the prophet had in mind, and what he wished King Ahaz to understand, when he uttered this remarkable prediction, this *cruz interpretum*. Into the question of textual emendation in this passage I do not enter.

Let us first possess ourselves of the historical setting of the prophecy. The first nine verses of the chapter under examination tell us that in the days of Ahaz of Judah, Rezin of Damascus and Pekah of Israel made war upon the Southern kingdom with the view of capturing Jerusalem, of displacing Ahaz, and of setting upon the throne a ruler of their own choice. A comparison of these statements with the parallels in 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles, and in the Assyrian records, reveals the purpose of their hostile movement and the damage they wrought in Judah. It appears that Pekah had slain Pekahiah the son of Menahem, a vassal of the Assyrian king, and had become leader of an anti-Assyrian party in Samaria. It was doubtless owing to hostility to a common foe, Assyria, that Damascus and Israel, kingdoms which had been the confirmed enemies of one another, were led into a mutual alliance; and solely with a view to resist Tiglath Pileser with success, that the allied forces laid their plans for the possession of Judah, and made their preliminary incursions upon its territory. We are not told whether these kings sought the co-operation of Ahaz before attempting to conquer him, or not, but they may well have done so. At any rate we cannot fail to discover that he favored Tiglath Pileser, and at the time Isaiah approached him was secretly meditating that alliance with him which he shortly afterward made at the cost of his independence.

It is agreed by nearly all recent writers upon the subject, that Ahaz came to the throne in 735 or 734, B.C. They differ only as to the *terminus ad quem*, whether Hezekiah succeeded him in 728 (or 727), or in 715. They agree that Pekah slew his predecessor in 736 or 735, and reigned until Tiglath Pileser slew him, the year of which event they differ about, but all put between 734 and 729. According

* Read in December 1889.

to the Assyrian canon, Tiglath Pileser invaded Israel and the coast land in 734, in which year Ahaz paid tribute to him, and it is as good as certain that Damascus fell before his army in 732, after a siege of two years. It must have been in 735 or 734, therefore, that Isaiah, accompanied by Shear-jashub his son, appeared before the timid Ahaz, outside of the city, not far from its wall, and make his bold prediction that, despite the apparently invincible strength of the allies, their plan would certainly fail. The historical picture thus hastily sketched, must be kept before the mind in interpreting our passage. The true interpretation must accord, likewise, with the following facts drawn from the passage itself:

1. Ahaz is exhorted to ask for a particular sign or pledge that the coalition against him would fail, and to make his selection from the whole realm of the Divine operations.

2. With mock reverence, Ahaz declines to tempt Jehovah; whereupon Isaiah expresses the sore displeasure of his God with him.

3. Nevertheless, the Lord himself gives Ahaz a sign of the promised deliverance. An עַלְמָה will soon bear a son, whom she will call Immanuel, during a few years of whose life the land will not yield the fruits of peace, because of the presence of two hostile kings. Before these years have passed, however, the kings will be deprived of all their power.

4. Not only a time of deliverance, but also a time of trouble is in store for Judah.

Let us see how much is involved in these salient points. What, in Hebrew usage, is a *sign*?

The word **אֵימָנָה** is used seventy-nine times in the Old Testament, forty-four times in the singular and thirty-five times in the plural. The seventy-seven cases found outside the present passage may be classified as follows:

1. The word is used twenty-seven times in the plural, in fifteen of them being associated with *wonders* or *deeds*, and three times in the singular, to denote those marvellous operations in which men see the hand of God.

2. It is used once in the plural for the heavenly bodies.

3. It occurs seven times in the plural for emblems of various sorts; twenty times in the singular as a memento of some past event; and six times in the singular as a mark of warning for the future.

4. In twelve instances it refers either to a miracle wrought by God,

or to a predicted event in the near future, as a pledge that some promise or threat will come to pass; and in one passage it refers to a symbolic act having the same end in view.

So far as I can discover, it is invariably applied to sensible phenomena which may be tested by the persons for whom it is intended.

Since there is a promise, or a threat, or both, in our passage, the use of the word here finds its place under the last head. Turning to that class of cases, we observe that in the entire thirteen passages the event used as a sign takes place before the promised event happens, and serves as a pledge to those to whom it is given that the event suggested by it will come to pass. We shall expect, then, to find in the sign given to Ahaz something which occurred prior to the deliverance foretold in the same passage, and became a pledge to him of that deliverance. It has been objected to this view that the sign is sometimes contained simply in the Divine *announcement*, and is to be accepted on the word of Jehovah as a suitable pledge, though actually fulfilled only after that of which it is the token has been accomplished; and the passages Exodus iii. 12 and 2 Kings xix. 29 (Isaiah xxxvii. 30) are quoted for this view. With regard to the second passage, however, it is held by many of the best interpreters that the writer assures Hezekiah, not simply that the host of Sennacherib now invading the land will be overthrown, but that there will be no further danger from that quarter; otherwise, they do not know how to account for the poverty of the promise; for the king's apprehension would not be allayed by the retreat of Sennacherib in the present instance, if he were compelled to dread some future return of that monarch. The fact, however, that seed-time and harvest would be resumed at the first possible date, would be a suitable sign of permanent deliverance. As for the passage in Exodus, the token, "Ye shall serve God upon this mountain," may be regarded as the sign of a *past* event rather than a *future* one; for the sending of Moses, although in its full meaning destined to cover a long period of time, was a fact actually accomplished when the sign was first mentioned, and the latter was needed simply as a confirmation of this fact. For this idea, the manifestation to Moses may be compared with the Abrahamic covenant (Gen. xvii. 11). Circumcision is declared to Abraham to be a perpetual token of the covenant between God and himself, and worship on Mount Horeb is declared to Moses to be a token of his divine mission. The parallel is not perfect, because in the first case the

action used as a sign is wrought by man, and is a simple memento, while in the latter, the sign is brought about by Divine Providence as a confirmation of the fact in the mental world which Moses was to accept; but in both cases events occurring in the physical realm are made tokens of facts no less real in the spiritual realm which without them would be difficult of belief. In other words, I understand the passage in Exodus to teach just this: Moses questioned very decidedly his fitness to go before Pharaoh and to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. He was inclined to doubt the reality of his divine commission. God reassures him by promising that he will so bring things to pass, that by and by, to this very mountain where Moses has just witnessed such a wonderful manifestation of God, he shall lead his people, and all shall there worship God together. The statement seems to have been accepted by Moses, he believed the event would come to pass; but the promised event was not operative as a sign until it had actually taken place, and then it suggested and confirmed a fact already in a great measure accomplished. If the mission is to be regarded as an accomplished fact when the sign was perceived, this passage must be excluded from the class to which Isaiah vii. 11, 14 belong.

Thus far we have seen no evidence to doubt that the sign offered to Ahaz was actually realized by him previous to the deliverance of Judah from the hands of the confederate kings. For the rest, we must assume that there was something in the prophetic announcement of it so striking as to render it a real pledge to the king of the ruin of the allied houses of Israel and Damascus. Our interest in a lofty interpretation of the passage must not be so great as to render null and void as a sign the event predicted to king Ahaz, by depriving him of the possibility of any proper verification.

The fact that Jehovah is sore displeased with Ahaz is based upon his wearying God, by occasioning him to exhaust all means for the recovery of the king's loyalty, without success. The sign which the Lord gives, therefore, while pointing to relief from the allied armies, points also to distress from Assyria herself; hence the sign involves a threat as well as a promise.

We now come to the prophecy of Immanuel. It is to be remarked first, that the same Hebrew consonants permit us to render, *thou* (Ahaz) *shalt call*, *thou* (עלצת) *shalt call*, *she shall call*, or *she is about to call*; but this ambiguity will not seriously affect our interpretation as a whole. Nor need the latter be affected, if we take הריח as the verbal adjective

meaning *pregnant* rather than the participle, *shall conceive*, for, after הִנֵּה, it might even then refer to future time, since in Isaiah הִנֵּה, according to Delitzsch, always introduces that which belongs to the future. Delitzsch compares Judges xiii. 3-5, where it is said unequivocally to the wife of Manoah, *thou shalt conceive*, and then again in the same interview, הִנֵּה חִירָה, *behold thou shalt conceive*. The most serious difference of opinion is concerning the word עַלְמָה, which is held to mean *virgin* by a small number of distinguished commentators, and *young marriageable woman* by the large majority of recent writers, many of whom claim that it may be used either of an *unmarried* or a *married* woman.

Interrogating the usage elsewhere, we inquire, *first*, if the word necessarily connotes virginity; and, *second*, if it must refer exclusively to the unmarried state. It is admitted by all that the strict Hebrew word for virgin is בְּחִילָה, a word which in the sister languages carries the same idea. Outside of Isaiah vii. 14, עַלְמָה is used eight times in the Old Testament. In Gen. xxiv. 43, it is the exact equivalent of נַעֲרָה of verse 14, for verse 43 is a mere repetition of verse 14; whereas in verse 16, to express the idea of virginity, the נַעֲרָה has to be expressly characterized as a בְּחִילָה, *no man having known her*. These facts furnish proof positive that, although עַלְמָה may be applied to a virgin, it does not refer to her *purity*, but only to her *age*. Moreover, the LXX rendering, *παρθένος*, is not decisive even of the idea which the translators had of the עַלְמָה of Isaiah; for, in Gen. xxiv, *παρθένος* is the rendering for all three words נַעֲרָה, בְּחִילָה, and עַלְמָה, and they translated verse 16, *and the παρθένος was exceedingly fair to the sight, she was a παρθένος, a man had not known her*.

The *second* question is a more difficult one. The passage which seems most like a decisive one is Prov. xxx. 19, where עַלְמָה is used of a female with whom the way of a man is spoken of apparently as leaving no outward marks. It is at least as natural to suppose the author here to speak of lawful intercourse as of the illegal connection of men and women. More positive evidence, however, is to be obtained through the sister tongues. The root, as is well known, means *to be ripe*. In Arabic, a feminine noun from this root is certainly applied to a *wife*. Moreover, the Aramaic language has but one word for both נַעֲרָה and עַלְמָה, namely, צִילְמָה in the Targums, and ܥܠܡܬܐ in the Syriac Peshitta version, and this word is the rendering of נַעֲרָה where the

latter does not connote virginity, even when it is applied to a married woman (cf. Ruth ii. 5).

The article with עַלְמָא in Isaiah vii. 14, most naturally refers to some well-known woman, had in mind by both Isaiah and the royal house, and perhaps present when the words were spoken. This is made yet more probable by the individuality involved in the name *Immanuel*, and by the fact that the land of Judah is afterward called *Immanuel's land* (Isaiah viii. 8).

The fact that the son spoken of will eat curdled milk and honey during his infancy, or at the time when he becomes old enough to distinguish between good and evil, points to a desolation of the land until that date, as is shown by verse 22. Before this day comes, however, the territory of the two kings, Rezin and Pekah, will have to be abandoned by them. The king of Assyria accomplishes all this mischief.

Every interpretation of the passage must be judged by its agreement, or failure to agree, with the above mentioned conditions; i.e. a proper sign must be afforded to Ahaz, a phenomenon in the world of sense capable of verification, not something more vague or distant than the thing signified; it need not be a miracle, but there must be some circumstance connected with the birth and early life of the child remarkable or striking enough to make him a suitable pledge of the coming deliverance and disaster. Further, a well-known woman, perhaps in view of the prophet, was soon to bear the child, who for a while would dwell in a country made desolate by Tiglath Pileser, although it would soon be rid of the hated presence of the allied kings.

We turn now to the leading interpretations which have been made of this prophecy. There are three general heads:

I. One general view applies verses 14-16 directly and exclusively to the Messiah. The advocates of this, in its simplest form, understand the desolation to belong to a time immediately subsequent to Messiah's birth. But the promise of deliverance for Ahaz in the course of 700 years or so, would not have been particularly reassuring to him; and the language of verse 16 reminds us too strongly of verses 1-9 to suppose any other than a reference to the circumstances then present to the mind of Ahaz. To obviate this difficulty by supplying a hypothetical clause, and by paraphrasing verse 16, "For before the Messiah, if he were born now, should know how, etc.," is to add something of which there is no hint in the context. We may

indeed escape the necessity of this clause by supposing that Isaiah, in prophetic ecstasy, had presented to him the birth of the Messiah apart from all chronological relations, and that he, being present in the prophetic consciousness as born, would serve as a sign of immediate deliverance, although he did not really come for 700 years. Suppose we allow this psychological theory, it is rather doubtful if Ahaz shared the prophetic state, and unless he did, the Messiah could not be the sign of present deliverance to him. It may well be questioned whether Isaiah could have retained the royal ear at all with such a sign. These difficulties are so great that many expositors suppose the birth of the Messiah to be predicted, indeed, but *in the immediate future*. Since the birth of a child from an unknown woman would be no sign to Ahaz, the advocates of this view are compelled to claim that the prophecy is addressed, not so much to the king himself, as to those persons who were willing to receive it. The next step, and it is a step which has been taken, is to deny all personal application of the passage; but this interpretation is not one which suggests itself naturally by a study of the context, and is not in harmony with the conditions which, at the outset, seemed necessary to a proper understanding of the address.

II. The prophecy has been made to refer to the births of two different children. A first promise is given that Christ should be born of a virgin at some future time, and a second that the land should be delivered from Rezin and Pekah before Shear-jashub, or some other boy born within a certain time, could distinguish between good and evil; but there is so little reason to suppose a second subject in verses 14-16, that the representatives of the theory can not agree whether to make the transition at verse 15 or verse 16. This dilemma others avoid by attaching the so-called *double sense* to the prediction, its champions contending that, while verse 14, in its obvious meaning, refers to a child born in due course of nature, the words relate in a secondary and higher sense to the miraculous birth of Jesus Christ. This hypothesis, no longer advocated by scholars, is carefully to be distinguished from the *typical* theory, for the latter finds but one person in the *language*, though it sees in that person the prophecy of a nobler one to come.

III. We come now to the most ancient view of all, which maintains that the birth and infancy are here contemplated of a child born, or supposed to be born, in the days of Ahaz himself. There are sev-

eral varieties of the view. Passing that of writers who understand the prophet to speak of a *hypothetical* birth, as if he had said, "Should one not now pregnant conceive and bear a son, she might call his name Immanuel," for the situation seems too real to square with that theory; also the view which makes Immanuel a younger son of Ahaz by a second marriage, which is a mere make-shift; let us consider three important shades of opinion among the representatives of this general interpretation: 1. That of those who suppose Isaiah to be speaking of his own wife; and since some object to the application of the term אִמָּנוּאֵל to the mother of Shear-jashub, a second marriage is allowed or demanded. This view, while doing some violence to the use of the article with אִמָּנוּאֵל , simply assumes that Isaiah was twice married, and that his new wife is called by a very ambiguous term, when a perfectly clear one was open to him, for, in Isaiah viii. 3, he speaks of her as *the prophetess*. Moreover, it is difficult to comprehend how Isaiah conceived of the land as belonging to his son (viii. 8). It has been claimed, it is true, that the land simply means *fatherland* or *native country*, but this explanation is inconsistent with the evident climax in viii. 8. 2. A second modification of the general hypothesis is made by commentators that think the אִמָּנוּאֵל was a woman actually present in the royal circle, and that the son born soon afterward can not be identified in the history. All forms of this view are wrecked by the fact that Isaiah attaches great significance to the name of the child, and, as stated before, makes him in some sense the *owner* of the land of Judah. No human being, save the king or crown-prince, would be entitled to such homage. 3. There is left the old, orthodox, Jewish view which refers this passage to the betrothed or wife of Ahaz, and her future son Hezekiah. This view was abandoned, because it was supposed from the point of view of the chronology that Hezekiah would not meet the conditions of the passage, and no modern commentator, so far as I know, has ventured to dispute this claim.

Will Hezekiah really serve as the אִמָּנוּאֵל of this passage? The question resolves itself into two: 1. Does the character of Hezekiah supply the demand? 2. Will the true chronology bring him within the required period? In regard to the personality of Hezekiah, a proper sign would be given to Ahaz, if his mother were not already pregnant, or if she would not naturally be taken by Isaiah to be so, when the prophecy was uttered. This might be true also if the prediction were given only just before the birth of the child. It has been

shown that the wife of Ahaz, if young, might be characterized as an *ἄρσς*. Note the significant fact that Ahaz, according to the traditional chronology, was only eleven years of age when Hezekiah was born; and, according to any view of the chronology, must have been very young, and probably had a young wife. To a possible objection that, as a sign, Hezekiah would not contain anything unpleasant for Ahaz, we may reply that the distress comes with the thing signified, and consists in the desolation of the land brought by the Assyrian.

2. In regard to the chronology, we have seen that Ahaz probably came to the throne in 735 or 734 B.C. A comparison of 2 Kings xviii. 13 with the Assyrian records, which put the campaign of Sennacherib in the year 701 or 702, shows that Hezekiah ascended the throne in or about 715. His father reigned, then, 20 years. How is the error of 16 for 20 in 2 Kings xvi. 2 to be explained? Simply by supposing that some copyist reversed the numbers given for his age at accession and for the years of his reign; so that, for 20 and 16, we should read 16 and 20. If Hezekiah succeeded his father in 715, then according to 2 Kings xviii. 2 he was born in 739 or 740, and would be five years old at the time of the Assyrian campaign of 734. In this case he would not fulfil the conditions of the problem. Is there any evidence to suppose that the number 25 in 2 Kings xviii. 2 has been erroneously substituted for 20, or some other number? Some writers have assumed this on other grounds, especially from the fact that, according to 2 Kings xvi. 2, xviii. 2, Ahaz would have been butly about 10 years old when his son was begotten. That an error of transcription might easily have occurred will be evident upon an examination of the second of the two chronological tables which follow:

TRADITIONAL TABLE.

Accession acc. to Ussher.	Name of King.	Age at Accession.	Age at Birth of Son.	Length of Reign in Years.
B.C. 839	Amaziah,	25	38	29
810	Uzziah,	16	43	52
758	Jotham,	25	21	16
742	Ahaz,	20	11	16
726	Hezekiah.	25	42	29

MODIFIED TABLE.

Accession acc. to Riehm.	Name of King.	Age at Accession.	Age at Birth of Son.	Length of Reign in Years.
B.C. 797	Amaziah,	25	38	29
780	Uzziah,	16	43	42
750	Jotham,	25	25	16
735	Ahaz,	16	16	20
715	Hezekiah,	20	37	29

There will be noticed in the third column the succession of numbers 25, 16, 25, 16. The next number would be, according to the Biblical statement, a 25 again, as in the first table. What is more natural than to suppose that, for an original number which may have been 20, the number 25, immediately following a 16 above, should have been substituted after another 16? For it is not at all improbable that the writer of Kings had access to some kind of tabular form. To show that this change of 20 to 25 is not in itself improbable, appeal may be made to external evidence for a similar change in the passage 2 Chron. xxviii. 1, for the reading of that passage in at least one MS (593 of de Rossi), and in the LXX, Syriac Peshitta, and Arabic versions, is 25 in place of the better reading, 20. We are not prevented by chronological considerations, then, from supposing that Hezekiah was the the son referred to; and since for other reasons he best answers the conditions of the passage, and indeed offers the only satisfactory solution of it, it is in the highest degree probable that the prophet had him in mind.

The use of our passage made by Matthew has not been considered, because an examination of a subsequent application of the language to other persons than those first mentioned did not seem to me germane to the present discussion, whether the application be an accommodation of it to new conditions, or whether the persons set forth in it are actual types of the persons named by the Evangelist. As was said at the beginning, my object has been to interpret the passage as Ahaz interpreted it, and as Isaiah intended he should interpret it. The result has been the discovery of a reference solely to Hezekiah and his mother. To suppose anything else, is to suppose something outside what is written here.