

## TO FULFILL WHAT HAD BEEN SPOKEN

FOLLOWING a genealogy beginning with Abraham and working its way down to “Jacob the father of Joseph” (Matt 1:16), the Gospel of Matthew records that Joseph had discovered his betrothed, Mary, to be pregnant. He knows the child is not his, since he and Mary had not consummated their relationship. Rather than create a scandal, Joseph, whom Matthew calls a “righteous man,” resolves to divorce Mary quietly. There is no mention of, or need for, public trial, let alone stoning.

Readers familiar with Israel’s scriptures might well anticipate what happens next. The reference to a Joseph, the son of Jacob, would have reminded them of Joseph, son of Jacob, from the book of Genesis. This earlier Joseph, best known today for having an “amazing Technicolor dreamcoat,” both dreamed prescient dreams and saved his family from famine by arranging for food to be stored in Egypt (see Gen 37, 39–49).

Matthew’s Joseph dreams, and in his dream, an angel tells him:

“Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

“Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,  
and they shall name him Emmanuel,”

which means, “God is with us.” (Matt 1:20–23)<sup>1</sup>

“What had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet” refers to Isaiah 7:14. This is the first of Matthew’s numerous “fulfillment citations” (2:15, 17, 23; 4:14; 8:17; 12:17; 13:35; 21:4; 26:56; 27:9; without the “to fulfill” formula: 2:5; 3:3; 13:14).<sup>2</sup> By marking events and sayings with reference to sacred texts, Matthew reinforces Jesus’s connection to Abraham and David, Moses and Israel. The first fulfillment citation also provides part of the frame of the Gospel: Matthew’s first chapter contains the promise, “they shall name him Emmanuel, which means ‘God is with us,’” and the Gospel ends with Jesus’s promise to his disciples, and so to Matthew’s readers, “And remember, I am with you always; to the end of the age” (Matt 28:20; emphasis added).

The angel next informs Joseph that Mary “will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins” (Matt 1:21). The connection between the name and the vocation is evident in Hebrew, but not in English or Greek. The name Jesus, from the Hebrew *yeshua*, comes from the root *y-sh-*, which means “deliverance” or “salvation” and evokes God’s saving powers. “Jesus” is a shortened form of the name Joshua (Hebrew *yehoshua*) and is related to Hosea (Hebrew *hoshua*), Isaiah (Hebrew *yeshua* *ayyah* [ו]), and the term *hosanna* (Hebrew *hoshiah na*), which means “save!” “Salvation” in Israel’s scriptures typically means being saved by God from oppression, war, or enemies. Matthew changes the focus to speak of salvation from sin.

Matthew’s Gospel is the only New Testament text to cite Isaiah 7:14 in relation to Jesus or to state explicitly that Mary was a virgin at the time Jesus was conceived. Luke may hint at these concerns when the angel Gabriel tells Mary:

“And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” The angel said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.” (Luke 1:31–35)

While Luke agrees with Matthew that Mary’s pregnancy is from the Holy Spirit’s activity, it is not clear here that Luke regards Mary as having conceived virginally. She is a virgin at the time of Gabriel’s annunciation, but the angel does not tell her that she will be so at the time of Jesus’s conception.

Matthew 1:25 states that Joseph “had no marital relations with her [Mary] until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus,” and this verse can suggest that Mary’s virginity ended after Jesus was born. The four Gospels and Paul’s letters mention that Jesus had siblings (e.g., Matt 12:46; Mark 6:3; Luke 8:19–20; John 2:12; 1 Cor 9:5; Gal 1:19).

Later apocryphal texts extended the citation of Isaiah 7:14 to find notice of Mary’s perpetual virginity. According to the early second-century *Protevangelium* (i.e., “pregospel”) of James, ascribed to Jesus’s “brother” James (here understood to be Joseph’s son from a previous marriage), Mary remains a virgin not only prepartum but also in partu and postpartum. The *Protevangelium* describes how Salome (a common name for first-century Jewish women) refused to believe that Mary, who had just given birth, could remain a virgin:

And Salome said, “As the Lord my God lives, unless I insert my finger and investigate her, I will not believe that a virgin has given birth.” And the midwife went in and said, “Mary, position yourself, for not a small

test concerning you is about to take place." When Mary heard these things, she positioned herself. And Salome inserted her finger into her body. And Salome cried out and said, "Woe for my lawlessness and the unbelief that made me test the living God. Look, my hand is falling away from me and being consumed in fire."

An angel then advises Salome to touch the child, and her hand is healed.

For some readers, Matthew records both a fulfillment of prophecy and a miraculous conception. Others, less likely to accept claims of divine activity, suggest that Mary was raped or involved with someone other than Joseph<sup>3</sup> and that Matthew sought to explain Jesus's conception out of wedlock. Still others suggest that Joseph was the father, and the account of a virginal conception developed in competition with stories of Greek and Roman gods fathering children or in concert with other Jewish tales of miraculous conceptions. Jesus's siblings have been variously understood to be Jesus's younger brothers and sisters, the children of Joseph's earlier marriage, or even first cousins, with Joseph himself being a virgin.

Historians cannot determine all the details of Jesus's conception and birth. What we can do is explain how Matthew comes to proclaim a miraculous conception when the scriptures of Israel make no mention of it. Isaiah speaks not about a virgin but about a pregnant young woman.

## ISAIAH IN HIS CONTEXT

LIKE MOST prophetic books, Isaiah has a long and complicated history, and none of these books represents an autograph of a prophet's original words. All have gone through some process of editing. Most scholars attribute much, but not all, of Isaiah 1–39 to the prophet mentioned in the superscription, "Isaiah son of Amoz, who prophesied concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah." This "First Isaiah" flourished in the second half of the eighth and very early seventh centuries BCE. Isaiah also appears in 2 Kings 19:2–20:19, and a bulla (clay seal impression) that may partially preserve the inscription "Isaiah the prophet" recently was unearthed in Jerusalem.<sup>4</sup>

Isaiah 40–55 (including the references to the famous "suffering servant" we discuss in the next chapter) and 56–66 have different authors and settings. Isaiah 40–55, which scholars call "Second Isaiah," was composed during the Babylonian exile and the early years of the community's restoration to the land of Israel. "Third Isaiah," the designation for chapters 56–66, comes from the next generation following the return from exile.

Narrowing the setting of the prophecy concerning the woman, Isaiah 7:1 sets the prediction in "the days of Ahaz son of Jotham son of Uzziah, king of Judah." The situation is political: "King Rezin of Aram and King Pekah son of Remaliah of Israel went up to attack

Jerusalem, but could not mount an attack against it.” This setting is what scholars call “the Syro-Ephraimite war” of 734–732 BCE, when the Northern Kingdom of Israel joined with the Aramaean city-state of Damascus to confront the Assyrian Empire. Israel and Aram (“Damascus”) wanted Judah, the Southern Kingdom, to join their coalition, but Judah’s king, Ahaz, refused. Believing that the Assyrians, whose territory encompassed much of present-day Iraq and southern eastern Turkey, could not be defeated, Ahaz made Judah an Assyrian vassal state.

Isaiah is not pleased. He had earlier counseled the king, “Take heed, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart be faint” (Isa 7:4). The prophet insists that Judah rely on its God rather than on military alliance. Isaiah 1–39 continues the two themes of the importance of trust in God and the inviolability of Jerusalem; because God will protect the city, Judah need not fear defeat.

To convey his message, the prophet seeks out, or waylays, the king. In the first part of chapter 7, God commands Isaiah: “Go out to meet Ahaz, you and your son Shear-jashub, at the end of the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the Fuller’s Field” (Isa 7:3). Shear-jashub means, literally, “a remnant will return [from exile].” Isaiah does not describe how he came to name his son, but the name does anticipate his prophecy about exile and repatriation: “A remnant will return, the remnant of Jacob, to the mighty God. For though your people Israel were like the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will return” (Isa 10:21–22a). Such symbolic names appear elsewhere in Israel’s scriptures. For example, the northern prophet Hosea (Hos 1:4–9) names his children Jezreel (“God will plant”), Lo-ruhamah (“not pardoned”), and Lo-ammi (“not my people”).

Instructions continue in 7:4, where God tells Isaiah to say to the king, “Take heed, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart be faint.” The prophet’s message: don’t worry, and don’t make any

alliances. Yet Isaiah also warns Ahaz, “If you do not stand firm in faith, / you shall not stand at all” (Isa 7:9), in Hebrew an alliterative statement: *’im lo’ ta’amnu ki lo’ te’amenu*. Despite this clever rhetoric, the king remained unconvinced. Isaiah tries again.

God next tells Isaiah to instruct the king, “Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol [the underworld] or high as heaven” (Isa 7:11). In the Bible, “sign” can signal a supernatural occurrence, such as the “signs and wonders” performed by God at the exodus from Egypt (e.g., Exod 7:3), or the “signs” (Greek *semeia*, whence the English “semiotics”) in John’s Gospel, such as Jesus’s turning water into wine (2:6–11) and raising Lazarus from the dead (11:1–44). But not all signs indicate miracles. Circumcision is a “sign” of the covenant (Gen 17:11); Exodus mandates that Israelite men wear a headband (later understood as tefillin) “as a sign upon your hand and as a symbol on your forehead” (Exod 13:16). Biblical signs are also often remarkable, in the sense that people would notice them. In Isaiah 20:3, for example, God states, “my servant Isaiah has walked naked and barefoot for three years as a sign and a portent against Egypt and Ethiopia.” As with the Hebrew term *’ot*, not every *semeion* in the New Testament is a supernatural event. The child wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger (Luke 2:12) is a “sign” to the shepherds that the Messiah has been born. The kiss of Judas is a “sign” to the soldiers that Jesus is the man to arrest (Matt 26:48).

Ahaz refuses to ask for a sign: “I will not put the LORD to the test” (Isa 7:12). Isaiah, annoyed at the rejection of God’s command, retorts: “Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also?” (7:13). Whether asking for a sign is appropriate depends on context. Generally, in Israel’s scriptures, the request is appropriate. The judge Gideon asks God for several signs, and God complies (Judg 6:36–40); when King Hezekiah asks Isaiah for a sign, the prophet agrees (2 Kgs 20:8–11). The Gospel

of Mark, conversely, presents Jesus as refusing to give a sign to people who doubt his authority; Matthew and Luke offer the enigmatic “sign of Jonah” (see Chapter 10).

Although the king will not ask for a sign, Isaiah tells him that the sign will appear nonetheless: “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign” (Isa 7:14). The opening Hebrew term, *lachen*, “therefore,” appears frequently in biblical prophecy to introduce a response to previous comments. In the majority of cases, *lachen* introduces a punishment, but that is not the case here. *Lachen* is rhetorically effective, since a punishment would have been the expected response to Ahaz’s refusal to ask for a sign. Instead of a punishment, Isaiah offers a sign of hope:

Look [*hineh*], the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted. The Lord will bring on you and on your people and on your ancestral house such days as have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah—the king of Assyria. (Isa 7:14b–17)

The prophecy continues by noting (v. 17—most likely an addition) that Assyria will later be the instrument of punishing Judah for its sins; for in 701 BCE, the Assyrian king Sennacherib ravaged the Judean countryside and besieged Jerusalem.

Isaiah 7:14 in its original context concerns political events in the last third of the eighth century BCE. The short timeframe is standard for biblical prophets. Both Jeremiah and Ezekiel, who began to prophesy shortly before the destruction of Jerusalem in 586, focus on that event. Biblical prophets do not offer predictions

concerning the faraway “latter days.” When the NRSV reads, for Jeremiah 23:20,

The anger of the Lord will not turn back  
until he has executed and accomplished  
the intents of his mind.

In the latter days [*’acharit hayamim*] you will understand it clearly,

it mistranslates the Hebrew *’acharit hayamim*. The expression simply means “(some time) in the future”—and not an eschatological age. The same point holds for the same expression in Micah 4:1, which the NRSV translates,

In days to come [*’acharit hayamim*]  
the mountain of the Lord’s house  
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,  
and shall be raised above the hills.  
Peoples shall stream to it.

A prophecy that states “Unless you show concern for the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the stranger, you will be destroyed in seven hundred years” is not much of a threat. Nor is “in seven hundred years redemption will come” much of a promise to the people of the time.

Isaiah’s sign is given “to you”—a plural in Biblical Hebrew. Kings were typically surrounded by their advisors, so Isaiah is addressing Ahaz along with his retinue. But the plural makes it easier to read the sign as addressed not only to the king, but to anyone, from any time.

The word that introduces the sign, *hineh*, is often rendered “Behold” (NRSV: “Look”), although etymologically the Hebrew term has nothing to do with seeing. Appearing more than one thousand

times in the Tanakh, *hineh* functions as an attention-getter. The prophet may be directing attention to the young woman's pregnancy, the birth, the naming of the child, or even the child's move toward eating solid food—or perhaps the word draws attention to all these images. At the time, eyes would turn to the young woman.

We now come to the verses that underlie Matthew's citation: "the young woman is with child." The Hebrew words are *ha'almah harah*. *Ha-* is the definite article "the," as we see in *ha'adam*, the earthling. *Almah* is the feminine form of *elem*, used twice (1 Sam 17:56; 20:22) to indicate a "young man." In all of its nine occurrences, *almah* refers to a young woman of marriageable age. These young women may be virgins, but lack of sexual experience is not the noun's main connotation. In Genesis 24:43–44, the word's first appearance, Abraham's servant states, "I am standing here by the spring of water; let the young woman [*almah*] who comes out to draw, to whom I shall say, 'Please give me a little water from your jar to drink' . . . let her be the woman whom the LORD has appointed for my master's son." The woman will be the matriarch, Rebekah. In Exodus 2:8, the word refers to Moses's sister: "the girl [*almah*] went and called the child's mother." Song of Songs 1:3 (cf. Song 6:8) speaks of lovestruck *alamot* (NRSV: "maidens"). Finally, Proverbs 30:18–19 announces:

Three things are too wonderful for me;  
four I do not understand:  
the way of an eagle in the sky,  
the way of a snake on a rock,  
the way of a ship on the high seas,  
and the way of a man with a girl [*almah*].

The quotation, concerning events for which there is no lasting sign, has sexual connotations, but the details are (appropriately) vague.

The Hebrew word used to indicate a woman who has not engaged in sexual intercourse is *betulah*; for example, Exodus 22:16, which concerns the seduction of a "virgin [*betulah*] who is not engaged to be married."

The following word in the Hebrew *ha'almah harah* is *harah*, an adjective meaning "is pregnant." It cannot be rendered by grammar or context as "shall conceive," which would be expressed with the imperfect (future) form *tehereth*. Thus, Isaiah says, "Look at the pregnant young woman." Had Isaiah wanted to predict a virginal birth, he would have said *habetulah tehereth*. Nothing in the phraseology of the verse suggests a miracle.

Isaiah never identifies this *almah*, although her identity must have been known to those present at the time of the prophecy. Since Isaiah's wife, who had previously given birth to Shear-jashub, would probably not be seen as still an *almah*, the most likely candidates are a wife or concubine of Ahaz.<sup>5</sup> Despite the suggestion of several sources from antiquity to the present, the child is not the future King Hezekiah, since at the time of Isaiah's prophecy, Hezekiah had already been born.

A central part of Isaiah 7:14 is the naming of the child "Immanuel." Isaiah displays a fondness for such symbolic names, as indicated by the earlier reference to Shear-jashub, "a remnant will return" (Isa 7:3). In the following chapter, after Isaiah's wife "conceived and bore a son," the prophet states, "Then the LORD said to me, Name him Maher-shalal-hash-baz" (8:3). This compound, meaning "plillage hastens, looting speeds," would have struck out in Judah, as it does now—four-part compound names are not attested elsewhere in the Bible. The following verse explains that it refers to the Assyrians' impending conquest of Israel and Damascus. Securing the connection: the Assyrians were known as consummate looters.

The next two Hebrew words in Isaiah 7, *weyoledet ben*, a verb fol-

lowed by a noun, mean “she is giving birth to a son.” The first two actions, “to be pregnant and to bear,” are commonly linked in the Bible, found first regarding Eve’s conceiving and giving birth to Cain (Gen 4:1). The formula is often followed by one of the parents naming the baby. The entire series in Isaiah 7:14—pregnancy, birth, and naming—appears in Genesis 16:11, in the description of Hagar and her son-to-be, Ishmael:

And the angel of the LORD said to her,

“Now you have conceived [or, “are pregnant”]; Hebrew *harrah*] and shall bear a son; you shall call him Ishmael, for the LORD has given heed to your affliction.”

Judges 13:3, concerning Samson, uses similar language, and similar phrasing from a pre-Israelite Ugaritic (Syrian) text suggests that it is a well-known formula.

As for who will name the child, the consonants of the MT read *qr’l*. The verb can be read as “she will name” or “you will name,” depending on what vowels are placed into the consonantal text. Jewish tradition dating back to at least the early Middle Ages reads this verb as *qara’l*, “she will name.” In the Tanakh, mothers frequently name their children: Leah and Rachel name their sons and the sons of Jacob’s secondary wives, and Leah also names her daughter Dinah (as in Gen 29:32–35; 30:6–13, 18–21); in 1 Samuel 1:20, Hannah names her son Samuel. Slightly different vowels (*qara’la*) yield the meaning “you [masculine singular] name.” The Great Isaiah Scroll from the Dead Sea reads *qr’*, “he will name,” which may also be understood in the passive voice, as “he will be named.”

This verse has no special significance in the Dead Sea Scrolls or in other Second Temple literature. As with the suffering servant from

Isaiah 52:13–53:12 (see Chapter 9), it is only in Christian texts where this prophecy takes on a special meaning—one related to events far past the crisis of Assyrian invasion.

We learn few specifics about this child. Immanuel is a compound name: *immanu* (with us) + *’el* ([is] God). Written as two words in the Masoretic Text, but as a single word in the Great Isaiah Scroll from Qumran, it expresses divine presence. It is similar in meaning to the name *’amadyahu*, “YHWH is standing (with you),” found on a seventh-century BCE ostrakon (broken piece of pottery), and the Aramaic name *’amenayah* (Hebrew *’immanuyah*), “Yah [a shortened form of YHWH] is with us,” found in a fifth-century BCE papyrus. This same idea of divine presence is found in the famous Psalm 23:4, “I fear no evil; / for you are with me.” Yet, the name “God [’el] is with us,” rather than “YHWH is with us,” is surprising, for outside of Isaiah 7:14 and the related 8:8, Isaiah never calls God *’el*.

The next verse, Isaiah 7:15, continues to offer information about this child: “By the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good” refers to the son’s youth, at which point he will “eat curds and honey,” most likely a reference to a child old enough to eat solid food.

The sign Isaiah offers is not a miracle but an assurance. When Ahaz and his court would see this pregnant woman, they would be reminded of Isaiah’s warnings against international alliances and assurances of divine protection. Once born and named, the child becomes the reminder that God is with the people of Judah and that they should have no fear.

Despite the clarity of the Hebrew, translations prove controversial. Conservative Protestants burned copies of the 1952 Revised Standard Version because it, correctly, translated *’almah* in Isaiah 7:14 as “young woman” rather than “virgin.” Some Roman Catholic bishops insisted that for the New American Bible (NAB, 2002), Isa-

iah 7:14 be translated as “virgin,” and it was.<sup>6</sup> For the NAB Revised Edition (promoted with the tagline “love your NABRE”), the verse reads “young woman.”

Since Isaiah clearly spoke of a pregnant young woman, and since the sign clearly addressed the looming political crisis, how did the idea of a virginal conception arise? For that, we need to look at the Greek translation of Isaiah 7:14.

## FROM “YOUNG WOMAN” TO “VIRGIN”

INSTEAD OF translating *‘almah* as “young woman of marriageable age,” with the expected Greek term *neanis*, the Septuagint offers *parthenos*. And with this one word, centuries of Jewish-Christian debate, as well as of internal Christian litmus tests, begin.

*Parthenos* is the term that underlies the “Parthenon,” the Greek temple dedicated to the (virgin) goddess Athena; it also underlies “parthenogenesis,” reproduction by way of an unfertilized ovum, that is, conception that does not require (male) sperm.

But not every *parthenos* is a virgin in the sense of a sexually inexperienced person. The term can also mean “young woman,” as we see in the story of Dinah, the daughter of Jacob and Leah. In Genesis 34:3, the Hebrew twice describes Dinah, who has just had sexual intercourse, as a *na‘arah*, a “young woman,” and the Septuagint uses *parthenos* in each case.

A comparison to the English word “maid” demonstrates how *parthenos* takes on different connotations depending on literary and historical contexts. The term “maid” dates to twelfth-century England, where it appears as a contraction of “maiden,” that is, either “virgin” or “young and unmarried woman” (at the time, “unmarried woman” and “virgin” were presumed to be synonymous). A maid was a woman with a “maidenhead,” that is, a hymen. Thus, bridesmaids were supposed to be virgins, as was Robin Hood’s girlfriend, “Maid Marion.”



The term “maid” then shifted from referring to a virgin (presumed to be a young woman) to referring to a young woman (presumed to be a virgin), and it begins to appear in compound nouns such as milkmaid and, later, barmaid and meter maid. Eventually, the connotation “virgin” dropped out. We still have “bridesmaids,” but their sexual status is, like the sexual status of the bride, not a matter for concern.

It is possible that the scribe who rendered *almah* as *parthenos* did mean to suggest that the woman in question was a virgin. The next term, in Hebrew the adjective *harrah*, “is pregnant,” comes into Greek as *en gastri eksei*, literally, “in (her) womb will have.” The verb is in the future tense, which indicates that the woman is not yet pregnant. The Greek therefore reads “the virgin will conceive.” It does not explicitly propose a miracle, or at least no more of a miracle than any other conception. For the Greek, Isaiah points to a young woman, still a virgin, and predicts that soon, she will become pregnant. For the Greek version of Isaiah, the king has more time to rely on Judah’s safety. The woman, not yet pregnant, will first have to conceive the child (and in the process, cease to be a virgin), and then the child, Immanuel, will be born, named, and eventually eat solid food.

Finally, whereas the Hebrew states that *she* will name the child, the Greek has Isaiah telling the king, “You [singular] will call his name Immanuel.” Matthew then offers one more permutation of this prediction: instead of “she will call his name” (MT) or “you will call his name” (Greek), Matthew has “they will call his name” (1:23). Matthew’s reference is not to Mary and Joseph, but to Jesus’s followers, who will identify him as God. For the Gospel writers, as with some early rabbis, liberty can be taken with textual citation.

Neither the Hebrew nor the Septuagint offers a miraculous sign; neither anticipates the fulfillment of the sign centuries after it was given. Neither, before Matthew, was cited in relation to a messianic

figure. Once Jesus’s followers began to proclaim that his birth was miraculous, Isaiah 7:14 provided, retrospectively, a suitable proof-text.

Most Jews at the time Matthew was writing, toward the end of the first century CE, would not have been flummoxed to hear of divine beings and humans having sexual relations and producing children. In the diaspora and even the towns of Judea and the Galilee, Jews would be familiar with Greek and Roman accounts of divine births: of Aeneas, the son of the goddess Aphrodite and the human Anchises (Homer, *Iliad* 2.819, 5.247–48; Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 14.581–608), and Hercules, the son of the god Zeus and the human Alcmena (Homer, *Iliad* 14.315–28). They heard that various emperors, philosophers, and military heroes had divine fathers: Alexander the Great was the son of Zeus; Apollo was the father of Asclepius and Augustus.<sup>8</sup> Ascription of divine conception usually worked backward: a person of impressive prowess or intellect had to be the child of a god; nothing else would explain his (always “his”) extraordinary accomplishments.

Divine conceptions also appear in Israel’s scriptures. Genesis, before detailing the story of Noah, records how the “sons of God” (Hebrew *benei ha’elohim*; Greek *huiioi tou theou*), the divine beings of the heavenly court, had intercourse with the “daughters of men,” who then gave birth to a race of giants (Gen 6:2–4). This account is developed in the Second Temple texts found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, including 1 Enoch (106–7) and the Genesis Apocryphon. The story of Samson in Judges 13 also intimates, strongly, that Samson’s mother, the wife of Manoah, had some angelic help in conceiving her child.<sup>9</sup> A few Second Temple texts speak of the miraculous birth of Melchizedek, the mysterious priest-king in Genesis 14:18–20 (see p. 166). In one account from 2 Enoch, a Jewish text preserved only in Old Church Slavonic, Noah’s brother, Nir, a priest, had stopped having sexual relations with his wife, Sopanin, so that he might remain in a state of ritual purity. When Sopanin becomes pregnant,

Nir accuses her of adultery. Shamed by his words but innocent of any extramarital relations, she dies, and while dying gives birth to Melchizedek. George Nickelsburg asks, "Is this story a Christian creation that reflects knowledge of Matthew and Hebrews, or has a Jewish author concerned about priestly succession and authority, who knows the Noachic stories, speculated about the possibility of a divine conception?"<sup>10</sup>

The Jewish philosopher Philo suggests that both Abraham and Isaac had some supernatural aid in conceiving their children.<sup>11</sup> It is possible that Paul alludes to a related tradition in his Epistle to the Galatians, where he contrasts the carnality of Ishmael (and so of gentile followers of Jesus who want to follow Jewish practice, such as circumcision) and the spirituality of Isaac (and so of gentile followers who enter into Abraham's family without practicing distinctive Jewish rituals): "One, the child of the slave [Hagar], was born according to the flesh; the other, the child of the free woman [Sarah], was born through the promise" (Gal 4:23).

What might have surprised Jews was not the claim of Jesus's miraculous conception; it was the citation of Isaiah 7:14 to legitimate the claim. The followers of Jesus read the scriptures of Israel in light of their understanding of him as the Messiah and risen Lord and so found references to him that outsiders would not have recognized. Matthew, who quotes Israel's scriptures (usually in their Septuagintal form) more than sixty times, finds in Isaiah the model for Jesus's birth. For Matthew, Israel's scriptures frequently function as predictions that Jesus fulfills. For other Jews, especially those following the Hebrew rather than the Greek versions, Matthew's claims would be peculiar if not illegitimate. The issue is not one of right reading versus wrong reading; rather, if one begins with the premise that the Christ is predicted by and present in what becomes called the "Old Testament," one will find him there.

## FROM PREDICTION TO POLEMIC

ALTHOUGH IN the New Testament only Matthew's Gospel cites Isaiah 7:14, later authors deployed the verse in their arguments against non-Messianic Jews as well as other Jesus-followers whose Christology they found deficient. The next extant textual citation of Isaiah 7:14 in relation to Jesus appears in Justin Martyr's *Dialogue with Trypho* (ca. 160). Justin, who lived circa 100–165, was born in Samaria to pagan parents. He was one of Christianity's foremost apologists, who sought to show the Roman Empire that Christianity was not a subversive or depraved sect but a philosophically logical and ethically moral movement. He gained the title "martyr" when he and his disciples refused to renounce their faith.

In the *Dialogue*, Justin and Trypho discuss what have remained major issues in Jewish-Christian conversation: the ongoing value of the covenant with Moses, supersessionism, the messianic identity of Jesus in relation to Israel's scriptures, the relation of Trinitarian thought to Jewish monotheism, the role of the *Logos*, and the distinctive wordings of the Hebrew scriptures versus their Greek translations. While speculation that the *Dialogue's* Trypho is based on Rabbi Tarfon, an early second-century companion of the famous Rabbi Akiva, cannot be confirmed, James E. Kiefer aptly observes that the dialogue was "probably a real conversation with a real rabbi (although it may be suspected that Justin in editing it later gave him-

self a few good lines that he wished he had thought of at the time), whom he met while promenading at Ephesus shortly after the sack of Jerusalem in 135.<sup>12</sup> Given that the emperor Hadrian, by destroying the city, ended hopes that the Temple destroyed by Roman troops in 70 CE would be rebuilt, the followers of Jesus became increasingly convinced that God's covenant had passed from the Jews to them.

In *Dialogue 67*, Trypho and Justin turn to the question of Jesus's conception. Trypho, as expected, states that Isaiah describes not a "virgin" but a "young woman" and adds, "But the whole prophecy refers to Hezekiah and it is proved that it was fulfilled in him, according to the terms of this prophecy."<sup>13</sup> As we have seen, his dating for the birth of Hezekiah is off. Trypho nevertheless quotes the Hebrew correctly.

Trypho goes on to cite some miraculous-birth stories from what we today would call "Greek mythology": "It is written that Perseus was begotten of Danae, who was a virgin; he who was called among them Zeus having descended on her in the form of a golden shower. And you ought to feel ashamed when you make assertions similar to theirs. . . . But do not venture to tell monstrous phenomena, lest you be convicted of talking foolishly like the Greeks." Justin had to guard the front on the pagan side, a front that saw Jesus as just another god, like Hercules or Mithra, Dionysius or Pythagoras. Placing the mythological examples on Trypho's lips, Justin is able to deny the charge that Christians were copying pagan stories. He goes on to insist rather that all the competing accounts of miraculous births were the work of Satan.

Then Justin, on the offensive, moves to the Greek of Isaiah 7:14. He accuses the Jew, "Here too you dare to distort the translation of this passage made by your elders at the court of Ptolemy, the king of Egypt, asserting that the real meaning of the Scripture is not as they translated it, but should read, 'Behold, a young woman will conceive.'" He goes on to assert that a woman pregnant by normal means

cannot be a sign, since a sign has to have a supernatural import. But, as we have seen, that definition of "sign" does not hold even in the New Testament alone.

Trypho, not finding Justin's initial salvo convincing, pushes his Christian interlocutor: "Please show us how that passage [Isaiah 7:14] refers to your Christ and not to Hezekiah, as we Jews believe" (*Dialogue 77*). Justin responds by quoting other verses from the Septuagint, in which he makes subtle changes to support his claim. For example, he cites Isaiah 8:4, "for before the child knows how to call 'My father' or 'My mother,' the wealth of Damascus and the spoil of Samaria will be carried away by the king of Assyria," and concludes, "You cannot prove that this ever happened to any of you Jews, but we Christians can show that it did happen to our Christ" (*Dialogue 77*). His proof-text: the gifts of the Magi described in Matthew 2. That the Magi are Chaldean (Babylonian) astrologers rather than from Damascus in Syria or Samaria is irrelevant to Justin. Trypho responds, "The words of God are indeed holy, but your interpretations are artificial" (*Dialogue 79*). The *Dialogue* ends as the two men part on remarkably civil terms. Trypho states:

You see that it was not by design that we fell into a discussion over these matters. And I acknowledge that I have been extraordinarily charmed with our intercourse, and I think that these are of like opinion with myself. For we have found more than we expected, or than it was even possible for us to expect. And if we could do this more frequently we should receive more benefit, while we examine the very words [of Scripture] themselves. (*Dialogue 142*)

Following Justin, the North African church father Tertullian similarly realizes that the proper text of Isaiah 7:14 is a fundamental dividing point between Jews and Christians: as long as the Jews have a

Hebrew text that mentions not a virgin but a young woman, and as long as they can explain Isaiah's prophecy as having been fulfilled by the birth of King Hezekiah, they can call the Christian project illegitimate. Tertullian writes, "Accordingly, the Jews say: 'Let us challenge the predictions of Isaiah, and let us institute a comparison whether, in the case of the Christ who is already come, there be applicable to Him, firstly, the name which Isaiah foretold, and (secondly) the signs of which he announced of Him'" (*In Answer to the Jews* 9).

By the time we get to Jerome's Latin translation at the beginning of the fifth century, Isaiah's "young woman" has become a "virgin": *ecce virgo concipiet*. Despite living in the land of Israel and claiming that he is translating his text from the Hebrew, Jerome doubles down on Matthew's text: for Jerome, Isaiah's young woman is not only a virgin, she is a cloistered one. He makes his case by suggesting that the Hebrew term *'almah* comes from a Hebrew root, *'l-m*, which means to "hide." Therefore the correct reading of Isaiah 7:14 concerns an *abscondita* (Latin for "hidden"), a woman hidden away from men, or "cloistered," ensuring the woman's virginity.<sup>14</sup> This wordplay would be familiar to his rabbinic counterparts, who also connected *'almah*, "young woman," to *'elem*, "hidden," although not in the context of sexuality. (In Hebrew the root *'l-m* is homonymic, meaning both a "young person" and "hidden.") In explaining why Exodus 2:8 refers to Moses's sister, who approaches Pharaoh's daughter with an offer to provide a Hebrew midwife, as an *'almah*, Rabbi Samuel offers, "because she concealed her words [i.e., her identity and intention]."<sup>15</sup>

Isaiah 7:14 plays no significant role in Judaism. It does not appear in the liturgy, nor is it ever chanted as a *haffarah* (prophetic reading). It primarily appears in anti-Christian polemics.<sup>16</sup> Such polemic may be reflected as early as the mid-second-century CE Greek versions of the Tanakh by Theodotion and Aquila, who translate *'almah* into Greek as *neanis*, "young woman." The Greek translation ascribed to

Symmachus, whom the church father Eusebius (*Demonstration of the Gospel* 7.1, ca. 320) identified as an Ebionite (a member of a Christian group who adhered to Jewish customs or, as Eusebius puts it, "a heresy of some so-called Jews who claim to believe in Christ"), similarly reads *neanis* for *'almah*. The same Greek term appears in the Septuagint's description of the Levite's concubine (who is manifestly not a virgin) in Judges 19; it describes the widow Ruth, who is also not a virgin, in Ruth 2:5.

Classical rabbinic literature rarely refers to Isaiah 7:14, and its few citations have no messianic import. Just the opposite: Although classical and medieval Jewish readings often take prophetic passages as referring to the distant future, Isaiah 7:14 is read in its historical context. Exodus Rabbah 18:5, unaware of the chronological problems it is creating, suggests that Immanuel is Ahaz's son Hezekiah, under whom the Assyrians failed to conquer Jerusalem, since the Chroniker (2 Chr 32:8) states that "with him [i.e., Sennacherib, the king of Assyria] is an arm of flesh; but with us [Hebrew *'immanu*—part of the name Immanuel] is the LORD our God."

In the Middle Ages, as Jews in Europe became aware of claims concerning Mary's perpetual virginity, either explicitly or implicitly they began to polemicize against the Christian interpretation of Isaiah 7:14. The medieval French exegete Rashi claimed that Immanuel's mother was the prophet Isaiah's wife and that this prophecy was meant to be fulfilled in the short term (in Rashi's words, "this very year"). For Rashi, Hezekiah could not be the son, since he was born before Ahaz gained the throne (see 2 Kgs 16:2; 18:2). Given Rashi's status among many European Jews, this interpretation became well-known and accepted.

Some Messianic Jews have insisted that Rashi recognized that Isaiah was actually talking about a virgin. The Messianic Jewish *Complete Jewish Study Bible* asserts regarding Isaiah 7:14: "Even Rashi is

quoted in *Mikraoth Gedaloth* [The Rabbinic Bible] on this passage: ‘Behold the *’almah* shall conceive and have a son and shall call his name Immanuel. This means that our Creator will be with us. And this is the sign: the one who will conceive is a girl *who never in her life had intercourse with any man*. Upon this one shall the Holy Spirit have power” (emphasis added).<sup>17</sup> These authors, however, misquote Rashi. Rashi has no “virginal” conception.

Abraham ibn Ezra (1089–1167), a Jewish commentator and poet born in Muslim Spain but who later traveled in Christian Europe, explains in greater polemical detail why Isaiah cannot be referring to Jesus:

It is to me a matter of surprise that there are those who say the prophet here refers to Jesus, since the sign was given to Ahaz, and Jesus was born many years afterwards; besides, the prophet says, “For before the child shall know to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land shall be forsaken”; but the countries of Ephraim and Syria were wasted in the sixth year of Hezekiah, and it is distinctly said “of those two kings” etc. . . . We know that a male child is called *na’ar*, a female child *na’arah* or *’almah*—the feminine of *’elem*—whether she be a virgin or not; for *’almah* signifies a person of a certain age, like the masculine *’elem*; and in *derekh gever be’almah* “the way of a man with a young woman” (Prov. 30: 19), *’almah* is certainly not a virgin; because at the beginning of the passage it is said, “which I know not” (v. 18).<sup>18</sup>

Although ibn Ezra does not refer to the Septuagint—he did not know Greek—he is clearly polemicizing against its rendition of *’almah* as *parthenos*.

This strong anti-Christian polemic spills over to Mary, as some early Jewish commentators countered claims of her virginity with claims of her promiscuity. For example, the *Tosefa* (ca. 250 CE) sug-

gests she had a sexual liaison with a Roman soldier named Ben Panthera (t. Hullin 2.22–24); the same story circulated in pagan circles, as we find it in Origen’s *Contra Celsum* 1.69. The name Ben Panthera (“Son of Panthera”) may be a play on the term *parthenos*.<sup>19</sup>

On the other hand, not all Jewish readings of Isaiah 7:14 are polemical. A late addition to the Zohar (2:212b), the central thirteenth-century mystical work, understands Isaiah’s prophecy as referring, allegorically, to divine assistance to Israel in exile. Some medieval Jews, especially in Italy, named their children “Immanuel”; the most famous is the scholar and poet Immanuel of Rome (1261–1328).

By the time the author of Matthew was writing circa 90 CE, more than seven centuries after the time of Isaiah, Isaiah 7:14 had become reinterpreted and recontextualized. Later readers of Isaiah, including those from the Dead Sea Scroll community and the early Christ-believing community, knew and cared little about the Syro-Ephraimite war. They also regarded their scripture as a divinely inspired work with wisdom for future generations. It was thus natural for them to see Isaiah’s ancient prophecy as relevant to their own communities.

Christian readers today, aware of the lack of a virginal conception in the Hebrew of Isaiah 7:14, will sometimes argue that while Isaiah in *his own time* referred to the birth of Hezekiah or some other individual, *he also* was referring to Jesus. This argument generally hangs on the reference to the plural “you” in Isaiah 7:14 (“the Lord himself will give you [pl.] a sign”), which is understood not as referring to Ahaz and his court but to Ahaz and unspecified people in the future. Such a reading is consistent with what the Catholic Church calls the *sensus plenior*, the “fuller sense.” Jesuit scholar Daniel Harrington in *The Bible and the Believer* describes this process in relation to Isaiah 7:14:

This is the deeper meaning of a text that was intended by God but not consciously or clearly expressed by the biblical author. . . . Whereas Isaiah and his audience at the royal court in Jerusalem might have assumed that he was talking about a male child (perhaps Hezekiah) to be born from one of King Ahaz's wives, in the fuller sense, the Holy Spirit, speaking through the prophet, was really looking forward centuries later to the virginal conception of Jesus by Mary who was a *parthenos* according to the Greek in Matthew 1:18–25. This sense is obviously a theological accommodation.<sup>20</sup>

Other scholars begin with the premise that the virginal conception was a historical event reported by Mary. Methodist scholar Ben Witherington offers the following retrospective explanation:

Since Isaiah 7:14 in the Hebrew or even in the LXX does not necessarily imply a miraculous conception, it must have been the actual miraculous conception in the life of Mary that prompted the rereading of the OT text in this way. In other words, this is not an example of a fictional story about Mary generated by a previous prophecy about a miracle. To the contrary, it is a reinterpretation of a multivalent prophecy in light of what actually happened to Mary.<sup>21</sup>

Witherington's view raises the question of how we do history. For him and many others, that God would contravene the laws of nature and so create not simply a "sign" but a miracle is historical fact. We read history differently: we seek interpretations that would make sense to believers—Christian, Jewish, Muslim, whoever—as well as to people who have no belief in a supernatural divine figure.

Like almost all biblical texts, Isaiah's prophecy opens to multiple interpretations, and we would do well to realize how different readings, translations, and historical contexts have led to these differences,

and to appreciate that our personal preference should not determine how others, from different religious communities, must read the text. Nor should the Jewish community cede certain scripture to Christianity. Rather than engage in another *Dialogue with Trypho* and run through the potential problems with the various readings, we think it more prudent to talk about what we might do with Isaiah 7:14 today. What pregnant questions might it pose?

Too often today blind faith is emphasized. Yet all readings of this text suggest that it is not only proper but on occasion crucial to doubt, to ask God to provide signs about future events. Isaiah speaks of a sign given to Ahaz, a king who refuses to believe the prophet's original message and refused to look for a sign: What are the signs given to people who refuse to believe the signs of the times?

We should also attend to what the sign of a pregnant woman might be today. Look, a woman is pregnant: What will happen before her child is old enough to eat solid food? Will there be food for him to eat, or healthcare for her to thrive?

The history of interpretation of this chapter should also teach us some humility. At one time or another we might claim certainty about what a text means. The different interpretations of Isaiah 7:14 by different religious groups over time should warn us against any narrow or restricted meaning.

Finally, the fact that such a central notion in Christianity as the virginal conception is mentioned explicitly only once in the New Testament offers a central lesson as to how all scriptural religions develop over time: Sometimes a notion barely attested in scripture becomes significant at a later period, and sometimes an idea that a scripture emphasizes time and time again becomes less important, or even falls by the wayside. Thus the history of interpretation of the sign of Immanuel teaches us much about how all religions have, and can, change over time.