

Chapter 9

Summary of Interpretations of Isaiah 7:14

Few prophecies have been the subject of so much controversy, or called forth such a variety of exegesis, as this prophecy of Immanuel. --George Rawlinson

Introduction

As Chapter 1 documented, scholars generally agree that Isaiah 7-14 is a difficult, controversial text that has had many interpretations over the centuries. The purpose of this chapter is to review the major interpretations of this verse in order to set the stage for the exegesis, analysis, and conclusions to be drawn in this book.

The main summary given here is by Joseph Addison Alexander, a Hebraist and professor of oriental and biblical literature at Princeton Theological Seminary, succeeding Charles Hodge in that position in 1840. I cite Dr. Alexander's review verbatim, except that long paragraphs are divided and placed in the form of an outline.¹ His review also includes his own responses to the interpretations summarized, and some of his points and arguments are cited in future chapters as I develop the interpretation presented in this book. Unfortunately, though a scholar of the highest order, Alexander is not a good writer.

Summary by J. A. Alexander

Hypothesis 1

I. The first hypothesis is that the only birth and infancy referred to in these verses are the birth and infancy of a child born (or supposed to be born) in the ordinary course of nature, and in the days of Isaiah himself.

The unessential variations, to which this hypothesis is susceptible, have reference chiefly to the question what particular child is intended.

1. The Jews of old supposed it to be Hezekiah; but this was exploded by Jerome's suggestion, that he was already at least nine years old, since his father reigned but sixteen years, and he succeeded him at twenty-five (2 Kings xvi. 2, xviii. 2).
2. Kimchi [Radak] and Abarbenel [Abravanel] suppose Immanuel to be a younger son of Ahaz, by a second marriage.
3. Isenbiehl, Bauer, Cube, Steudel, and Hitzig, understand by הַעֲלָמָה , a woman who was present, and at whom the Prophet pointed.
4. J. D. Michaelis, Eichhorn, Paulus, Hensler, Ammon, understand the Prophet to predict not a real but an

1 Joseph Addison Alexander, *The Prophecies of Isaiah*, 2 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner & Co., 1870), I:166-72; italics original and brackets added.

ideal birth, as if he had said, should one now a virgin conceive and bear a son, she might call his name Immanuel, &c.

5. Aben Ezra, Jarchi [Rashi], Faber, Plüschke, Gesenius, Maurer, Hendewerk, Knobel, suppose him to be speaking of his own wife, and the birth of his own son; and as Shearjashub was already born, Gesenius assumes a second marriage of the Prophet, and supposes two events to be predicted; first, the deliverance of Judah at the birth of the child, and then the desolation of Syria and Israel before he should be able to distinguish good and evil.

To this last supposition, it is justly objected by Hengstenberg that it assumes too great an interval between the deliverance of Judah and the desolation of the other countries, as well as between the former and the resumption of agricultural employments. It is besides unnecessary, as the interposition denoted by the name Immanuel need not be restricted to the time of the child's birth, and as the desolation of Syria and Israel is said to take place before, but not immediately before the child's attaining to a certain age; to which it may be added that the age itself is left somewhat indefinite.

But besides these objections to Gesenius's assumption of a twofold prophecy, his whole hypothesis, with all the others which have been enumerated, except perhaps the fourth, may be justly charged with gratuitously assuming facts of which we have no evidence, and which are not necessary to the interpretation of the passage; such as the second marriage of Ahaz, or that of Isaiah, or the presence of a pregnant woman, or the Prophet's pointing at her.

A further objection to all the variations of this first hypothesis is, that although they may afford a sign, in one of the senses of that term, to wit, that of an emblem or symbol, they do not afford such a sign as the context would lead us to expect. Ahaz had been offered the privilege of choosing any sign whatever, in heaven or on earth. Had he actually chosen one, it would no doubt have been something out of the ordinary course of nature, as in the case of Gideon (Judges vi. 37-40) and Hezekiah (Isa. xxxviii. 7,8). On his refusal to choose, a sign is given him unasked, and although it does not necessarily follow that it was precisely such as he would have selected--since the object was no longer simply to remove his doubts, but to verify the promise and to mark the event when it occurred as something which had been predicted--yet it seems very improbable that after such an offer, the sign bestowed would be merely a thing of everyday occurrence, or at most the application of a symbolical name.

This presumption is strengthened by the solemnity with which the Prophet speaks of the predicted birth, not as a usual and natural event, but as something which excites his own astonishment, as he beholds it in prophetic vision. This may prove nothing by itself, but is significant when taken in connection with the other reasons. The same thing may be said of the address to Immanuel, in chap. viii. 8, and the allusion to the name in ver. 11, which, although they may admit of explanation in consistency with this first hypothesis, agree much better with the supposition that the prophecy relates to something more than a natural and ordinary birth.

A still stronger reason for the same conclusion is afforded by the parallel passage in chap. ix. 5, 6, occurring in the same connected series of prophecies. There, as here, the birth of a child is given as a pledge of safety and deliverance, but with the important addition of a full description, which, as we shall see below, is wholly inapplicable to any ordinary human child, however high in rank or full of promise.

If led by these remarkable coincidences to examine more attentively the terms of the prophecy itself, we find the mother of the promised child described, not as a woman or as any particular woman merely, but as **הַעֲלֹמָה** a term which has been variously derived from **עלם** to *conceal*, and from [an Arabic word] to *grow up*, but which, in the six places where it [**עֲלֹמָה**] occurs elsewhere, is twice applied to young unmarried females certainly (Gen. xxiv. 43; Exod. ii. 8) and twice most probably (Ps. lxxviii. 25; Sol. Song i. 3), while in the two remaining cases (Sol. Song i. 8; Prov. xxx. 19) this application is at least as probable as any other. It would therefore naturally suggest the idea of a virgin, or at least of an unmarried woman.

It is said, indeed, that if this had been intended, the word **בְּתוּלָה** would have been employed; but even that word is not invariably used in its strict sense (see Deut. xxii. 19; Joel i. 8), so that there would still have been room for the same cavils, and perhaps for the assertion that the idea of a virgin could not be expressed except by a periphrasis.

It is enough for us to know that a virgin or unmarried woman is designated here as distinctly as she could be by a single word. But why should this description be connected with a fact which seems to render it inapplicable, that of parturition [bringing forth young]? That the word means simply a young woman, whether married or unmarried, a virgin or a mother, is a subterfuge invented by the later Greek translators who, as Justin Martyr tells us, read *νεᾶνις*, instead of the old version *παρθενος*, which had its rise before the prophecy became a subject of dispute between the Jews and Christians.

That the word [**עַלְמָה**] denotes one who is a virgin or unmarried now, without implying that she is to remain so, is certainly conceivable; but, as we said before, its use in this connection, especially when added to the other reasons previously mentioned, makes it, to say the least, extremely probable that the event foretold is something more than a birth in the ordinary course of nature. So too, the name *Immanuel*, although it might be used to signify God's providential presence merely (Ps. xlv. 8, 12, lxxxix. 25; Joshua i. 5; Jer. i. 8; Isa. xl. 2), has a latitude and pregnancy of meaning which can scarcely be fortuitous, and which, combined with all the rest, makes the conclusion almost unavoidable, that it was here intended to express a *personal* as well as a *providential* presence. If to this we add the early promise of salvation through the *seed of the woman* (Gen. iii. 15), rendered more definite by later revelations, and that remarkable expression of Isaiah's contemporary prophet Micah (ver. 2), *until the time that she which travaileth hath brought forth*, immediately following the promise of a ruler, to be born in Bethlehem, but *whose goings forth have been of old, from everlasting*--the balance of probabilities, as furnished by the Old Testament exclusively, preponderates decidedly in favour of the supposition, that Isaiah's words had reference to a miraculous conception and nativity.

When we read, therefore, in the gospel of Matthew, that Jesus Christ was actually born of a virgin, and that all the circumstances of his birth came to pass that this very prophecy might be fulfilled, it has less the appearance of an unexpected application, than of a conclusion rendered necessary, by a series of antecedent facts and reasons--the last link in a long chain of intimations more or less explicit. The same considerations seem to shew that the prophecy is not merely transferred or accommodated to another subject by the evangelist, which is, moreover, clear from the emphatic form of the citation (*τοῦτο ὄλον γέγονεν ἵνα πληρωθῆ ἡ κ. τ. λ.*), making it impossible to prove the existence of any quotation, in the proper sense, if this be not one, and from the want of any similarity between the two events, viz., a natural and miraculous conception, upon which a mere illustrative accommodation of the words could have been founded.

The idea, insidiously suggested by J. D. Michaelis, that the first two chapters of Matthew may be spurious, is so far from deriving any countenance from this application of the prophecy, that, on the contrary, its wonderful agreement with the scattered but harmonious intimations of the Old Testament, too numerous and too detached to be fortuitous, affords a strong though incidental proof that these very chapters are genuine and authentic. The rejection of Matthew's authority in toto, as an interpreter of the prediction, is not only inconsistent with the proofs of his inspiration drawn from other quarters, but leaves unexplained the remarkable coincidence between his interpretation and the original form of expression, the context, and the parallel passages. That these should all conspire to recommend an ignorant or random explanation of the prophecy, is more incredible than that the explanation should be true, and the words of Isaiah a prediction of something more than the birth of a real or ideal child in the ordinary course of nature, and in the days of the Prophet himself.

The question, however, still arises, how the birth of Christ, if here predicted, is to be connected with the promise made to Ahaz, as a sign of the event, or as a measure of the time of its fulfilment?

Hypothesis 2

II. The second hypothesis removes this difficulty, by supposing that the prophecy relates to two distinct births and two different children.

Of this general theory there are two important modifications.

1. The first supposes one child to be mentioned in ver. 14, and another in ver. 16. As to ver. 15, some connect it with the one before and some with the one after it. Thus Junius understands ver. 14 to refer to Christ, but vers. 15, 16 to Shearjashub; Usher applies vers. 14, 15 to Christ, and ver. 16 to Shearjashub; Calvin, vers. 14, 15 to Christ, but ver. 16 to a *child*, i.e. any child indefinitely. They all agree that the prophecy contains two promises. First, that Christ should be born of a virgin, and then that Judah should be delivered before Shearjashub (or before any child born within a certain time) could distinguish good from evil.

To such of these interpretations as refer ver. 15 to the infancy of Christ, it may be objected that they put a sense upon that verse which its expressions will not bear, and which is inconsistent with the use of the same terms in ver. 22. It will be seen below that the eating of curds and honey is predicted as a sign of general desolation, or at least of interrupted tillage.

Another objection which applies to all the forms of this interpretation is the sudden change of subject, in the fifteenth or sixteenth verse, from Immanuel to Shearjashub, or to any child indefinitely. Nothing but extreme exegetical necessity could justify the reference of vers. 15, 16 to any person not referred to in ver. 14.

2. This difficulty is avoided in the second modification of the general hypothesis that the passage, as a whole, refers to two distinct births and to different children, by assuming that both are mentioned in the fourteenth verse itself. This is the supposition of a double sense, though some refuse to recognise it by that name. The essence of the theory is this, that while ver. 14, in its obvious and primary sense, relates to the birth of a child in the ordinary course of nature, its terms are so selected as to be descriptive, in a higher sense, of the miraculous nativity of Christ.

This theory is mentioned by Jerome as the opinion of a certain Judaizing Christian, whom he does not name (*quidam de nostris judaizans*), and by Calvin as a compromise between the orthodox and Jewish expositions, but it has since had many eminent and able advocates.

The minor variations of this general hypothesis have reference chiefly to the particular child intended by the prophecy in its lower sense, whether a son of Isaiah himself, as Grotius, Clericus, and Barnes suppose, or any child born within a certain time, as Lowth, with more probability, assumes.

The advantage of these interpretations is, that they seem to account for the remarkable expressions which the prophet uses, as if to intimate a deeper meaning than the primary and obvious one, and at the same time answer the conditions both of the context in Isaiah and of the application in Matthew, presenting a sign analogous to others given before and after by this very prophet (chap. vii. 3, viii. 2), and at the same time furnishing believers with a striking prophecy of the Messiah.

The objections to it are its complexity, and what seems to be the arbitrary nature of the assumption upon which it rests. It seems to be a feeling common to learned and unlearned readers, that although a double sense is not impossible, and must in certain cases be assumed, it is unreasonable to assume it when any other explanation is admissible. The improbability in this case is increased by the want of similarity between the two events, supposed to be predicted in the very same words, the one miraculous, the other not only natural, but common, and of everyday occurrence. That two such occurrences should be described in the same words, simply because they were both signs or pledges of a promise, though not impossible, can only be made probable by strong corroborating proofs, especially if any simpler mode of exposition be at all admissible.

Another objection, which lies equally against this hypothesis and the one first mentioned is, that in its primary and lower sense it does not afford such a sign as the context and the parallel passages would lead us to expect, unless we suppose that the higher secondary sense was fully understood at the time of the prediction, and in that case, though the birth of the Messiah from a virgin would be doubtless a sufficient sign, it would, for that

very reason, seem to make the lower one superfluous.

Dathe's courageous supposition, that the primary reference is to a miraculous conception and birth in the days of Isaiah, only aggravates the difficulty which it would diminish, though it certainly escapes the force of some of the objections to the supposition of a double sense, to wit, those founded on the inadequacy of the sign and the dissimilarity of the events.

None of these reasons seem, however, to be decisive against the supposition of a double sense, as commonly understood, unless there be some other way in which its complexity and arbitrary character may be avoided, and at the same time the connection between the birth of the Messiah and the deliverance of Judah satisfactorily explained.

Hypothesis 3

III. The third general hypothesis proposes to effect this by applying all three verses directly and exclusively to the Messiah, as the only child whose birth is there predicted, and his growth made the measure of the subsequent events.

The minor variations of this general hypothesis relate to the time when these events were to occur, and to the sense in which the growth of the Messiah is adopted as the measure of them.

1. The simplest form in which this theory has been applied, is that exhibited by J. H. Michaelis and others, who suppose the prediction to relate to the real time of Christ's appearance, and the thing foretold to be the desolation which should take place before the Saviour reached a certain age.

To this it is an obvious objection that it makes the event predicted too remote to answer the conditions of the context, or the purpose of the prophecy itself. A similar objection has, indeed, been urged by the Rabbins and others, to a prophecy of Christ's birth as a *sign* of the promise made to Ahaz.

But the cases are entirely dissimilar. The promise of immediate deliverance might be confirmed by an appeal to an event long posterior, if the one necessarily implied the other, as included in it, or as a necessary previous condition. Thus the promise that Israel should worship God at Sinai, was a *sign* to Moses, that they should first be delivered from Egypt (Exod. iii. 12), and the promise that the tillage interrupted by Sennacherib's invasion should be resumed, was a sign to Hezekiah, that the invasion was itself to cease (Isa. xxxvii. 30). In like manner, the assurance that Christ was to be born in Judah, of its royal family, might be a *sign* to Ahaz, that the kingdom should not perish in his day; and so far was the remoteness of the sign in this case from making it absurd or inappropriate, that the further off it was, the stronger the promise of continuance to Judah, which it guaranteed. Especially is this the case, if we suppose it to have been a familiar doctrine of the ancient Church, that the Messiah was to come, and that for his sake, Israel existed as a nation.

But, according to the theory now in question, not only is the *sign* remote, but also the thing signified; not only the pledge of the event, but the event itself. The Prophet's contemporaries might have been encouraged to expect deliverance from present danger by the promise of Christ's coming; but a promise of deliverance before the end of seven hundred years could afford no encouragement at all. That this objection to the theory in question has been felt by some of its most able advocates, may be inferred from several facts.

One is, that J. H. Michaelis is obliged to insert the words *long since* (*dudum deserta erit*), and yet to leave the promise wholly indefinite.

Another is, that Henderson departs from the ancient and almost universal explanation of the passage as a promise, and converts it into a threatening, not only against Israel, but against Judah; both of which kingdoms were to lose their kings before the twelfth year of our Saviour, when Archelaus was banished from Judea.

A third is, that Cocceius, though one of the most accurate philologists of his own or any other age, and only too decided in his exegetical judgments, hesitates between the interpretation now in question and the ungrammatical

and arbitrary reference of ver. 16 to a different child.

At all events, it may be safely assumed, that the application of these three verses to the time of Christ's actual appearance has no claim to be received, if there is any other form of the same general hypothesis, by which the connection of the promise with the context can be made more natural.

2. This end Vitranga has attempted to secure, by supposing the language to be hypothetical, or that the Prophet, while he views the birth of Christ as a remote event, makes it the measure of the events at hand--*q.d.* before the Messiah, *if he were born now*, could know how to distinguish good from evil, &c.

The only objection to this ingenious explanation is, that the conditional expression on which all depends, if he were born now, is precisely that which is omitted, and of which the text contains no intimation. And that the Prophet, without such intimation, would make this use of an event which he distinctly saw to be remote, though not incredible, ought surely not to be assumed without necessity.

3. Another modification of the hypothesis, which refers the three verses all to the Messiah, is that proposed by Rosenmüller, in the second and subsequent editions of his Scholia, and substantially renewed by Ewald, viz., that Isaiah really expected the Messiah to be born at once, and therefore naturally made the progress of his infancy the measure of a proximate futurity.

Neither of these writers supposes any reference to Christ, both regarding the prediction as a visionary anticipation.² But Hengstenberg has clearly shewn that such a positive belief and expectation, on Isaiah's part, is not only inconsistent with other prophecies, but with the sequel of this, in which a series of calamitous events is described as intervening between the approaching deliverance and the nativity of the Messiah. To the merely negative assumption that the time of the advent formed no part of this particular revelation, he thinks there is not the same objection.

4. Accordingly, his [Hengstenberg's] own interpretation of the passage is, that the birth of the Messiah being presented to the Prophet in connection with the proximate deliverance of which it was the sign or pledge, without regard to chronological relations, and seen by him in prophetic ecstasy as actually present, he naturally makes the one the measure of the other. As if he had said, I see the virgin bringing forth a son, and calling his name Immanuel; I see him living in the midst of desolation till a certain age; but before that time arrives, I see the land of our invaders lying desolate.

The only objection to this ingenious improvement on Vitranga's ingenious exposition, is that it rests upon a certain theory as to the nature of prophetic inspiration, or of the mental state in which the prophets received and uttered their communications, which, however probable, is not at present generally current with believers in the plenary inspiration of the Scriptures, nor perhaps maintained by Hengstenberg himself.

Assessment of Alexander's Summary

The above summary by Alexander gives the three major approaches to Isaiah 7:14 together with the several variations of each. A few approaches have been developed since Alexander wrote. There is also the possibility of selecting one or more of the variations to construct a plausible interpretation with arguments to support it. This is

2 It should be noted that E. F. Rosenmüller "argued that Isaiah did definitely intend to speak of the virgin-birth of the Messiah, and in defense of this view appealed to numerous ancient myths which speak of great men born of virgins or in other marvellous ways. Rosenmüller cites many of these..." (George Gray, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Isaiah I-XXXIX*, in *The International Critical Commentary*, gen. ed. Charles Augustus Briggs [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1912], p. 135). Thus, as Alexander states, neither Rosenmüller nor Ewald thought the prophecy had reference to Christ. According to Gray, this theory was further developed by H. Gressmann, Jeremias, Box, and Burney. For example, Burney "appeals to Mic 5² to show that in the age of Isaiah the birth of a great deliverer was expected, and he argues that Isaiah's sign consists of setting a time in the immediate future when the damsel, well known to every one from the part assigned to her in the current expectation, would bring forth the Deliverer in marvellous circumstances befitting his high destiny" (Gray, p. 136).

done in the remaining chapters of this book. First, however, it is informative to present and consider Alexander's approach to the problem based on his analysis of the material just presented. The following section completes the citation of Alexander.³ Note that it is large and not indented, but Alexander's thoroughness in organizing and explaining the various interpretations is most helpful. Few writers of commentaries on Isaiah are this thorough.

J. A. Alexander's Suggestions

In expounding this difficult and interesting passage, it has been considered more important to present a tolerably full view of the different opinions, arranged according to the principles on which they rest, than to assert the exclusive truth of any one interpretation as to all its parts. In summing up the whole, however, it may be confidently stated, that the first hypothesis is false; that the first modifications of the second and third are untenable; and that the choice lies between the supposition of a double sense and that of a reference to Christ exclusively, but in connection with the promise of immediate deliverance to Ahaz. The two particular interpretations which appear to be most plausible and least beset with difficulties, are those of Lowth and Vitringa, with which last Hengstenberg's is essentially identical. Either the Prophet, while he foretells the birth of Christ, foretells that of another child, during whose infancy the promised deliverance shall be experienced; or else he makes the infancy of Christ himself, whether foreseen as still remote or not, the sign and measure of that same deliverance. While some diversity of judgment ought to be expected and allowed, in relation to this secondary question, there is no ground, grammatical, historical, or logical, for doubt as to the main point, that the Church in all ages has been right in regarding this passage as a signal and explicit prediction of the miraculous conception and nativity of Jesus Christ.

As to the form of the expression, it will only be necessary further to remark that **הַרְהָרָה** is not a verb or participle (Vitringa, Rosenmüller), but a feminine adjective, signifying *pregnant*, and here connected with an active participle, to denote that the object is described as present to the Prophet's view. *Behold, the virgin, pregnant and bringing forth a son, and she calls his name Immanuel.* The future form adopted by the Septuagint (*ἔξει, λήψεται, τέξεται*) is retained in the New Testament, because the words are there considered simply as a prophecy; but in order to exhibit the full force which they have in their original connection, the present form must be restored. The form of the sentence is evidently copied from the angel's address to Hagar (Gen. xvi. 11), and so closely that the verb **קָרָאת** remains unchanged; not, however, as the second person feminine (though all the other Greek versions have *καλέσεις*, and Junius likewise, who supplies *o virgo* to remove the ambiguity), but as the third person feminine, analogous to **עָשָׂתָּ** (Lev. xxv. 21), **נִפְלְאתָ** (Ps. cxviii. 23), **הִבְרִאתָ** (Gen. xxxiii. 11). The form **קָרָאתָ** itself occurs (Deut. xxxi. 29; Jer. xlv. 23), but in another sense (See Nordheimer, § 422).

Calvin, with a strange lapse of memory, alleges that in Scripture mothers never name their children, and that a departure from the constant usage here is a prophetic intimation that the child would have no human father. The error of fact is easily corrected by referring to the exercise of this prerogative by Eve, Leah, Rachel, Hannah, and others (Gen. iv. 1-25; xix. 37; xxix. 32-35; xxx. 6-24; 1 Sam. i. 20; 1 Chron. iv. 9; vii. 16). That the same act is frequently ascribed to the father, needs of course no proof. In the case before us, it is so far from being an important question, who was to impose the name, that it matters very little whether it was ever imposed at all; or rather, it is certain that the name is merely descriptive or symbolical, and that its actual use in real life was no more necessary to the fulfilment of the prophecy, than that the Messiah should be commonly known by the titles of Wonderful, Counsellor, the Prince of Peace (Isa. ix. 6), or the Lord our Righteousness (Jer. xxiii. 6). Hence in Mat. i. 23, the singular **קָרָאתָ** is changed into the plural *καλέσουσι*, *they shall call*, i.e. they indefinitely, as in our familiar phrase *they say*, corresponding to the French *on dit* and the German *man sagt*, which last construction is adopted by Augusti in his version of this sentence (*man wird nennen seinen Namen*). With equal adherence to

3 Alexander, *The Prophecies of Isaiah*, 1:172-73.

the spirit, and equal departure from the letter of the prophecy, the Peshito and Vulgate give the verb a passive form, *his name shall be called*. As to the meaning of the name itself, its higher sense is evident from Matthew's application, notwithstanding Hitzig's paradoxical denial, and its lower sense from the usage of analogous expressions in Ps. xlvi. 8, 12, lxxxix. 25; Josh. i. 5, Jer. i. 8, Isa. xliii. 2.

Other Summaries Since the Time of J. A. Alexander

The previous section presented J. A. Alexander's summary of the multitude of views on Isaiah 7:14. In his analysis, all the various interpretations can be classified under three main headings:

- I. Those in which the only birth and infancy referred to in these verses are the birth and infancy of a child born (or supposed to be born) in the ordinary course of nature, and in the days of Isaiah himself.
- II. Those that argue the prophecy relates to two distinct births and two different children.
- III. Those that apply all three verses [14-16] directly and exclusively to the Messiah, as the only child whose birth is there predicted, and his growth made the measure of the subsequent events.

Note that Alexander's own view was "that the choice lies between the supposition of a double sense and that of a reference to Christ exclusively, but in connection with the promise of immediate deliverance to Ahaz."

T. K. Cheyne

A number of other commentators have also organized the various interpretations under major headings. In introducing his summary, T. K. Cheyne makes the following comment:

As to the historical meaning of the passage, opinions are and always will be divided. There is no explanation which does not require us to make some assumption not directly sanctioned by the text.⁴

Cheyne in his commentary classifies the various views under four main headings.⁵ However, in his subsequent article in *Encyclopaedia Biblica*, Cheyne lists two additional approaches to Isaiah 7:14.⁶

| General Approach | Description | Adherents Cited by Cheyne |
|--|-------------|--|
| I. Those who take the mother of Immanuel to be the wife of Isaiah. | | Rashi, Ebeneza, Gesenius, Hitzig, Knobel |

⁴ T. K. Cheyne, *The Prophecies of Isaiah*, 2 vols. (London: C. Kegan Paul & Co., 1880), I:47.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ T. K. Cheyne, "Immanuel," *EB*, II:2162-64.

| | | |
|--|--|--------------------------|
| II. Those who take "the young woman" to represent the people of Israel as the bride of Yahweh. | | Hofmann, Köhler, Weir |
| III. Those who take the clause as to the birth of the son to be hypothetical. | | Roorda, Eichhorn, Kuenen |
| IV. Those who take the "young woman" as the mother of the Messiah whose advent was expected to synchronize with the Assyrian invasion. | This view is explained as follows: "If any young woman is at this time with child, she may call her son by the name 'Immanuel,' as a memorial of the foretold deliverance." ⁷ | Ewald |
| V. Those who take the עֲלְמָה to be either the wife of Ahaz or a member of the royal harem. | | Lagarde, M'Curdy, Porter |
| VI. The view of F. C. Porter who suggests that the name Immanuel does not express the prophet's faith but rather the false faith, the ungrounded confidence of the king and the people | The sign consists, not in the name nor in the lot of the boy, but in the relationship between them, viz., the contradiction between the name and the lot, as seen in Isaiah 8:8. Porter's view combines elements of approach V. According to Skinner, this approach requires the excision of the latter part of Isaiah 7:16 and verses 8;9, 10. ⁸ | F. C. Porter |

Note that Cheyne's approach I corresponds to variation 5 of Alexander's heading 1; his approach III corresponds to variation 4 of Alexander's heading 1; and his approach IV corresponds to variation 3 of Alexander's heading 3. It would appear that Cheyne's approach II, which he attributes to Hofmann, Köhler, and Weir, was an idea developed subsequent to Alexander's commentary. Cheyne's approach VI is a variant of variation 5 of Alexander's heading 1.

C. R. Brown

Brown suggests that there are three leading approaches to the interpretation of Isaiah 7:14, but he does not cite any proponents.⁹

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ J. Skinner, *The Book of the Prophet Isaiah, Chapters I-XXXIX*, (Cambridge: The University Press, 1896), p. 62.

⁹ C[harles] R. Brown, "Exegesis of Isaiah VII 10-17," *JBL* 9 (1890):123-25.

| General Approach | Description | No Adherents Cited by Brown |
|--|--|-----------------------------|
| <p>I. This approach applies verses 14-16 exclusively to the Messiah.</p> | <p>Four variations are noted:</p> <p>A. This version supposes a hypothetical clause in verse 16, "before the boy, <i>if he were born now</i>, will know enough to refuse..."</p> <p>B. Instead of a hypothetical clause, this version suggests that Isaiah, in prophetic ecstasy, views the Messiah as already born in Isaiah's prophetic consciousness, thus serving as a measure of current time.</p> <p>C. To avoid both of the problems with the two preceding views, some expositors suppose the birth of the Messiah to be predicted but to take place in the near future.</p> <p>D. The final view within this approach is to deny all personal application of the passage to the current crisis.</p> | |
| <p>II. In this approach the prophecy is made to refer to the births of two different children.</p> | <p>Three variations are noted:</p> <p>A. In this version, verse 14 is taken as a reference to the Messiah, while either verse 15 or verse 16 is a reference to a current birth.</p> <p>B. To avoid the difficulties of the previous version, others attach a <i>double sense</i> to the prediction: first, a reference to a current child born naturally, and second, to the miraculous birth of Jesus.</p> <p>C. A similar view interprets the one child in the language of the text is a <i>type</i> but sees in that child a prophecy of a nobler birth to come.</p> | |
| <p>III. The most ancient approach argues that the birth and infancy refer to a child born in the days of Ahaz.</p> | <p>Five versions are noted:</p> <p>A. Some writers understand the prophet to speak of a hypothetical birth.</p> <p>B. Another view makes Immanuel a younger son of Ahaz by a second marriage.</p> <p>C. Similarly, others suppose that Isaiah is speaking of his own wife, usually not the mother of Shear-jashub but a second wife, the "prophetess" of 8:3.</p> <p>D. In this view the עלמה is a woman in the royal circle, and the son born afterward cannot be identified in the history.</p> | |

| | | |
|--|---|--|
| | E. Finally, there is the old, orthodox Jewish view that identifies the woman as the wife of Ahaz who gives birth to Hezekiah. | After almost two pages discussion of the relevant chronology, Brown prefers this view. |
|--|---|--|

This list of interpretations follows closely to that of Alexander's. Brown's approach I corresponds to Alexander's heading 3, approach II to Alexander's heading 2, and approach III to Alexander's 1.

J. Skinner

Another commentator who attempts to summarize the various interpretations of Isaiah 7:14 is J. Skinner. However, he prefaces his summary by two important observations.

First, the import of the sign, had Ahaz chosen one, would have been entirely positive and limited to the deliverance from Rezin and Pekah, while the import of the sign actually given to Ahaz after his refusal to select one included the devastation of Judah by Assyria.

There is a presumption that the *import* of the sign will have been changed by what has taken place in the interval [Ahaz's refusal, v. 12]. Isaiah's first message to Ahaz is an unqualified assurance of deliverance from the designs of Rezin and Pekah, and the sign first offered would be a sign of that and that alone. The prospect of an Assyrian invasion was no doubt in the background of the prophet's horizon, but his message to Ahaz is complete in itself and takes no account of that final catastrophe. It is manifest, however, that in Isaiah's mind the whole aspect of affairs is altered by the king's refusal. The Assyrian invasion is brought into immediate connexion with the attack of the allies, and a new forecast of the future is presented by the prophet in which three great events follow closely on one another: (1) the collapse of the project of the allied princes, (2) the total destruction of Syria and Ephraim by the Assyrians, and (3) the devastation of Judah by the same ruthless conquerors. And the most natural supposition is that the new sign will be an epitome of this new and darker outlook, that is to say it will be a pledge at once of the immediate deliverance and of the judgment that lies behind it. Indeed this view is so obviously implied by vv. 14-16 that we are shut up to it unless, with some critics, we remove v. 15 as an interpolation.¹⁰

Second, Skinner lists the three features of Isaiah's subsequent prediction, one or more of which might serve as the intended import of the sign.

Now there are three features of the prediction in which the import of the sign may be looked for: (i) the birth of the child, (ii) his name, and (iii) his history. And of these three the last is certainly an essential element of the prophecy, as is shewn by vv. 15, 16. With regard to the other two we can only say that it is antecedently improbable that either of them should be without some special significance.¹¹

That is, the import of the sign could include all three features of the prophecy. With this in mind, Skinner lists the following five broad headings for the various interpretations of Isaiah 7:14.

10 Skinner, *The Book of the Prophet Isaiah, Chapters I-XXXIX*, pp. 60-61; emphasis original and brackets added.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 61.

| General Approach | Description | Adherents Cited by Skinner |
|---|--|----------------------------|
| <p>I. Those who take the import of the sign to be the <i>birth of the child</i>, thus making it likely that the sign includes something extraordinary and mysterious in the circumstances of the birth.</p> | <p>The primary example of this approach would be the traditional Christian interpretation that takes the prophecy as a direct prediction of the birth of the Messiah to the virgin Mary.</p> | |
| <p>II. Those who take the events as a sign to Ahaz and nothing more.</p> | <p>The primary example of this approach is the interpretation that finds the chief significance of the sign in the <i>naming of the child</i>. For example, according to Duhm the ^ʿ<i>almāh</i> is any young mother who may give birth to a child at the time Judah is delivered from Syria and Israel, with "Immanuel" ("God [is] with us") being the spontaneous exclamation of the mother. The child (or children) will grow up being a sign to Ahaz of, first, Isaiah's inspiration and, second, the yet future judgment coming upon him as a result of his rejection of the Lord. As part of his support of this view, Duhm suggests removing verse 15.</p> | <p>Duhm</p> |
| <p>III. Those who stress not so much as the <i>birth or naming</i> of the child but the <i>history of the child</i>.</p> | <p>According to these interpretations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Before the birth of a certain child, Judah will be delivered from Rezin and Pekah (v. 14). • Before the child emerges from infancy, Syria and Ephraim will have disappeared (v. 16). • At a later stage of his development, the land of Judah will be reduced to a pastoral wilderness (v. 15). <p>Different versions of this approach propose different identities for the ^ʿ<i>almāh</i>: Isaiah's wife (either the mother of Shear-jashub or a second wife, the mother of Maher-shalal-hash-baz, taken by some to be Immanuel), a girl in Ahaz's harem, or a young woman among the bystanders at the meeting of Isaiah and Ahaz.</p> <p>Another interpretation, which could be considered a variation of approaches II or III, excludes the prospect of deliverance for Judah from the import of the sign, which instead consists of a <i>contrast</i> between the name of the child and his history. The name Immanuel points to a religious optimism of Ahaz and Judah when in fact God is not going to protect them from Assyria.</p> | |

| | | |
|--|---|--|
| <p>IV. Those who take this text to be the first time the figure of a <i>personal Messiah</i> comes to Isaiah's mind.</p> | <p>Facing the apostate king Ahaz, Isaiah receives a revelation of the true King, born during this time of danger, sharing the poverty and affliction until "the government shall be upon his shoulder" and the perfect kingdom of God shall be established.</p> | |
| <p>V. Those who take an allegorical interpretation of the prophecy.</p> | <p>A number of variations exist. The <i>‘almāh</i> might be a personification of the house of David or the religious community, and the child might be the Messiah or a figure of the new generation. Also, the birth may be explained simply as a general symbol of deliverance.</p> | |

Note that Skinner's approach I corresponds to variations 2 or 4 of Alexander's heading 3; his approach II corresponds to variation 4 of Alexander's heading 1; his approach III corresponds to variations 2 or 3 of Alexander's heading 1; and his approach IV corresponds to variation 3 of Alexander's heading 3. Skinner's heading V would seem to correspond to Cheyne's approach II and therefore was an idea developed subsequent to Alexander's commentary.

George Buchanan Gray

Gray introduces no new approaches from those already cited by Alexander, Cheyne, and Skinner.¹² However, he includes in his review of interpretations (1) the question of whether Micah 5:1-2 (Christian, 5:2-3) refers to or interprets Isaiah 7:14, (2) the LXX translation of Isaiah 7:14, together with the translations by Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotion, and (3) Matthew's interpretation of the verse in 1:22-23. Point (2) is addressed in Chapter 10, the section "The Meaning and Use of *παρθένος*," and point (3) is addressed in Chapter 14, the sections "The Two New Testament Passages That Portray the Virgin Birth of Jesus" and "The Fulfillment of Isaiah 7:14."

Emil Kraeling

Kraeling's list of the various approaches to Isaiah 7:14 apparently is limited to "the current interpretations":

We may group the current interpretations of the passage into two major classes: *collective* and *individual*, and proceed to examine them briefly.¹³

For a rough idea of what he means by "current," his article was published in 1931. Also, I have added the dates of the publications of the adherents he cites in the outline.

¹² Gray, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Isaiah I-XXXIX*, pp. 133-36.

¹³ Emil G. Kraeling, "The Immanuel Prophecy," *JBL* 50 (1931):281-96 (italics original). The presentation is organized as an outline and the titles of the various approaches are Kraeling's. Kraeling's own approach is given in this outline by him; his view is also summarized by Edward J. Young later in the chapter.

| General Approach | Description | Adherents Cited by Kraeling |
|-------------------------------|--|---|
| I. Collective Interpretations | <p>By "collective interpretation," Kraeling means that the text does not refer to a specific woman and child but rather to any number of women who will name their child Immanuel. The three types of <i>collective interpretations</i> have in common the view that the definite article on עִלְמָה is the <i>generic article</i>. I agree with this view of the use of the definite article.¹⁴ The three approaches are as follows.</p> <p>A. The Salutary Interepretation</p> <p>According to this approach, the sign predicts well-being for Judah.</p> <p>Duhm argues that the purpose of the sign given by Yahweh is to confirm that the plans of Rezin and Pekah will fail. This view was included in Skinner's list, and its main features are given there.</p> <p>B. The Ominous Interpretation</p> <p>According to this approach, the sign predicts affliction for Judah.</p> <p>Mowinckel asserts that "Immanuel" is an old cultic word which Isaiah uses ironically in the sense of "Be with us, O God!" Isaiah then means that when any young woman gives birth she will call the child born under such awful circumstances "Be with us, O God!"</p> <p>C. The Mixed Interpretation</p> <p>According to this approach, the sign predicts a mixture of well-being and affliction.</p> <p>To Guthe, the two elements of the sign are: (1) a year from now young women will call their sons Immanuel because Rezin and Pekah will no longer be a menace, but (2) children of the future will grow up in a land made desolate by the Assyrians.</p> <p>Budde presents a "messianic" version. Great disaster will overtake Judah, while the name Immanuel has a salutary significance--Isaiah's prophecy is of a new future generation, the Holy Remnant allegorized as the first born of a young mother just come to puberty.</p> | <p>A. Duhm (1892)</p> <p>B. Mowinckel (1922)</p> <p>C. Guthe (1922), Budde (1923)</p> |

14 I discuss this issue in Chapter 12.

| | | |
|--|---|--|
| | promised sign. The Immanuel prophecy was an "Isaiah legend" designed to "predict" the historical fact of the doom of Rezin and Pekah recorded in 8:1-4. | |
|--|---|--|

Kraeling's approach I does not correspond to any of Alexander's three headings. His approach II, A corresponds to variations 1, 2 and 5 of Alexander's heading 1. Approach II, B, like approach I, does not correspond to any of Alexander's three headings. Note that approach II, B includes Kraeling's view ("the salutary interpretation"), which he calls a "new interpretation" and elaborates under approach III of the outline.

Cuthbert Lattey

Roman Catholic scholar, Cuthbert Lattey, has written a set of three articles on the interpretation of Isaiah 7:14.¹⁵ In the third installment he lists five approaches to Isaiah 7:14. As with Gray, his first is a discussion of the text in Micah. He then discusses Justin's argument in *Dialogue with the Jew Trypho*. That leaves three to be addressed.

| General Approach | Description | Adherents Cited by Lattey |
|-------------------------------|---|----------------------------|
| I. Conditional interpretation | Condamin suggests that <i>hinneh</i> ("Behold") in Isaiah 7:14 is conditional. <i>BDB</i> does recognize this rare meaning for הִנֵּה but not in Isaiah 7:14. ¹⁶ It is very difficult to interpret Isaiah 7:14 using this meaning for <i>hinneh</i> , and Condamin himself suggests a textual corruption here. | Père Condamin |
| II. Typical interpretation | The literal meaning is restricted to Isaiah's time, and the boy born then is a <i>type</i> of the Messiah to be born some 700 years later; the literal meaning must be restricted to Isaiah's own time. This is an acceptable interpretation within Catholic circles, but Lattey considers the interpretation based on compenetration the best view. | |
| III. Compenetration | Lattey gives several examples of interpretation using the principle of compenetration but does not offer a succinct and precise definition of it. The subsection subsection "Generic Prophecies" in Chapter 2 defines a generic prophecy and the principle of compenetration. They are essentially quite similar. Both refer to one or more fulfillments as down payments or harbingers of the ultimate, climactic fulfillment. The prophecy contains | Common Roman Catholic view |

15 Cuthbert Lattey, "The Emmanuel Prophecy: Isaias 7:14," *CBQ* 8 (October 1946):369-76, "The Term Almah in Is. 7:14," *CBQ* 9 (January 1947):89-95, and "Various Interpretations of Is. 7:14," *CBQ* 9 (April 1947):147-54.

16 *BDB*, p. 244; Isa. 7:14 is listed under the far more common meaning of introducing a solemn and important declaration.

| | | |
|--|--|--|
| | <p>both aspects, thus preserving the single meaning of the text.¹⁷ Bernard Ramm defines compenetration as follows:</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">In an Old Testament passage the near meaning and the remote meaning for the New Testament so compenetrate that the passage at the same time and in the same words refers to the near and the remote New Testament meaning.¹⁸</p> | |
|--|--|--|

Note that both Lattey's approaches II and III would fall within variation 2 of Alexander's heading 2, although no examples are cited by Alexander that distinguish between typological interpretation, multiple sense, and multiple fulfillment (generic prophecies or compenetration). Lattey's approach I would seem to be the view of only one expositor who wrote subsequent to Alexander's commentary.

Edward J. Young

The last summary to be presented in this chapter is given by Edward J. Young.¹⁹ However, Young does not name the six approaches he cites by their main characteristic but rather identifies each by a specific expositor without mentioning whether others have also taken that approach.²⁰

I. Bernard Duhm

Duhm's view was included in Skinner's list and its main features were given there.

II. Emil G. Kraeling²¹

According to this approach, the sign that is predicted has the same purpose as the sign Ahaz could have requested. Thus the sign given would establish "a visible assurance of certainty of divine help in the crisis of the moment."²² He then argues for a view that is "individual indefinite non-messianic and yet salutary."²³ Immanuel is taken to be a child about to be born. Ahaz will hear of this birth, and that the child's mother has named him "Immanuel," and thus be reassured. Kraeling, however, does not adhere to the Masoretic text. He considers verse 15 to be spurious and thinks its comment about curds and honey to be "incomprehensible." In fact, he

17 The various references to the "the day of the Lord" in the prophets is the paradigm example of a generic prophecy. See, e.g., Joel 1:15, 2:1, and 2:11, which use the phrase "day of the Lord" to refer to the locust plague, a down payment or harbinger of the final, climactic manifestation of the day of the Lord. In 3:4 (2:31) and 4:14 (3:14) the same phrase refers to this final, climactic fulfillment of the day-of-the-Lord prophecy--namely, the coming of the Messiah to defeat the nations in the great battle in the Valley of Jehoshaphat. Together, the harbingers and the final fulfillment constitute the single meaning of the day-of-the-Lord prophecy. In Chapter 2, see subsection "Generic Prophecies" in the section "Interpretation of Prophecy" for a more detailed discussion.

18 Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation: A Textbook of Hermeneutics*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1970; the first edition was published in 1950), p. 253.

19 Edward J. Young, "The Immanuel Prophecy: Isaiah 7:14-16, Second Article," *WTJ* 16 (November 1953):23-50.

20 In the first installment of Young's twofold study of Isaiah 7:14, "The Immanuel Prophecy: Isaiah 7:14-16," *WTJ* 15 (May 1953):97-124, he discusses the view of Hans Schmidt. However, it is more of a comment on form criticism than Schmidt's view of Isaiah 7:14. Young gives a much lengthier summary of Schmidt's form-critical approach in his article "The Study of Isaiah Since the Time of Joseph Addison Alexander Third Article," *WTJ* (May 1948):143-47.

21 As noted earlier in this chapter, Kraeling develops his view in the article "The Immanuel Prophecy.". The summary of Kraeling's view given here is based on the aspects that Young points out.

22 Kraeling, "The Immanuel Prophecy," p. 286.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 292.

thinks Isaiah 7:1-17 is a "legend," not written by the eighth-century Isaiah.

III. Karl Budde

Budde develops his view in response to Kraeling. He argues that the sign given to Ahaz exhibits, not God's patience, but the awful consequences of Ahaz's disastrous decision to invoke the help of Tiglath-pileser. He further thinks that verses 23-25 originally came before verses 21-22, and that 21-22 explain the riddle of Immanuel. He would be a child born at that time and raised on cream and honey, luxurious food that will be available in abundance after the period of the devastation of the land. This is why the young mother will call her son "God is with us."

IV. E. Hammershaimb

Hammershaimb considers the sign as one of promise that is taken from an old "king cult." So the prediction is that the queen will give birth to a son, a natural event, who will be named Immanuel, or "God is with us," because "the situation will take a happier turn."²⁴ This birth itself is the sign and assures Ahaz that the Lord will annihilate his enemies, giving a period of prosperity to Judah. However, to maintain this theory, Hammershaimb must take the phrase, "king of Assyria," in verse 17 as a gloss. He also believes that the outward fulfillment of prophecies was never an essential matter for the prophets. It is therefore a minor issue whether the queen ever gave birth to a child and named him Immanuel.

V. Sigmund Mowinckel

According to Young, "Mowinckel believes that even in a fairly early period of the Hebrew monarchy there was present the hope that a king would come who would incorporate in himself the ideal of kingship more perfectly than the actual reigning king was doing. Hence, when a crown prince was born, this hope might be realized, and so such a birth was a time for rejoicing."²⁵ Thus the "young woman" was the wife of Ahaz, and the sign offered would convince him that his son would be that ideal king.

VI. William S. LaSor²⁶

LaSor believes that the immediate fulfillment of the prophecy was to be a child born to a young woman in the normal biological way. Israel and Syria would be destroyed before the child was fully grown. The sign included not only the birth of the child but also the sequence of events described in verses 14-17 and expanded in verses 18-25. The prophet's message, therefore, had significance for his own generation, but that immediate fulfillment did not exhaust the prophecy. It also has a "deeper sense" that predicts the virgin birth of Jesus. This is a relatively common view, and a number of scholars have promoted some form of this approach over the years. LaSor's view is discussed further in Chapter 13, the section "The Views of Dual Sense and Multiple Fulfillment."

The first five views reviewed by Young are of little interest to those scholars who accept the integrity and revelatory nature of the book of Isaiah. However, LaSor is an evangelical scholar, and his view corresponds to variation 2 of Alexander's heading II, and a number of scholars have promoted some form of this approach over the years.

Exegesis

Chapters 1 through 9 in this book have been introductory in nature. The detailed exegesis of Isaiah 7:14 now begins with Chapter 10.

24 Hammershaimb, cited by Young, "The Immanuel Prophecy: Isaiah 7:14-16, Second Article," p. 43.

25 Young, "The Immanuel Prophecy: Isaiah 7:14-16, Second Article," p. 44.

26 William S. LaSor, *Isaiah 7:14-"Young Woman" or "Virgin"?* (unpublished manuscript, n.d.).