

Translating Isaiah 7:14: A Modest Proposal

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Christian translators of passages in the Hebrew Bible whose importance for New Testament messianic interpretation is paramount often feel compelled to translate in accordance with said interpretation. I have discussed an example of this in my post on Zech 9:9.

Isa 7:14 is probably the most controversial example of the problem. To be sure, Matt 1:22-23's take on this passage is not necessarily innovative vis-à-vis pre-occurring exegetical trends. OG Isaiah, a translation two centuries old by the time Matthew wrote his gospel and quoted from it, may have already interpreted Isa 7:14 in terms of an expectation that the ideal king who would usher in a new era, the messiah promised to the Jewish people, would be born of a virgin. These were matters of great moment. It would not be especially surprising if the translation reflected an expectation of this kind. Scholars are divided on the issue.¹

In any case, the underlying Hebrew of Isa 7:14 bears no hint of a virgin birth. A review of recent commentaries, including those written by Catholics and evangelicals, reveals a consensus on this point. Two examples may illustrate.

7,14-15 “La joven” es, en el contexto histórico, la esposa del rey. El niño es Ezequías, que asegura la continuidad de la dinastía. . . . La tradición judía ha interpretado “virgen”; así aparece en la versión griega (*parthenos*) y así pasa a la tradición cristiana, que aplica la frase a María (Mt 1, 23).²

(Luis Alonso Schökel, ed., *Biblia del Peregrino. Antiguo Testamento. Poesía. Edición de Estudio. Tomo II* (“con las debida licencias de la

¹ For a discussion, see Ronald Troxel, “Isaiah 7,14-16 through the Eyes of the Septuagint,” *ETL* 79 (2003) 1-22. Moises Silva translates *parthenos* with ‘virgin’ here (*A New English Translation of the Septuagint. Esaias. Provisional Edition* [IOSCS, 2005] 12; online [here](#).) The translation misleads unless the sense Silva deems to be that intended by the translator is ‘virgin’ in the specialized sense ‘virgin’ regularly has in English.

² [Isaiah] 7:14-15. “The young woman” is, in the historical context, the wife of the king. The child is Hezekiah, who assures the continuity of the dynasty. . . . Jewish tradition interpreted in the sense of “virgin”; so it appears in the Greek version (*parthenos*), and from there the interpretation made its way into Christian tradition, which applied the phrase to Mary (Matt 1:23).

Conferencia Episcopal Española”; Estella: Verbo Divino, 2005 [1997] 77).

Matthew (1:22-23) finds in the LXX rendition of 7:14 a coincidental convergence of this sentence in Scripture with the events he is recounting and interprets it as prophecy and fulfillment. He quotes the LXX almost verbatim, with only the variation καλέσουσιν, “they will call,” for καλέσεις, “you [sg.] will call.” The translation ἡ παρθένος, “the virgin,” suits Matthew’s intention perfectly. If one supposes a divine intention in this connection, part of God’s work was done through the Greek translator.³

(John D. W. Watts, *Isaiah 1-33* (WBC 24; Nashville: Nelson ²2005 [1984] 140-41).

The consensus is that Isa 7:14 in the Hebrew refers to a non-virgin birth in the days of Ahaz. How shall one then translate? NAB (Catholic) and NIV (evangelical) both translate - “directly from the Hebrew” - in terms of *the* virgin birth. Now that’s what I call chutzpah.

What I will now say is irrelevant to the issue at hand. But it will matter to a lot of people who might otherwise be convinced that this post is written by someone incapable of imagining a miracle-working God. As it is, I am a joyful believer in the virgin birth of Mary’s son. I believe that Mary’s son was God’s answer to the prayers of her people who expected a Messiah to come and secure the fulfillment of all the promises found in the Law, the Prophets, and David.

As a general rule, when God answers prayer, God accommodates the answer to our needs and expectations. Simultaneously, the answer transcends our expectations. That seems to be the way things go throughout the trajectory of the life and death of the son of Mary. The circumstances of the birth of Mary’s son both accommodated and transcended the expectations of those who in that day awaited the Coming One.

It does not follow, however, that Isaiah predicted that the Messiah would be born of a virgin. It only follows that Christians who read Isa 7:14 in the authorized Greek translation of the day, and in Jerome’s Vulgate thereafter,

³ For a carefully argued defense of the view that Isaiah 7:14 points to a child that will be born during the lifetime of King Ahaz, and that Matthew claims in Jesus a typological rather than a predictive fulfillment of Isaiah 7:14, see James M. Hamilton, Jr., “The Virgin will Conceive: Typology in Isaiah and Fulfillment in Matthew, The Use of Isaiah 7:14 in Matthew 1:18-23,” Tyndale Fellowship, 2005, online [here](#).

with its triumphant *ecco virgo*, would have naturally and inevitably thought so.

I have a modest proposal. In a case like Isaiah 7:14, instead of translating the Hebrew inaccurately, translate it as it stands. NJB, NRSV, and NJPSV so translate. When the day arrives in which a widely used evangelical translation renders likewise, it will merely have caught up with conclusions a host of evangelical scholars have already reached. My own translation goes like this: 'Look, this young woman is pregnant and will bear a son whom she will call Emmanuel.' The details of the sign Yahweh gives to Ahaz follow. They apply of course to the situation of Ahaz. That need not and has not stopped interpreters of later generations from seeking to understand how the passage in question might be fulfilled in their day.

There is no shame in admitting that a distinction must be made between the text *per se* and later interpretation of it. Gerhard Ebeling somewhere tells the story of confessing Christians under Hitler and in the midst of a terribly destructive war reading Isaiah 13 and knowing that the text spoke of Hitler and what was happening. It does, even though it doesn't. It's important to be nimble enough intellectually to affirm both propositions.