

Understanding Isaiah 7:14

Petros Koutoupis
www.petroskoutoupis.com

The Book of Isaiah is one of the most influential of all Old Testament material.¹ It also serves as a backbone to New Testament scripture, as it is constantly referenced². One of the most quoted verses from the book which makes a connection to the Christian messiah, Jesus, is chapter 7 verse 14 (KJV):

Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.

Did the prophet predict the birth of a messiah to a virgin? Well, to better understand the verse in questions, let us take a look at its other translations. According to the Masoretic Text (hereafter, MT) Hebrew Bible we read:

לכן יתן אדני הוא לכם אות הנה העלמה הרה וילדת בן וקראת שמו עמנו אל

Therefore, the Lord Himself will give you a sign. Look, a young woman is with child³ and about to give birth to a son. And she/you will call his name Emanu-El.

Here we have the exact same verse from the Isaiah Scroll (1QIsa) found at Qumrân (from the collection of Dead Sea Scrolls):

לכן יתן יהוה הוא לכם אות הנה העלמה הרה וילדת בן וקרא שמו עמנואל

Therefore, YHWH Himself will give you a sign. Look, a young woman is with child and about to give birth to a son. And He will call his name Emanuel.

To date, the Dead Sea Scrolls are the oldest preserved known copies of the Old Testament that we have at our disposal. We can observe some differences between the MT and the Isaiah Scroll. For example, instead of referring to God as Lord (אדני), we see what may have most likely been an original invocation of the supreme deity's name as YHWH (יהוה). Some other differences can be seen with the individual(s) involved in calling the name/title of the son to be born. The MT uses a form of “to call” which can be interpreted as either “she will call” or “you will call”; while the Isaiah Scroll uses the form “he will call.” In this case we can only assume that “he” may refer to YHWH. The last difference

-
- 1 This article was inspired by a video from Jeff A. Benner (www.ancient-hebrew.org) covering the same topic. Note that this research and concepts is not original. These studies cannot be isolated to an original source but have been quite known for some time.
 - 2 These references can be found in Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts, Romans, Corinthians, Peter, among other smaller references.
 - 3 ילדה is a general term used to describe a woman in labor and about to give birth. Instead of writing all of that, I thought it was better to choose the JPS translation of that word.

between the two versions is the name of the son. The MT reading treats more as a title by separating the two words: “is with us” and “God.” The Isaiah Scroll joins the two words which usually signifies a name (“God is with us”) instead of a generic epithet.

Now let us take a look at the translation found in the Greek written Septuagint (hereafter, LXX):

Διατούτο δώσει Κύριος αὐτός ὑμῖν σημεῖον ἰδοὺ ἡ παρθένος ἐν γαστρὶ λήψεται, καὶ τέξεται υἱόν, καὶ καλέσεις τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ Ἐμμανουήλ.

Therefore the Lord Himself shall give you a sign. Behold, a virgin shall conceive in the womb, and shall bring forth a son, and you will call his name Emmanuel.

The term used to define the supreme deity is Κύριος which the Greeks used in both translations of Lord (אֲדֹנָי) and YHWH (יְהוָה). This does not do much to confirm what the original text may have looked like, aside from the fact that the MT came later than the Dead Sea Scrolls. We do find confirmation of the MT structure of “you will call” in καλέσεις. In the Greek translation we also find through the transliteration of the Hebrew Emanuel, further confirmation that it was used as a proper noun in the form of a name and not a generic title to the son about to be born.

One thing does stick out from the LXX, which does not obtain any support from the other versions, is the description of the woman who is about to give birth. Both MT and the Isaiah Scroll use the Hebrew word for *the young woman* (הַעַלְמָה) and not *virgin* (παρθένος). The Hebrew language has a different term to describe a female virgin; *הַעַלְמָה* is not that term. So then, why would the Greeks translate it to virgin? Is there some sort of significance to the female being a virgin?

In the ancient Greek culture, it was customary to attribute anything female and her relationship to the divine as clean and pure. That included virginity. The goddess Athena was regarded as “the Virgin.” When Zeus would come unto the daughters of men, they were to be pure enough for him. Could this need for a virgin bearing a divine gift⁴ stem from the ancient Greek interpretation of Isaiah 7:14 mixed with their preconceived ideas of divinity that were present within their culture? Note that the translation of the LXX was done in 3rd - 1st centuries BCE in Alexandria; a Greek colony located in the Egyptian delta. This was at a time when Greek was the *lingua franca* of the ancient Mediterranean world at around this period in history. The ancient Greek culture (religion, art, philosophy, etc.) had played a huge role in influencing the region.

If we try to reconstruct the text and attempt to identify its original form we would most likely obtain:

לכן יתן יהוה הוא לכם אות הנה העלמה הרה וילדת בן וקראת שמו עמנואל

Therefore, YHWH Himself will give you a sign. Look, a young woman is with child and about to give birth to a son. And you will call his name Emanuel.

4 The son.

The apostles Matthew (1:18, 23) and Luke (1:26-28) reference this specific verse to help convince a Jewish audience that Christ is their messiah. How then, would this affect the overall message of the prophet Isaiah? It doesn't. Just because the original Hebrew text described the female as a young woman, does not necessarily mean that she was not a virgin.