

## Isaiah Part 5: “and shall call his name Immanuel...”

### Isaiah 7

Isaiah now turns his attention from the internal condition of Judah to the realm of international politics. The historical background to chapters 7 to 10 is the ‘Syria-Israel alliance’, when King Rezin of Syria and King Pekah of Israel (i.e. the northern kingdom) conspired against Judah in 735 BC. Ahaz, King of Judah, overcome with panic (Isaiah 7 v 2), rejected Isaiah’s advice that he should trust in God (Isaiah 7 v 3, 4), and instead appealed to King Tiglath-Pileser of Assyria, an action which Isaiah predicted would have disastrous consequences in the end, even though at first it was apparently successful. See 2 Kings 16 v 1 to 9, noting that Ahaz was a wicked king, worshipping other gods and even sacrificing his son to Molech (v 1 to 4).

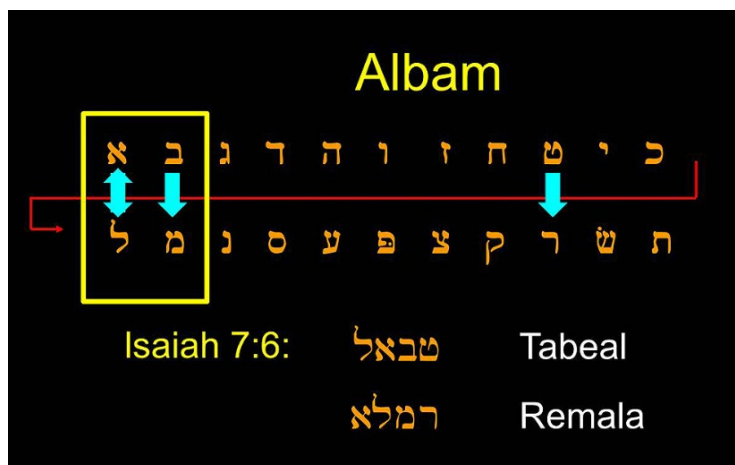
#### Isaiah sent to King Ahaz (Isaiah 7 v 1 to 9)

“The heart of Ahaz and the heart of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind” (v 2) – Ahaz and his people react with fear instead of with trust in God: they are shaken and unstable in their hearts. The people of Judah really are the people of Ahaz (‘his people’), not God’s people. God was not shaken or unsettled by this threat. If the king of Judah and the people of Judah had put their trust in God, they would have had the peace of God in this conflict. Isaiah was told to take his son, Shear-Jashub, and bring a word from the LORD to Ahaz (v 3). He brought his son as a walking object lesson, because the name Shear-Jashub means ‘a remnant shall return’.

- What did Ahaz lose – both personally and politically – through his refusal to trust in God?

Why was it so hard for Ahaz to trust God? Because he did not see the situation the way God did. Ahaz looked at Israel and Syria and saw a terrible threat: God looked at them and saw “two smouldering stumps of firebrands” (v 4). To the LORD, Israel and Syria were all smoke and no fire!

“The son of Tabeel” (v 6) – has been the subject of speculative conjectures by many commentators. It may simply be a play on words: by only a slight alteration, the word *tabeel* can mean ‘good-for-nothing’. However, students of cryptography have discovered that there are examples of ‘secret’ writing in the Old Testament. One of the oldest forms of encryption is a simple sliding alphabet used for direct substitutions, such as ‘ALBAM’ in which the first 11 letters of the Hebrew alphabet are written over the last 11 letters, and the vertical pairs are interchanged: thus A (*aleph*) becomes L (*lamed*), and vice versa; B (*beth*) becomes M (*mem*) etc. – thus ‘A-L-B-M’. If ‘Tabeel’ undergoes such an encryption, we get ‘Remaliah’ – which reveals a conspiracy: the man whom Rezin of Damascus and Pekah of Israel planned to place upon the throne of Judah as a puppet king in place of Ahaz was simply ‘the son of *Remaliah*’, i.e. Pekah! See below...



[MORE OVER...]

## ***The sign of Immanuel (Isaiah 7 v 10 to 16)***

But Ahaz said, “I will not put the Lord to the test” (v 12) – this sounds very spiritual, and similar to what Jesus said in Matthew 4 v 7: “You shall not put the Lord your God to the test”, but here it was a case of stubborn unbelief. Ahaz refused to ask for a sign, because he would ‘have to’ believe, if it was fulfilled...

- How is the special ‘sign’ to be given to Ahaz a foreshadowing of the future coming of the Messiah? See Matthew 1 v 21 to 23. In daily experience, do you know Jesus as ‘Immanuel’ – ‘God with us’?

“Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel” (v 14) – this is one of the most famous prophecies regarding the birth of Jesus the Messiah in the Bible. It illustrates a principle of prophecy: it may have both a ‘near’ fulfilment and a ‘far’ fulfilment.

The ‘near’ fulfilment of this sign focused around Ahaz and the attack from Israel and Syria, and a relatively short time span (“before the boy knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land whose two kings you dread will be deserted”, v 16). The “boy” may have been Ahaz’s son, King Hezekiah.

The ‘far’ or ‘ultimate’ fulfilment of this sign is the miraculous virgin birth of Jesus Christ. (i) We know this passage speaks of Jesus, because the Holy Spirit says so in Matthew 1 v 23. (ii) We know it speaks of Jesus, because the prophecy is addressed to David’s entire house (“O house of David”, v 13). (iii) This passage speaks of Jesus, because it says “the virgin” will conceive, and that conception would be a miraculous sign. Those who deny the virgin birth point out that the Hebrew word translated ‘virgin’, *almah*, can also mean ‘young unmarried woman’; but the Old Testament never uses this word in a context other than ‘virgin’, and the Septuagint translates the word as *παρθένος* (*parthenos*), which categorically means ‘virgin’. (iv) We know this passage speaks of Jesus, because it says that he will be called ‘Immanuel’, which speaks both of the deity of Christ (*God with us*), and his identification with man (*God with us*).

## ***Assyria, the Lord’s instrument (Isaiah 7 v 17 to 25)***

“The LORD will bring upon you and upon your people... the king of Assyria” (v 17) – this was bad news to Ahaz, who had been foolishly trusting in Assyria instead of the LORD. It is as if the LORD was saying, ‘It will seem to you like foolishly trusting in Assyria is a clever move, because the armies of Syria and Israel will be defeated. But the Assyrians will end up defeating you as well!’ If Ahaz understood and believed what the LORD said, it would have terrified him. The Assyrians were well known for their sheer cruelty, especially over the nations they conquered, delighting in the torture and humiliation (v 20).

“In that day the LORD will whistle for the fly that is at the end of the streams of Egypt, and for the bee that is in the land of Assyria. And they will all come ...” (v 18, 19) – the people of Judah would not only be attacked by the Assyrians: they would also be invaded by the Egyptians. God would ‘pinch’ Judah between these mighty nations located to the north and south.

These invasions would bring Judah low, so that they could not farm as normal, but instead, “for everyone who is left in the land will eat curds and honey” (v 22). Normal agriculture would be devastated: “every place where there used to be a thousand vines... will become briars and thorns” (v 23). Former farms will be suitable only for grazing: “a place where cattle are let loose and where sheep tread” (v 25).

*Prayer – Lord, as we think of Ahaz, and his failure to trust in you, we pray that – whatever our circumstances – our hearts may not be shaken, as the trees of the forest are shaken by the wind. Instead, help us to remember your promise that the virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel – we thank you that Jesus was born of the virgin Mary, and that his name is Immanuel, God with us. Help us to remember that you are with us always, and that we have no need to be afraid. Amen.*