

Isaiah: Messianic Prophecies

The Virgin Birth

Isaiah 7:14: *Therefore, the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.*

Matthew 1:22-23: *Now all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us.*

The Hebrew word in Isaiah 7:14 translated as *virgin* is *almâh*. Modern scholars contend that this word literally means “a young woman of marriageable age.” Of course, that may be a virgin, but they point out that this is not necessarily the case. The Christian response to this is that there is really no *prophetic* import in claiming that the Messiah will be born of a young woman. Virtually every person who has ever lived has been born of a young woman. It makes no sense for Isaiah to point out that the mother will be “a young woman of marriageable age” as if that fact will be conclusive as to the identity of the Messiah. Moreover, the Septuagint translators understood it to be a reference to a “virgin,” and not just “a young woman of marriageable age,” for in every other instance in the Old Testament where *almâh* appears it is contextually understood to refer to a young woman of marriageable age *who is not yet married*. Such a woman would be legally and culturally designated as a virgin. The Hebrew word is derived from the verb *âlam*, meaning “to conceal.” Saint Jerome explains: “the word *âlam* is given to a virgin because she is said to be hidden or secret; because she does not expose herself to the gaze of men but is kept with great care under the custody of parents.”

There is a deeper theological import here. Virginity refers not just to being uncorrupted. It also refers to being concealed. What is concealed can be known only if it is unconcealed, which is to say, if it is revealed. Thus, the virgin birth is God's *self-revelation*. He who is unknown will make Himself known. He says, "Let there be light," and then there is light. We cannot know the truth of God by ourselves, but He will make Himself known to us. Therefore, seeing the Messiah is an act of divine grace opening our eyes – turning on the light – and guiding us out from our mental and spiritual darkness.

From the Pulpit Commentary: *Jewish commentators suggested that the mother was Abi, the wife of Ahaz (2 Kings 18:2), and the son Hezekiah, who later delivered Judah from the Assyrian power. But this was early disproved by showing that, according to the Second Book of Kings (2 Kings 16:2; 2 Kings 18:2), Hezekiah was at least nine years old in the first year of Ahaz, before which this prophecy could not have been delivered (Isaiah 7:1). The second suggestion identified the mother with Isaiah's wife, the "prophetess" of Isaiah 8:3, and made the son a child of his, actually called Immanuel, or else his son Maher-shalal-hash-baz (Isaiah 8:1) under a symbolical designation. But **ha-'almah**, "the virgin," would be a very strange title for Isaiah to have given his wife, and the rank assigned to Immanuel in Isaiah 8:8 would not suit his own son.*

The Jewish commentators err in trying to remove the apocalyptic character of the Messianic prophecies. The Greek word *apokálypsis* literally means to reveal. Contextually, it means to be revelatory of God Himself, hence the association with catastrophic or earth-shattering events. For Messianic prophecies to be apocalyptic, the ramifications must transcend the immediate here and now of worldly events. For God reveals by subsuming the worldly life into *His life*, by making sacred what had been profane. God reveals by coming down to man (*kenosis*, which is God emptying Himself of the fullness of His divinity), but we understand this revelation, which is the essential predicate of anything said to be revelatory, by ascending up to God (*plerosis*, or the state of man becoming full or complete in God). If God is revealed in the virgin birth of the Messiah, then the ramifications are universal and, though happening in a very specific time and place, cannot be contextualized only to that time and place. By removing the virgin birth from

apocalyptic reality, the Jews are forced to try to make sense of Isaiah 7:14 in a worldly context, which is to say, in a world that absent God's apocalyptic intercession cannot by definition have a son conceived by a virgin. The virgin birth must be rendered as metaphorical or symbolical to have any meaning at all and associations with contemporary political figures must be contrived.

The Prince of Peace

Isaiah 9:6: *For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.*

Keil and Delitzsch Biblical Commentary: *The reason for the triumph is the deliverance effected; and the reason for the deliverance, the destruction of the foe; and the reason for all the joy, all the freedom, all the peace, is the new great King. - "For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given; and the government rests upon His shoulder: and they call His name, Wonder, Counsellor, mighty God, Eternal-Father, Prince of Peace." The same person whom the prophet foretold in chapter 7 as the son of the virgin who would come to maturity in troublous times, he here sees as born, and as having already taken possession of the government. There he appeared as a sign, here as a gift of grace. The prophet does not expressly say that he is a son of David in this instance any more than in chapter 7; but this followed as a matter of course, from the fact that he was to bear the government, with all its official rights (Isaiah 22:22) and godlike majesty (Psalm 21:6), upon his shoulder; for the inviolable promise of eternal sovereignty, of which the new-born infant was to be the glorious fulfilment, had been bound up with the seed of David in the course of Israel's history ever since the declaration in 2 Samuel 7. In chapter 7 it is the mother who names the child; here it is the people, or indeed anyone who rejoices in him. But the active verb itself has really been twisted by Jewish commentators in a way; so that [some Jewish commentators] follow the Targum, and explain the passage as meaning, "the God, who is called Wonderful, Counsellor, the mighty God, the eternal Father, calls his name the Prince of Peace;" but this rendering evidently tears asunder things that are well connected textually to the Prince of Peace and not to the God who names him the Prince of Peace. And so Luzzatto has observed*

that you do not expect to find attributes of God the Father here, but rather such as would be characteristic of the child.

Again, by separating Wonderful, Counselor, the mighty God, and the everlasting Father from the Prince of Peace, the Jewish commentators are trying to remove the apocalyptic attributes from the Prince of Peace. In this reading, the Prince of Peace is no longer revelatory of God in the world. At most, he is a man exalted by God like one of the Judges or, perhaps, even a new Moses, but God Himself remains concealed from His people and from the world even though this Prince of Peace is doing the work of God. Therefore, God delivers through an intermediary but remains absent. For God being Wonderful, Counselor, mighty, and everlasting, are not in that Prince of Peace and as such not revealed by that Prince of Peace. Removing apocalyptic attributes from the Prince of Peace in a way puts God in a box. He delivers for Israel through that Prince of Peace, but because that deliverance is not apocalyptic in character (meaning God remains as concealed as before) it is not a universal deliverance. By diminishing the Messiah, they keep God to themselves, which is to say, that God's deliverance is parochial in character. He is the God of all, but His deliverance is peculiar to the Jews.

The Suffering Servant

Isaiah 53:5: *But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.*

1 Peter 2:24: *Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed.*

Barnes' Notes on the Bible: *But he was wounded* - Margin, 'Tormented.' Jerome and the Septuagint also render this, 'He was wounded.' Junius and Tremellius, 'He was affected with grief.' The Syriac renders it in a remarkable manner, 'He is slain on account of our sins,' thus showing that it was a common belief that the Messiah would be violently put to death. The word rendered 'wounded' means in the original Hebrew to bore through, to perforate, to pierce;

hence, to wound, see 1 Samuel 31:3; 1 Chronicles 10:3; Ezekiel 28:9. There is probably the idea of painful piercing, and it refers to some infliction of positive wounds on the body, and not to mere mental sorrows, or to general humiliation. The obvious idea would be that there would be some act of piercing, some penetrating wound that would endanger or take life. Applied to the actual sufferings of the Messiah, it refers undoubtedly to the piercing of his hands, his feet, and his side. The word 'tormented,' in the margin, was added by our translators because the Hebrew word might be regarded as derived from to writhe, to be tormented, to be pained - a word not unfrequently applied to the pains of parturition. But it is probable that it is rather to be regarded as derived from "to pierce, or to wound."

*For our transgressions - The prophet here places himself among the people for whom the Messiah suffered these things and says that he was not suffering for his own sins, but on account of theirs. The preposition 'for' here answers to the Greek *dia*, on account of, and denotes the cause for which he suffered and means, even according to Gesenius (Lex.), here, 'the ground or motive on account of, or because of which anything is done.' Here the sense is, that the reason why he thus suffered was, that we were transgressors. All along the prophet keeps up the idea that it was not on account of any sin of which he was guilty that he thus suffered, but it was for the sins of others - an idea which is everywhere exhibited in the New Testament.*

He was bruised - The word used here means properly to be broken to pieces, to be bruised, to be crushed. Applied to mind, it means to break down or crush by calamities and trials; and using the word here, no doubt, the most severe inward and outward sufferings are designated. The Septuagint renders it 'He was rendered languid,' or feeble. The same idea occurs in the Syriac translation. The meaning is, that he was under such a weight of sorrows on account of our sins, that he was, as it were, crushed to the earth. How true this was of the Lord Jesus it is not necessary here to pause to show.

The chastisement of our peace - That is, the chastisement by which our peace is effected or secured was laid upon him; or, he took it upon himself,' and bore it, in order that we might have peace. Each word here is exceedingly important, in order to a proper estimate of the nature of the work performed by the Redeemer. The word 'chastisement' properly denotes the correction, chastisement, or punishment inflicted by parents on their children, designed to amend their faults. It is applied also to the discipline and authority of kings, and to the discipline or correction of God. Sometimes it means admonition or instruction, such as parents give to children, or God to human beings.

We are healed - literally, it is healed to us; or healing has happened to us. The healing here referred to, is spiritual healing, or healing from sin. Pardon of sin, and restoration to the favor of God, are not unfrequently represented as an act of healing. The figure is derived from the fact that awakened and convicted sinners are often represented as crushed, broken, bruised by the weight of their transgressions, and the removal of the load of sin is represented as healing.

Thus, we see here that the Suffering Servant must be the God-Man. Who else can die in a way that is substitutionary for the sins of others? Who else can take upon himself the chastisement of God upon men? Again, we see that for Isaiah the Messianic prophecies are apocalyptic. God Himself is the primary actor in our deliverance. As such, God Himself is revealed, and His work has universal ramifications beyond Israel's worldly affairs.

We also see the Triune Nature of the God at work here. The Trinity of God is glimpsed in Isaiah 6. Though not fully revealed until the New Testament, we see here another indication that the God who judges, saves, and sanctifies is the same One God but in Three Persons. The Judgment of God the Father must be at play here, for the substitutionary sacrifice of the Son of God to be sensible. The Holy Spirit must be at play for the rest of us to be healed by this substitutionary sacrifice. At the very least, we are seeing the *economia* of God for Man revealed as the act of Three Persons in One God. What God is intrinsically in Himself will be revealed by Christ Jesus.

The Silent Lamb

Isaiah 53:7: *He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth.*

Acts 8:32-35: *The place of the scripture which he read was this, He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; and like a lamb dumb before his shearer, so opened he not his mouth: In his humiliation his judgment was taken away: and who shall declare his generation? for his life is taken from the earth. And the eunuch answered Philip, and said, I pray thee, of whom speaketh the prophet this? of himself, or of some other man? Then Philip opened his mouth, and began at the same scripture, and preached unto him Jesus.*

Barnes' Notes on the Bible: *He was oppressed* - Lowth renders this, 'It was exacted.' Hengstenberg, 'He was abased.' Jerome (the Vulgate), 'He was offered because he was willing.' The Septuagint 'He, on account of his affliction, opened not his mouth,' implying that his silence arose from the extremity of his sorrows. The Chaldee renders it, 'He prayed, and he was heard, and before he opened his mouth he was accepted.' The Syriac, 'He came and humbled himself, neither did he open his mouth.' Kimchi supposes that it means, 'it was exacted;' and that it refers to the fact that taxes were demanded of the exiles when they were in a foreign land. The word used here properly means, "to drive," to impel, to urge; and then to urge a debtor, to exact payment; or to exact tribute, a ransom, etc. (see Deuteronomy 15:2-3; 2 Kings 23:35.) Compare Job 3:18; Zechariah 9:8; Zechariah 10:4, where one form of the word is rendered 'oppressor;' Job 39:7, the 'driver;' Exodus 5:6, 'taskmasters;' Daniel 11:20, 'a raiser of taxes.' The idea is that of urgency, oppression, vexation, of being hard pressed, and ill-treated. It does not refer here necessarily to what was exacted by God, or to sufferings inflicted by him - though it may include those - but it refers to all his oppressions, and the severity of his sufferings from all quarters. He was urged impelled, oppressed, and yet he was patient as a lamb.

And he was afflicted - Jahn and Steudel propose to render this, 'He suffered himself to be afflicted.' Hengstenberg renders it, 'He suffered patiently, and opened not his mouth.' Lowth, 'He was made answerable; and he opened not his mouth.' According to this, the idea is, that he had voluntarily taken upon himself the sins of people, and that having done so, he was held answerable as a surety. But it is doubtful whether the Hebrew will bear this construction. According to Jerome, the idea is that he voluntarily submitted, and that this was the cause of his sufferings. Hensler renders it, 'God demands the debt, and he the great and righteous one suffers.' It is probable, however, that our translation has retained the correct sense. The word means to be afflicted, to suffer, be oppressed or depressed Psalm 119:107, and the idea here is, probably, that he was greatly distressed and afflicted. He was subjected to pains and sorrows which were hard to be borne, and which are usually accompanied with expressions of impatience and lamentation. The fact that he did not open his mouth in complaint was therefore the more remarkable and made the merit of his sufferings the greater.

Yet he opened not his mouth - This means that he was perfectly quiet, meek, submissive, patient, He did not open his mouth to complain of God on account of the great sorrows which he had appointed to him; nor to God on account of his being ill-treated by man. He did not use the language of reviling when he was reviled, nor return upon people the evils which they were inflicting on him (compare Psalm 39:9). How strikingly and literally was this fulfilled in the life of the Lord Jesus! It would seem almost as if it had been written after he lived and was history rather than prophecy. In no other instance was there ever so striking an example of perfect patience; no other person ever so entirely accorded with the description of the prophet.

He is brought as a lamb to the slaughter - This does not mean that he was led to the slaughter as a lamb is, but that as a lamb which is led to be killed is patient and silent, so was he. He made no resistance. He uttered no complaint. He suffered himself to be led quietly along to be put to death. What a striking and beautiful description! How tender and how true! We can almost see here the meek and patient Redeemer led along without resistance; and amidst the clamor of the multitude that were assembled with various feelings to conduct him to death, himself perfectly

silent and composed. With all power at his disposal, yet as quiet and gentle as though he had no power; and with a perfect consciousness that he was going to die, as calm and as gentle as though he were ignorant of the design for which they were leading him forth. This image occurs also in Jeremiah, Jeremiah 11:19, 'But I was like a lamb or an ox that is brought to the slaughter.'

As a sheep - As a sheep submits quietly to the operation of shearing. Compare 1 Peter 2:23, 'Who when he was reviled, reviled not again.' Jesus never opened his mouth to revile or complain. It was opened only to bless those that cursed him, and to pray for his enemies and murderers.