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Figures in Isaiah 7:14

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THE MEANING OF "IMMANUEL"

In Matthew 1:23 we read: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Immanuel" (RSV), in a formula that is immediately recognizable as a central element in Christian liturgy and theology about Jesus Christ. There are curiosities about the passage, not only in its announcement of a virgin birth, but also in the fact that the child that is born is called not Immanuel, but Jesus, a first indication (in our present enquiry) that texts do not necessarily say exactly what they mean. This oblique connection between text and meaning is evident in the story of interpretation that leads up to this appropriation of biblical prophecy in the Gospel of Matthew. The point applies to Matthew's use of the Old Testament generally, but in the present case he is referring to Isa 7:14, a text that pre-dates the birth of Christ by some seven centuries, and has its context in a political crisis involving several minor states in Syria-Palestine. The question is by what hermeneutical pathway a text that meant something in one setting can be said to mean something entirely different in a new one, far removed from it in time and circumstance.

In 735–33 BC, King Ahaz of Judah is under pressure from an alliance of two near neighbors, the kingdoms of Israel, to the immediate north, and Syria (or Aram). These appear to want to de-throne Ahaz and force Judah into an alliance for defensive purposes against the current local superpower, Assyria (centered farther east on the River Euphrates). The crisis raises political and theological issues, rooted in Judah's identity as a people in covenant with Yahweh, under a king in Jerusalem who is successor to King David, and thus heir to Yahweh's promise to David of national integrity and continuity (2 Sam 7:11b–16). That promise is variously conditionalized in the tradition, and it underlies the encounter in Isaiah 7, in which Ahaz is twice referred to by the metonymy "House of David" (7:2, 13).

The "figures" in Isa 7, therefore, as the stage is set, are the king and the prophet Isaiah, with the kings of Israel and Syria ominously in the wings, a pretender to the throne of Judah, "the son of Tabeel," and Isaiah's son with the double-edged symbolic name, Shear-Jashub, or " a remnant shall return" (7:1–6). In the religio-politics of the ancient world, kings conventionally consulted prophets or other intermediaries in the hope of rightly discerning the will of God or the gods in relation to urgent matters. In this case, the prophet is sent by Yahweh to confront Ahaz "at the end of the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the Fuller's Field" (7:3), where presumably the king is personally inspecting the city's water supply in view of the impending crisis. Ahaz is doing what kings and governments do—that is, he is preparing a political and military strategy for confronting the crisis. According to the account of the same crisis in 2 Kgs 16, his plan involves an embassy to the King of Assyria himself, accepting vassalage to that king, to secure him against the threat from his immediate neighbors. Isaiah's message to Ahaz is that he is to trust Yahweh for a good outcome of the crisis. "If you will not believe, surely you will not be established" (7:9b RSV). Reading Isa 7 along with 2 Kgs 16, this appears to mean that Isaiah is warning him not to put his trust in alliance with Assyria, but rather in Yahweh. The "sign" in 7:14, as explained in vv. 15–16, supports this message: before a child who is shortly to be born is very old, the kingdoms that now seem so threatening will lie in ruins. It is Yahweh, not great powers, who knows and governs outcomes.

I have already suggested that the narrative context of the sign opens up a line of interpretation. But what do the terms of the sign actually mean? Isaiah's words are:

הנה העלמה הרה וילדת בן וקראת שמו עמנו אל

It introduces two important new "figures," a young woman and her son, who is yet to be born. It is not said who the young woman is, nor is the child identified with any figure known otherwise from the book of Isaiah or

elsewhere. There are further unclarities arising from the form of the words. First, the Hebrew is capable of various translations, as a glance at a range of standard English versions shows. Should we translate it "the young woman," or perhaps "this young woman," taking the definite article ה as demonstrative? Or is it "*a* young woman," since the article can have the quite different function of denoting one of a kind? So whether she is someone who is known to the small circle who hear the prophet's words or not is impossible to determine.[1] Secondly, is she already pregnant, or shortly about to be? This cannot be immediately determined from the adjective הרה, but has to be inferred from the context. As the verb וילדת is a participle, a present tense may be suggested for both, hence "she is pregnant."[2] Yet there is obviously a future reference in the naming of the child and the effect of the sign, and the adjective and participle could equally be a vivid depiction of an event shortly to happen. The LXX puts both the pregnancy and the birth in the future:

ἡ παρθένος ἐν γαστρὶ ἕξει καὶ τέξεται υἱόν.[3]

Thirdly, what does the word העלמה actually mean? It is variously taken in the standard English translations as "virgin" or "young woman." In the few occurrences of העלמה in other Old Testament texts it undoubtedly refers to young women who may be presumed to be virgins, in that they are not married,[4] but this does not make it a *terminus technicus* for "virgin,"[5] and therefore the text cannot bear the sense that the conception will be a virginal conception. Watts meets the translation problem thus: "The common meaning [of *'almâ*] signifies one who is sexually mature. It is difficult to find a word in English that is capable of the same range of meaning. 'Virgin' is too narrow, while 'young woman' is too broad"; and he translates: "A *young*

1. Seitz, however, thinks that "the young woman is one of the king's own consorts, who is known by him," Seitz, *Isaiah 1–39*, 79.

2. Childs, *Isaiah*, 66.

3. There are variations in the LXX tradition, but not on the point of the future tense.

4. The singular form עלמה occurs only three times elsewhere in the Old Testament: Gen 24:43 (Rebekah), Exod 2:8 (Miriam), and Prov 30:19; see Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39*, 233. The last case concerns "the way of a man with a young woman," and refers presumably to the "wonder" of awakening sexual awareness.

5. So Childs, who expresses the common view that the technical term for *virgo intacta* is בתולה, *Isaiah*, 66. The point has been challenged by Wenham, "*betûlāh*: A Girl of Marriageable Age," who thinks that it is בתולה that denotes a woman of marriageable age. See to the contrary, Locher, *Die Ehre einer Frau in Israel*, who cites Babylonian marriage laws in support. It is possible that neither term has the force to express *virgo intacta*, but would generally convey an assumption of virginity because the woman is not yet married.

woman who is . . . not yet married (i.e., a virgin) will in due course bear a child."[6] LXX, as we have seen, translates העלמה with ἡ παρθένος, the term which Matthew then cites in Matt 1:23. This does not make a significant difference to our understanding of עלמה, however, for as Andrew Lincoln has shown, παρθένος has the same range of meaning as the Hebrew term; that is, it can denote a young woman of child-bearing age who is not yet married.[7] The term παρθένος in itself, therefore, whether in Isaiah LXX or in Matthew, is not sufficient to denote a virginal conception. Lincoln contends that it is not absolutely clear that Matthew had an actual virginal conception and birth in mind in his annunciation narrative; rather, the idea of Christ's virgin birth took time to establish itself in early Christian thought, with the work of Justin Martyr in the second century CE playing a decisive part.[8] Daniel Harrington, commenting on Matthew 1:23, also thinks that while LXX presumes the young woman was a virgin at the time of the oracle, both texts (MT or LXX) assume a natural mode of conception.[9]

There are, therefore, a range of obscurities for the modern reader in Isa 7:14. The sign concerns a young woman who cannot be identified, who may or may not be already pregnant, who will give birth to a son, who also cannot be identified, at a time in the future that cannot be determined. It is possible that Isaiah's words were clearer to his contemporary hearers, but any such clarity has been lost in their committal to text.

Modern readers have attempted to penetrate behind the obscurities. Among those who think it is possible to identify whom Isaiah had in mind in his sign of Immanuel, the two leading contenders are the son of King Ahaz, who would become King Hezekiah,[10] and the son of the prophet himself. In favor of Hezekiah is the way in which the underlying "narrative" of the book of Isaiah unfolds from this giving of the sign (of which more in a moment). Against it is the likelihood that, at the time of the encounter between Isaiah and Ahaz, Hezekiah was already several years old (though the biblical chronology is admittedly difficult to reconstruct on this point).[11]

6. Watts, *Isaiah 1–33*, 97, 99. Childs expresses a similar view, and translates: "A maiden (*'almāh*) is with child and she will bear a son"; *Isaiah*, 61, 65.

7. Lincoln, *Born of a Virgin?*, 75.

8. Ibid., 177–80.

9. Harrington, *Gospel of Matthew*, 35.

10. This identification is ancient, being represented by Justin Martyr's Jewish interlocutor Trypho in Justin's *Dialogue with Trypho*.

11. Commentators point to the chronological difficulties involved in identifying the child with Hezekiah. Blenkinsopp adjudicates, on the grounds of the confused biblical chronology of the period, that "a conclusion cannot be reached on chronological grounds alone either permitting or excluding identification of Immanuel with

In favor of the prophet's son is the fact that two other sons of the prophet feature in the immediate context (chs. 7–8), namely Shear-Jashub and Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz, both having symbolic names rather like Immanuel. The similarities of structure and meaning between 7:14–16 and 8:1–4 in this regard are particularly striking, and might be taken to imply the same parentage of both children.[12] Yet against this is the resistance of the text itself (7:14–16) to be read in this way with any certainty. Brevard Childs is right therefore, in my view, when he says:

> The reader is simply not given enough information on the identity of the maiden, or how precisely the sign functions in relation to the giving of the name Immanuel. It is, therefore, idle to speculate on these matters; rather the reader can determine if there are other avenues to understanding opened up by the larger context.[13]

This is not a counsel of despair regarding the possibility of understanding ancient texts in general, or this one in particular, but rather is part of an intractable problem entailed in the (essential) historical dimension of biblical study. This is frankly expressed by H. Utzschneider, who opens his monograph on conceptions of God in the Old Testament with a section entitled "Die Uneindeutigkeit biblischer Texte als hermeneutisches Problem," and says of the Bible reader's inevitable experience of this, together with the proliferation of attempts at explanation: "Sie ist auch eines der hermeneutischen Grundprobleme der historisch-kritischen Bibelwissenschaft."[14] For him, the meaning of texts is inseparable from their aesthetics, and thus the forms in which they have been received.

My concern, therefore, is not only with the fact that the text is in certain respects obscure to us, but also with the ways in which such a text comes to us in a form in which it has already been subjected to reflection from a standpoint, or standpoints, later than the time when it was delivered, in this case to King Ahaz. This entailment of retrospect in the sign seems to be there at the outset, since it is given to Ahaz only after he has refused to

Hezekiah"; Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39*, 233–34.

12. Some think Immanuel actually *is* Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz; Wolf, "A Solution to the Immanuel Prophecy in Isaiah 7:14—8:22"; Oswalt, *Isaiah 1–39*, 213; Keener, *Matthew*, 58. But this is not the natural reading of the texts.

13. Childs, *Isaiah,* 66. Cf. also Moberly on the Immanuel sign: "The initial setting fades from view: what follows lacks any clear setting, and the train of thought becomes increasingly difficult to follow"; Moberly, *Old Testament Theology*, 150. Seitz is among those who identify Immanuel with Hezekiah, arguing that the well-known chronological difficulties are not fatal to this reading: Seitz, *Isaiah 1–39*, 60–71.

14. Utzschneider, *Gottes Vorstellung*, 17.

ask for it (v. 12), or in different terms, to "enquire of the LORD," and so with the implication that he refuses to heed it when it comes. If it can function for Ahaz only in retrospect, this accords well with the logic that operates in Isa 8:16, where a prophetic word is formally witnessed and sealed in order to be produced at an appropriate later time. The sign may, indeed, be uttered by way of a word of judgment. In that case, the real audience of the sign is not Ahaz, but other hearers or readers. This leads us, next, to consider what happens to Isaiah's words to Ahaz in what follows in the remainder of Isa 7:1—9:1.

THE TEXT IN CONTEXT (7:1—9:1)

The immediate sequel to the narrative of the Immanuel sign is perplexing. It begins with 7:17, which seems to be a non sequitur from vv. 14–16. That is, the words that declare the threat to Ahaz to be void—making it formally an oracle of salvation—are followed directly by a judgment saying. Syria and Israel are not a problem: but Judah will be laid low by Assyria! And the remainder of the chapter follows suit.

The oddities continue. In 8:1–4 we have a new sign remarkably similar to the one in 7:14–16: a child is conceived and born, receives a pregnant name, the imminent demise of the Syro-Israelite alliance is reiterated, again within a short time as measured by the child's period of early maturing, and the child's name is seen as a token of this. Differently, both the mother and father of this child are identified, namely Isaiah and "the prophetess"—who we suppose, for propriety, is his wife. Curiously therefore, several of the aspects of the Immanuel sign that were obscure are clear in this one, and it seems as if the element of reassurance in Isa 7:14–16 is reinforced by this.

Yet there is a new twist in 8:5–8. While in 8:4 Assyria is introduced as the nemesis of Syria-Israel, it now turns (again) against Judah ("this people" in 8:5)—in an oracle that culminates in a dramatic address to *Immanuel*! God-with-us becomes a word of judgment. Even this is not the end, however, for a new oracle of salvation follows in vv. 9–10, this too culminating in the word *Immanuel* (v. 10). *Immanuel* is once again "good news." The double possibility of *Immanuel* is realized throughout this redacted whole. There is also, in this culmination, a certain intensification or overflow of meaning, in the extension of the original oracle of salvation from the context of an immediate threat from two enemy nations to a more generalized threat from "all you far countries" (NRSV), or better, "all remote places of the earth" (NAS; Hebrew כל מרחקי ארץ). The taunting invitation to these to

"take counsel together" in futile conspiracy recalls Ps 2, with its images of Yahweh's rule from Zion after the conquest of his enemies.

Yet the section (to 8:23a) changes gear twice more. In 8:11–15 the prophet himself is addressed with a plea to fear Yahweh, and a declaration that he will become a "stone of offence" (etc.) to *both* houses of Israel. Judgment for Judah is thus rolled into judgment on Israel. *Many* shall stumble on it—so perhaps not all, in an echo of "remnant," and 1:27–31. And in 8:16–23a, Isaiah affirms his own intention, with his children (including Immanuel?), to put his trust in Yahweh, and be "signs and portents" (לאתות ולמפתים—elsewhere "signs and wonders," v. 18) in Israel from Yahweh. The "testimony" heralds a time of judgment—followed by salvation! The sign given to Ahaz, therefore, has become the occasion of theological development in the context. There is little that is obviously logical or natural, however, about the relationship between the terms of the sign and the lines of development from it.

REDACTIONAL EXPLANATIONS

Redactional approaches to interpreting the Immanuel sign look for its possible meanings in terms of those readings of it that have themselves become part of the received tradition, both in the immediate context as just outlined, and in the book of Isaiah more widely. This means considering the stages of the text's composition against the backdrop of historical changes. There is evidence of this within Isa 7–8, since the setting of the Syro-Ephraimite threat to Judah in the 730s, when according to Isaiah Ahaz's decision might yet affect the course of events, is evidently overlaid by a perspective which knows that Judah would become a victim of Assyria. While the "reach" of the original oracle runs to 722 BCE (the fall of the northern kingdom, and thus fulfillment of Isaiah's vision about the alliance), the Assyrian "overwhelming" of Judah points at least to Sennacherib's invasion in 701 BCE. The idea of the book as "redaction" pays attention to the attempt perceived in it to understand the meaning of prophetic words in ever new contexts. Isaiah 1–12, as a sub-unit of the book, evidently aims to weave together words of judgment and salvation, presumably from a point of view that has tried to make sense of Yahweh's work in history, and inherited prophetic words about the fate of Israel and Judah. Isaiah 1 illustrates this perspective, not least in 1:21–26, which contains in brief compass a theological concept and logic that knows of judgment on Jerusalem followed by its restoration. (Isa 1:21–26 has been likened to Isa 1–55 in this respect, while 1:27–31 makes a parallel with chs. 56–66).

Kings Ahaz and Hezekiah also function in contrastive relation to each other within a certain conception of the book, which has as its theological focus the notion of Zion's inviolability (cf. 29:1–8; 31:1–5). Ahaz refuses to listen to Isaiah and declines to accept a sign, while Hezekiah listens to the prophet, prays for deliverance, and sees the salvation of Jerusalem (Isa 37; it might be said, in the terms of 7:9, that "he believes and is established"). Ahaz in contrast fades out of focus, and sees no benefit from the word of assurance given him—instead, the notes of hope and assurance that feature in chs. 7–8 are re-directed. Thus, 9:5–6[6–7] is often taken of Hezekiah; and 14:28 opens an oracle against Philistia and in favor of Zion with the telling words, "in the year that King Ahaz died"! The respective fates of the two kings become a paradigm of faith in relation to the divine providence. This paradigmatic approach to historical representation is typical of the book, in which Assyria and Babylon can serve successively as types of the oppressor of Yahweh's people, and in which Cyrus of Persia can appear as his "anointed" (Isa 45:1).

The series of non-logical articulations in Isa 7–8 can thus be explained partially in terms of a redactional process, whose result is a series of distinct theologoumena arising out of ever new situations. The theological layering includes: Judah need not fall victim to an enemy if it is faithful, for "God is/will be with her" (7:1–16; 8:1–4); Judah (presumably having been unfaithful) will succumb to an enemy in its turn (i.e., after Syria and Israel)—for "God will be with her" in judgment (7:17–25; 8:5–8); God will punish nations that conspire to come against Judah, for "God is with us" (8:9–11); both houses of Israel are equally under judgment—*many in them* shall fall because they have not trusted Yahweh (8:11–15); a judgment is coming (or has come) that will be followed by salvation (8:16–23a). This layering, and juxtaposing, of distinct theologoumena becomes a new theological reflection in itself, an attempt to understand what "God with us" can mean when brought to bear on the vicissitudes of the history of the chosen people.

Redactional study is based on the form of historical enquiry that aims to understand the meanings of texts in their original contexts. Yet it also shows that the individual texts come to point beyond themselves and their putatively original scope. More importantly, it shows that in principle the meaning of a text is not confined to what might be taken to be its meaning in the specific context of its conception, and of its first utterance or committal to writing.

FIGURATIVE (METAPHORICAL) EXPLANATIONS

Redactional explanations go part of the way towards an explanation of the perplexities of Isa 7:14, but there is more to be said. A text's redactional history can be something like an updating, a re-application in a new situation, an adjustment of understanding and expectation. But it does not necessarily explain things that are puzzling in themselves, as several features of Isa 7:14 are. What do we make of the fact of elusiveness here? The text's elusive quality is made the more conspicuous by comparison with its Doppelgänger, 8:1–4. The latter case notably provides answers to the sort of questions 7:14 casts a veil over: the father of the child is Isaiah and the woman is "the prophetess" (the theoretical doubt about whether she is his wife is a minor uncertainty); there is no question about whether she is already pregnant or not, and the validity of the process as a "sign" is strengthened by the writing of the name beforehand in the presence of witnesses. Even the measure of the child's age at the time when the prophecy would be fulfilled (before he could say "my father" or "my mother") is relatively clear compared with the more gnomic 7:15–16. The comparison of the two passages might lead us to think of it as a disambiguation of 7:14–16, that is, to suggest, when taken together with 8:18, that Isaiah is also the father of Immanuel, thus creating a coherent narrative in which the prophet's sons, with their eloquent names, serve as signs.[15] Yet even if this represents some level of intentionality in the text, it does not answer the question why Isa 7:14 needs to be rescued from ambiguity in the first place. Just as plausible a reading of the comparison between the texts is that the latter throws the imponderables of the former into relief. Isaiah 8:1–4, though it has similarities with "exegetical" texts,[16] does not function by simply telling us what Isa 7:14–16 actually meant. Rather, it produces a juxtaposition that poses a question about the limits of a text's meaning.

The common scholarly belief that Isa 7–8 is part of the prophet's "memoir" does not entirely answer the question about how it functions as a text. On the surface it is a sequential account of things that Isaiah said and did, but this is somewhat undermined by the perplexing relationship of 8:1–4 to 7:14–16. The nature of the text is helpfully illuminated, I think, by a discussion by Joel Rosenberg of what he calls "allegorical" texts. He enters the caveat that allegory is not best understood as a "genre," but is hard to

15. Thus with Ibn Ezra, Rashi, and "a host of modern interpreters," Seitz, *Isaiah 1–39*, 62.

16. I have in mind the way in which Genesis 20, in a quasi-midrashic fashion, apparently answers questions left unanswered by the more reticent Genesis 12:10–20; see Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 319.

define so as to include all cases of it, and he carefully distinguishes between texts that are allegorical in a sustained way and others that employ allegory in some measure as part of their rhetorical strategy.[17] Texts can be seen as allegorical if they contain signals that undermine their surface impression of coherence. Allegory, he says, "[spreads] out along the axis of an imaginary time in order to give duration to what is, in fact, simultaneous within the subject."[18] And he goes on:

> Yet the allegorical text must somehow, by the details or contradictions of its own unfolding, invert or destabilize that succession, providing the clues to the sense of disjunction and otherness that eventually awakens in the mind of the reader. Such clues can often be quite faint and obscure—a word, a turn of phrase, an invasive discourse, any small linchpin of temporal structure whose enunciation loosens and collapses the temporality into the ruin (one could say, rune) of allegorical insight.[19]

This applies well, in my view, to the process by which the reader makes sense of Isa 7–8. Rosenberg suggests that meanings can be inflected in the words of a text in ways that differ from the ordinary interrelationships of grammar, syntax, and logical progression. There is a resonance here with the kinds of studies of Old Testament texts that find pointers to meaning in compositional structures and patterns, such as chiastic or concentric forms. It is evident that Isa 1–12 (or 2–12) has been organized into a pattern in which oracles of judgment alternate with oracles of salvation. The culmination in ch. 12, a song of thanksgiving that knows of a divine anger that is now past (12:1), has echoes of Isa 40, which also proclaims a time of punishment now ended. There is a sense in chs. 1–12, therefore, of a meaning of texts that goes beyond the particularity of their individual, immediate contexts. One striking attempt to reckon with this dimension of Isaiah is Andrew Bartelt's analysis of Isa 2–12 based on a count of lines and syllables and the comparative length of sub-units. Bartelt claims that the words "she shall call his name Immanuel" (וקראת שׁמו עמנו אל) lie at the exact center of the Isaiah *Denkschrift*, with 844 syllables both before and after this line. As the *Denkschrift* forms the center structurally of Isa 2–12, the Immanuel sign, and the name of the child, consequently are at the exact center of Isa 2–12.[20]

17. He follows Northrop Frye who sees it, not as a genre, but as "a structural principle in literature," or in his words, "in the broadest sense, as a process of signification"; Rosenberg, *King and Kin*, 12.

18. Ibid., 17.

19. Ibid., 18.

20. Bartelt, *Book around Immanuel*, 256. The success or validity of Bartelt's

The implication of this analysis, if accepted, is that Isa 2–12 is an extremely sophisticated compositional performance, demonstrating that "Immanuel" is illuminated by, and gives meaning to, the full range of Yahweh's actions towards Israel and the nations exhibited in that part of the book. The teasing echo of 7:14–16 in 8:1–4, therefore, is a clue to look more carefully in the larger context for what the Immanuel sign might mean. The reception of the sign within Isaiah itself opens the way for new readings of what "God with us" might mean in ever new situations.

This, of course, is precisely what has happened to the text in its larger reception history, beginning with LXX and the Gospel of Matthew. Matthew zooms in on the promise of a child whose name is Immanuel, and applies it to the birth of Jesus, who is "God with us" in a way that transcends the horizons of Isaiah. His interpretation leans heavily on his rendering of the Hebrew הנה העלמה הרה וילדת בן as ἡ παρθένος ἐν γαστρὶ ἕξει καὶ τέξεται υἱόν. In taking העלמה as ἡ παρθένος he follows the wording of LXX, but with his own purpose of using the text to support his announcement of Jesus' virginal conception. For him, the issues surrounding Isaiah, Ahaz, and Hezekiah are no longer in view, though his interpretation presumably rests on a perception of some relationship between the meaning of "God with us" for Ahaz (and Hezekiah) and its meaning in relation to the birth of Jesus.

This is only the beginning of the hermeneutical question as to how the Old Testament text can be read in the context of the two Testaments, and especially in the light of specific New Testament appropriations. If the meaning of a text is not enshrined within its "original" historical setting, as far as that can be determined, nor within an authorial intention contingent on such a setting, what process is involved in establishing its meaning?

The issue is the relationship between "literal" meanings of Old Testament texts and their meaning in the context of the two-Testament witness to Jesus Christ. The present section is headed "figurative (metaphorical) explanations" (sc. of the way in which Isa 7:14–16 becomes meaningful beyond its immediate context), but this has to be set in the context of time-honored attempts to conceptualize the relationship. Rosenberg took a cue from the history of reading Old Testament or Hebrew Bible texts. Early Jewish and Christian interpretations each had a version of a "four-fold sense," distinguishing "literal" readings from several kinds of non-literal.[21]

analysis cannot be adjudged here; my point is to suggest the significance of this kind of approach to the text for an understanding of how its language works.

21. Rosenberg, *King and Kin*, 12–15. There are close correspondences between the Christian version, traceable to Nicholas of Lyra (literal, spiritual, moral, anagogical/eschatological), and the Jewish PaRDeS. This acronymic term, meaning "Paradise," is formed from the initials of "*peshaṭ* (simple, literal, or historical sense), *remez* (allusive,

The fundamental distinction for ancient interpreters, however, lay between "literal" and non-literal, or "figurative" meanings. There was a recognition, in these approaches, of a complex relationship between the literal, or plain, sense of a text and its wider possibilities of interpretation, especially when located in a canon, which implied some ultimate meaning relationship among all the texts that composed it.[22] This recognition gave rise to a hermeneutical language that included a range of terms such as allegorical, typological, spiritual, and *sensus plenior*. Differences among the meanings of these terms could be exaggerated. For example, the Antiochene hermeneutical tendency broadly affirmed the "literal," historical meanings of texts, and its version of the relationship between literal and non-literal meanings has often been characterized as "typological," on the grounds that this formula protects the close relationship between the two. Alexandrian "allegory," on the other hand, has been thought to allow meaning to float freer of the literal and historical. Yet this distinction is now widely acknowledged to be an over-simplification.[23] For the Alexandrian Origen, according to Childs, "the difference between the literal and the allegorical was not absolute, but lay within a spectrum"; and again:

> The move from the literal to the spiritual is not an alien transference to bridge a double meaning, but rather a generalization to a universal scope of the historical particularity, because the literal sense has already opened up the one spiritual reality.[24]

Childs, citing a work by Otto Pesch, finds that the discovery of levels of meaning—here with reference to a "four-fold sense"—was far from being merely a reflection of contemporary Hellenistic philosophy, but "the method relates organically to the Christian faith."[25] And for Seitz, "figural" interpretation, while fully respecting the plain sense of the original, is essential to an understanding of the Old Testament as part of the two-Testament witness

conceptual, or allegorical), *derash* (homiletical, exemplary, or moral), and *sod* (esoteric, mystical, or eschatological" (ibid., 13).

22. On this, Aichele comments: "The texts in the intertextual mechanism [in this case in the biblical canon] resonate, interfere with, or otherwise contact each other in various and complex ways"; *Control of Biblical Meaning*, 19. For Aichele, the canon exerts a constraint on what would otherwise be limitless meaning possibilities, a constraint which he thinks can be understood as ideological control. The canon can also be regarded as "a process . . . of accommodation and compromise," Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 710, following Rainer Albertz.

23. Childs, *The Struggle*, 65–66.

24. Ibid., 68–69.

25. Ibid., 149. He refers to 1 Cor. 10:11 for New Testament warrant, and to Pesch, "Exegese."

to Christ. This he contrasts with the brand of historical enquiry that he calls "historicism," in which meanings of texts from the past have in principle no bearing on modern concepts, including concepts of God.[26]

Terminology can obscure the issues at stake here. Rosenberg expressly dissociates his concept of "allegory" from what he calls "allegoresis," in which alternative meanings are assigned to the words and phrases of a text.[27] His allegory moves subtly between literal and non-literal meanings, and is based on pointers within the form of a text that precisely arise from the extent to which it succeeds in making meaning in an ordinary or "literal" sense. As, for Origen, the relationship between literal and allegorical "lay within a spectrum," so Rosenberg also spoke of degrees in which texts might be regarded as allegorical. Childs deploys the term "metaphorical" to express a kind of relationship that is neither "allegorical" nor "typological," where "typology" is taken to entail a historical relationship between the literal and non-literal. Rather, metaphorical interpretations attempt to catch a real relationship or resonance between the literal and the figurative.[28] Childs' case study for this kind of interpretation is Theodoret of Cyrus, who cites Immanuel and Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz as an example of metaphorical extension.[29] The advantage of this approach is that it does not require some logical or necessary connection between the two Isaiah passages, but allows room for an imaginative construal of the meaning of their relationship.

REDACTIONAL AND FIGURATIVE READINGS

There are some similarities between modern redactional and traditional Christian figurative interpretation. Both look beyond the immediate (putative) reference of the text (of Isa 7:14–16) to elucidate its meaning. Both assume that the meaning of the text (beyond the "literal") can be found in relation to a reality that transcends the immediate situation of the text. In redaction criticism, it is supposed that the redaction pushes beyond Isaiah's word to Ahaz, in order to express something about God's activity in judgment and salvation to Israel on a broad historical canvas. In this sense, it perceives a relationship between the word (the text in its immediate context)

26. Seitz, *Figured Out*, 6–10.

27. Rosenberg, *King and Kin*, 13. In his view, "allegory" describes a kind of text, while "allegoresis" is an "allegorical *criticism*" (emphasis original).

28. Childs, *The Struggle*, 143.

29. Theodoret gives as an example, besides the two characters in Isaiah, Heb 7:4–10, on Levi paying tithes to Melchizedek, as it were, while still in the loins of Abraham; Childs, *The Struggle*, 143. Childs sees in Theodoret's take on Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz "an ontological move in the interpretation of Immanuel" (ibid.).

and a reality that transcends that situation and word-event. A similarity with patristic hermeneutics may be found in this. There are significant differences too, however. In modern thinking, the relationship between word and reality is not intrinsic. Individual words are contingent, and can be regarded as simply wrong, or of limited value in relation to truth. Texts that are difficult or obscure, moreover (such as Isa 7:14), do not become occasions for appeal to special spiritual knowledge, nor are they assigned definitive *literal* meanings on the grounds of their New Testament usage.[30] The difference between traditional Christian and modern interpretation can become a chasm, as (for example) the different approaches of Childs and Walter Brueggemann show. Brueggeman (as a self-styled "postmodern" Christian Old Testament/Hebrew Bible scholar) is at pains to deny any overarching theological narrative comprising the Old and New Testaments, on the grounds that this is in principle hegemonic and anti-Jewish.[31] There is nothing in OT texts that pushes in the direction of Christian theological interpretation. Rather, the NT and early church imaginatively adopted OT texts in the interes ts of their belief in Christ. In Childs' critique of Brueggemann on Isaiah, he focuses on Brueggemann's deployment of this idea of the "imagination": for Brueggemann, "the biblical text serves to provide a potential for the endless generation of new meanings."[32] Childs, in contrast, affirms that the OT is indeed part of a two-Testament witness to Christ, and his account of the ways in which the church has attempted to understand this, in relation to the stubborn particularities of the OT, is part of his attempt to articulate it. The disagreement between these two has at its heart the same dilemmas over the "literal" understanding of the OT that have always attended the Christian reception of it (though Childs thinks Brueggemann's hermeneutical position "offers a serious break with the entire Christian exegetical tradition."[33])

I think, however, that this difference does not turn on the place of the imagination in interpretation as such. Rather, there is an indispensable role for the human imagination in the reading of Isa 7:14–16 as Christian Scripture, in a way that does not entail the radical disjunction of meanings

30. Some commentary on Isaiah still understands the meaning of עלמה in the light of Matthew's reading of the sign. Oswalt thinks the term is such that it can speak truly about a natural birth in the time of Ahaz and also the supernatural birth of Jesus. Regarding Isaiah's choice of it, rather than another term such as אשה, he argues that it made the sign capable of being fulfilled in a miraculous birth; Oswalt, *Isaiah 1–39*, 210–11. Goldingay in contrast simply cuts the connection between the literal meaning of Isa 7:14 and its ("inspired") re-application in Matthew; Goldingay, *Isaiah*, 67.

31. Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 707–20.

32. Childs, *The Struggle*, 294–95. He refers to Brueggemann, *Isaiah* and *Theology of the Old Testament*.

33. Childs, *The Struggle*, 294–95.

between OT and NT advocated by Brueggemann. This is evident from the outset in the surmises that are bound to arise from the non-disclosures of the text that we have observed. Its assimilation into a redactional nexus testifies to an act on the part of the biblical writers that involves what may be called "theological imagination." This is not the unbridled imagination of postmodernism, but tutored by what the redactors know and think about God. The redactors' use of theological imagination is offered to readers, who must use theirs. The early Christian interpreters of the OT were equally employing intellectual powers that included the human imagination.

I call Paul Ricoeur in aid on this. For him, the imagination is "the power of giving form to human experience," or differently, of "redescribing reality."[34] In biblical narrative and its reading, he finds the fusion of a type of imaginative production that follows certain conventions characteristic of narrative, and a type of "heuristic" imaginative creativity in which the reader re-contextualizes what they read in their own world.[35] In relation to texts within texts (in "The Bible and the Imagination" he is writing about Jesus' parables), he shows how the individual story (here, the "narrative-parable") both illuminates and is illuminated by the encompassing context. The dynamic that exists between narrative and context he sees as a "metaphorization process," where "metaphorization" is understood as a "transformation of meaning."[36] The role of the imagination, for him, is inherent in the reading process.

In Ricoeur's analysis, where history belongs to the subject matter of the narrative, the narrative is nevertheless fictive: "Narratives, in virtue of their form, are all fictions."[37] This is not a skeptical point, but one about the nature of literature and reading. It means that there is an imaginative quality in the text that engenders in the reader the activity of imaginative interpretation, involving both thought and action.[38] In theological context, however, the specific characteristic of Christian reading of the biblical text is that Jesus Christ is at the center of the reality within which the reader's imaginative activity takes place.[39]

34. Paul Ricoeur, "The Bible and the Imagination," 144. He used the term first in his *The Rule of Metaphor*, 216–56.

35. Ricoeur, "The Bible and the Imagination," 144–45.

36. Ibid., 147, 150–51.

37. Ibid., 145.

38. Ibid., 147.

39. Ibid., 146–47.

Somewhat similarly, Sandra Schneiders speaks of the "paschal imagination," or "the Christian theological/spiritual imagination."[40] This is a form of the "constructive imagination" that we have encountered above,[41] meaning "our capacity to construct our world."[42] For her, the Gospels (which are her immediate focus) are "works of the imagination appealing to the imagination," in a formula that echoes Ricoeur. Here too, the point is not historically skeptical; indeed, for her, the reader whose objective is spiritual transformation must also read for certain "information" that is required for the text to make sense, and upon which the spiritual reading is predicated.[43] The paschal imagination integrates historical experience with faith experience:

> The gospels, in short, are the product of the paschal imagination. What they give us is the Jesus-image, or the proclaimed Jesus who actually lived and died in first-century Palestine, who now reigns gloriously as savior of the world, who indwells his followers in this and every age, and who is the Christ in whom God is definitively and salvifically revealed.[44]

The "imagination," understood thus, recognizes that the language of the Bible (especially the OT with its poetry and narratives, its "gaps," and its heavy dependence on appeals to human experience through metaphor), is often not of the sort that can closely determine meaning. This seems to me to be a gain of modern hermeneutics broadly speaking. It follows, I think, that the relationship between OT text and NT reception cannot be a simple matter of seeing that "this is that." Even where one says that "this is analogous to that," an effort of the imagination is entailed in expressing why it is so. We are still in the business of understanding what it means to say "Jesus Christ is Immanuel," Son of God, Savior, Messiah, Lord. If it ever mattered in the scheme of things whether or not a small Near Eastern people should be overwhelmed by its enemies—if this had anything to do with the belief that "God is with us"—there remains a great deal to think about in working out the meaning of confessions of faith, and the human imagination has a role to play in it.

40. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text*, 102.

41. She refers to the work of Kaufman, *Theological Imagination*. She also cites Hart, *Unfinished Man and the Imagination*, and Tracy, *Analogical Imagination*; Ibid., 129.

42. Ibid., 103.

43. Ibid., 14.

44. Ibid., 107.