

# THE PASTORS' PEN

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Second Kings 16 gives us some insight into Ahaz's character. We are told there that "he did not do what was right in the eyes of the LORD his God." Instead, "he walked in the way of the kings of Israel," so much so that "he even burned his son as an offering according to the

despicable practices of the nations whom the LORD drove out before the people of Israel."

Furthermore, "he sacrificed and made offerings on the high places and on the hills and under every green tree" (vv. 1–4). The was a man wholly given to idolatry.

When the kings of Syria and Israel waged war against Jerusalem, Ahaz made a treaty with Assyria, trusting in them to deliver him and Judah from the invading forces. God was displeased with this treaty and warned Ahaz against it, but the king would not listen. This is the background to Isaiah 7.

The chapter opens with the initial invasion of Syria and Israel having failed, but they quickly redoubled their efforts and committed to attacking afresh. God sent Isaiah to assure Ahaz that his enemies would not triumph. Isaiah urged the king to take God's promises to heart: "If you are not firm in faith, you will not be firm at all" (v. 9). If the king could not trust God's promise, what could he trust? Wanting to verify his promise, God told Ahaz to ask for a sign: "Let it be as deep as Sheol or as high as

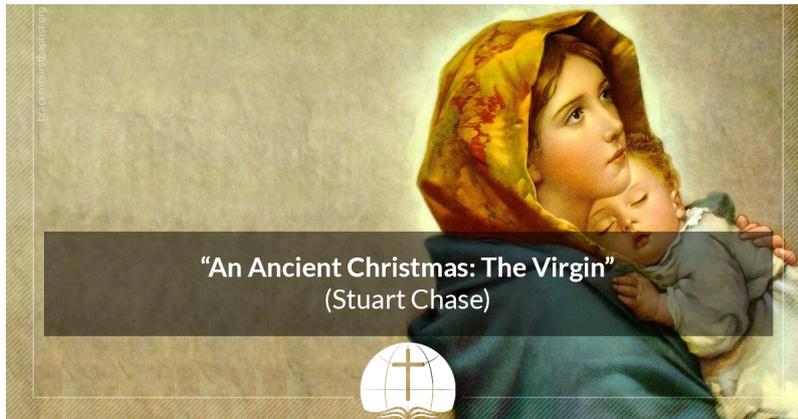
heaven" (v. 11). In a show of feigned piety, Ahaz refused: "I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test" (v. 12). The sentiment may sound good, but God had *instructed* him to ask for a sign. Piety was not at the heart of Ahaz's refusal; an unwillingness to submit to God's messenger was. Ahaz trusted more in Assyria's military might than God's signs delivered by God's messengers.

Wearied with Ahaz's impiety, God promised a sign anyway: "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Emmanuel" (v. 14). These famous words are quoted in the New Testament and applied directly to the birth of Jesus (Matthew 1:23).

Some years ago, a particular English translation of the Bible raised the ire of evangelicals and Catholics alike when,

translating v. 14, translators opted to render the Hebrew word *almah* ("virgin") as "young woman." The translation was decried as liberal for supposedly denying the virgin birth of Christ—even though the same translation translated Matthew 1:23 using the word "virgin." But there is, in fact, some controversy surrounding the Hebrew word.

A reasonable argument can be made that Isaiah's prophecy had a more immediate initial fulfilment than the birth of Jesus. God told Ahaz to ask for a sign that he would grant military victory to Judah against Israel and Syria. The sign was for Ahaz's benefit. The birth of Jesus, some six hundred years later, can hardly be considered a sign to Ahaz of military victory against his immediate enemies. Speaking of the son to be born of the *almah*, God says, "For before the boy knows how to refuse the evil



"An Ancient Christmas: The Virgin"  
(Stuart Chase)



and choose the good, *the land whose two kings you dread will be deserted*" (v. 16). Clearly, the prophesied boy would be born while Syria and Israel were still a threat to Ahaz. By the time Jesus was born, that threat was long past, and Ahaz was no longer alive to witness the fulfilment of the prophecy.

The notion must at least be entertained that the immediate fulfilment of this prophecy lay in the birth of a son to a young woman, not a virgin, in Ahaz's own time. Or else a virgin indeed conceived and bore a son while Ahaz was alive and Israel and Syria posed a threat to Judah. The former seems more likely. Perhaps Isaiah's own son, Mahershalalhashbaz, whose birth is recorded in the opening verses of chapter 8, was God's sign to Ahaz.

This interpretation in no way detracts from the virgin birth of Christ. The Holy Spirit clearly guided Matthew under inspiration to apply Isaiah 7:14 to the birth of Jesus, and the Greek word that Matthew chose unequivocally means "virgin."

Laying aside for the moment the debate surrounding the proper translation of *almah*, let's consider the text as it applies to Jesus. When Joseph learned of Mary's pregnancy, he immediately (and understandably) assumed that she had been unfaithful. As he contemplated the most discreet way to divorce her, an angel spoke to him: "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." Matthew adds his commentary: "All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: 'Behold, the *virgin* shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel'" (Matthew 1:20–23). As noted, the Greek word here translated "virgin" only and always speaks of a virgin.

The translation choice of the aforementioned English Bible was controversial because the doctrine of the virgin birth is controversial. Sceptics decry the notion of a virgin birth as completely fallacious (because impossible). But the Bible tells us quite plainly that Mary *did* conceive, and give birth, as a virgin. The question to be asked is, how important is the doctrine of the virgin birth to historic Christianity? Its significance is at least fourfold.

First, it is significant because it shows that Christ's birth was supernatural. Right from the outset, Jesus' life was shown to be one of supernatural significance. The story of Jesus of Nazareth commenced with a supernatural birth and concluded with a supernatural resurrection and ascension. As Donald Macleod notes, "The virgin birth is ... blatantly supernatural, defying our rationalism, informing us that all that follows belongs to the same order as itself and that if we find offence there is no point in proceeding further."

Second, it is significant because it displays God's initiative. Mary did not plan to bear Messiah and was not asked whether she was willing to do so. She submitted, to be sure (Luke 1:38), but God had already decreed that the Saviour would be conceived in and born from her. God was determined to save his people from his sins (Matthew 1:21) and took the initiative to do so.

Third, the virgin birth highlights the dual nature of Jesus. He was fully divine, conceived by the Holy Spirit and not by means of ordinary human intercourse. At the same time, he was fully human, born of a woman. Wayne Grudem captures it well:

God, in his wisdom, ordained a combination of human and divine influence in the birth of Christ, so that his full humanity would be evident to us from the fact of his ordinary human birth from a human mother, and his full deity would be evident from the fact of his conception in Mary's womb by the powerful work of the Holy Spirit.

Fourth, it is significant because, as at many other points in his life and ministry, it shows that Jesus fulfilled prophecy. A great many messianic prophecies were given that needed to be fulfilled in Jesus' life and ministry, and this is one of them.

In short, the virgin birth of Christ proved that he was uniquely qualified to be the one who would save his people from their sins. Isaiah prepared God's people for this unique Saviour hundreds of years before he was born. Jesus of Nazareth was, indeed, God's promised Messiah, sent by God's own initiative to save his people from their sins.