# DEVELOPMENT OF THE INTERPRETATION OF ISAIAH 7:14
## A Tribute to Edward J. Young

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In the interpretation of Isaiah 7:14, three basic positions have been historically taken by commentators: 1) that the reference is only to an immediate event of the prophet's own day; 2) that it refers only to the Messiah; 3) that it refers to both. The first position has been generally held by those who have denied the unity of the book's structure and supernaturalness of the content.[1] There have, though, been exceptions such as Orelli who denied the unity and held the direct messianic interpretation of 7:14.[2] From the time of the reformers most evangelicals have held the second viewpoint. Calvin early reflected this view, maintaining the Christological interpretation of Isaiah seven.[3] Early writers like Bishop Lowth and the Baptist minister, John Gill also held the messianic interpretation of this passage.[4] However, during the middle of the nineteenth century, especially after the publication of Duhm's work, the concept of immediate contemporary fulfillment of all of Isaiah's prophecies became widespread.[5] Unable to stem the rising flood of opinion, many conservatives retreated to a dual-fulfillment position, especially on this particular passage.[6] Thus, the position of the reformers, who saw fulfillment only in Christ, was abandoned. This influence affected the interpretation of the entire Immanuel passage, which came to be viewed by many as merely symbolic.[7]

Barnes represents this viewpoint in advocating that "some young female" would bear a son whose name would indicate God's blessing and deliverance. He maintains that only in this way could there have been any satisfactory and convincing evidence to Ahaz. However, he continues that though this is the obvious meaning there is no doubt that the language is so "couched" as to contain application to a more significant event that was a sign of God's protection. He concludes that "the language, therefore, has at the commencement of the prophecy, a fullness of meaning which is not entirely met by the immediate event."[8]

Beecher also accepted this viewpoint in asserting that the first event of the prediction inadequately fulfills it, but that it is completely fulfilled in a series of events that lead to final culmination.[9]

This concept was historically paralleled by the conservative thinking that the prophet did not know the implication of what he wrote and that his prophecy had "room for" a fuller applica-

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tion. For example, Ellicott maintained that in the New Testament times the prophecies were seen to have been fulfilled by events in Christ's life even though that meaning was not present to the prophet's own mind.[10]

A contemporary of these men was Dewart who criticized the views of leading liberals and the condescension of fellow conservatives such as Barnes, Fairbairn, and Riehm.[11] He argues that the true picture of the prophet is given in the Epistles of Peter, who tells us that they did know what they were writing of when they wrote. He challenges conservative writers to evaluate the implications of advocating that the prophets did not know the true meaning of what they wrote. He asks what this does to our concept of inspiration in bending it toward a dictation concept. His book provides several excellent discussions on key passages and is very helpful, though it is very little known today.[12]

The Dutch theologian, Gustav Oehler, also criticized the concept of "double-fulfillment" in the Isaiah seven passage. He felt that the whole context of chapters 7-9 clearly intends a direct messianic interpretation. He admits, "The interpretation now prevailing regards it as only typically Messianic."[13]

His view was followed by Briggs who also criticized seeing a double-fulfillment in the Isaiah passage. He maintained that a "typical correspondence" is not a direct prediction, for if it can have a "multiple fulfillment" then it was never really a prediction as Matthew obviously regarded it.[14] He sees the sign presented to Ahaz as assigned to the future and, therefore, no immediate fulfillment was to be seen by either Ahaz or Isaiah.[15]

Hengstenberg also maintained that the Christian church had, from the time of the Church Fathers, upheld the direct messianic explanation of Isaiah 7:14. He states that it was not until the mid-eighteenth century that writers began to turn from this view. He admits that by the mid-nineteenth century it had gained to the point of prevailing over the historic interpretation.[16]

Cowles also criticized the growing double-fulfillment influence upon conservative writers. He gives a thorough discussion of the problems created by the double-fulfillment interpretation of Isaiah 7:14. He concluded that a dual-fulfillment view of the prophecy is really a "single-fulfillment" view in that only the first event is really predicted and the latter one is merely an "analogy."[17] He asks some very searching questions, such as why did not the prophet structure the passage to "allow" a multiple meaning? He stresses that the use of the definite article and the verb tenses imply that the prophet has only one person in mind.[18]

Many exegetical writers such as J. Alexander and F. Delitzsch stood for the "single-fulfillment" view of this passage.[19] However, most of the homiletical commentaries written by conservatives adopted the dual-fulfillment view and thus it came into the American pulpits.[20]

Many contemporary conservative writers have continued the influence of the multiple-fulfillment interpretation of Isaiah 7:14. These, however, are generally represented in shorter commentaries and journal articles, since there have been no recent conservative commentaries of length on Isaiah except the appearance of Edward J. Young's work.[21] Writers such as W. Mueller have advocated that we should accept the R.S.V. translation of <u>'almah</u> as "maiden" and

ise it as an acceptable working basis to present a further correspondence in the passage to the life of Jesus.[22] In his book on hermeneutics, Berkhof discusses the concept of successive fulfillment in prophecy and indicates that he leans toward a double-fulfillment view of this passage.[23] Writing very excellent books on the Gospel of Matthew, H. N. Ridderbos and R. V. G. Tasker also indicate, while commenting on Matthew 1:23, that they see a multiple-fulfillment in the Isaiah 7:14 passage.[24] The fine conservative German writer, Erich Sauer also indicates that he accepts the concept of double-fulfillment when the appearance of a "type" fulfills part of the prediction and when "this type is also fulfilled in the Messianic development."[25] The only recent extensive conservative commentary on Isaiah that holds a dual-fulfillment view of Isaiah 7:14 is the work by the Plymouth Brethren writer, F. C. Jennings, who maintains that Immanuel is the prophet's son. He adds that this alone, however, cannot fulfill vv. 14-15.[26] Since then two major one-volume conservative commentaries have been published that represent a dual-fulfillment view of the Isaiah 7:14 passage.[27] Being very fine works representative of the best British and American evangelical scholarship, they are certain to help establish dual-fulfillment interpretation for many years to come. Fitch (N.B.C.) sees both an immediate and ultimate fulfillment in the Immanuel passage. He emphasizes that we cannot separate the passage from its messianic emphasis.[28] Archer (W.B.C.) presents an excellent case for viewing the prophet's wife as being typical of the virgin Mary. He relates the fulfillment both to the prophet's son and ultimately to Christ.[29]

Among the recent critics of the dual-fulfillment concept of prophecy the most outspoken have been J. Barton Payne of Wheaton College and Bernard Ramm of California Baptist Theological Seminary. Payne criticizes Fairbairn's "overdone" typology which he refers to as a "modified form of dual-fulfillment."[30] He states that if one read only the New Testament it would be safe to say that he would never suspect the possibility of dual-fulfillment because the New Testament indicates that the predictions refer directly to Christ.[31] Ramm warns that "one of the most persistent hermeneutical sins" is attempting to place two interpretations on one passage of Scripture, thereby breaking the force of the literal meaning and obscuring the picture intended.[32] He concludes that if prophecies have many meanings, then "hermeneutics would be indeterminate."[33]

List of Recent English Language Commentaries on Isaiah and Their View of Isaiah 7:14

| MESSIANIC | NON-MESSIANIC | DUAL-FULFILLMENT |
|---|---|---|
| Henry (1712) | | |
| Lowth (1778) | Michaelis (1778) | |
| Clark (1823) | | |
| Hengstenberg (1829) | | |
| Alexander (1846) | | Barnes (1840) |
| Simeon (1847) | Meyer (1850) | Keith (1850) |
| | Luzzatto (1855) | |
| Delitzsch (1866) | | |
| Cheyne (1868) | | |

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|---|---|---|
| Cowles (1869) | | |
| | Ewald (1876) | |
| Birks (1878) | | |
| Kay (1886) | Driver (1888) | |
| | Smith (1888) | |
| | Sayce (1889) | |
| Dewart (1891) | | |
| Orelli (1895) | | Skinner (1896) |
| | Oesterley (1900) | MacClaren (1906) |
| | | Naegelsbach (1906) |
| Robinson (1910) | Gordon (1909) | |
| Gaebelein (1912) | Gray (1912) | |
| Rawlinson (1913) | | |
| | | Plumptre (1920) |
| | | Exell (1925) |
| | | Williams (1926) |
| | Torrey (1928) | |
| Rogers (1929) | Wade (1929) | |
| | Boutflower (1930) | |
| | Kissane (1941) | |
| Copass (1944) | | |
| Kelly (1947) | | Aberly (1948) |
| | | Jennings (1950) |
| Vine (1953) | | |
| | | Fitch (1954) |
| | Interpreter's Bible (1956) | |
| | Blank (1958) | |
| | Shilling (1958) | |
| | Mauchline (1962) | Archer (1962) |
| Young (1965) | Leslie (1965) | |

It may be noted from this chart that as the non-messianic interpretation gained impetus in Germany and began to influence writers in England and the United States during the last half of the nineteenth century, conservative writers of the early twentieth century began to adopt the position earlier advocated by Barnes and Keith.[34] At the same time there was a noticeable drop in commentaries advocating a strictly messianic fulfillment. Meanwhile the critical viewpoint continued to gain acceptance, especially with the publication of Gray's work as part of the International Critical Commentary.[35] Such interpretation has a firm foothold today in liberal and neo-orthodox interpretation. The conservative works advocating single-fulfillment since Orelli were really more study-guides and devotional commentaries, so that Young was right when he wrote in 1954 that "since 1900 no truly great commentaries upon Isaiah have been written."[36] He declared that a great twentieth-century commentary must be written to break with the influence of Duhm.[37] He called for the writing of a new commentary.[38] Eleven years later he

answered his own call with the publication of volume one of such a commentary.[39] It is a defense of the unity of the book's authorship and of the Messianic interpretation of the Immanuel passage.

Dr. Young's death in 1968 came as a great shock to the world of Biblical scholarship. Yet it was gratifying to learn that he had completed the draft of the third volume of his commentary on Isaiah. We are all deeply grateful for God's providence in this matter. Dr. Young has gone to a greater reward but he has left us a tremendous legacy in his great work on the Book f Isaiah. Certainly he has written the "truly great commentary upon Isaiah" of the twentieth century

## DOCUMENTATION

1. See such examples as S. R. Driver, Isaiah: His Life and Times (London: Nisbet and Co., 1888); Gray, The Book of Isaiah Vol. I (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1912); Duhm, Das Buch Jesaia (Gottingen, 1922); Boutflower, The Book of Isaiah (London: SPCK, 1930); Mowinckle, He That Cometh (New York: Abingdon, 1954); Mauchline, Isaiah 1-39 (New York: Macmillan, 1962); Leslie, Isaiah (New York: Abingdon, 1963); G. Knight, A Christian Theology of the Old Testament (London: SCM, 1964).
2. C. Von Orelli, The Prophecies of Isaiah (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1895).
3. See Calvin's position in Commentary on the Book of Isaiah (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), p. 246.
4. Lowth, Isaiah (Boston: Buckingham, 1815--originally published in 1778) and Gill, Body of Divinity (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1951, reprint of 1771 edition).
5. Duhm, op. cit. For a good discussion of Duhm's methods and the influence he exerted upon other writers see Young, Studies, pp. 39-47.
6. Discussed by H. Ellison, Men Spake From God (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.), p. 14.
7. A. B. Davidson, Old Testament Prophecy (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, n.d.), p. 268.
8. A. Barnes, Notes on the Old Testament--Isaiah, Vol. I (Grand Rapids: Baker, n.d.), p. 158.
9. W. Beecher, The Prophets and the Promise (Grand Rapids: Baker, n.d.), p. 130.
10. C. Ellicott, Bible Commentary For English Readers (London: Cassell & Co., n.d.), p.438.
11. See the excellent discussion on the viewpoints of his contemporary writers on Isaiah 7:14. He mentions Riehm, Orelli, Oehler, Green, G. A. Smith, Gloay, Davidson and Cheyne. Dewart, Jesus the Messiah in Prophecy and Fulfillment (Cincinnati: Cranston & Stowe, 1891), pp. 128-29.
12. Ibid., pp. 64-73. He provides an excellent criticism of the radical viewpoints of Workman who advocated the view that there is nothing in the Old Testament that refers to Christ.
13. G. Oehler, Theology of the Old Testament (New York: Funk & Wagnallis, 1883; reprint Grand Rapids: Zondervan, n.d.), p. 527.
14. C. Briggs, Messianic Prophecy (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1892), p. 197 ff.
15. Ibid., p. 197.

16. Hengstenberg, A Christology of the Old Testament and a Commentary on Messianic Predictions, Vol. III (Grand Rapids: Kregal, 1956; reprint of 1829 ed.), p. 48. Perhaps the reason Dewart's fine work has become almost unknown is because of Hengstenberg's poor footnotes and mis-pagination of his writing. Nevertheless, Hengstenberg's volumes are excellent and his notes are very useful.
17. Cowles, Isaiah: With Notes (New York: Appleton & Co., 1869), p. 53. This is also a very fine work that has generally been overlooked by most writers.
18. Ibid., p. 54.
19. Alexander, The Earlier Prophecies of Isaiah (New York and London: Wiley & Putnam, 1846), pp. 111-114; and Delitzsch, Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament: Isaiah Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949; reprint of 1877 ed.), pp. 216-21.
20. See the comments of A. MacClaren, Expositions of Holy Scripture: Matthew I-VIII (New York: Hodder and Stoughton, 1906), pp. 10-11. In his commentary on Isaiah he completely skips over the 7:14 passage! In his reference to Matt. 1:23 he accepts the dual-fulfillment position. He states: "the fulfillment does not depend on the question whether or not the idea of virginity is contained in the Hebrew word, but on the correspondence between the figure of the prophet. . .and the person in the gospel." For a criticism of the concept that prophetic fulfillment is merely a "correspondence" see E. J. Young, "Prophets" in Zondervan Pictorial Bible Dictionary, ed. M. Tenney. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1963), p. 689. He warns: "We must guard against the view that there is merely a correspondence between what the prophets say and what occurred in the life of Jesus Christ. There was of course a correspondence, but to say no more than this is not to do justice to the situation. Jesus Christ did not merely find a correspondence between the utterances of the prophets and the events of His own life. . .so we may say of the entire prophetic body, they saw Christ's day and spoke of Him."
21. Young, The Book of Isaiah in New International Commentary series. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965).
22. W. Mueller, "A Virgin Shall Conceive," Evangelical Quarterly, Vol. XXXII. No. 4 (London: October, 1960), pp. 203-207. For a good criticism of this viewpoint see the article by W. Robinson, "A Re-Study of the Virgin Birth of Christ." Evangelical Quarterly, Vol. XXXVII. No. 4 (London: October, 1965), pp. 198-211 and C. Feinberg, "Virgin Birth in the Old Testament and Isaiah 7:14." Bibliotheca Sacra Vol. 119 (Dallas: July, 1962), pp. 251-58.
23. L. Berkhof, Principles of Biblical Interpretation (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1950), pp. 137-38.
24. H. Ridderbos, Matthew's Witness to Jesus Christ (New York: Association Press, 1958), p. 21 and Tasker, Gospel According to St. Matthew (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), p. 34. Tasker sees the original intention of the prophecy as signifying the birth of Hezekiah. He maintains that it is Matthew's indication that Isaiah was not really fully aware of the far-reaching consequences of his own prophecy.
25. Sauer, Dawn of World Redemption (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), pp. 146-47. He classifies all predictions that dealt with events in the gospels and the church age as "spiritually and typically" predictive. This seems to indicate that he does not see a passage like Isaiah 7:14 as directly predictive of Christ. He also lists on pp. 161-62 events relating to the work of the Messiah, beginning with his "birth in Bethlehem" (Micah 5:2), but he makes no reference at all to Isaiah 7:14; therefore, it is difficult to determine his position on that passage, but his leaving it out indicates that he probably

does not consider it directly messianic. For a criticism of Sauer's view of predictive prophecy see J. B. Payne, "So-Called Dual Fulfillment in Messianic Psalms" in Printed Papers of the Evangelical Theological Society (1953 meeting at Chicago), pp. 62-72.

26. Jennings, Studies in Isaiah (New York: Loizeau Brothers, 1950), pp. 84-85. He argues that Isaiah's sons are referred to as "signs" in chapter eight and, therefore, Immanuel must be either Maher-shalal-hash-baz or a third (unknown) son. This is the same position taken exactly a century earlier by A. Keith, Isaiah As It Is (Edinburgh: Whyte & Co., 1850), pp. 67-69.
27. F. Davidson (ed.). The New Bible Commentary. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954); and C. Pfeiffer and E. Harrison, The Wycliffe Bible Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1962).
28. W. Fitch, "Isaiah" in N.B.C., p. 569.
29. G. Archer, "Isaiah" in W.B.C., p. 618.
30. Payne, op. cit., p. 64.
31. Ibid., p. 65.
32. Ramm, Protestant Biblical Interpretation (Boston: Wilde, 1956), p. 87.
33. Ibid., p. 88.
34. There is good reason to doubt whether Keith can actually be considered a "conservative."
35. Gray, The Book of Isaiah (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1912).
36. Young, Studies in Isaiah (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), p. 72.
37. Ibid., p. 72.
38. Ibid., p. 100.
39. In 1965 Eerdmans of Grand Rapids published Vol. I of a projected three-volume commentary on Isaiah by E. Young, entitled The Book of Isaiah. It is the initial volume of the New International Commentary series on the Old Testament. Much of its contents are a compilation of Dr. Young's earlier works: Studies in Isaiah (1954); Who Wrote Isaiah? (1958) and the appendix material in the revised edition of R. D. Wilson's A Scientific Investigation of the Old Testament (Chicago: Moody Press, 1959).