

SUMMARY

Handel and Jennens quote several verses from Isaiah 7 and 9 in *Messiah*. In this session we will attempt to understand what these words meant at the time when they were written, as well as how they came to take on new meanings when they were read by subsequent generations of believers. We will also discuss some guidelines for appropriating them in our own lives.

MESSIAH REFERENCES

- I.7 Recitative for Alto (“Behold, a virgin shall conceive”)
- I.10 Air for Bass (“The people that walked in darkness”)
- I.11 Chorus (“For unto us a child is born”)

BASIC BIBLE REFERENCES

- Isaiah 7:1-17
- Isaiah 9:2-7
- Matthew 1:18-25
- Matthew 4:12-16

WORD LIST

- Ahaz
- Hezekiah
- Emmanuel
- messiah
- recontextualization
- canon
- Septuagint

SESSION 3



FOR UNTO US A CHILD IS BORN

Recitative for Alto

*Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name
Emmanuel: GOD WITH US.*

(Isaiah 7:14b and Matthew 1:23; modified)

Air for Bass

*The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light, and they that
dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined.*

(Isaiah 9:2)

Chorus

*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.

(Isaiah 9:6)

Texts and Contexts

It was Christmas Eve. The sanctuary was dimly lit, with most of the light radiating from the Advent wreath placed front and center. For the first time since the beginning of the Advent season, all five candles were lit—one candle for each of the four Sundays and a central candle, taller than the rest, to signal the long-awaited birth of Jesus Christ.

A hush fell over the expectant congregation as the lay reader took her place and opened the large pulpit Bible to Isaiah 9:6. She paused for a moment and looked out at the upturned faces in the pews. “Hear the word of the Lord,” she urged them with quiet confidence and then began to read:

For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named

Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

“This is the word of the Lord,” she concluded, and the congregation responded with one resonant voice, “Thanks be to God!”

“Thanks be to God!” Ann’s voice was one of many in that dimly lit sanctuary that Christmas eve, and she voiced her affirmation with enthusiasm as she remembered reading that verse in her senior high Sunday school class just last week. Maybe it was just hearing it read so close to Christmas, but for the first time she had been struck by how incredible it was that these words had been written centuries before Jesus’ birth. How had Isaiah known? It was like a miracle. And it made her even more certain that the Bible was, indeed, the “word of the Lord.”

“Thanks be to God,” Jim affirmed, even as his mind raced with all of the information that had been poured into his head during the last few weeks in his Old Testament class at the seminary. It was odd hearing that text read on Christmas Eve. He had spent so many hours trying to untangle the intricacies of Israelite history and the possibility that this verse had been written about King Hezekiah, that he had almost forgotten the way in which he had always understood it prior to seminary. The arguments for understanding it as a reference to Hezekiah were pretty convincing, yet he wasn’t sure he wanted to give up the idea that it might be about Jesus. Was it possible that it might fit for both of them? He made a mental note to pose that question to his professor.

Marie could hardly speak the affirmation after the Scripture, but that wasn’t because she didn’t feel thankful. It was just that her heart was so full and her throat was so choked with tears. She and her husband had come to the service that night with their newborn son. It was their first time out in public since the baby had been born just one week ago. They had arrived late, of course, not used to all the complications of packing up a newborn. When they had finally made their way into the sanctuary, the only seats left were all the way to the front. She had been a little embarrassed about making such an entrance. But now, as she looked into the wide, bright eyes of their firstborn son, she saw with delight that they were reflecting the light of the Christ candle in the Advent wreath. When the woman began to read, “For a child has been born for us, a son given to us . . .” Marie almost started to cry. “Thanks be to God!” She had never meant it more than tonight!

Suitable for Framing

There was a time when biblical scholars would have insisted that most of the above reflections on Isaiah 9:6 were taking that text “out of context.” Only the first part of Jim’s interpretation

which focuses on the verse's original historical setting would have been deemed "accurate." Never mind that the Christian church has interpreted these verses in reference to Jesus Christ for centuries!

Scholarship has come a long way in the last few decades. More and more scholars are realizing that the original context is only one of several legitimate contexts in which we can consider a biblical text. Each context frames the text differently, and often the frame one uses will bring out something different in the text's own "painting."

In this session we are going to experiment with some of the different frames or contexts for these verses from Isaiah 7 and 9. Among these will be their original historical context, their canonical context (both in terms of the final edition of the book of Isaiah and the way in which they were read by the Gospel writers), and finally, in a more personal context. Each of these will highlight a different aspect of the biblical text. The object is not to focus on one to the exclusion of the others, but to allow each to enhance our appreciation in its own unique way.

Setting the Scene

To understand the Isaiah 7 and 9 passages we must turn back our mental timetables to before the Babylonian exile. Isaiah of Jerusalem, whom we met in Session One, had his hands full with faithless King Ahaz of Judah. Isaiah 7 tells the story of one critical encounter between the two men. Before we focus on that scene, however, let us try to get a broad view of its historical setting.¹

The year was approximately 733 B.C.E. Israel and its neighbor, Aram, had made an alliance against Assyria. They were determined to get the Southern Kingdom of Judah to join them, so determined, in fact, that they laid siege to the capital city of Jerusalem to underscore their point. The message to King Ahaz of Judah was obvious: join us or else!²

To give Ahaz some credit, we ought to acknowledge that he *was* between a rock and a hard place. He could either join the alliance and risk antagonizing Assyria, or he could appeal to Assyria for help and hope that it would respond in time to save the city of Jerusalem from starvation. No wonder Isaiah 7:2 says that "the heart of Ahaz and the heart of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind."

1 Both this section and the biblical references will be easier to read if one remembers a few basic facts. The Northern Kingdom of Israel is also called Ephraim; its capital is Samaria; its ruler is Pekah. The Southern Kingdom is called Judah; its capital is Jerusalem; its ruler is Ahaz. Syria is sometimes called Aram; its capital is Damascus; its ruler is Rezin.

2 This conflict is called the Syro-Ephraimitic War, even though Syria and Ephraim were allies.

Trust and Obey

Read **Isaiah 7:1-17** now. As the scene between Isaiah and Ahaz opens, Ahaz is nervously checking the city's water supply. Would it last? What should he do? The fate of the city and the whole Southern Kingdom rests in his hands.

Into this tense situation walks the prophet Isaiah, accompanied by his son, Shear-jashub. Having a son with a name which meant "A Remnant Shall Return" had to have been useful for the prophet. The boy was like a walking billboard. On the one hand, his name gave the chilling impression that only a remnant of the people would survive; on the other hand, it hinted that the remnant would return to claim their heritage. Perhaps this is what God had in mind when God ordered Isaiah to bring him along that day.

When the prophet does finally speak, it is with a message that leaves Ahaz speechless. Although there is incredible pressure for Ahaz to do something, the word from the Lord is, in fact, to do nothing at all. "Be quiet," Isaiah counsels (7:4). Be quiet and remember that the rulers of Aram and Israel are mere mortals. The implication is that they are no match for God, in whom Ahaz is being asked to put his trust. But the stakes are high. The prophet does not mince words: "If you do not stand firm in faith, you shall not stand at all" (7:9).

Sometimes the hardest thing to do is to do nothing. As if to acknowledge the difficulty of the task, God offers in 7:10-11 to give Ahaz a tangible sign of God's good will, a sort of collateral which could reassure him of God's ultimate intentions.

Ahaz' response is the equivalent to a slap in the face. "I will not ask," he demurs with false piety. "I will not put the LORD to the test" (7:12). While Scripture does contain warnings about testing God (see Deuteronomy 6:16 and Matthew 4:7), God has here honored Ahaz by offering him the sign. To refuse such generosity seems ungrateful at best. Isaiah's impatient response confirms the unsuitability of Ahaz' answer (7:13). He tells Ahaz not to push his luck: God will give him a sign whether he wants one or not!

Emmanuel

The sign had to be fairly immediate in order for it to fulfill its desired function as "collateral." Isaiah's words in 7:14-17 announce just such a sign. "*The young woman*" implies that Isaiah has a particular young woman in mind. It may well be that she is known to Ahaz, since no further information about her identity is deemed necessary. The most obvious candidate would be Ahaz' own wife, though some have suggested that the prophet's wife was intended. We should also note that the word for "young woman" does not necessarily imply

that she is a virgin. It simply means one who is sexually mature (see Genesis 24:43). Hebrew has another word for “virgin” (see Genesis 24:16). As Bernhard W. Anderson remarks, “the sign is the child himself—not the manner of his birth.”³

This particular young woman, then, “is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.” The fact that she is already with child (or is about to become pregnant—the Hebrew is a little hard to pin down here) underscores the immediacy of the sign. Within nine months time, Ahaz will receive God’s concrete pledge that “God is with us” (this is the literal meaning of the name Immanuel/Emmanuel⁴). Verses 15-16 hold out hope for the end of the siege, since they suggest that “by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose good” the child will be eating curds and honey.⁵ What is more, says Isaiah, before the child reaches this relatively tender age, the two nations of Aram and Ephraim will be deserted. Ahaz could not have asked for more!

But he did. We know from 2 Kings 16:5-9 that Ahaz refused to trust and obey. In spite of this and a subsequent sign (see Isaiah 8:1-4), Ahaz rushed to make an alliance with Assyria, preferring the insurance of a world power to the assurance of God’s word. Isaiah was understandably disgusted. Isaiah 8:16-22 relates the prophet’s decision to “bind up the testimony” and retreat into the prophetic community. Since the prophetic words had fallen on deaf ears, there was nothing to do now but wait for those words to be fulfilled (see Isaiah 8:5-8).

For unto Us a Child Is Born

Scholars think that what the prophet’s disciples bound up was what is called the Book of Testimony. This is the material in Isaiah 6:1-9:7. It includes not only the story of the prophet’s call in Isaiah 6, but also the messianic poem in **Isaiah 9:2-7** from which Handel quotes in his *Messiah*.

Read this poem now. It is important to keep in mind that the original meaning of the word for “messiah” was “anointed one.” It was used with reference to the ceremony at which a king was anointed with oil and thereby designated as God’s specially chosen representative (see 1 Samuel 10:1). Isaiah’s poem describes such a king in unusually glowing terms. During his reign “all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire” (verse 5), and he will be known as the “Prince of Peace” (verse 6). As opposed to Ahaz, who could not even take advice well, this king will be called “Wonderful Counselor.”⁶

3 *Understanding the Old Testament* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey:Prentice-Hall, Fourth Edition, 1986) p. 333.

4 Immanuel is a transliteration of the Hebrew term, Emmanuel a transliteration of the Greek.

5 The significance of this particular diet may be that it represents an even richer version of “milk and honey,” the traditional symbols of the abundance of the promised land (see Joshua 5:6).

6 Note that there is no comma between these two words; “wonderful” is an adjective which modifies “counselor.”

His strength is such that he is designated “Mighty God.”⁷ Finally, he is called “Everlasting Father.” Perhaps this, too, should be read in contrast to Ahaz, who was neither much of a father nor particularly long-lasting. One could hardly accuse Ahaz of establishing his kingdom “with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore” (verse 7)!

Such an interpretation of Isaiah 9:2-7 requires us to read “against the grain” of our usual assumptions, since most of us are familiar with these verses primarily through their reading during the Advent season or through their inclusion in Handel’s *Messiah*. Yet, in the context of Isaiah’s political situation, one can see how they could well have originated with reference to Ahaz’ son, the beloved King Hezekiah. Following as it does on the heels of Isaiah’s prophecy in 7:14 (“Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son . . .”), the birth announcement in 9:6 seems most likely to refer to Hezekiah (“For a child has been born for us . . .”).

Does this mean that centuries of interpretation have been wrong in reading these verses as a reference to Christ? I do not think so. Theirs is simply an example of framing the text within a different context, a practice which should add to the passage’s significance but does not require us to neglect all its previous meanings. In the next section we will explore some of the ways in which the Old Testament itself encourages this process of “recontextualization.”

The Shaping of the Book of Isaiah

In Session One we saw how the poetry of Isaiah 40 arose during the time of the Babylonian exile (around 539 B.C.E.). In this session we have explored the origins of Isaiah 7-9 during the days of Ahaz and Hezekiah (733 B.C.E. and following). What we have not done is to pose the question of how these texts from such disparate times came together. Who edited them into their present form, and how does that form affect the way we read them?

During the time of the Babylonian exile and then again during the postexilic period, editors collected and arranged the literature we now know as the book of Isaiah. They were careful about their work, and we would be very wrong if we pictured this process as a casual “cut and paste” procedure. They were probably part of a group of prophets loyal to the tradition begun by Isaiah of Jerusalem, so we could expect that they would “bind up the testimony” with the greatest of care.

⁷ The first word is one that is often used to describe warriors (see Judges 6:12), while the second—here translated “God”—is actually a word that is sometimes used with reference to human beings who reflect the divine majesty (see Ezekiel 31:11, where it is translated “prince”).

But an interesting thing happened when they combined the three major sections which comprise the book of Isaiah as a whole (chapters 1-39; 40-55; and 56-66). Since they did not clearly identify the historical situations in which these works originated, the oracles were, as one scholar puts it, “loosened from their historical moorings.” As a result, the words of Isaiah 40 became connected, not with the exile, but with the words of Isaiah of Jerusalem in chapters 1-39. This shift gives the impression that these texts are oriented toward the future. Thus, rather than reading Isaiah 40’s words of comfort as a message only for the exiles, we are now able to read them as a consolation for all ages. Instead of being framed forever by the details of their original historical context, they are freed up for “recontextualization” in whatever situation believers find themselves.

New Frames for Old

When Matthew sets out to give his account of “Jesus the Messiah,” he includes the story of Jesus’ miraculous conception and birth. Read **Matthew 1:18-25**. After describing how Mary found herself with child by the Holy Spirit, he claims,

All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken
by the Lord through the prophet:
“Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel,”
which means, “God is with us.” (1:22-23).

We recognize the source of this prophetic saying as Isaiah of Jerusalem, and the text as Isaiah 7:14. If we look closely, however, we will see that the quote is slightly different from the one we used in our examination of that Old Testament text. Most significantly, the phrase “the young woman” is now “the virgin.”

We may well wonder why Matthew would have misquoted his own Scriptures! Yet, the changes in this verse reflect not so much Matthew’s innovation, as his use of the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible known as the Septuagint.⁸ This translation uses the word *parthenos* to translate the word which in Hebrew simply means “young woman.” While *parthenos* is not always used to denote literal virginity, this is its most common connotation. Thus, we can see how the Septuagint translation of this verse lent itself to Matthew’s interpretation. His use of the Greek assisted his attempt to reframe the ancient text in the context of the life of Jesus Christ.

⁸ This translation was used by Greek-speaking Jews in the Mediterranean basin and by early Gentile Christians.

We see something similar happening in Matthew's appropriation of Isaiah 9:1-2. In the first verse from Isaiah 9 the picture is of the desolate lands of Zebulun and Naphtali, two of the northern tribes of Israel that had been swept away by Assyria. Yet, verse two proclaims that their desolation is not permanent. In this, the beginning of the famous "Wonderful Counselor" oracle, Isaiah declares,

The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined.

Small wonder that Matthew should make reference to these verses as he tells the story of Jesus' ministry in Galilee, the former territory of Zebulun and Naphtali. Read **Matthew 4:12-16**. In his slightly modified version of these verses from Isaiah, Matthew proclaims Jesus as the "great light" that shines "for those who sat in the region and shadow of death."

We have come a long way with these texts! Perhaps we should take a moment to retrace our steps. What may have begun as a reference to Hezekiah was reframed, first by the editors of Isaiah into a "messianic" framework, and then, via the Gospel of Matthew, into a frame that reflects the life of a very specific Galilean carpenter. Handel (or Jennens) obviously took his cue from Matthew as he interpreted these verses in the musical framework we know as *Messiah*. In doing so he offers us an example of how we, as individuals, can reframe these ancient texts in the context of our own lives. In what follows we will suggest some reasons why his example is a good one.

Taking Our Cue from the Canon

At the beginning of this session, we "eavesdropped" on the thoughts of several members of a Christmas Eve congregation. The last one, Maria, heard the verse from Isaiah 7:14 in the context of her own recent experience of giving birth. Was this an appropriate "frame" in which to recontextualize those ancient words, or was her very personal interpretation taking that activity too far?

My own sense is that if Maria had heard the words as somehow predictive of her own infant's birth she would have been guilty of obscuring the painting with the frame. There are hints, however, that she is not doing this. She sees the light of the Christ candle reflected in her own infant's eyes. That experience seems to trigger a sort of emotional chain reaction as she associates her own recent participation in the process of giving birth with the birth of the Christ-child. Her longing for her child and her excitement at his arrival help her to make an emotional connection with this passage. Perhaps most of

all, she sees the reflected light of the Christ candle as a reminder of God's love for all of us. In short, she takes her cue from the canon of Scripture itself (that is, the final form of the text that has been accepted by the community of believers for generations). Nothing in her "frame" obscures or contradicts the interpretive framework which the Bible itself commends.

As we seek to frame the words of Scripture in the contexts of our own lives, we must be careful to take our cue from the canon. But just as importantly, we must make sure that we *do* try to frame the ancient words in a personal context. For it is only when we do so that we truly know that God is with us!

FOR FURTHER STUDY AND REFLECTION

Memory Bank

Isaiah 7:14 and Matthew 1:23

Isaiah 9:2 and Matthew 4:16

Isaiah 9:6-7

Research

1. Compare several English translations of Isaiah 7:14. Make a chart of the points at which they differ. Explore reasons why English translations vary so much.
2. Turn to Appendix B and read the libretto for *Messiah* up to the Pastoral Symphony. Pay particular attention to the ways in which Jennens weaves the biblical passages together. Now retell the story he tells in your own words.

Reflection

1. Review the perspectives represented by the three members of the Christmas Eve congregation at the beginning of this session. Which one(s) do you identify with the most strongly? Why?
2. Listen several times to Handel's interpretation of one of the verses studied for this session. Each time you listen, focus on a different "frame" for the text (e.g., original historical context, New Testament context, personal context).
3. Does Matthew's use of Isaiah 7:14 cause you to question the virgin birth? If so, why? If not, why not? You may want to consider Luke's version of the annunciation (Luke 1:26-45) as part of this process of reflection.