IMMANUEL AS THE PROPHET'S SON *)

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The Immanuel Sign is an exegetical enigma so complex and delicately balanced that the interpreter is guided to his conclusions as much by intuition as by logic 1). The writer represents a school of interpretation which in his opinion calls for a somewhat different exposition than it has yet received. He can only hope that his logic is not wholly overborne by his intuition.

The proper context for interpreting the Immanuel sign is the narrative complex embracing Isaiah Chapters vi-viii. The substance of these chapters derives either directly from the prophet or from his immediate followers. The third person form of Chapter vii (contrasted with first person in vi and viii) may indicate that disciples were responsible for its written form. To be sure there are secondary features in Chapters vi-viii. It seems unlikely that vii 18-25 (possibly also vss. 15 and 17) were ever addressed to Ahaz. Scholars have often emphasized that a large part of our confusion about Immanuel is in the compressed dialogue between prophet and king, which so sharply excludes the background and presuppositions on which the sign was based. But to this hiatus in our knowledge should be added the likelihood that the present form of the Immanuel prophecy is a result of modification and expansion by those who were as puzzled by Isaiah's meaning as are we. We may be confident that the memoirs of vi-viii give sufficient information about Isaiah for the Immanuel sign to be regarded as


historical; 1) but at the same time they show evidence of reshaping, whether oral or written it would be hard to say, which defies any simple theory of cohesion.

What then is the essential nature of this narrative grouping? So much attention has been focused on the exalted call vision and the dramatic encounter with Ahaz that the actual climax in viii 16-18 has not been allowed its full weight. Of course it must be recognized that the import of vs. 16 is open to many constructions. But one need not reach certitude about the content of “the testimony” or “teaching”, the meaning of “binding” and “sealing”, or the role of “the disciples” in order to grasp the unequivocal declaration: “Behold, I and the children whom Yahweh has given me are signs and portents in Israel from Yahweh of hosts, who dwells on Mt. Zion” (vs. 18). These words probably stood at the end of the memoirs as summary and rationale. Evidently in vi-viii we possess a Book of Waiting or, more precisely, a Book of Signs. After the call vision, the body of the complex is concerned with the signs, namely “the children whom Yahweh has given me.” Naturally that includes Shear-jashub and Maher-shalal-hash-baz and, unless the immediate context forbids, Immanuel is to be understood in the same way, especially since the very term “sign” addressed to Ahaz in vii 10 and 14 is echoed in the summary of viii 18, “I and the children whom Yahweh has given me are signs and portents in Israel.” If the present grouping of materials in vi-viii is at all accurate, then attention must be given to the controlling contextual evidence that Immanuel, since not otherwise differentiated, is to be regarded as one of Isaiah’s sons.

The neglect of context and the desperate search for the identity of Immanuel has followed from at least three confusions. One of these is the assumption that the Immanuel oracle is in some way more miraculous or messianic than the symbolic names of Isaiah’s sons. This comes in part from the use made of the passage in the New Testament as a buttress for the virgin birth of Jesus Christ. In Hebrew tradition there was an early tendency to read the Immanuel sign messianically, in the sense of an offspring of Ahaz. This was possible because Immanuel

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1) This rules out the proposal that Immanuel and Maher-shalal-hash-baz are the same child, advanced by Ferdinand Hitzig and Eduard Reuss (cited in T.K. Cheyne, “Immanuel”, HDB, II, 2162). Emil Kraeling, “The Immanuel Prophecy”, JBL, L (1931), 277-97 is of the opinion that the Immanuel sign is a legendary doublet of viii 1-4 which once appeared after 2 Kings xvi 4. I cannot share such complete distrust of the passage.