

The Signs of Christmas: Intro; the 1st Sign of Christmas: the Virgin Birth, Isa 7:14; Oth, Degel, & Nes: Synonyms for "Rallying Point"; Fulfillment, Lk 1:26-35; 2:1-6

The Signs of Christmas

Sunday, December 24, 2006

I. Introduction:

The Old Testament contains 38 passages that are prophetic about the Jewish Messiah. These prophecies track His bloodline from Abraham down to David's and specify He would be born of a virgin in the city of Bethlehem. We are informed that:

1. He would be born of a woman, Genesis 3:15; confirmed in Galatians 4:4.
2. His line would go through Abraham, Genesis 12:2-3, confirmed in Matthew 1:1.
3. It would continue through Isaac, Genesis 17:19, confirmed in Matthew 1:2.
4. The line would continue through Jacob, Numbers 24:17, confirmed in Matthew 1:2.
5. The line would be narrowed down to the tribe of Judah, Genesis 49:10, confirmed in Luke 3:33.
6. It would be finally isolated to the house of David, 2 Samuel 7:12-13, 16, confirmed in Matthew 1:1, 6-16
7. He would be born of a virgin, Isaiah 7:14, fulfilled in Luke 1:26-27, 30-33; Luke 2:4-7.
8. His birth would occur in the city of Bethlehem, Micah 5:2, fulfilled in Luke 2:4-7.

Today we are going to study an Old Testament prophecy that contains a sign which identifies the source Messiah's true humanity followed by a New Testament passage that will be prophetic of His earthly mission.

II. The First Sign of Christmas, Isaiah 7:14:

Isaiah 7:14 - [NASB] "Therefore, the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she shall call His name Immanuel."

1. The historical context of this verse finds the Northern Kingdom, called Israel, whose capital is Samaria, and Syria, also called Aram, whose capital is Damascus, in a military coalition in preparation for an expected invasion by the Assyrian Empire under its ruler Tiglath-Pileser \tig'-lath-pi-lē'-zer\ III.
2. Pekah \pē'-kā\, the king of Israel, and Rezin \reh'-cēn\, the king of Syria, are worried that the Southern Kingdom, also called Judah, will side with the Assyrians and thus conclude they needed to make a preemptive strike against Jerusalem in order to protect their southern flanks. Their presumptions were correct as Ahaz, aware of the coming invasion, was preparing to meet with Tiglath-Pileser to form an alliance with Assyria.
3. In order to protect the Holy City of Jerusalem the Lord sends Isaiah to Ahaz to offer help:

Isaiah 7:10 - Then the Lord spoke again to Ahaz, saying,

v. 11 - "Ask a sign of Jehovah your God, ask it either in the depth or in the height above."

4. The parameters given in the idiom "in the depth or in the height above" indicates that Ahaz is free to ask anything at all and God will provide the miracle. Ahaz however was a very arrogant man and arrogant men sound pious in their comments about things theological but their entire focus is an over-emphasis on self. And so he responds to Isaiah in:

Isaiah 7:12 - But Ahaz said, "I will not ask, nor will I test Jehovah."

5. The word “test” is נָסָה *nasah* which means “to test one’s faithfulness.” The last thing a person should say when God grants him the freedom to ask whatever he wishes in order to save his kingdom is to refuse the offer because he does not want to “test His faithfulness.” God is faithful. If He says something He means it. Only arrogance would reject divine provisions and Ahaz’ remark shows outward respect but it is a façade for inner distrust. In response to Ahaz, Isaiah then gives a series of prophecies that may be interpreted under the principle of near and far fulfillment.

Isaiah 7:13 - And Isaiah said, “Hear you now, O house of David! Do you consider it too insignificant to try the patience of men? Is that why you are also trying the patience of my God?”

6. The prophecy that follows is designed to assure Ahaz that since he is in the Messianic line of David, God will assure him that the nation will be spared including the house of Ahaz. The deliverance of Judah from the Assyrians is the near fulfillment. The far fulfillment is the permanent deliverance of Israel by means of the Messiah. The entrance of His true humanity into human history is the subject of the next verse.

7. Identification of the Messiah’s arrival will be facilitated by the presence of a sign:

Isaiah 7:14 - “Therefore, the Lord Himself will give you a miraculous sign. Behold, the virgin shall become pregnant and will give birth to a son, and she will call his name Immanuel.”

8. There are several words that need to be noted. The first we note is:

אוֹת *'oth* - “identification, indication.” The importance of this word as an indicator or marker for identifying the fulfillment of a prophecy is discussed in:

Jenni, Ernst and Claus Westermann. *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Translated by Mark E. Biddle. (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1997), 1:68-69:

אוֹת *'oth*. The basic meaning is “sign” in the senses of “identification” and “indication.” In the broader development of the term, *ot* also signifies “field signal.” (p. 68)

The *'oth* [sign] legitimizes the prophetic word; it arrives only in the future and is predicted by the prophet (in Isaiah 7:14). The sign is the prophet’s technical device for gaining recognition and belief from his hearers.

'oth can also signify a “marker” or “memorial” pointing to a past saving act of God or which envisions a future, eschatological phase of divine history. (p. 69)

9. A synonym of *'oth*, which we have noted in our study of Song of Solomon, adds a nuance to our understanding of the sign’s fulfillment in the Virgin Birth of the Messiah in Bethlehem.

Song of Solomon 2:4 - [SW] “He brought me to the banquet house and his banner [דֵּגֶל *degel*] over me was love.”

10. The word for “banner” is *degel*, a military term referring to the standards that identify units on the battlefield. This banner is the guidon to which military personnel rally in combat so that they are not separated from their units.
11. These standards are revered by those in the unit and all who serve under it are motivated by the victories in which it has been engaged during their nation’s military history.
12. In Roman military history we learn that the standard, or the *aquila*, is the rallying point for a legion and metaphorically it carries the idea of a place where one can reorient to a pressure situation, find renewed strength, and gain protection.
13. To deviate from the standard means that one has become disoriented in the midst of pressure and thus loses contact with his source of strength and protection.
14. A second synonym of both *'oth* and *degel* is נֶס *nes* and its applications are found in:

Tenney, Merrill C. (gen. ed.). *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), 1:462:

The word *nes* is translated “ensign” or “standard” in the English Bible, but it refers more specifically to a rallying point for the people. It marks the center of attraction on which people should pin their hopes. Moses called the altar of thanksgiving after Amelek’s defeat, *Jehovah Nisi*, “Jehovah my banner.” Messiah Himself becomes such a standard and rallying point of nations (Isaiah 49:22 [Thus says the Lord God, “Behold I will lift up My hand to the nations and set up My standard (*nes*) to the peoples.”]). It was raised to assemble the soldiers of an army at the sound of trumpets (Isaiah 18:3).

15. The Shulammitte takes a military term that is used in Scripture to describe divine protection and turns it into a metaphor for the Shepherd’s love for her.
16. His love for her is a banner, the standard or guidon to which she rallies. He is the one who has committed his soul to her and his enduring love is pictured as the banner, the standard to which she responds.
17. When the Song of Solomon is taken figuratively the Shepherd represents the Lord Jesus Christ and the Shulammitte is symbolic of the church. The Shepherd’s love for her represents the unconditional love of our Lord Who volunteered to become the substitutionary sacrifice for the human race.
18. As we now shift our attention to the New Testament we discover that Isaiah’s “sign” or the “banner” of the Virgin Birth will be the guidon that draws the shepherds of Luke chapter 2 toward the manger in Bethlehem.

Isaiah 7:14 - Therefore, the Lord Himself will give you a miraculous sign [**אוֹת** *’oth*: a guidon: “the center of attraction on which people should pin their hopes”]. Behold, the virgin [**עַלְמָה** *’almah*: nubile young woman; a virgin] shall become pregnant and will give birth to a son, and she will call his name Immanuel [**עִמָּנוּאֵל** *’Immanu’el*: God with us].

19. The fulfillment of this prophecy of the virgin pregnancy—the First Sign of Christmas—is found in:

Luke 1:26 - Now in the sixth month [of the pregnancy of Elizabeth with John the Baptist] the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city in Galilee called Nazareth,

v. 27 - to a virgin [**παρθένος**, *parthenos*: a virgin] engaged [**μνηστεύω**, *mnēsteuō*: to be betrothed; to be committed to another for marriage] to a man whose name was Joseph, of the descendants of David; and the virgin’s name was Mary.

v. 28 - And coming in, Gabriel said to her, “Rejoice, divinely approved one [**χαριτόω**, *charitōō*: “to be approved by means of divine grace”]. The Lord is with you.

v. 29 - But she was greatly perplexed at this announcement and kept pondering what sort of greeting this could be.

v. 30 - So the angel Gabriel said to her, “Stop being afraid [present middle imperative of **φοβέομαι**, *phobeomai*, plus the negative conjunction **μή**, *mē*], Mary, for you have found grace from God.

v. 31 - “Behold, you shall become pregnant and you shall give birth to a son, and you will name Him Jesus.

Luke 1:32 - “This One will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David.

v. 33 - "He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will never end."

v. 34 - But Mary said to Gabriel, "How can this be since I have not had sexual relations with a man?" (See v. 31)

v. 35 - And Gabriel replied, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you [ἐπισκιάζω, *episkiazō*: **encapsulate you with divine protection**] with the result that the thing conceived [τὸ γεννώω, *to gennaō*: **neuter singular: zygote**] is holy [ἅγιος, *hagios*: **sanctified: set apart for special service**] and will be called the **Son of God.**"

20. Almost exactly nine months later, a political circumstance arose that required Joseph and his fiancée to leave their home in Nazareth and travel down to his home town of Bethlehem, some six miles south of Jerusalem. This trip and their arrival in the city set the stage for the first Christmas and the fulfillment of the second part of Isaiah's prophecy that the virgin would "give birth to a son":

Luke 2:1 - Now in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus [Gaius Julius Caesar Octavian, first Roman emperor (27 B.C.–A.D. 14)], that a census be taken of the Roman Empire.

v. 2 - This was the first census taken while Quirinius [Κυρήνιος, *Kurēnios*: **Publius Sulpicius Quirinius**] was governor of Syria.

v. 3 - And everyone was on his way to register for the census, each to his own city.

v. 4 - Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David,

v. 5 - in order to register along with Mary, who was engaged [μνηστεύω, *mnēsteuō*: **to be betrothed; to be committed to another for marriage**] to him, and was with child.

v. 6 - While they were there, the days were completed for her to give birth.