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IMMANUEL AND JESUS: NAME, PROPHECY, AND THEOLOGICAL TENSION IN BIBLICAL TRADITION

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Abstract

The relationship between the name Immanuel in Isaiah 7:14 and the name Jesus in Matthew 1:21–23 discloses a persistent hermeneutical tension in biblical tradition. Isaiah presents a child who is to be called Immanuel, meaning "God with us," within a defined historical crisis, while Matthew narrates a birth in which the child is named Jesus, a name grounded in the motif of salvation, "YHWH saves." Jewish interpreters have long regarded the divergence as decisive against Christian claims of fulfilment, because prophetic naming functions as a sign whose integrity should not be displaced. Christian interpretation has typically responded by distinguishing between personal name and theological title, or by appealing to typological fulfilment as a legitimate rereading of Israel's Scriptures. This article investigates the historical context of Isaiah 7, interrogates the linguistic complexities arising from Matthew's citation practice, and analyses the theological strategies employed to preserve coherence within Christian tradition. It argues, however, that the tension between the Isaianic context and its Matthean appropriation remains unresolved at the level of historical exegesis. It further considers how African biblical scholarship, shaped by both critical responsibility and contextual imagination, can engage the text with intellectual integrity and pastoral realism. The study concludes that doctrinal synthesis may achieve coherence within faith communities, yet scholarly clarity requires admitting the distance between Isaianic sign and Matthean proclamation rather than dissolving it by rhetorical harmonisation.

Keywords: Immanuel. Jesus. Isaiah 7:14. Matthew 1:21–23. Prophecy. Typology. Fulfilment, Hermeneutics. African biblical scholarship

INTRODUCTION

The theological power of names in biblical literature cannot be overstated, because names often function as condensed claims about identity, destiny, and divine action.[1] In prophetic discourse, naming frequently operates as a sign, in which the spoken designation is bound to a historical moment and is intended to carry interpretive force for its first audience.[2] Within this framework, the movement from Isaiah's Immanuel to Matthew's Jesus generates a textual divergence that has not ceased to provoke interpretive debate.[3] The issue is not merely that two different names appear, but that the logic of prophetic naming in Isaiah seems to demand a precision that Matthew's narrative does not reproduce in ordinary address.[4] The result is a tension that can be interpreted as a problem of fulfilment, a problem of hermeneutics, and a problem of how later theology relates to earlier textual horizons.[5]

For Jewish interpretation, the tension has often been treated as structurally damaging to Christian claims, because the prophetic sign is understood to require correspondence between what is declared and what is realised.[6] If the child in Isaiah is to be called Immanuel, the absence of that name as an actual personal address in the Gospel tradition becomes, for many Jewish readers, a decisive indicator that Matthew is not reporting fulfilment in the plain sense.[7] Christian tradition, by contrast, frequently approaches the question through theological synthesis, arguing that Jesus is the personal name while Immanuel functions as a title that describes his theological significance.[8] Such a move can be coherent within Christian doctrine and liturgy, yet it does not eliminate the historical exegetical question concerning what Isaiah meant in the eighth century BCE and what Matthew is doing when he rereads that text.[9] The present study, therefore, aims to retain the critical edge of the tension while describing the competing interpretive traditions with measured scholarly restraint.[10]

This article proceeds in four movements. First, it outlines the function of naming in prophetic texts and shows why the sign logic of Isaiah makes the naming element hermeneutically weighty.[11] Second, it situates Isaiah 7:14 in the Syro-Ephraimite crisis and clarifies why many historical readings locate Immanuel within Isaiah's own horizon rather than in a distant messianic future.[12] Third, it examines Matthew 1:21–23 as a narrative that juxtaposes Jesus and Immanuel and considers how Second Temple interpretive practices, including typological rereading and pesher-style fulfilment claims, help explain Matthew's procedure even when they do not satisfy historical-critical expectations of literal fulfilment.[13] Fourth, it considers implications for Christology, interfaith interpretation, and African biblical scholarship, arguing that scholarly integrity is best served when doctrinal coherence is acknowledged as doctrinal coherence rather than presented as historical resolution.[14] The conclusion maintains that the tension is real and enduring, but it can be articulated without polemical overstatement and without denying the meaningful ways communities have lived with textual diversity.[15]

Names, Signs, and Prophetic Speech in the Hebrew Bible

In the Hebrew Bible, names frequently operate as theological speech acts rather than as mere labels.[16] The narrative traditions repeatedly attach interpretive significance to naming, so that the name becomes a compact carrier of meaning for the community that receives it.[17] Prophetic literature intensifies this function by making names into public signs, as in Isaiah's naming of *Shear jashub* and *Maher shalal hash baz*, where the name itself performs a communicative task within a political moment.[18] In such instances, the integrity of the name is bound to the logic of the sign, because the sign is designed to be recognisable and rhetorically forceful.[19] This background explains why Isaiah 7:14 is not experienced as a marginal detail, since the naming of Immanuel is embedded in the sign logic that Isaiah offers to Ahaz.[20]

The expectation of correspondence between prophetic speech and realised sign is especially strong in interpretive communities that treat prophecy as a domain of divine precision.[21] Within that horizon, the absence of the promised name in later fulfilment claims is experienced as a serious discontinuity rather than as a minor flexibility.[22] Jewish exegetical critique, in many of its forms, therefore emphasises that the prophetic sign is not only the birth but also the identity communicated through the name.[23] When Christian interpretation responds by shifting Immanuel into the category of title rather than personal name, it changes the sign logic from concrete correspondence to theological meaning.[24] That move may be theologically intelligible, but it also indicates that the interpretive debate is ultimately about hermeneutical rules, and not only about the semantics of two names.[25]

Immanuel in Isaiah 7: Contextual Reading

Isaiah 7 is anchored in the Syro-Ephraimite crisis, when Judah faced intense political pressure from regional powers and internal fear about dynastic survival.[26] Isaiah's encounter with Ahaz is not framed as a distant messianic oracle but as a prophetic intervention into a near-term crisis, in which the sign is meant to stabilise the Davidic house against panic and political calculation.[27] The sign of the child called Immanuel is therefore intelligible as a near-horizon sign whose meaning is tied to the assurance of divine presence amid geopolitical threat.[28] Scholarly debates about the identity of the child have varied, including proposals that connect the sign to a child within royal circles or within Isaiah's wider symbolic naming practice, but the dominant historical point remains that the text speaks first to its own time.[29] In this reading, the theological burden of Immanuel is not primarily messianic prediction but covenantal reassurance expressed in a name sign.[30]

Matthew's Rereading of Isaiah: Narrative Juxtaposition and Second Temple Hermeneutics

This contextual frame is crucial for evaluating Matthew's later appropriation. If Isaiah's sign is embedded within eighth-century realities, then Matthew's use of the text must be described as rereading rather than as straightforward prediction fulfilment.[31] Jewish interpretation typically insists on this priority of original horizon and treats later theological extension as a change of subject rather than a fulfilment of the same subject.[32] Christian tradition has often acknowledged the historical setting while still maintaining that the text possesses an expanded horizon of meaning, whether by *sensus plenior* (the claim that a biblical text has a fuller divinely intended meaning beyond what its human author originally meant, disclosed later through history or revelation[33]) arguments or by typological pattern recognition.[34] Yet even when such approaches are granted legitimacy as theological practices, they do not dissolve the fact that Isaiah's sign logic presumes a correspondence that is not reproduced in the Gospel's naming practice.[35] The tension, therefore, remains, not because communities lack creativity, but because the two texts operate within different horizons of meaning and different rules of fulfilment.[36]

In Matthew 1:21, the angelic instruction to Joseph is explicit: the child is to be named Jesus, and the name is interpreted through the motif of salvation.[37] The narrative then immediately cites Isaiah 7:14, presenting Immanuel as scriptural confirmation that the birth event stands within Israel's textual world.[38] The juxtaposition produces a double naming structure: Jesus is the commanded personal name, while Immanuel is the cited prophetic name that is translated and interpreted as "God with us."[39] Matthew's technique is recognisably programmatic, because it frames the infancy narrative as Scripture-saturated and presents Jesus' identity through Israel's textual resources rather than through biography alone.[40] At the

same time, the technique foregrounds the name tension because the narrative does not proceed to show Jesus being called Immanuel as a lived address.[41]

At this point, it is important to acknowledge, with scholarly fairness, that Matthew's practice resembles wider Second Temple interpretive culture. Interpretive practices such as Midrashic expansion, typological patterning, and pesher-like applications permitted earlier texts to be reread in light of new events, often by claiming that the earlier Scripture found its fuller sense in the present.[42] In such a world, Matthew's fulfilment formula functions less like a modern proof of prediction and more like a claim that the Jesus event discloses the deeper meaning of Israel's Scriptures.[43] This recognition can explain Matthew's procedure without requiring a reader to accept that the Isaianic sign, in its original horizon, predicted Jesus in a literal predictive sense.[44] In other words, Matthew can be situated within Second Temple hermeneutics while the historical critical question remains open, namely, whether Isaiah 7:14, as Isaiah's contemporaries heard it, concerned a child in their own time rather than a far future messianic figure.[45] The tension is therefore best described as a divergence between modes of reading, not as a simple error that can be erased by doctrinal harmonisation.[46]

Within Christian hermeneutical traditions, the appeal to sensus plenior has often functioned as a way of accounting for New Testament rereadings of Hebrew Scripture without denying the historical situatedness of the prophetic text. Pontifical Biblical Commission defined the concept as a "fuller sense" intended by God but not clearly grasped by the human author, such that a later community may legitimately discern an additional layer of meaning beyond the original horizon[47]. Recent scholarship continues to engage this category with caution, noting both its theological coherence within confessional frameworks and its limits as a historical explanatory tool. Joshua Smith, for example, argues that appeals to sensus plenior help describe how Christian communities understand Matthew's use of Isaiah 7:14, while

simultaneously acknowledging that such claims cannot be adjudicated by historical-critical criteria alone.[48]

In debates over Immanuel and Jesus, the concept is therefore deployed to suggest that Isaiah originally addressed Ahaz within the Syro-Ephraimite crisis and that the naming of the child functioned as a concrete political sign, while Matthew's Gospel discloses what believers perceive as a deeper divine intention realised in Jesus. The category does not erase the original sense but proposes an additional theological layer, a distinction that explains Christian doctrinal coherence without resolving the historical question of correspondence between prophetic sign and Gospel naming practice. For precisely that reason, sensus plenior remains contested, criticised by historical critics for presupposing divine intentionality that cannot be tested methodologically, and defended by theologians as a disciplined way of accounting for the church's rereading of Scripture. The present study, therefore, treats the concept descriptively rather than normatively, as part of the hermeneutical repertoire that shapes Matthew's reception history while leaving intact the tension between historical exegesis and theological proclamation.

Christological Integration and the Limits of Harmonisation

The central difficulty is that Isaiah's sign includes naming as part of the sign, while Matthew's narrative includes a different naming instruction as part of its Christological framing.[49] Jewish readers who prioritise prophetic precision see the divergence as evidence that the Christian fulfilment claim is not grounded in literal correspondence.[50] Christian interpretation often replies by distinguishing the personal name from the theological title, asserting that Jesus is the name given at birth and Immanuel is a true description of his identity and mission.[51] This distinction can be coherent within Christian doctrinal reasoning, particularly where Christology affirms that Jesus embodies divine presence and therefore

deserves the title "God with us."[52] Yet coherence within doctrinal synthesis is not identical with historical resolution, because Isaiah's naming tradition typically expects the prophetic name to be borne as an observable sign, not merely inferred as a later theological label.[53]

Further harmonising strategies sometimes appeal to the notion that Immanuel is fulfilled functionally rather than nominally, meaning that Jesus realises the content of the name even if he does not publicly bear the name in ordinary usage.[54] Such an explanation may carry pastoral and liturgical plausibility, since Christian worship and devotion do employ Immanuel as a title for Jesus, especially in Advent traditions.[55] However, it also quietly shifts the debate from prophecy as an event linked sign to prophecy as a reservoir of theological symbols, and that shift should be named rather than hidden.[56] The critical point is therefore not that Christians have no meaningful way to integrate the names, but that the integration operates within a theological framework that does not remove the textual divergence at the level of historical exegesis.[57] A careful academic account can affirm Christian self-understanding and liturgical practice while still insisting that the Isaianic sign, read in its historical context, remains distinct from Matthew's Christological rereading.[58]

Implications for Christology and Messianic Expectation

The Immanuel Jesus tension exposes a broader divergence between Jewish and Christian conceptions of messianic legitimacy.[59] For many Jewish approaches, fulfilment is measured by textual fidelity, historical continuity, and recognisable correspondence between prophecy and event.[60] Under those criteria, the displacement of the prophesied name functions as evidence that the Christian claim exceeds what Isaiah promised in the immediate horizon.[61] Christian Christology, by contrast, has historically developed ways of holding multiple designations together, treating names and titles as layered disclosures of identity rather than as mutually exclusive markers.[62] The tradition's capacity to integrate "God with us" and "YHWH

saves" as complementary themes can be doctrinally rich and internally consistent, especially when understood as different angles on the same Christological claim.[63]

Methodological Clarity and Theological Rereading

Yet it is precisely here that methodological clarity matters. A doctrinal synthesis can be coherent within Christian theology without becoming a historical proof that Isaiah 7:14 predicted Jesus in the manner often assumed in popular apologetics.[64] Scholarly responsibility, therefore, requires distinguishing between theological coherence and historical correspondence, and it requires doing so without dismissing lived religious meaning.[65] The Christological question is not only whether Christian tradition can reconcile the names, but whether the reconciliation depends on a rereading that transforms Isaiah's sign logic into typological proclamation.[66] Once that distinction is made, the debate can move away from polemical accusations and toward a disciplined account of how Scriptures are reappropriated within communities to construct identity.[67] The tension does not need to be denied for theology to be meaningful, but it does need to be articulated honestly for scholarship to remain credible.[68]

Contemporary Scholarship and African Hermeneutical Engagement

Modern scholarship has increasingly treated Matthew's fulfilment practice as an interpretive phenomenon that must be analysed within ancient reading cultures rather than judged solely by modern standards of prediction and proof.[69] When Matthew cites Isaiah 7:14, he participates in a scriptural world in which texts are reread as living speech, and where fulfilment can mean disclosure, pattern completion, or theological recontextualisation.[70] At the same time, scholarly approaches that prioritise the Isaianic horizon continue to underline that Isaiah 7:14 has an intelligible meaning in its own context that is not dependent on a later Christological application.[71] The most responsible interpretive posture, therefore, avoids two

extremes: it avoids denying the historical horizon of Isaiah, and it avoids caricaturing Matthew as merely manipulative, since his practice reflects recognisable ancient hermeneutics even when it stretches the earlier text.[72] The task is to describe what the texts do, and then to clarify what later communities claim those texts mean.[73]

In African biblical scholarship, this debate carries both critical and constructive potential. Critical responsibility appears in the insistence that churches should not present rereading as if it were the same thing as original meaning, because intellectual credibility and ethical teaching depend on interpretive honesty.[74] Constructive engagement appears when African interpreters bring contextual questions to the text, exploring how names as theological claims function within communities negotiating presence, suffering, deliverance, and identity.[75] In many African contexts, "God with us" is not merely a doctrinal slogan but a pastoral grammar for survival, while "YHWH saves" resonates with communal hopes for liberation and moral restoration.[76] These constructive readings do not need to deny the historical exegetical tension, because they can openly treat Matthew as a theological rereader whose proclamation serves faith communities.[77] When African scholarship holds together critical method and contextual imagination, it models an approach that is both academically credible and socially meaningful.[78]

Conclusion

The relationship between Immanuel in Isaiah 7:14 and Jesus in Matthew 1:21–23 is best described as a persistent hermeneutical tension rather than as a problem that disappears under confident harmonisation.[79] Isaiah's sign functions within a specific crisis, where naming belongs to the logic of public assurance and covenantal presence.[80] Matthew's narrative, by contrast, juxtaposes Jesus and Immanuel in order to articulate Christological identity through scriptural rereading, a practice that can be situated within Second Temple interpretive culture

even when it exceeds historical critical criteria of literal predictive fulfilment.[81] Christian theology has developed coherent ways to integrate the names, especially by distinguishing title and personal name and by sustaining liturgical uses of Immanuel as a Christological designation.[82] Such doctrinal coherence is real within faith communities, but it should not be confused with the elimination of historical exegetical distance between Isaiah's horizon and Matthew's proclamation.[83]

For Jewish interpretation, the name divergence remains a significant reason for resisting Christian fulfilment claims, since prophetic sign logic is understood to require correspondence that the Gospel does not present as ordinary naming practice.[84] For Christian interpretation, the divergence has been received as an invitation to theological synthesis, where "God with us" and "YHWH saves" are held together as complementary truths about Jesus.[85] Academic integrity is best served when both positions are described without caricature and when the methodological distinction between historical exegesis and theological rereading is maintained with precision.[86] In African biblical scholarship, the tension can be engaged as an opportunity to model interpretive honesty while also developing constructive contextual readings that address lived realities without confusing proclamation with original meaning.[87] The enduring value of the debate is that it compels interpreters to state clearly what they are doing, whether they are reconstructing history, articulating doctrine, or proclaiming a theological identity grounded in a rereading of Scripture.[88]

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