

Isaiah's Prophecy Fulfilled in Incarnation

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The Old Testament only points to mystery of Mary's motherhood, but the New Testament proclaims that the birth of Jesus fulfils the prophet's words

"Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Emmanuel" (Is 7:13-14). These well-known words from the prophet Isaiah were the subject of the Holy Father's catechesis at the General Audience of Wednesday, 31 January, as he continued his reflections on Mary's role in salvation history. Here is a translation of his talk, which was the 13th in the series on the Blessed Virgin and was given in Italian.

1. In discussing the figure of Mary in the Old Testament, the Council (Lumen gentium, n.55) refers to the well known text of Isaiah, which caught the particular attention of the early Christians: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Emmanuel" (Is 7:14).

During the annunciation of the angel, who invites Joseph to take to himself Mary, his wife, "for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit", Matthew gives a Christological and Marian significance to the prophecy. In fact, he adds: "All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: 'Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel' (which means God-with-us)" (Mt 1:22-23).

2. In the Hebrew text this prophecy does not explicitly foretell the virginal birth of Emmanuel: the word used (*almah*), in fact, simply means "a young woman", not necessarily a virgin. Moreover, we know that Jewish tradition did not hold up the idea of perpetual virginity, nor did it ever express the idea of virginal motherhood.

The Lord himself will give you a sign

In the Greek tradition, however, the Hebrew word was translated "*parthenos*", "virgin". In this fact, which could seem merely a peculiarity of translation, we must recognize a mysterious orientation given by the Holy Spirit to Isaiah's words in order to prepare for the understanding of the Messiah's extraordinary birth. The translation of the word as "virgin" is explained by the fact that Isaiah's text very solemnly prepares for the

announcement of the conception and presents it as a divine sign (Is 7:10-14), arousing the expectation of an extraordinary conception. Now, it is not something extraordinary for a young woman to conceive a son after being joined to her husband. However, the prophecy makes no reference to the husband. Such a formulation, then, suggested the interpretation given later in the Greek version.

3. In the original context, the prophecy of Is 7:14 was the divine reply to a lack of faith on the part of King Ahaz, who, threatened with an invasion from the armies of the neighboring kings, sought his own salvation and that of his kingdom in Assyria's protection. In advising him to put his trust solely in God and to reject the dreadful Assyrian intervention, the prophet Isaiah invites him on the Lord's behalf to make an act of faith in God's power: "Ask a sign of the Lord your God". At the king's refusal, for he preferred to seek salvation in human aid, the prophet made the famous prediction: "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary men, that you weary my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Emmanuel" (Is 7:13-14).

The announcement of the sign of Emmanuel, "God-with-us", implies the promise of God's presence in history, which will find its full meaning in the mystery of the Incarnation of the Word.

4. In the announcement of the wondrous birth of Emmanuel, the indication of the woman who conceives and gives birth shows a certain intention to associate the mother with the destiny of the son—a prince destined to establish an ideal kingdom, the "messianic" kingdom—and offers a glimpse of a special divine plan, which highlights the woman's role.

The sign, in fact, is not only the child, but the extraordinary conception revealed later in the birth itself, a hope-filled event, which stresses the central role of the mother.

The prophecy of Emmanuel must also be understood in the horizon opened by the promise made to David, a promise we read about in the Second Book of Samuel. Here the prophet Nathan promises the king God's favour towards his descendent: "He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his father, and he shall be my son" (2 Sam 7:13-14).

God wants to exercise a paternal role towards David's offspring, a role that will reveal its full, authentic meaning in the New Testament with the Incarnation of the Son of God in the family of David (cf. Rom 1:3).

5. The same prophet Isaiah, in another very familiar text, confirms the unusual nature of Emmanuel's birth. Here are his words: "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government will be upon his shoulder, and he will be called 'Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace'" (9:5). Thus the prophet expresses, in the series of names given the child, the qualities of his royal office: wisdom, might, fatherly kindness, peacemaking.

The mother is no longer mentioned here, but the exaltation of the son, who brings the people all they can hope for in the messianic kingdom, is also reflected in the woman who conceived him and gave him birth.

6. A famous prophecy of Micah also alludes to the birth of Emmanuel. The prophet says: "But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days. Therefore the Lord shall give them up until the time when she who is in travail has brought forth..." (5:2-3). These words re-echo the expectation of a birth full of messianic hope, in which once again the mother's role is stressed, the mother explicitly remembered and ennobled by the wondrous event that brings joy and salvation.

Prophecy prepares revelation of virginal motherhood

7. Mary's virginal motherhood was prepared for in a more general way by God's favour to the humble and the poor (cf. *Lumen gentium*, n. 55).

By their attitude of placing all their trust in the Lord, they anticipated the profound meaning of Mary's virginity. By renouncing the richness of human motherhood, she awaited from God all the fruitfulness of her own life.

The Old Testament then does not contain a formal announcement of the virginal motherhood, which was fully revealed only by the New Testament. Nevertheless, Isaiah's prophecy (Is 7:14) prepares for the revelation of this mystery and was construed so in the Greek translation of the Old Testament. By quoting the prophecy thus translated, Matthew's Gospel proclaims its perfect fulfilment through the conception of Jesus in Mary's virginal womb.