

The Sign of Immanuel, and Isaiah and His Children as Signs (Isa 7:1–8:18)

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- I. **The Use of this Passage in the NT** — There are at least two uses of this passage in Isaiah (7:1–8:18) that are a little puzzling at first glance. One of them involves a pretty well-known passage—the prophecy about the child born to a virgin. The other is perhaps not as well-known but is probably even more puzzling—the use of Isaiah and his children as signs. Here are the two sections that I am thinking of:
- A. **Isaiah 7:14–16** — “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. ¹⁵ He will be eating curds and honey when he knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, ¹⁶ for before the boy knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, the land of the two kings you dread will be laid waste.”¹
1. The prophecy predicts that God “**himself**” will give a sign. The sign is going to involve a woman who is a virgin conceiving and giving birth to a son. The son is supposed to receive a special name—Immanuel. And verse 16 (more on this later) seems to be saying, at least at first glance, that this child with the very unusual conception and special name will be born relatively soon.
 2. Over 700 years later, Jesus was born in Bethlehem and had a virgin as his mother, and Matthew tells us that this fulfilled what God had said through the prophet Isaiah. This is how Matthew puts it, “**All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ‘The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel’**” (1:22–23). As you can see, with only one small change, the quoted material is a nearly exact match of the last half of Isaiah 7:14.² Matthew clearly believes that Jesus’ birth in some way fulfilled the prediction about a sign in Isaiah 7:14–16. But how can this be if people were looking for that sign 700 years earlier? As we will see, the two kings who were dreaded in Isaiah’s day were long gone before the boy Jesus was born and grown. So, was another

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the New International Version 2011.

² We should not be surprised when a quotation of the OT in our NT does not match the English translation in our OT. First, when we are talking about reading an OT quotation in our English NT, we are talking about a translation of a translation. At some point, it went from Hebrew to Greek and then to English. Some little things do get lost in translation. More importantly, the NT writers did not have quotation marks—they would not know what a quotation mark was. They are never claiming to be quoting an OT passage exactly. Sometimes they quote a Greek translation fairly closely, or make their own translation; often, they are loosely quoting or even paraphrasing a passage without changing its original meaning.

child born in the 700s BC who was the sign? Is Matthew using this OT prophecy correctly? Most of us would probably want to say, “yes,” but how would we explain what he is up to? One writer boldly states, “If this is a prediction of the birth of Jesus 700 years hence, then it makes utter nonsense of the story being narrated in Isaiah.”³ But, perhaps, there is another explanation...

- B. **Isaiah 8:17–18** — “I will wait for the LORD, who is hiding his face from the descendants of Jacob. I will put my trust in him.”¹⁸ Here am I, and the children the Lord has given me. We are signs and symbols in Israel from the Lord Almighty, who dwells on Mount Zion.”
1. As we will see, in its context, Isaiah 8:18 is clearly talking about the prophet Isaiah (he is the “I” who is speaking) and his own biological children. When our passage begins, we are told that Isaiah has a son named Shear-Jashub, which, as the footnote in our Bible tells us, means “a remnant will return” (Isa 7:3). Later we find out that he has another son whose name is Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz, which, as the footnote in most of our Bibles tells us, means “quick to the plunder, swift to the spoil.” So, Isaiah has two biological sons with special names that serve as signs. So far, so good.
 2. However, close to 800 years later, whoever wrote the book of Hebrews tells us that *Jesus* (!) says he is not ashamed to call *us as Christians* “brothers and sisters” (Heb 2:11), and for support, the author says that Jesus also says, “**I will put my trust in him**” and “**Here am I, and the children God has given me**” (2:13). Those words that the author of Hebrews puts on the lips of our Lord are the ones that end Isaiah 8:17 and begin Isaiah 8:18. It is not too surprising that the writer says that a member of the Trinity spoke the words of the OT, since he does that regularly throughout the book of Hebrews (see, e.g., 1:5–13; 3:7; etc.). All of the words of the OT are ultimately God’s words. However, is the author, and perhaps Matthew as well, playing a little fast and loose with the original context? Is it appropriate to say that what Isaiah said about himself and his children being signs can be applied by Jesus to himself and his spiritual family hundreds of years later?
 3. To answer these questions, we must do what should always be done when confronted with a puzzling use of the OT in the NT—*go back to the OT and make sure that we have understood the original context well*. And in doing so, I think we will see that both the Apostle Matthew and the mysterious writer of Hebrews had good reasons for pulling two quotations from this prophecy in Isaiah.

³ Steve Moyise, *The Old Testament in the New*, 3 as quoted by Todd Bolen, “The Messiah in Isaiah 7:14: The Virgin Birth,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 33 (2022): 272.

II. Isaiah 7:1–8:18 in Its Original Context⁴

A. The Sign of Immanuel (7:1–25)

1. The Background to the Sign (7:1–2): Ahaz, the king of Judah, along with his people, is frightened by a coalition of Aram (aka Syria) and Israel (i.e., the northern kingdom).
 - Notice that, when he writes this, Isaiah makes a point of saying that the whole “**house of David**” was told about these two threatening kings, and that the news then leads Ahaz and the people to be afraid.
 - If the news had reached a wider audience than Ahaz and had significance beyond him, then we are probably supposed to expect God to act in a way that would also have significance beyond Ahaz. Ahaz is afraid, but the problem that he faces is bigger than just him. It impacts the whole “house of David.”
2. God’s Promise to Ahaz (7:3–9): God sends Isaiah to meet Ahaz and to assure the king that these two pagan kings would not triumph over Judah.
 - Notice that Isaiah already has a son whom he is supposed to take with him when he goes to meet Ahaz (v. 3).
 - God tells Ahaz, through Isaiah, that these two pagan nations will not prevail because they have two ordinary humans as their kings—Rezin and Remaliah’s son, Pekah (vv. 7–9a). On the other hand (and I think this is implied here), Judah does not just have an ordinary man as their king. Instead, they have a member of the house of David on the throne (as Isaiah just reminded us)! No matter how evil Ahaz is, he is still in David’s line and the rightful heir to the throne. The Davidic kings are God’s adopted sons installed by God as his viceregent in Jerusalem (2 Sam 7:11b–16; Psa 2:4–6)! God can and will discipline these sons and remove them individually from the throne due to sin in order to make way for another, but that is not what God is doing at this moment with Ahaz. No two human kings, no matter how powerful they may be, can band together and topple God’s anointed one when God is determined to save his king. God has graciously decided to save Ahaz from these two threats if Ahaz will only trust him.
 - So, because God will protect his Davidic king and show kindness to the anointed one and his people, Ephraim (i.e., the northern kingdom of Israel left by Pekah) will be “**shattered**” (v. 8). And notice that this will take place “**within sixty-five years.**” So, the prophecy comes with a time frame. Judah can expect the destruction of this northern coalition in 65 years, but Ahaz, the king, is

⁴ Although he might explain some things slightly differently, I have been helped a great deal in my understanding of this passage by Bolen, “Messiah in Isaiah 7:14.” This article may be downloaded at: https://www.academia.edu/87690157/The_Messiah_in_Isaiah_7_14_The_Virgin_Birth.

already an adult; he will not be alive in 65 years.⁵ Therefore, we have another indication that this prophecy, which will lead to the sign of Immanuel, is not merely directed to Ahaz. It is not limited to his lifetime. It is bigger than that!

- Finally, notice that Ahaz is called to respond in faith, believing that what God had promised was true (**v. 9b**). Salvation will come through faith!
3. God predicts a coming sign (7:10–17)
- In verses 10–12, God *graciously* tells Ahaz that he can ask for a sign to serve as a confirmation of the promise just made in verses 7–9, but Ahaz stubbornly refuses to accept God's kind offer. 2 Kings 16:7–8 tells us that Ahaz was trusting in an alliance with the Assyrians instead of trusting in God.
 - So, in verses 13–14, because Ahaz does not respond in faith, Isaiah says, “**the Lord himself will give you a sign.**” This might sound like Ahaz is still getting his sign anyway, but he rejected the offer, and that “**you**” is plural (we can't really do that in English, at least not in proper English). Ahaz is not being addressed directly. So, along with the fact that Isaiah addresses the “**house of David**” in verse 13, we have further indications that this coming sign of Immanuel was not for Ahaz. Ahaz was given the chance to ask for a sign that he could see, and he refused God's gracious offer. So, God will provide the “house of David” with a great sign, but Ahaz will not live to see it. Assuming that Ahaz must see this sign in his lifetime is an assumption we might bring to our reading of Isaiah. Still, on further examination of what Isaiah actually writes, I don't think it's a warranted assumption.
 - Also, notice that this child will be conceived in the womb of a virgin (“**the virgin will conceive,**” v. 14). When he is born, his mother will still be a virgin (a point that Matthew goes out of his way to show is true of Mary at Jesus' birth).
 - In addition, although this is sometimes disputed, there is no good reason for translating the Hebrew word for “**virgin**” here as anything other than “virgin,” such as “young woman.” It is sometimes said that this child may be Isaiah's, but his wife had already given birth to the child introduced at the beginning of the account. We could argue that Isaiah is supposed to get a second wife, or that his first wife had died, but this is just speculation, not based on anything actually written in Scripture. We could say the same about the suggestion that this child will be a son of Ahaz or any other child born in a normal way.⁶ Instead, the most

⁵ The events of Isaiah 7 are taking place around 734 BC. Ahaz died around 716 BC.

⁶ Those who believe that the Immanuel prophecy in Isa 7:13–14 is not a direct prediction of Jesus' birth have difficulty identifying how it was fulfilled in the lifetime of Isaiah or Ahaz. In other words, they want there to be a fulfillment in the 700s BC, but they admit that we do not know for sure how it was fulfilled. At some point, we probably should admit that if no record of its fulfillment has come down to us, then it was not much of a sign. So, perhaps, we were wrong to look for fulfillment in the lifetime of Isaiah in the first place.

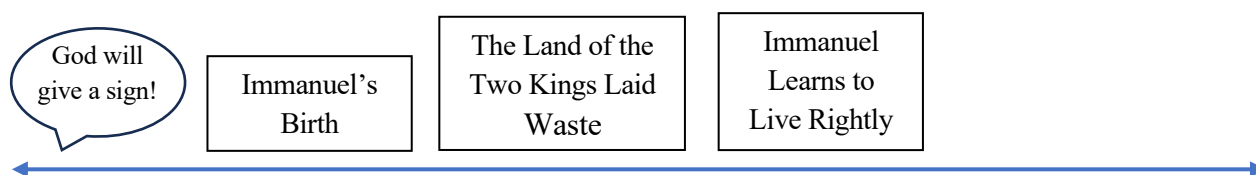
natural way of taking verse 14 is that God is going to perform a great sign, something on par with **“in the deepest depths or in the highest heights”** (v 13). It is important to note that the sign in verse 14 is not the sign originally offered to Ahaz, but it should be just as spectacular. It would be strange for God to offer to do something spectacular for Ahaz, but then end up doing something so routine that we cannot even be sure when it was originally fulfilled. Instead, it is better to conclude that both signs, the one offered and the one that actually occurs, are equally marvelous. The difference between them is, of course, that only the second one actually occurs, and because Ahaz did not accept God’s offer of the first, he will not live to see the second. This second sign is a child who enters the human race unlike any other. And Isaiah never says that this child will be born in the near future. Instead, there are several indications in the passage that this child will come much later.

- In verses 15–16, the prophet gives us a brief description of the circumstances surrounding the life of this coming child, Immanuel:
 - He will grow up **“eating curds and honey,”** which is the food of poverty and exile. This is made clear when we go to 7:22 and see that the same expression is part of the *negative* description of how the people will have to live after the devastation caused by the Assyrian invaders. This is eating off the land when civilization has broken down around you. Therefore, the child will not grow up in a royal palace. Instead, by referring to his food, Isaiah is using picturesque language to say that the child will be born on the other side of the deportations and destructions. This would not be true of any Davidic heir for at least another 100 years (when the Babylonian deportations of Jerusalem began), but would be true of this Davidic child.
 - And this lowly position will be used by God to train him to **“reject the wrong and choose the right.”** Many of our English translation understand that clause to be saying something about the time frame during which he is eating curds and honey (notice the **“when”** in the NIV). That translation is certainly possible. However, it more likely refers to the *purpose* of his eating this food. For example, the NET translates verse 15 as “He will eat sour milk and honey, which will help him know how to reject evil and choose what is right.”
 - Why will this child grow up under these harsh conditions? Verse 16 gives us the *reason* (notice the **“for”**). He will be eating the food of poverty and exile *because*, before he is an adult who has learned to make responsible decisions between right and wrong,⁷ **“the land of the two kings you dread**

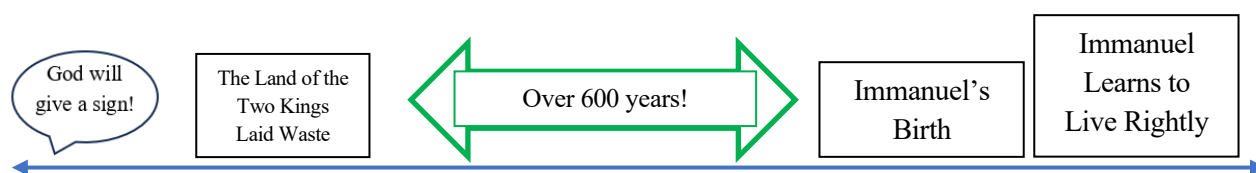
⁷ Although this is debated, the expression **“before the boy knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right”** is likely just a longer way of saying “before the boy becomes an adult” (see the similar language

[i.e., Aram/Syria and Israel/Ephraim] **will be laid waste.**” *Observe carefully what Isaiah actually says and what he does not say*—the two enemies have to be destroyed “before” the child grows up or learns to live rightly, but Isaiah does not say how long before. Isaiah does not say anything that would make us have to conclude that this destruction will occur just before or only a few years before the arrival of Immanuel. He certainly does not say that the order of events must have the child being born before the land of the two kings is devastated. Perhaps a chart will help...

It is often wrongly assumed that the timeline of the prophecy *must* unfold like this:



However, it could just as easily, and I believe more likely, unfold like this:



- In verse 17, Isaiah makes it clear how these two enemies are going to be “laid waste”—God is going to bring against them “**the king of Assyria.**” What is at least implied here is that this child, whom you would expect to be living in Jerusalem, is going to be living in lands previously held by the kings of Aram/Syria and the northern kingdom of Israel. Why else does their destruction cause him to eat curds and honey? This implication is confirmed in 9:1–7, where we learn that the child will be born and live in the land of the northern tribes, in the region known as Galilee.
4. God describes the coming judgement in which the Assyrians will be his instrument (7:18–25). The nation that Ahaz was trusting in as his Savior will actually be the destruction of his country; only by God’s grace will a remnant survive. This will all occur before the sign—the child, Immanuel—arrives.

in Deut 1:39; cf. Num 14:29–30). This is different from the time it takes a child to say “Father” and “Mother,” so this is a different timeframe than the one referred to in 8:4, which is another indication that Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz is a different child than Immanuel (more on this below).

B. Isaiah and His Children as Signs (8:1–18)⁸

1. God gives Isaiah a son named Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz as a sign (8:1–4)
 - Notice this is not the same child as Immanuel. This child's name symbolizes judgment and destruction; Immanuel's name symbolizes hope and deliverance. This child's name speaks to the beginning of Israel's exile; Immanuel is the child born to bring his people out of the exile. In addition to having a different name, Isaiah emphasizes that this child is his own and that the child was conceived in the normal manner (v. 3).⁹
 - Therefore, since this is a different child, one that must be born in the near future (actually is already born when Isaiah writes verse 3), the language of verse 4 can be used to assign a relatively brief time frame between the birth of the child and the destruction of the two northern enemies. This is important to understand. This child has to be born a few years before Rezin and Pekah are defeated. However, the Immanuel child can (and we know eventually will) be born long after these men, along with Ahaz and even Isaiah himself, are dead—two different children for two different signs with two different timeframes.
2. God describes the coming Assyrian “flood” (8:5–10)
 - Notice that the land is Immanuel's land (“**your land**,” v. 8b).
 - Even if and when the nations gather against the people of Israel, their strategies and plans will be thwarted “**for God is with us**” (vv. 9–10). And that last phrase is, of course, also the name *Immanuel* (as the footnote in the NIV reminds us).
3. God calls on the people of Israel to fear him (8:11–15)
 - Instead of fearing what the people of this world fear, the reader is supposed to fear the “**LORD Almighty**” and regard him to be holy or unique (vv. 12–13).
 - God is likened to a stone (vv. 14–15). Many people in Israel and Judea will stumble and fall over this “stone.” They won't regard God as holy and listen to his words.
 - In at least three places, the wording of this prediction is applied to Jesus in the NT (Luke 2:34; Rom 9:32–33; 1 Pet 2:8). He is the “LORD Almighty” who, like a stone, will cause people to stumble and fall when they reject him.
4. Isaiah responds in faith to God (8:16–18).

⁸ On this passage, I was helped, among other writers, by Michael J. Vlach, *The Old in the New: Understanding How the New Testament Authors Quoted the Old Testament* (The Woodlands, TX: Kress, 2021), 230. I would recommend Vlach's helpful, easy-to-read book for studying the uses of the OT in the NT.

⁹ We could also add here that (1) Isaiah never tells us in his book that Immanuel and Maher-shalal-hash-bez are the same child, (2) that Immanuel was to be named such by his mother (7:14) but this other child is named by Isaiah (8:3), and (3), perhaps this is better seen with the hindsight of the NT, it seems that the name *Immanuel*, or “God with us,” better fits a child a bit grander than Isaiah's son. After all, the land of Israel is called Immanuel's land in 8:8 (“**your land**”). This is pretty close to an explicit statement about his ownership or rule over the land.

- Notice that this contrasts with the next paragraph (8:19–22), where the people of Israel “**curse their king and their God**” (v. 21).
- Israel is at a crossroad; they can either respond like Ahaz with unbelief and eventually be destroyed, or they can respond like Isaiah and his small band of “**disciples**” (v. 16) and “**wait for the LORD**” and put their “**trust in him**” (v. 17).
- Isaiah believes that judgment is coming (notice that God is “**hiding his face from the descendants of Jacob**”), but he eagerly awaits the day when God will intervene to save him and the rest of the world. He reminds me of the prophet Habakkuk in this sense. Arguably, all of the prophets, and we as modern believers, are in the same boat as Isaiah. We live in a world where most have rejected our Rock, the Lord Jesus. They have tripped over the stone. This stumbling is certainly true of most of the people of Israel as well. God has “hidden his face” from them, and their promised restoration has not yet occurred. Yet, we believe God! We believe that everything will be made right and new and that his promises will come to pass. Our God-given faith is a distinguishing mark of being his child. We are saved *through* faith. Isaiah and his two biological sons, with the unusual names, are also God’s children and stand as “**signs and symbols in Israel from the LORD Almighty**” (v. 18). Everytime somebody spoke the names of Isaiah’s sons those names served as reminders that God had predicted both the plunder and destruction of Israel (*Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz*) but also that “a remnant will return” (*Shear-Jashub*).

III. Conclusions

A. Isaiah 7:14–16

1. To put it simply, I believe that Isaiah 7:14–16 is a direct prediction of the birth and life of Jesus of Nazareth. It is for that simple reason that Matthew quotes from the prophecy of Immanuel. Immanuel was always going to be Jesus. I know the gap of time between the prophecy and its fulfillment is startling and perhaps(?) would have surprised Isaiah, but there was nothing about what God said that would lead us to believe that the prophecy might not take a long time to come true.
2. God does not always give signs before or immediately after a call to faith. Sometimes, signs come later confirming that the response of faith was a wise one. For example, in Exodus 3:12, at the burning bush, God said that he would give Moses a sign that he was the one sending Moses. The sign that God is with Moses and sending Moses will be that when Moses *is later at Mt. Sinai*, Moses and the people will worship God on that mountain. Moses is not given the sign and then called to obey. He is instead called to obey now, trusting that God is with him, and *later* receives a sign confirming that he had chosen wisely by following God. I think the sign of Immanuel functions in a similar confirming fashion.

3. We have primarily looked at Isaiah 7 and some of Isaiah 8, but much more could be said about Isaiah 7–12. This is a Messianic text. Jesus is prophesied throughout it. He is the “holy seed” promised in Isaiah 6:13 (right before our story begins in chapter 7). The “seed” promised to Eve, Abraham, and David, who will crush the Serpent, bless the nations, and reign forever and ever (Gen 3:15; 22:17–18; 2 Sam 7:12–16). He is also the “shoot” and “Branch” that will come from the “stump” and “root” of Jesse in Isaiah 11:1, who will rule the world and gather his scattered people from exile (11:1–16). At least one NT passage clearly indicates that Jesus is the fulfillment of Isaiah 11’s prophecy (Rom 15:12), and other passages allude to it by calling him the “shoot” or “branch” (e.g., Rev 5:5; 22:16).
4. Remember, his name also means “God with us.” And as the prophecy of Isaiah moves along into what we call chapter 9, we find out that this “child” who is to be born, this “son” who is to be given, will be called the “Mighty God” (v. 6). He “will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever” (v. 7a). But just like chapter 7, chapter 9 of Isaiah reminds us that this child will not be born in a palace, in a nation secure and safe, but will instead arrive like a light in the midst of “people walking in darkness” (v. 2). Matthew 4:12–16 helps us see clearly that that “light” was our Lord Jesus, growing up as a young man in the northern frontier first “flooded” by the Assyrian armies.
5. By quoting from Isaiah 7 in Matthew 2 and Isaiah 9 in Matthew 4, the Apostle Matthew has created bookends around this story of Jesus’ infancy, both bookends drawn from the Immanuel section of Isaiah (Isa 7–12). Combined with everything else we have just seen, I think the reasonable conclusion is that Matthew wants us to see that Isaiah’s Immanuel prophecy originally concerned Jesus of Nazareth and is now being fulfilled when Jesus is born. The Apostle was not playing fast and loose with the OT after all! Perhaps we just needed to read our OT a little more carefully.

B. Isaiah 8:17–18

1. What about this passage’s use in Hebrews 2? What is the connection between Jesus and believers on the one hand and Isaiah and his children on the other?
2. Like Isaiah, but even more so, Jesus *always* trusted God. He was obedient in the midst of a nation that mostly “stumbled” over him, as Isaiah 8 predicted. By being obedient, even to the point of the cross, he obtained a spiritual family (as Isa 53 predicted). As a result of his obedience, he now has people he can call his brothers and sisters.

3. So, at minimum, the author of Hebrews applies the words of Isaiah 8 to Jesus to “emphasize Jesus’ trust in God and His familial solidarity with His people.”¹⁰
4. But perhaps we can say a bit more than even that. Hebrews 2:5ff is about the superiority of Jesus over angels—a superiority demonstrated by the fact that Jesus is human and humans were created for a higher position than angels. After all, mankind was to be “crowned with glory and honor” with “everything under their feet” (vv. 7–8; quoting from Psalm 8:6–7). I don’t know about you, but I don’t always feel like I was created to rule this world and have all things under my feet. Instead, we often are keenly aware of our weakness and frailty and of the opposition that we face from unrepentant sinners.
5. However, Hebrews 2:9 reminds us that we do see Jesus in the position that humans were made to be in! He is “now crowned with glory and honor” because he was obedient and “suffered death.” Just like Isaiah 7 predicted, Jesus developed as a human and learned what it was like *as a human* to have to say no to what is wrong and yes to what is right (v. 10). And he now has a spiritual family (v. 11). He can speak the words of Psalm 22:22 about his “brothers and sisters” (v. 12). And because he and his family are still, like Isaiah was, waiting for all of the Messiah’s good work to be accomplished, the founder of this family and his spiritual “children,” like Isaiah long ago, serve as signs pointing to God’s faithfulness.
6. So, we might say that there is a relationship between Jesus and his family that is analogous to that between That could be why the author of Hebrews feels comfortable using these words from Isaiah. However, Isaiah and his sons were also part of this spiritual family, even before the birth of the Messiah, so the connection among all these characters might be described in terms stronger than analogy.
7. We don’t yet see Immanuel’s “to-do list” completed. We still have enemies that are waiting to be put under his feet. But we do see Jesus! He was born and is reigning from the right hand of his Father. And we do see his family, and together they are signs that God is faithful.

¹⁰ Vlach, *The Old in the New*, 230.