

Does Calling Jesus “Immanuel” Mean He is God?

by Servetus the Evangelical

Matthew says Jesus’ birth fulfilled Isaiah 7.14. He quotes it and explains as follows: “‘BEHOLD, THE VIRGIN SHALL BE WITH CHILD, AND SHALL BEAR A SON, AND THEY SHALL CALL HIS NAME IMMANUEL,’ which translated means, ‘GOD WITH US’” (Matthew 1.23).

Due to Jesus’ virgin birth, Isaiah 7.14 and Matthew 1.23 have received considerable attention throughout church history. The main reason is that Isaiah’s Hebrew word *almah* has aroused much scholarly debate as to whether it means “virgin” or “young woman.” If the latter, it doesn’t seem to foretell about Mary, Jesus’ mother, having a supernatural conception and therefore Jesus being born of a virgin.

Laying aside this question about *almah*, the question for Christology is this: How did Matthew understand Isaiah’s ascription of the word “Immanuel” to a child? Regardless of whether Isaiah intended that the child referred to the Messiah, which also has been much debated among especially critical scholars, Matthew obviously understood it that way. And he treats “Immanuel” as a title, not a proper name, for Jesus. For he had just related that the angel had instructed Joseph, “you shall call His name Jesus” (v. 21).

This word “Immanuel” represents the joining of two Hebrew words: *immanu* and *el*. Since *el* is the shortened Hebrew word for “God” (Heb. *elohim*), some traditionalists assert that ascribing the title “Immanuel” to Jesus effectively identifies Him as God.

On the contrary, joining these two words together means exactly what Matthew says: “God with us.” That is, calling Jesus “Immanuel” means God is present with his people through Jesus as his agent. It indicates what someone exclaimed when Jesus raised the widow’s dead son to life, “God has visited His people” (Luke 7.16). Jewish scholar Geza Vermes rightly explains, “Jews would have known that the name Emmanuel (‘God is with us’) signified not the incarnation of God in human form, but a promise of divine help to the Jewish people.”

The Apostle Peter preached likewise on the first day of Pentecost of the Christian era by saying, “Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst” (Acts 2.22). Later, Peter related similarly that Jesus “went about doing good and healing” people because “God was with Him” by means of the anointing of “the Holy Spirit” (10.38).

Some traditionalists support their belief that “Immanuel” in Matthew 1.23 means that Jesus is God by connecting Isaiah 7.14 with the distinctly messianic Isaiah 9.6. It applies the Hebrew title *el gibbor*, usually translated “Mighty God,” to Messiah. But *el gibbor* in Isaiah 9.6 is more aptly rendered “mighty warrior” or the like.

Calling Jesus “Immanuel” is similar to the names of some OT saints. For example, Israel, Elijah, Elisha, Daniel, Michael, Ezekiel, and Joel contain *el*, meaning “God;” yet their parents who named them did not intend it as a declaration that their child was God. The same is true of those Hebrew names that contain the shortened form of Yahweh.

Most traditionalist authorities who have written extensively that Jesus is God now concede that Matthew 1.23 does not so identify him. For instance, Murray Harris explains, “Matthew is not saying, ‘Someone who is “God” is now physically with us,’ but ‘God is acting on our behalf in the person of Jesus.’” And A.W. Wainwright points out that Matthew’s explanation can be understood in two ways: either as (1) “God with us,”

implying that Jesus is God, or as (2) “God *is* with us,” which means no more than that God mystically indwells Jesus. Wainwright concludes, “because of its ambiguity this passage cannot be used as evidence that Jesus was called God.”

God being *with* Jesus is similar to the ending of Matthew’s gospel. Therein, the risen Jesus says to his disciples, “lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matthew 28.20). Just as Jesus being with his people does not make them Jesuses, so God being with Jesus does not him God.

God was *with* Jesus by God being *in* Jesus. It is one of the great truths that the Johannine Jesus taught. For instance, when he proclaimed to his interlocutors, “I and the Father are one” (John 10.30), they objected by accusing him of blasphemy. They said, “You, being a man, make Yourself out to be God” (v. 33). But Jesus denied this charge by explaining, “I said, ‘I am the Son of God’” (v. 34). In doing so, he distinguished God from the Son of God. Post-apostolic church fathers later obliterated this distinction. Then Jesus explained what he meant by him and the Father being “one.” He said, “the Father is in Me, and I in the Father” (v. 38), which scholars call “the mutual indwelling.” It is the mystical union of the Father and the Son.

The Johannine Jesus taught this concept again while he was talking with his apostles Philip and doubting Thomas. We read that he said to them concerning God the Father, “‘from now on you know Him, and have seen Him.’ Philip said to Him, ‘Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Have I been so long with you, and yet you have not come to know Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; how can you say “Show us the Father”? Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father is in Me?... Believe Me that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me’” (John 14.7-11). Thus, God the Father was with Jesus by being in him.

The Apostle Paul taught the same thing about God the Father and Jesus Christ. He wrote “that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself” (2 Corinthians 5.19). And in another letter he said of Jesus that “it was the Father’s good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him” (Colossians 1.19), which he repeated by saying, “For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form” (2.9).

In conclusion, calling Jesus Immanuel does not mean he is God.