

11-21-2008

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Recommended Citation

Chiavone, Michael L., "Matthew's Use of Isaiah 7:14: A Valid Hermeneutic" (2008). *Biblical and Theological Studies Faculty Presentations*. 129.

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MATTHEW'S USE OF ISAIAH 7:14: A VALID HERMENEUTIC

How should Christians today interpret the Old Testament? Believers throughout the history of the church have answered this question in a variety of ways.¹ In the Patristic period, Alexandrian and Antiochene leaders agreed that the Hebrew Bible should be understood Christologically, and differed primarily in the degree to which they were willing to interpret it allegorically. The medieval Scholastics, determined to make the Bible relevant to their concerns, developed a hermeneutic which sought to determine the four meanings inherent in each passage. The Reformers, who believed Scripture was clear, and therefore carried its meaning in the plain sense of its words, nevertheless resorted to allegorizing in their Christological interpretations of some passages.

The rise of modern critical scholarship has brought about a consensus among Evangelicals that a text bears one, authorially intended meaning, and that meaning can be discerned by historico-grammatical analysis. Prophetic passages, however, and messianic prophecies in particular, continue to defy this consensus.² Prominent thinkers disagree as to the number of intended referents a prophecy has, the degree of correspondence between the intent of the divine and human authors, and the degree to which a prophecy specifically predicts later events.

¹Moisés Silva, *Has the Church Misread the Bible?*, in *Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation: Six Volumes in One*, ed. Moisés Silva (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 53–59; Bruce K. Waltke, “A Canonical Process Approach to the Psalms,” in *Tradition and Testament: Essays in Honor of Charles Lee Feinberg*, ed. John S. Feinberg and Paul D. Feinberg (Chicago: Moody, 1981), 4–5.

²Silva, *Misread?*, 52; D. Bock, “Evangelicals and the use of the Old Testament in the New: Part 1,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 142, no. 567 (Jy–Sep 1985): 209.

This continued uncertainty is surprising given that Christians have at their disposal a theoretically authoritative model for interpreting the Old Testament: the New Testament. The New Testament authors make extensive use of the Old Testament, both quoting from and alluding to the Hebrew Bible. Yet the New Testament's interpretations of Old Testament prophecies have only added to the hermeneutical difficulties these texts present. Rather than answering the debate about prophetic interpretation, the New Testament authors have added questions about the method of interpretation they use and about the propriety of imitating that method in the present.³

This present study will attempt to answer those two questions as they apply to Matt 1:22–23, in which the author states Isa 7:14 is fulfilled in the conception and birth of Jesus of Nazareth. This particular passage is exemplary for several reasons. First, it explicitly claims to be an example of prophetic fulfillment. Second, it is the first Old Testament quotation in the modern English Bible. Third, Matthew's use of the Old Testament has historically caused consternation.⁴ Finally, both Matt 1:22–23 and Isa 7:14 are set in a context which provides sufficient information to accurately interpret them.

This paper will attempt to demonstrate that Matthew, in stating Isa 7:14 had been fulfilled, accurately determined the author's single, intended meaning, and did so in a manner that can be repeated today, based on the distinction between a prophetic event and the prophetic

³Richard N. Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period*, 2^d ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), xiv–xvii, xxxi–xxxvi. Blomberg raises these questions specifically in regard to Matthew; Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew, New American Commentary*, vol. 22 (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 59.

⁴Blomberg, *Matthew*, 59; Krister Stendahl, *The School of St. Matthew and its use of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968), 39. Note that while I believe in the individual, apostolic authorship of Matthew, that premise is not central to the thought of this paper. As such, “Matthew” can be understood to represent whoever authored the present text, if it suits the reader.

text. It will commence with a survey of present interpretations offered for Isa 7:14. It will then discuss Matthew's use of Isa 7:14 and interact with several methods currently suggested for understanding that use. Finally, a new understanding for Matthew's use will be suggested.

The Interpretation of Isa 7:14

Before the rise of critical scholarship, it was common for believers, influenced by the testimony of Matt 1:22–23, to see Isa 7:14 as a purely messianic prophecy, with no historical referent. This view even found expression in published commentaries near the turn of the twentieth century, and Blomberg mentions it as an untenable extreme view.⁵ However, few today would allow such an ahistorical interpretation. Silva notes that “such a use of that verse wrenches the statement out of its historical and literary context.”⁶ Indeed, the contextual purpose of the prophecy, to serve as a sign for Ahaz, requires some historical fulfillment.⁷ Today, the historical aspect of Isaiah's prophecy is taken quite seriously by scholars of all sorts, who have reached a consensus about the interpretation of several elements in the prophecy.

The Context of Isa 7:14

Isaiah 7 provides a specific historical context for the prophecy. Ahaz sits on the throne of Judah, and Ephraim has joined Syria in an attempt to conquer Judah and erect a puppet government there (7:1–2, 4–6). This Syro-Ephraimite coalition is also a threat to Assyria, and

⁵A. C. Gaebelein, *The Gospel of Matthew: An Exposition*, vol. 1 (New York: Our Hope, 1910), 35–36. Broadus mentions others who hold such a view, John A. Broadus, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1886), 12; Blomberg, *Matthew*, 59.

⁶Silva, *Misread?*, 78.

⁷Broadus, *Matthew*, 12; Page H. Kelley, *Proverbs–Isaiah, The Broadman Bible Commentary*, vol. 5 (Nashville: Broadman, 1973), 215; Otto Kaiser, *Isaiah 1–12: A Commentary*, trans. R. A. Wilson (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), 101.

Ahaz is contemplating sending to that foreign power for help. Isaiah meets Ahaz as he is inspecting the city's water supply to prepare for the impending siege and tells him his being "established" depends upon his trusting God rather than Assyria (7:7-9).⁸

Some time passes between 7:9 and 7:10, but the passing time has intensified the crisis rather than resolving it.⁹ Apparently Ahaz is still contemplating asking Assyria for aid. Isaiah commands Ahaz to ask for a sign, an indication that God will fulfill his promise to deliver Israel.¹⁰ Ahaz, feigning piety, refuses to ask for a sign, the occurrence of which might force him to alter his policies.¹¹ It is in response to this refusal to ask for a sign that Isa 7:14 is uttered. To properly interpret this prophecy, one must account for three terms: sign, virgin, and Immanuel.

Key Terms in Isa 7:14

Sign, אֵימָנָה, appears seventy nine times in the Old Testament. Many of those instances occur in the Exodus account, and refer to the "plagues" which God visits on Egypt.¹² While some have taken this to mean that Isaiah is promising a supernatural event, that is not necessarily true.¹³ In Gen 1:14, the heavenly bodies serve as signs. In the Exodus context, the Sabbath is a sign (Exod 31:13). Walton notes that four other Old Testament prophecies contain the promise of

⁸Kaiser, *Isaiah 1-12*, 213; R. E. Clements, *Isaiah 1-39, New Century Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 10; John H. Walton, "Isaiah 7:14: What's in a Name?" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 30, no.3 (Sep 1987): 289.

⁹Walton, "In a Name?" 289; Kelley, *Isaiah*, 214.

¹⁰John D. Watts, *Isaiah 1-33, Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 24 (Waco: Word, 1985), 96.

¹¹Andrew H. Bartelt, *The Book Around Immanuel: Style and Structure in Isaiah 2-12* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1996), 115; Kelley, 214.

¹²Watts, *Isaiah*, 96.

¹³Gaebelein, *Matthew*, 36; Blomberg, *Matthew*, 60.

a sign. In Exod 3:12, God authenticates his plan to use Moses as a deliverer with the sign that they will serve God upon the mountain. In 1 Sam 2:34, God's prophecy against the house of Eli is validated by the sign of his two sons dying in a single day. Likewise Jer 44:29–30 and 2 Kgs contain signs which could hardly be characterized as supernatural.¹⁴ As such, the term “sign” itself does not demand a supernatural occurrence. Instead, it is an event, normal or otherwise, which serves a divine purpose, to show fulfillment is underway.¹⁵ The sign event is mentioned beforehand, and is clearly evident to the recipient of the prophecy when it occurs.

The Hebrew word translated “virgin” in the AV, *העלמה*, also has a broad semantic range. While it is frequently used of virgins (Gen 24:43, Exod 2:8, Song 1:3), most see it as referring primarily to an eligible young woman who has reached sexual maturity. It makes no direct claim regarding the virginity of its referent and only means “virgin” by semantic overlap with adolescence, to which it primarily refers.¹⁶ Interestingly, it is not the usual term for virgin, *bethulah*, which Isaiah uses (23:4, 12; 37:22; 47:1; 62:5).¹⁷ Also noteworthy is the fact that the *העלמה* in the prophecy is articular, which has led commentators to suggest Ahaz knows the woman to whom Isaiah is referring, who is already pregnant.¹⁸ This is a reasonable suggestion,

¹⁴Walton, “In a Name?” 294.

¹⁵Ibid.; Kelley, *Proverbs–Isaiah*, 214; Watts, *Isaiah*, 96.

¹⁶Watts, *Isaiah*, 98; Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah* (Louisville: Knox, 2001), 66; Kaiser, *Isaiah*, 101; Watts, *Isaiah*, 98; Walton, “In a Name?” 292; Kelley, *Proverbs–Isaiah*, 215. Given the rarity of the term in the Old Testament, one wonders about the possible etymological fallacy involved in this definition, as Kelley clearly refers to the root to explicate the meaning.

¹⁷Kelley, *Proverbs–Isaiah*, 215.

¹⁸Ibid., 217; Walton, “In a Name?” 290–91.

for the pregnancy, birth, and naming of the child can hardly be a sign to Ahaz if he does not know the mother or the son.

The name of the child, Immanuel, also constitutes a significant aspect of the sign.¹⁹ It does not require that the child himself be divine, for names formed in compound with “el” are common in Hebrew history.²⁰ It does, however, indicate that the child will be born and named in a hopeful time, during which the parents will see the presence of God in the deliverance of Israel.²¹ But the sign of God’s presence is double-edged. While God is present in the short term to deliver, Ahaz’s obstinacy results in the child’s name also being associated with the threat of Assyrian invasion; God will be present to destroy Israel.²²

A Proposed Interpretation of Isa 7:14

The elements of the prophecy which can be analyzed regarding their meaning, the sign, the virgin, and the name, lead one to question the referent of “son.” On this issue more than the others, commentators disagree. Some suggest that no particular child is in mind, and that the prophecy is intentionally vague to focus attention on the name of the child, the true point of Isaiah’s pronouncement.²³ This is hard to believe. Both Walton’s argument regarding the nature of a sign, and the articular form of *העלמה* require that the child and his naming be clear events

¹⁹Walton, “In a Name?” 295; Kelley, *Proverbs–Isaiah*, 215.

²⁰Kelley, *Proverbs–Isaiah*, 216; Consider Samuel, Elijah, Elisha, etc.

²¹Ibid.; Childs, *Isaiah*, 67; Walton, “In a Name?” 300; Kaiser, *Isaiah*, 103.

²²Kaiser, *Isaiah*, 103; Kelley, *Proverbs–Isaiah*, 216; Bartelt, *Immanuel*, 115–116.

²³Kaiser, *Isaiah*, 103; Childs, *Isaiah*, 66.

which Ahaz witnesses. Three possible “sons” who meet these criteria have been proposed: Maher-shalal-hash-baz, Hezekiah, and a child of Ahaz’s harem.

The first possible son is that of Isaiah himself, Maher-shalal-hash-baz from 8:3. R. E. Clements argues this position, noting that only if the child is his can Isaiah control the naming of the child and his diet.²⁴ There are several problems with this interpretation. First, it links the sign to the actions of the prophet, something which was not a factor in previous instances of signs. Second, it ignores the fact that Isaiah’s children are consistently identified as his children in the surrounding context.²⁵ Finally, Isaiah’s wife, identified as “the prophetess,” has already borne children, which makes the appellation העלמה inappropriate.²⁶ As such, there seems little reason, other than a bias against the supernatural, to suggest that Isaiah’s son Maher-shalal-hash-baz is the “son” of Isa 7:14.

Others have argued that the son we know Ahaz to have had, Hezekiah, is the “son” in mind in Isa 7:14.²⁷ The article on העלמה indicates that Ahaz knows the girl, and because Ahaz is facing a serious threat, the birth of the child as his heir serves to reassure him about God’s continued plans for the house of David.²⁸ Kelley suggests that Isaiah is not predicting the birth of just any crown prince, but the ideal Messianic king, whom God would soon raise up, and that Isaiah cannot be blamed for his excessive optimism anymore than Paul can for expecting the

²⁴Clements, *Isaiah*, 86.

²⁵Kaiser, *Isaiah*, 102.

²⁶Walton, “In a Name?” 290–92.

²⁷Watts, *Isaiah*, 99.

²⁸Kelley, *Proverbs–Isaiah*, 217.

parousia to occur during his lifetime.²⁹ Yet the realities of Hezekiah's birth rule him out as the intended son. He is Hezekiah, not Immanuel, and Isaiah, who continued to minister into his reign, gives no indication that Hezekiah is Immanuel. Also, the age of Hezekiah does not fit the prophecy in 7:14; Hezekiah is born too early.³⁰ If the dates used by Archer are correct, Hezekiah would be past age twenty when Syria and Ephraim are destroyed, certainly well past the age when he could "know to refuse the evil and choose the good" (7:16).³¹

Thus, one final option is open to the interpreter, that argued convincingly by Walton. He argues that the son is born in Ahaz's own house, but is not Hezekiah. The *העלמה* is a member of the royal entourage, and is in fact a harem girl.³² Song 6:8 states that the king had queens, concubines, and many *העלמה*, and Walton suggests that the latter were distinguished not by their virginity, but by their not having yet borne children. Because she is not a queen, her child will not be the crown prince, and Ahaz will have little to do with the child. The sign is not that she will conceive in the future, for the idiom is verbless and therefore draws its present tense from the context; the girl is already pregnant when the sign is offered.³³ Judah will be delivered so swiftly that by the time the child is born the girl will literally name him "Immanuel," for she will be

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Kaiser, *Isaiah*, 102.

³¹Gleason L. Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 320–21.

³²Walton, "In a Name?" 296–300.

³³Ibid., 290; cf. Gen 16:10, Judg 13:3.

filled with hope and see God's presence in the deliverance. This girl, who has a hope and trust in the Lord, contrasts with Ahaz, who is a prime example of one who lacks faith.³⁴

This interpretation of Isaiah's prophecy in Isa 7:14 is rather convincing. It accounts for the language, the historical background, and the contextual events in the narrative, and as such seems to be the best interpretation a grammatico-historical approach can provide. Unfortunately, it seems to provide no help for the current study. At best it sheds little light on Matthew's use of Isa 7:14, and may in fact suggest that Matthew misused it. Silva notes that Matthew appears to be interpreting it allegorically, seeing a Messianic interpretation that is "something extra in the text."³⁵ To determine the validity of this assessment, one must turn to an examination of Matthew's use of Isa 7:14.

Matthew's Use of Isa 7:14

Matthew quotes Isa 7:14 in a context entirely different than that just examined. He states that Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ, is found to be with child before she has come together with Joseph, her espoused husband. Before Joseph can end their betrothal, an angel appears to him and tells him Mary has not been unfaithful, but that the Holy Spirit has given her a child to bear, whom he should name Jesus, because "he shall save his people from their sins"(1:21). It is to these events, then, that Matthew is referring when he states:

Now all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, "Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us" (Matt 1:22-23).

³⁴Bartelt, *Immanuel*, 115.

³⁵Silva, *Misread?*, 79.

The quotation is, of course, Isa 7:14, which has been shown to have a proper interpretation unrelated to Jesus of Nazareth. It is this discrepancy between the apparent meaning of Isaiah's pronouncement and the meaning Matthew seems to ascribe to it that has so perplexed interpreters. What exactly does Matthew mean by "fulfill"?

To answer that question, two areas will now be explored. First, an attempt will be made to determine Matthew's purpose in writing his Gospel, in the hope that purpose will aid one in understanding Matthew's use of Isa 7:14. Then, currently proposed methods for understanding prophetic fulfillment will be analyzed and critiqued.

The Purpose of the Gospel of Matthew

One should be cautious in attempting to identify a single purpose in a narrative work of the complexity of the Gospel of Matthew. It provides no direct statement of its purpose. Whatever contemporary purpose the author intended to achieve is, to some extent, veiled by his intent to record the events of the ministry and death of Jesus Christ. Despite this limitation, or perhaps because of it, the numerous themes apparent in Matthew have invited a plethora of proposals regarding its purpose.³⁶ Carson, Moo, and Morris list several of these suggested intentions, including "teaching Christians how to read their Bibles," "trying to evangelize Jews," training "Christians to sharpen their apologetics," and "aiming to refute incipient antinomianism."³⁷ However, two purposes seem to have the attention of current scholarship.

³⁶Blomberg, *Matthew*, 34; D. A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 80.

³⁷Ibid.

Either Matthew is written to provide a catechetical, liturgical, or administrative handbook for churches, or it is written a distinctively Jewish gospel to proclaim that Jesus is the Messiah.

The first view, that Matthew is written as some form of educational handbook, is grounded in the work of Kilpatrick, who saw the text as a liturgical handbook, and developed by Stendahl.³⁸ Stendahl bases his conclusion on numerous observations about the text. He sees it as a work similar to both the Qumran *Handbook of Discipline* and *The Didache*.³⁹ Between the preamble, chapters one and two, and the epilogue, chapters twenty six through twenty eight, it is divided into five teaching sections separated by some form of the phrase, *kai egeneto 'ote etelesen 'o Ihsouc*, “and it happened when Jesus finished,” each of which sections contains a narrative introduction which prepares the reader for the subsequent discourse. These sections deal, respectively, with ethics, apostleship, the Kingdom, church discipline, and eschatology. Four of the five sections are paralleled in either the *Handbook of Discipline*, *The Didache*, or both.⁴⁰ The systematized nature of the book, when coupled with its emphasis on specific casuistry and the duties of church leaders, leads Stendahl to conclude it is a text intended to prepare scribes for their roles in the church.⁴¹

Stendahl’s analysis of Matthew is open to criticism on several grounds. First, it presupposes that Matthew is a revision of Mark.⁴² As such, Stendahl considers himself justified

³⁸David H. Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew, The New Century Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 34–37; Stendahl, *School of Matthew*, 20–21.

³⁹Stendahl, *School of Matthew*, 23.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 25–27.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 29–30.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 27.

in only expecting the author of Matthew to be responsible for the discourse material. When the narrative portion of a section has no relation to the discourse which follows, the deviation from his theory is blamed on Mark. If Matthew does not depend on Mark, or if the author is as capable a craftsman as he appears to be, a purpose of the text should fit the text as a whole. Textual corruptions which Stendahl sees as a link between Matthew and *Handbook of Discipline* could be more reasonably attributed to the general corruption or “mixed” nature of the texts available at that time.⁴³ If chapters one and two are a preamble, it seems that the purpose of the book should be at least foreshadowed therein, but Stendahl demonstrates no such portent. Finally, David Hill’s comment, that any analysis of Matthew which ascribes both the birth narrative and the passion to the peripheral roles of preamble and epilogue certainly fails to understand the text as a whole, applies with devastating effect.⁴⁴

Most contemporary scholars maintain that the primary purpose for the book of Matthew is what has historically been perceived. It is primarily a Jewish apologetic, i.e., it attempts to demonstrate to Jews that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah.⁴⁵ This is, of course, a generalization about several distinct positions, but all agree that Matthew highlights Jesus as the Messianic King and addresses Jews. Kupp suggests that Matthew assumes Jesus is the Messiah in 1:1 rather than attempting to demonstrate or prove it.⁴⁶ Presumably, he is referring to the title “son of David.” However, in 1:20 Joseph is also referred to by that title, and no one suggests that Joseph

⁴³Hill, *Matthew*, 37.

⁴⁴Ibid., 38; Hill is not specifically rebutting Stendahl here, but the criticism is fitting.

⁴⁵Ibid., 43; Blomberg, *Matthew*, 34; Gaebelein, *Matthew*, 7; Broadus, *Matthew*, 1; Carson, Moo, and Morris, *Introduction*, 81.

⁴⁶David D. Kupp, *Matthew’s Emmanuel: Divine Presence and God’s People in the First Gospel*

is also the Messiah. It is clear that Matthew intends persuasion rather than presumption. The quotations of Old Testament prophecies are meant to prove that Jesus is the goal of God's prior revelation.⁴⁷ The genealogy and the visit by the magi demonstrate that he is a king, and his consistent references to kingdom imply the same.⁴⁸ While the kingship of Jesus is presented to all mankind, the gospel remains very Jewish.⁴⁹ The validity of the Law is upheld, the disciples are enjoined to keep the commandments and the Sabbath day, and the temple tax is honored. Based on these considerations, one can confidently say that convincing Jews that Jesus is the Messiah is at least a major purpose of Matthew, if not the primary purpose.

What implications does that conclusion have for Matthew's use of Isa 7:14? Presently, it only suggests that the use be appropriate to part of an argument meant to persuade a Jew that a crucified criminal is the Messiah. If Matthew is meant to provide such an argument, its Old Testament quotations, with their distinctive fulfillment formulae, should play a role therein.⁵⁰ To determine what that role entails, the issue of prophetic fulfillment must now be addressed.

Prophetic Fulfillment

It is safe to say that most believers take the concept of prophetic fulfillment for granted. They have what Waltke calls a "pre-critical" understanding of prophecy; they believe prophecy is

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 166.

⁴⁷Hill, *Matthew*, 39.

⁴⁸Gaebelein, *Matthew*, 8–9; David R. Bauer, "The Kingship of Jesus in the Matthean Infancy Narrative: A Literary Analysis," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 57, no. 2 (Apr 1995): 306.

⁴⁹Hill, *Matthew*, 42, 39.

⁵⁰Longenecker, *Exegesis*, 120.

fulfilled when the single historical event which the prophet predicted beforehand occurs.⁵¹ Texts like Matt 1:22–23 force scholars to look at prophetic fulfillment more carefully, and numerous understandings of prophetic fulfillment have developed to account for the seemingly multiple meanings in prophecy.⁵² Despite their diversity, they fall into three broad categories, moving across a spectrum of connection to authorial intent. Some concepts of prophetic fulfillment allow the interpreter to determine the meaning and the fulfillment of prophecy. On the other end of the spectrum are approaches which tie the meaning of fulfillment to the intent and words of the original author, though these usually allow some extrapolation. Between these two extremes are approaches to fulfillment which see the meaning of prophecy being expanded by some mediator between the author and the present interpreter, such as a redactor or later biblical author.

Interpretive Freedom

John Walton and Andrew Hill propose an understanding of prophecy which completely divorces fulfillment from the prophet. While the prophets understood the message they expounded, they had no specific fulfillment in mind. “The fulfillment was almost incidental.”⁵³ The prophecy might be appropriate to numerous events in history, any of which can be called fulfillments. The New Testament authors state prophecy is fulfilled when they note an “appropriate correlation” between the prophecy and the current event.⁵⁴ This concept of prophecy

⁵¹“Canonical Process,” 5.

⁵²Bock, “Evangelicals,” 210.

⁵³Andrew E. Hill and John H. Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 411-412.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 412; Kupp suggests a similar understanding lies behind Matt 1:22–23. Jesus fulfills Isa 7:14 in that Matthew recognizes the double-edged divine presence to which Isaiah’s sign refers.

is based upon Walton's understanding of the Jewish use of names. He notes that Jacob's name was the result of a certain aspect of his birth, but Esau's later wordplay on his name, which indicts Jacob as a usurper, goes uncorrected by Isaac. Thus, Isaac leaves the interpretation of Jacob's name up to Esau. In a similar manner, the prophets anticipated that future events would reveal the appropriateness of a given prophecy and the proper interpretation thereof. The original author could not intend the meaning hindsight reveals fully.⁵⁵

Several objections can be raised to this position. It requires an unjustified equation of the Hebrew concepts of prophecy and naming. It rejects the implication in the Law that the word of the Lord to a prophet contains both prediction and definite fulfillment. Deut 18:22 states a prophet could be tested based on whether the word he spoke came to pass, which makes it unlikely a prophet would consider the fulfillment of prophecy incidental. His life depended on it! This position also destroys the apologetic value of prophecy and fulfillment. While Hill and Walton argue the New Testament uses prophecy to support rather than prove its beliefs,⁵⁶ how can such a subjective concept of prophecy even provide support for a belief, when the belief itself determines the interpretation of the prophecy?

Richard Longenecker argues the New Testament authors interpreted prophecy in a similarly subjective manner. He identifies the hermeneutic which Jesus used, and which he taught to his disciples, with that used at Qumran and exemplified in the Habakkuk Commentary (DSH) of the sect there.⁵⁷ This hermeneutic is based on the belief that all Scripture has a veiled

⁵⁵Walton, "In a Name?" 298.

⁵⁶Hill and Walton, *Survey*, 412.

⁵⁷Longenecker, *Exegesis*, 54, 62.

eschatological meaning which cannot be understood by exegesis but requires divine revelation of the interpretation, the peshet. The biblical Daniel serves as a model for those who would properly interpret.⁵⁸ The leader at Qumran, the Teacher of Righteousness, saw his sect as the eschatological fulfillment of Habakkuk, and interpreted that text in DSH in that light.⁵⁹ So also Jesus saw himself as the Messiah inaugurating the eschaton and used peshet interpretation to appropriate Old Testament prophecies to himself. Matthew, a faithful disciple, used peshet interpretation in his formula quotations.⁶⁰

Longenecker's proposal, though it leaves the fulfillment of prophecy in the hands of the interpreter, has a distinct advantage over the position of Hill and Walton. It provides for a meaningful apologetic based on a common Judeo-Christian acceptance of peshet interpretation. Indeed, Jews expected the Messiah's arrival to explain obscure portions of the Torah.⁶¹ This allows the formula quotations, such as Matt 1:22–23, to play an important role in Matthew's argument to a Jewish audience.⁶² It remains a problematic position, however.

Longenecker's position remains open to the charge that it rejects the value of prophecy for authenticating prophets. It is even more vulnerable to questions regarding the validity of identifying the interpretive methods of Jesus and the disciples with those at Qumran. It appears that the only evidence for the peshet style of interpretation comes from Qumran. Longenecker

⁵⁸Ibid., 30, 28.

⁵⁹Stendahl, *School of Matthew*, 190.

⁶⁰Ibid., 195; Longenecker, *Exegesis*, 128.

⁶¹Ibid., 79.

⁶²Ibid., 120.

cites no other sources. Of the 159 articles pertaining to pesher in the ATLA religion online index, 129 were based on Qumran in general, and the remaining 30 on DSH. There is no evidence, then, that the interpretive method of this eschatological sect was widespread or generally accepted. If Matthew was aware of the method his apologetic purpose would weigh against its usage, for the isolated nature of the Qumran group suggests their beliefs were not successfully spreading. The text of Matthew also resists identification as pesher. The DSH does not contain the explicit fulfillment formulae found in Matthew.⁶³ Matthew's use of forms of *plhrow* for fulfillment, rather than *sugkrima* or *sugkrisin*, which the LXX consistently uses in Daniel for interpretation, suggests that he does not have a pesher type of fulfillment in mind. Particularly telling is Dan 5:26, in which both *sugkrima* and *plhrow* appear. The former refers to Daniel's interpretation, the latter to God finishing Belshazzar's kingdom.⁶⁴ Several of Brownlee's characteristics of pesher are also notably absent from Matthew's use of the Old Testament. He does not split words and interpret the parts, rearrange letters to form new words, or substitute similar letters within words.⁶⁵ Even when one grants an eschatological perspective in the early church similar to that at Qumran, the suggestion that Matthew uses pesher interpretation is not adequately supported.

⁶³Stendahl, *School of Matthew*, 183.

⁶⁴Matthew's familiarity with the LXX is unquestioned. See Blomberg, *Matthew*, 20; Stendahl, *School of Matthew*, 39–40.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, 192; Stendahl lists the criteria, but does not comment on Matthew's use or disuse thereof.

Authorial Intent

Those who hold that any concept of prophetic fulfillment must be tied to authorial intent fall into two camps. Some, aware of the difficulties of attributing New Testament fulfillment to Old Testament authors, escape the dilemma by positing dual meanings in individual prophecies. Walter Kaiser notes three arguments used to allow for double meanings. Scripture has two authors, and each may have a different meaning in mind for a given passage. Prophecy itself may inherently allow double meanings. The distinction made between the natural man and the spiritual man suggests that an interpretation fit for each may be found in passages of Scripture.⁶⁶

These justifications have allowed many to posit a *sensus plenior* to prophetic passages, if not Scripture in general. A single prophecy can have multiple fulfillments, some of which were not present in the mind of the human author. This does not allow the interpreter to say a prophecy means anything, for, while God can intend more than the human author intended, the divine intent is never less than or different from the intent of the human author. God's meaning for a particular verse is not disconnected from the grammatico-historical interpretation, but is an extension and development of that meaning beyond the understanding of the human prophet.⁶⁷ Broadus appeals to *sensus plenior* to explain Matthew's use of Isa 7:14, noting it is sometimes impossible to believe the prophet had the New Testament fulfillment in mind, and the fulfillment may not even seem reasonable to the modern reader.⁶⁸ Johnson suggests that a better term for this

⁶⁶Walter C. Kaiser, "The Single Intent of Scripture," in *Evangelical Roots: A Tribute to Wilbur Smith*, ed. Kenneth S. Kantzer (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1978), 123.

⁶⁷J. I. Packer, "Biblical authority, Hermeneutics, and Inerrancy," in *Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussions on the Theology and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til*, ed. E. R. Geehan (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1971), 146–148.

⁶⁸Broadus, *Matthew*, 11–12.

understanding is *referentes plenior*, because God has the same meaning, or sense, in mind for various individual referents. Thus Psalm 16 has one meaning, which applies to both David and Christ.⁶⁹

The *sensus plenior* understanding of prophecy has been criticized by those on both sides. Kaiser, convinced that the prophet's intent must match God's, argues that those who hold this view have abused the biblical texts, particularly 1 Pet 1:10–12, in their attempts to justify a distinction between the divine and the human meaning. He notes that this passage suggests the prophets understood that their prophecies were Messianic, that the Messiah would suffer, that he would then be glorified, that grace would come through him, and that he would come to later generations. The only thing which the prophets did not know was when he would come.⁷⁰ Kaiser argues that divorcing the divine and the human intent of prophecy ignores the implications of 1 Cor 2:9–16, in which the Holy Spirit is said to teach the words which the spiritual man speaks. Thus, comprehension is part of the prophetic role.⁷¹ Waltke notes that the concept of *sensus plenior* either opens the door for allegorical interpretation or implies the New Testament authors discerned the full meaning of prophecies by supernatural means, a hermeneutic which is inherently unrepeatable.⁷²

Kaiser's strident opposition to a *sensus plenior* position should not be mistaken for a rejection of the idea of multiple fulfillments to prophecy. Kaiser's primary point is that the

⁶⁹Bock, "Evangelicals," 213–14.

⁷⁰Kaiser, "Single Intent," 125–136.

⁷¹Ibid., 137.

⁷²Waltke, "Canonical Process," 8–9.

fulfillments are intended by the human author as much as the divine. Thus, authorial intent is the key to determining a prophecy's meaning, and all of its intended fulfillments. After all, what force can an argument based on fulfilled prophecy, such as Matthew's case for Jesus, have if it is disconnected from the author's intended meaning?⁷³ If the meaning of a passage, prophetic or otherwise, cannot be determined by standard exegesis, it cannot be determined at all.⁷⁴

Old Testament prophecies can have several fulfillments because they are promises more than predictions. Kaiser says the prophets deliver a promise which is "a generic unit with a series of parts, separated by time intervals, but expressed in a language . . . applied to the whole process."⁷⁵ Many prophecies carry a corporate sense intended by the prophets, which is manifested in their use of collective nouns, their references to offices, and shifts between singular and plural verbs.⁷⁶ The modern interpreter should therefore look for fulfillment like the New Testament authors do, looking for the continued occurrences of promise fulfillment intended by the authors.⁷⁷

Kaiser makes a strong case for his position. The Bible indicates that the prophets have a fuller understanding of their words than those who hold to a *sensus plenior* allow. His position

⁷³Walter C. Kaiser, "The Abolition of the Old Order and Establishment of the New: Psalm 40:6–8 and Hebrews 10:5–10," in *Tradition and Testament: Essays in Honor of Charles Lee Feinberg*, ed. John S. Feinberg and Paul D. Feinberg (Chicago: Moody, 1981), 21. Kaiser is not discussing Matt 1:22–23, but the role of prophetic fulfillment in New Testament argument.

⁷⁴Kaiser, "Single Intent," 138.

⁷⁵Walter C. Kaiser, "The Eschatological Hermeneutics of Evangelicalism," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 13, no. 2 (Spr 1970): 97.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, 96–97; Bock, "Evangelicals," 211–12.

⁷⁷Kaiser, "Abolition," 32.

also avoids the complete subjectivity of the positions of Longenecker and Walton, and allows the New Testament usages of prophecy to have the weight they were intended to have.

Unfortunately, his position remains incomplete in the light of specific prophecies. In what sense is Isaiah's proclamation of a sign to Ahaz a generic unit? The grammatico-historical method does not evince a Messianic meaning when applied to Isa 7:14, so by Kaiser's own standard the fulfillment cited by Matthew is incorrect. Kaiser fails to provide criteria to determine which prophecies still await fulfillment, or fulfillments. Perhaps another position will better address all the issues.

Canonical Interpretation

Mediating between those which emphasize interpretive freedom and those which stress authorial intent are positions which note that the meaning of prophetic texts is partially determined either by the shape later redactors have given them, or by the addition of books to the canon. In this case, the proper interpretation of Isa 7:14 is not determined by either the grammatico-historical meaning the prophecy carries, nor a correlation with events in the time of the interpreter. Instead, it must be determined in light of either Isaiah as it has been edited, or the complete canon which we now have. These approaches rely upon the current, canonical, shape of the text.

A canonical approach sees the form of the Old Testament contributing to its proper interpretation as much as the contents.⁷⁸ It posits the existence of redactors who assembled

⁷⁸John H. Sailhamer, "The Canonical Approach to the Old Testament: Its Effect on Understanding Prophecy," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 30, no. 3 (Sep 1987): 307.

individual works into a cohesive canon whose present state is authoritative.⁷⁹ These redactors believe the events in the texts foreshadow future events; they are types. John Sailhamer argues that the similarities between Gen 12:10–3:4, Gen 20:1–18, Gen 26:1–35, and Gen 41:1–Exod 12:51 are “part of a larger typological scheme intending to show that future events are often foreshadowed in events of the past.”⁸⁰ This does not deny that individual texts have a historical meaning or historical content. Instead, it suggests that the full meaning of biblical texts, and the proper interpretation of biblical prophecies, can only be seen as they are read in the light of the entire canon.⁸¹ Matthew, then, understands the Old Testament as the redactors intended him to, typologically rather than historically.

While the importance of the present shape of the canon for the interpretation of individual passages should not be ignored, one must be careful not to generalize this too much. Bruce Waltke, for example, states that all the Psalms are Messianic, that the human subject of all the Psalms is Jesus Christ.⁸² This interpretation of the Psalms seems overly narrow, given the universal blessing they have been for believers throughout history.

Unfortunately, a canonical approach still fails to account adequately for Matthew’s use of Isa 7:14. It relies upon the work of redactors to amplify the meaning of individual passages, but even those who propose numerous authors and redactors for Isaiah agree that Isaiah 6–8 is the

⁷⁹Childs, *Isaiah*, 4; Waltke, “Canonical Process,” 9–10.

⁸⁰Sailhamer, “Canonical Approach,” 307, 312.

⁸¹Waltke, “Canonical Process,” 9–10.

⁸²*Ibid.*, 7.

work of the original author, the prophet himself.⁸³ Also, much of the argument for any redaction of Isaiah is based on anti-supernaturalism rather than the literary conventions which Sailhamer observes in the Pentateuch and between the Law, Prophets, and Writings.⁸⁴ Matthew states authoritatively that Jesus is fulfilling the word spoken through the prophet, singular; no plurality of authors is in mind. If there has been no redaction, how can redactors have shaped the interpretation? It seems that Matthew must have been claiming the birth of Jesus Christ was what Isaiah had in mind, but that seems impossible in light of the interpretation of Isa 7:14.

A New Proposal

Given the failure of current concepts of prophetic fulfillment to adequately explain Matthew's use of Isa 7:14 in light of his purpose and the nature of biblical prophecy, a new proposal must be offered. It is new not in the sense of original, for it draws on ideas behind both the canonical approach and Kaiser's single intent approach. Instead it is new in the sense of synthetic, for it combines the proper observations of these two approaches with the distinction between text and event discussed by Sailhamer and applies them to an interpretation of Isa 7:14.⁸⁵

Contemporary interpretations of Isa 7:14 and modern understandings of prophetic fulfillment fail to explain Matthew's use of Isaiah because they all, with the possible exception of the canonical approach, share a common mistake. They identify the prophetic event during the

⁸³Bartelt, *Immanuel*, 133; Clements, *Isaiah*, 4.

⁸⁴Childs, *Isaiah*, 65; Clements, *Isaiah*, 6–7; cf. Sailhamer, "Canonical Approach," 308–313.

⁸⁵See John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical–Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 16–22.

life of Ahaz with the prophetic text of Isa 7:14.⁸⁶ Unless Isaiah prophesied via memo, this is an incorrect identification. It is a mistake to identify a “preliterary prophecy” with the text.⁸⁷

Several clues lead Matthew and the astute reader to conclude that there are actually two prophecies here, one spoken to Ahaz centuries ago, one inscripturated for succeeding generations.⁸⁸ Matthew’s language does not require him to interpret the speech of Isaiah, for it is the Lord who spoke, and what the prophets wrote God uttered.⁸⁹ The writing of this prophecy occurs certainly after the resolution of the Syro-Ephraimite crisis, probably after the death of Ahaz, and possibly near the end of Isaiah’s ministry.⁹⁰ Regardless, because the sign was to occur for Ahaz before Syria and Ephraim were destroyed, Isaiah recorded this prophecy after it had already been fulfilled. Yet he does not mention the fulfillment! In so doing, he delivers a new prophecy and intentionally leaves the door open for future fulfillment.

A canonical approach is needed to determine what shape this future fulfillment will take. Isaiah opens with a superscription, “The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah” (Isa 1:1). This serves as an introduction to the entire book, and characterizes it as a single

⁸⁶This imprecision has been followed to this point in the paper intentionally.

⁸⁷Childs, *Isaiah*, 80. He is referring specifically to 9:5–6.

⁸⁸See Archibald L. H. M. Van Wieringen, *The Implied Reader in Isaiah 6–12* (Boston: Brill, 1998), 85. Van Wieringen notes that Isaiah as character is a prophet to Ahaz, but as author he is prophet to the implied reader.

⁸⁹Packer, “Authority, Hermeneutics, and Inerrancy,” 141.

⁹⁰Depending upon the amount of authorship to be ascribed to Isaiah the Son of Amoz. See Clements, *Isaiah*, 4; Bartelt, *Immanuel*, 22, 133; Childs, *Isaiah*, 11. For the sake of argument, I assume full Isaianic authorship near the end of his ministry.

vision.⁹¹ It is as though the prophet, reflecting on his ministry, sees in his previous pronouncements a singular, unfulfilled prophecy. The words spoken to Ahaz with one meaning take on another when they are inscripturated, a meaning based on the book as a whole. A proper interpretation of Isa 7:14 must therefore be based not on history, but on the movement of the text.

That movement is Messianic and eschatological.⁹² Isaiah invites the reader to identify the son of 7:14 with the child of 9:6 and the shoot of 11:1, which are Messianic.⁹³ Later chapters in Isaiah become more apocalyptic, speaking more of the distant future and predetermined events, in which the Messianic hope will become realized.⁹⁴ Isaiah writes about the birth, the nature, the mission, the suffering, and the exaltation of the Messiah. Matthew sees this intention in Isaiah, and draws six of his formula quotations from the text. He is fully justified, then, in identifying the birth of Jesus as the fulfillment of the textual prophecy of Isa 7:14, because that fulfillment is the one intended by Isaiah when he wrote the text. Not that he had “Jesus of Nazareth” in mind, but his book is a book about the Messiah, and 7:14, which is dehistoricized by Isaiah’s neglect of mentioning its fulfillment, is therefore Messianic as well. In addition, while העלמה may have a range of meanings in its general usage, its first referent in the Old Testament is Rebekah, a girl specifically and repeatedly identified as virgin (Gen 24:16, 43). That Isaiah writing, and Matthew reading, of the promised seed should intend this connection is not unreasonable.

⁹¹Kaiser, *Isaiah*, 1; Kelley, *Proverbs–Isaiah*, 182; Watts, *Isaiah*, 3; Childs, *Isaiah*, 11.

⁹²Childs, *Isaiah*, 80.

⁹³Van Wieringen, *Implied Reader*, 244–45; Blomberg, *Matthew*, 60.

⁹⁴Clements, *Isaiah*, 22; Bartelt, *Immanuel*, 122.

This is a hermeneutic modern believers can imitate. By distinguishing between text and event, and by being alert for clues that the author intends a meaning beyond his immediate history, readers today can determine whether a seemingly historical prophecy awaits further fulfillment. Prophecies which are inscripturated with no mention of fulfillment will be fulfilled after the text is written, in a manner consistent with the theme of the text and the words of the prophecy, but not necessarily in a way affiliated with the original, spoken prophecy.

Conclusion

This paper has served primarily to defend the validity of Matthew's hermeneutic by arguing that he properly interpreted the text of Isa 7:14, and that he did so by interpreting it as part of the singular vision of the book, rather than an isolated prophecy spoken to Ahaz. It seems reasonable that such a hermeneutic may lie behind much of the New Testament's use of the Old, though it may not be as apparent in interpretations of prophecies with less obvious context. The interpretive method of Matthew is repeatable, but its applicability is clearly limited. It requires that the time of the writing of a text be known, and requires the reader to discern whether history after the text, or some other element within the text, constitutes fulfillment. But all divine prophecy requires fulfillment after God utters it, and when that has not happened yet, one can be confident that it will.

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