"The Virgin Will Conceive":
Typological Fulfillment in Matthew 1:18-23

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Introduction

What does Isaiah 7:14 mean in its own context? Does Matthew show awareness of this context? Does he respect it, and, for that matter, does he know what the word "fulfilled"? Is the validity of the way that Matthew quotes Isaiah 7:14 affected by whether or not the Hebrew term 'almah (אָלְמָה) refers strictly to a 'virgin'? In this essay, I will address each of these issues as I seek to demonstrate the thesis that Matthew was not claiming that the OT prophet was making a future prediction about Israel's Messiah when he wrote, "Now the whole of this has happened in order that was spoken by the Lord through the prophet.


3. Ulrich Luz (Matthew 1-7 [Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1989], 133-24) writes, 'Luther declared his willingness to pay the 'stubborn, condemned Jew' a hundred guilders if Isa. 7:14 really means 'yong woman' and not 'virgin. He owes them.'

4. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own. I deliberately seek to be as direct as possible in these translations. For the text form Matthew employed here, see Richard Beaton, Isaiah's Christ in Matthew's Gospel (SNTSMS 133; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 88-90.


7. Thus Rikki E. Watts, "Immanuel, Virgin Birth Proof Text or Programmatic Warning of Things to Come (Isa. 7:14 in Matt. 1:23)?" in In Prophecy to Testament (ed. C. A. Evans; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2004), 52: "Although it is widely recognized that Isa. 7:14 does not appear to predict a virgin conception, that as far as we can tell the oracle was not understood messianically in contemporary Judaism, and that Jesus' miraculous origin is hardly of major concern in the NT, the general opinion is that this has not prevented Matthew from ingeniously reading the 'Immanuel oracle as a prophecy of Jesus' virgin birth."

8. Luz (Matthew 1-7, 134) writes, "The traditional church interpretation... turns out to be evidence of Christian sin."
some who believe in the virgin birth (as I do) from accepting arguments regarding the context of Isaiah 7:14. My objective in this essay is to argue for an understanding of Matthew’s use of Isaiah 7:14 in terms of what he states in its OT context. That is to say, I am not arguing against the virgin birth by saying that Isaiah was not predicting it. Matthew’s testimony to the virgin birth of Jesus is sufficient for it to be established. The question for this study is how Matthew understands and claims fulfillment for the OT.

Affirming that when read in the broad context of Isaiah’s messianic expectation the text does contribute to Isaianic Messianism, I will nevertheless argue here that in the immediate context of Isaiah 7 the statement in verse 14 refers to something that will take place during the life of King Ahaz. While it may be true that the prophecy has a dual application, the interpretation I will present incorporates Matthew’s understanding of the Isaianic context. The crucial premise for my argument is that Matthew does not mean by fulfillment what many assume that he means (the realization of a future prediction). For example, Gundry writes that Matthew pursues a course of “transforming historical statements in the OT — those concerning the Exodus and the Babylonian Exile — into messianic prophecies.” If it were shown that Matthew does refer to things long ago predicted now coming to pass when he uses fulfillment language, my thesis would be falsified.

I am positing a clarification of one aspect of the range of meaning of the word “fulfill” (πληρώμα). Delling describes the places where the word is used for the fulfillment of prophecy as follows: “To complete; ‘to fulfill’ prophetic sayings which were spoken with divine authority and which can thus be called directly the words of God.” It is not clear, however, what sort of fulfillment he has in mind, and this complaint can be made against the relevant section of BDAG as well, where we read that the word is used of “the fulfillment of divine promises or promises.” The assessment of Davies and Allison is similarly vague: “Matthew’s formula is a development of the early Christian use of πληρώμα to indicate OT texts fulfilled in the story of Jesus.” So these authors agree that “fulfill” (πληρώμα) can be used to point to the fulfillment of OT texts, but is this a predictive fulfillment or a typological fulfillment? Delling makes reference to typological fulfillment in his discussion, but he cites only Luke 22:16 as a possible instance. This essay will propose that Matthew has typological fulfillment in view when he states that something has been fulfilled in 12:22; 21:5, 17, and 21. I know of no other treatment that has argued for the typological understanding I seek to set forth, not even studies of typology.

When we examine the five texts cited in the first two chapters of Matthew’s Gospel, we find that in their original contexts only Micah 5:2 might be construed as a prophecy about the distant future. And when Matthew cites this text he does not use a form of the word “fulfill” (πληρώμα) but introduces the citation with the words, “for so it has been written through the prophet” (Matt. 2:5). In the other four cases, the verb “fulfill” is used, and each time, in Hagner’s words, “the quoted texts themselves are . . . not even predictive of future events.” To draw the conclusion from this that Matthew has no regard for historical or literary context when he cites the OT would be to rush to a conclusion that assumes a meaning of the word “fulfilled” that Matthew might not, in fact, intend.
Predictive or Typological Fulfillment?

Concentrating mainly on the first text cited, Isaiah 7:14, I will argue that when Matthew speaks of the OT being “fulfilled” he refers to typological rather than predictive fulfillment.22 At the risk of oversimplification I offer these brief explanations of predictive and typological fulfillment.23

Predictive fulfillment would require that when Matthew states that something has been fulfilled, he means that the prophet was speaking specifically of the coming of the Messiah in the distant future. As Young put it in his commentary on Isaiah with reference to 7:14, “This is prediction, and in the birth of Jesus Christ it found its fulfillment.”24 Matthew does appear to cite some OT texts this way (e.g., Micah 5:2 in Matthew 2:5-6), but, as noted above, in this instance he does not use the verb “fulfill” in the citation formula. If we maintain that Matthew has predictive fulfillment in view when he refers to the OT being fulfilled in Jesus, the OT contexts create problems for our proposed interpretations. If Matthew has predictive fulfillment in view, Bultmann’s allegation might be on the mark: “the writers in the New Testament do not gain new knowledge from the Old Testament texts, but read from or into them what they already know.”25

As we consider typological fulfillment, we begin by noting with Alsup that “Much of what was later used to discredit typology was based on the misperceptions of typology as allegory stemming from developments within [the] patristic period.”26 Typological fulfillment is neither allegory nor sensus plenior,27 and in contrast to predictive fulfillment, it does not necessarily maintain that the prophet is looking into the distant future and prophesying about something outside his own historical context.28 Rather, typological fulfillment in the life of Jesus refers to the fullest expression of a significant pattern of events.29 Thus, typological interpretation sees in biblical narratives a divinely intended pattern of events. Events that take place at later points in salvation history correspond to these and intensify their significance.30 As Ellis writes,


23. For other brief descriptions of the relationship between typology and prediction-fulfillment, see Eichrodt, “Typological Exegesis,” 229; Knowles, Jeremiah in Matthew’s Gospel, 226.

24. Young, Isaiah, 1:394.

25. Bultmann, “Prophecy and Fulfillment,” 54. See also Richard T. Mead, “A Dissenting Opinion about Respect for Context in Old Testament Quotations,” NTS 10 (1964): 279–89, reprinted in Beale, ed., The Right Doctrine from the Wrong Texts, 153–69, esp. 154–55, where Mead argues that in Matt. 21:4 “the historical Old Testament situation is thoroughly disregarded.” Contrast Goppelt (Typos, 204), arguing that in their use of typology the NT authors respect the meaning of OT texts: “When Christian salvation is read into the OT, both the OT and the reality of Christ are distorted.”

26. John E. Alsup, “Typology,” in ABD 6:684. See Goppelt, Typos, 203–5, where he argues that “the Epistle of Barnabas . . . has abandoned the most important aspect of NT typology.”

27. Hagner seems to conflate sensus plenior with typology. He describes sensus plenior as “a fuller or deeper sense within the quoted material not understood by the original author but now detectable in the light of the new revelatory fulfillment” (Matthew 1–13, 161). Thus far what he is describing can be called sensus plenior, but in his next sentence he brings in what seems to be a better description as typology, drawing no distinction between the two. “This is not an arbitrary, frivolous misuse of the texts, as is sometimes claimed, but a reasoned practice that assumes a divinely intended correspondence between God’s saving activity at different times in the history of redemption” (emphasis added). The italicized words are similar to the definition of typology adopted here, emphasizing historical correspondence and eschatology. See the helpful discussion in Douglas J. Moo, “The Problem of Sensus Plenior” in Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon (ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 179–211, esp. 192: “The sensus plenior is to be distinguished from typology: the former has to do with the deeper meaning of words, the latter with the extended meaning of things.”

28. See France, Jesus and the Old Testament, 39–42. Some of the typology in the OT, for instance in Isaiah 40–66, is looking beyond its own historical context into the eschatological future.

29. Delling (“Napóéos,” in TDNT, 6:296) writes, “Fulfillment means that in the today of the NT God’s saving will achieves its full measure in the Christ event. The NT concept of fulfillment is summed up in the person of Jesus.”

30. E. Earle Ellis, “Foreword” to Leonhard Goppelt, Typos (trans. Donald H. Madvig; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982; reprint Wipf and Stock, 2001 [1939]), 1: Baker rejects “increase” or “progression” from type to antitype as a characteristic of typology (“Typology and the Chris-
"typology views the relationship of OT events to those in the new dispensation not as a 'one-to-one' equation or correspondence, in which the old is repeated or continued, but rather in terms of two principles, historical correspondence and escalation." 31

In order to argue that typological rather than predictive fulfillment is in view in the early chapters of Matthew, this study will focus primarily on Matthew's first use of the "fulfillment" formula. Other texts will be brought in as corroborating evidence after both Isaiah 7 and Matthew 1 have been examined.

The Context of Isaiah 7:14

Isaiah 7:14 identifies the historical time frame in which the sign of Immanuel was given: "And it came about in the days of Ahaz, son of Jotham, son of Uzziyah, king of Judah." 32 Isaiah 7:1-6 gives insight into the political context that the sign of

Immanuel addresses. The king of Syria, Rezin, has aligned himself with Pekah, the son of King Remaliah of Israel — the northern kingdom in the divided realm of Israel and Judah (7:1). Their plans to attack the southern kingdom of Judah (7:2, 5–6) in order to set up a puppet king there (7:6) were made known to Ahaz, the king of Judah, and these plans quelled him and his people (7:2).

Yahweh responds to Ahaz's fright by sending Isaiah to meet Ahaz (7:3). Isaiah is to reassure Ahaz that what Syria and Israel are planning will neither stand nor come to pass (7:7). Rather, the enemies of Judah will have their heads broken (7:8–9). Ahaz is urged to ask for a confirming sign from Yahweh that he might trust that the danger from the north will not materialize (7:10–11). Ahaz refuses to "test Yahweh" (7:12), but Isaiah sees the refusal to ask for a sign as an indication of faithlessness. He responds to Ahaz's refusal with a denunciation (7:13) and the sign of Immanuel (7:14).

The sign of Immanuel is not limited to the statement in 7:14; it continues through chapter 8. The statement in 7:16 roots the sign of Immanuel firmly in the historical context with which the chapter is dealing, "For before the boy knows to reject the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are terrified will be deserted." 33 This appears to mean that a child will be born in the near future, and that before this child is old enough to discern good and evil the threat from Syria and Israel will be resolved by the devastation of Ephraim, the northern kingdom of Israel, and Syria. This devastation seems to be the subject of 7:17–8:10, as the prophet describes the coming of Assyria against Syria, Israel, and then Judah. The devastation of the land appears to result in underpopulation because of the many slain (7:21–25), and it is apparently this scarcity of people that results in the abundance of food Immanuel will en-

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1. Ellis, "Foreword"; x; Goppelt, Typos, 202. Horbury ("Old Testament Interpretation in the Writings of the Church Fathers"); 766) writes, "Typology can be said to differ from allegorical interpretation in that it takes seriously the historical setting of an OT law or event; type and antitype identify some correspondence between different stages in a sacred history; whereas allegory elicits timeless truth from beneath the veil of the biblical 'letter,' which may be regarded as having no reference to history." The entry on "types" in the Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church (3rd ed.; ed. E. A. Livingstone; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), is similar: "In theology, the foreshadowings of the Christian dispensation in the events and persons of the OT ... A Christian type differs from allegory in that the historical reference is not lost sight of. Types are looked upon, however, as having a greater significance now than was apparent in their pre-Christian OT context" (549). So also Goppelt discussing Philo (Typos, 52). Eichrodt ("Typological Exegesis," 257) writes: "The so-called tupoi ... are persons, institutions, and events of the Old Testament which are regarded as divinely established models or rerepresentations of corresponding realities in the New Testament salvation history. These latter realities, on the basis of:[Peter 3:21, are designated 'antitypes'" (cf. 237, where Eichrodt distinguishes between allegory and typology).

32. In this discussion I am concerned only with the text of Isaiah as it stands. For a discussion of the redactional history of the text, see H. G. M. Williamson, "The Messianic Texts in Isaiah 1–39," in King and Messiah in Israel and the Ancient Near East (ed. John Day; JSOTSup 270; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998), 244–50.

33. Israel is referred to as Ephraim in 7:2, 5, 8, 9, 17, etc. Cf. Siegfried Hermann, "Ephraim (Person)," in AB 2:2351.

34. The head-shattering language may echo Genesis 3:15, calling Ahaz to trust in Yahweh's promise.

35. Whether Isa. 7:10–25 is continuing the encounter with Ahaz on the highway to the fuller's field (7:3) or represents a later proclamation does not affect the thesis of this study. From a literary perspective, the juxtaposition of the two oracles to Ahaz with no indication of a change in time or place would seem to indicate that the two are to be read together.

36. "The sign cannot refer to Jesus, argued Ibn Ezra, since it calls for verification in the near future" (Joseph Blenkinsopp, Isaiah 1:1–39 [Alb: Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 2000], 232). Some authors emphasize the difficulty of relating Immanuel to Isaiah's historical context in order to favor a more strictly messianic interpretation" (Joseph Jensen, "Immanuel," in AB 3:398).
joy when he has matured enough to know the difference between good and evil (cf. 7:15 with 7:22).\(^{37}\)

Significantly, there is no direct evidence that the child to be born will be from the line of David, and it appears from the near context that the child might be Isaiah’s (8:3),\(^{38}\) though this is disputed.\(^{39}\) The reference in Isaiah 8:18 to Isaiah and the children given to him being signs and portents in Israel fits with the three children named (Shear-jashub, Immanuel, and Mahær-shalalhash-baz) being his.\(^{40}\) The relevance of the birth of the child to the threat from Syria and Israel is seen again in 8:3-4, where Isaiah fathers a child (8:3), and the word comes that “before the child knows how to call, ‘my father,’ or, ‘my mother,’ the wealth of Damascus [Syria, 7:8] will be carried away along with the spoil of Samaria [Israel/Ephraim, 7:9] before the king of Assyria.” This statement appears to elaborate upon 7:16, and if that is the case, it is tempting to identify Mahær-shalal-hash-baz (8:3) with Immanuel (7:14; 8:8, 10).\(^{41}\)

The identification of Mahær-shalal-hash-baz with Immanuel appears to be corroborated by 8:5-7, where Rezin and Pekah are still in view (8:6), and the promise that they will be swept away by the king of Assyria is restated in 8:7. The overflowing flood of the Assyrian army will not stop in the north, however, but will continue down into the land of Judah, the land of Immanuel (8:8).

The promise to Ahaz from 7:7 that the plan of Syria and Israel “will not stand (יהן נ)” was verified by the promised sign of Immanuel (7:14), and this appears to be restated in 8:10. Following the breaking (יהון) and shattering (יהון) of the peoples (8:9; cf. the breaking of Ephraim [יהון] in 7:9), the promise comes again: “but it will not stand because of Immanuel (יהון רפ ב; יהון) (8:10).\(^{42}\) This restates the assurance to Judah that they will not be over-


38. Ibn Ezra, followed by Rashi, identified the young woman as Isaiah’s wife and Immanuel as his son” (Blenkensop, Isaiah 1-39, 233). Cf. Von Rad, Old Testament Theology, 2173-74. This was Jerome’s view as well, and H. G. M. Williamson in 1998 called it “increasingly popular” (“The Messianic Texts in Isaiah 1-39,” 245; see too the bibliography he cites in note 15).

39. For an argument against this view, see Walton, “Isa 7:14: What’s in a Name?” 295-97. Cf. Blenkensop, Isaiah 1-39, 233: “by now the scholarly debate on the designation of the woman and the name of the child practically defies documentation.” Rikki E. Watts concludes, “the text as it stands offers nothing specific. . . . It is also worth noting that if Shear-jashub is not himself the remnant, nor Mahær-shalal-Hash-Baz the spoiler, then it is unlikely that this second child is himself somehow ‘God with us’” (Immanuel, 96).


42. Most English translations follow the Greek translation of the OT at 8:10, rendering come by Syria and Israel: the plan will not stand because God has given a sign to his people — Immanuel, God is with us — and this sign guarantees his promise for them. The words of Isaiah 8:12, “Do not call conspiracy all that this people calls conspiracy, and neither fear nor tremble (plural verbs) at what he (singular pronominal suffix, referring to Ahaz in 7:27) fears,” could be referring to the conspiracy between Syria and Israel to unseat Ahaz. Since Ahaz has apparently rejected Isaiah’s message (7:12-13), Isaiah commits his words to his disciples (8:16) and resolves to wait for Yahweh (8:17), noting that he and his children are “signs and portents in Israel from Yahweh of hosts who dwells on Mount Zion” (8:18).

Thus, it seems that in the context of Isaiah 7-8, the promise of the birth of a child who will be named Immanuel is a sign that guarantees God’s promise that the plan concocted by Syria and Israel to dethrone Ahaz and replace him with one they can control will not stand. God’s people were threatened and uncertain. God promised through Isaiah that they would be delivered from these circumstances, and the promise of deliverance was guaranteed by the birth of a child. This child would be born to a mother who could have been a virgin when the promise was made, or perhaps she was simply a young woman of marriageable age — depending upon the meaning of the Hebrew word ‘almah (יהון).’ But there is no indication in the text that this woman would not conceive through intercourse with a man.\(^{43}\) If, as I have suggested, the birth of Mahær-

יָחָלַשׁ not as I have it here, “Immanuel,” but along the lines of, “It will not stand, for God is with us” (ESV, HCSB, NASU, NIV, NRSV, NLT, TANAK, etc.). These translations do not follow the Greek translation at 8:8, however, where most transliterate “Immanuel,” but the TANAK renders, with the Greek, “with us is God.” BHS indicates no distinction in the spacing of יָחָלַשׁ — it is spaced the same way in 7:14, 8:8, and 8:10. The Vulgate, like most ENs and LXX, has “Immanuæl” at 7:14 and 8:8 and “nobiscum Deus” at 8:10. The Targum interprets “your land, O Immanuel,” in 8:8 with “your land, O Israel,” and “because of Immanuel (or, because of God is with us)” in 8:10 as “for God is our help (or, because in our help is God, our God).”

43. Joseph Jensen, “Immanuel,” in ABD 3:395. Gundry suggests that “we should have expected ‘almah if marriage were contemplated before conceiving and giving birth. The adjective יָחָלַשׁ emphasizes the state of the ‘almah’s pregnancy, as if it had already begun; so that we must understand the conceives and bears in her status as ‘almah. . . . Second, if marriage is not contemplated, ‘almah is used in the sense of a young married woman. To this writer’s knowledge, such a meaning for ‘almah has never been demonstrated” (The Old Testament in St. Matthew’s Gospel, 226-27). Gundry’s suggestion that pregnancy is viewed as if it has already begun is countered by Jensen (“Immanuel,” in ABD 3:305), “the young woman . . . will conceive (or: has conceived — the Hebrew does not clearly specify . . .).” Similarly, Gregor (Isaiah, 69). The usage of ‘almah is, of course, endlessly disputed. It seems to me that neither of Gundry’s objections derive from an exegetical analysis of Isaiah 7, but from the prior conviction that Isaiah is predicting what would take place 700 years later when Jesus was born of the virgin Mary. Rikki E. Watts writes, “Did Isaiah envisage this as a miraculous virgin birth? It is now widely agreed that
shalal-hash-baz is the realization of the promise, then the child appears to have
been conceived when Isaiah "drew near to the prophetess" (8:3). This is my
reading of the passage, but my argument is not falsified if the child is Ahaz's, or
if one of the other proposed interpretations is adopted. The child's name, Im-
manuel, is apparently a reflection of the confidence of those who believed that
God would keep his promise and protect them by his presence. In the wider
context, there are pointers toward a child to be born who will be Mighty God
(9:6),

but the child immediately in view in Isaiah 7:14 is a child whose birth
will be relevant during the life of Ahaz. As Oswalt puts it, "To suppose that
the sign did not occur in any sense until 725 years after the fact flies in the face of
the plain sense of the text."

Taken as a whole, Isaiah is a book fraught with Messianism, and this can be
poignantly felt in chapters 7-11. It might be that Matthew read Isaiah 7:14 more
in light of the many messianic statements in Isaiah and the OT than in the light
of its immediate context in chapter 7, and if so, then perhaps Matthew read Isai-
ah 7:14 as a predictive prophecy of the Messiah.

But this interpretation does not appear to fit either Matthew or Isaiah. Matthew's
fulfillment formulas in chapters 1 and 2 do not support this suggestion, as will be seen below, and in contrast
to many passages in Isaiah that bear no explicit historical connections, there are many historical notices in chapters 7 and 8 which serve to anchor Isaiah
7:14 to a particular point in Israel's history. Taken in the context of Isaiah 7, it

is hard to deny that verse 14 directly predicts a child who will be born during
rather than after Ahaz's life, and perhaps this accounts for the fact that Isaiah 7:14
"does not appear to have been widely cited in early Jewish literature and never in
connection with a messianic figure."

Williamson rightly states, "In the immediate context the prediction of [Immanu-
elah's] birth is securely tied to the prevailing historical circumstances of the reign of Ahaz, so that a long-range messianic prediction is ruled out, at least at the primary level."

If it is the case that the sign applies to Ahaz's day, and if Matthew respected the Isaiahic context, what did he mean that the birth of Jesus "fulfilled" what was spoken in Isaiah 7:14?

The Context of Matthew 1:22-23

By opening with the statement that Jesus the Messiah is the son of David, son of
Abraham, the Gospel of Matthew presents Jesus as the fulfillment of the promises
to David and Abraham (1:1). A genealogy containing three sets of fourteen is then presented (Matt. 1:1-17).

This genealogy is geared to engender an expectation that the last days have come. "The new, Messianic age has dawned."

In the last days, all that was spoken by the prophets would be fulfilled. As Davies and Allison note, "The early church found in the Scriptures the declared will of divine providence and believed that the life of Jesus in its every detail completely fulfilled that will. Thus arose the NT's distinctive sense of fulfillment and its distinctive ἐνθημεστος-formulas." All of history was to culminate in the coming of the Kingdom of God. Yahweh would judge the nations from Jeru-
usalem, the capital of the globe to which the nations would stream to learn his Torah (Isa. 2:1-4). Gloom would be banished, dawn would bring great joy, and the oppressor would be "broken as [in the past when God had delivered his people through Gideon] on the day of Midian" (Isa. 8:23-9:3 [ET 9:1-4]).

The letters of the name David according to gematria add up to fourteen (7 + 4 + 6 + 1
4), and, perhaps also of significance, in the three sets of fourteen there are six sets of seven, Me-
siah Jesus being the "head of the seventh seven, the seventh day of history, the dawn of the eternal sabbath" (Davies and Allison, Matthew, 1:62). Davies and Allison cite parallels (1 Enoch
93:1-10; 91:12-17), but note that "Matthew expressly writes of three fourteen, not six sevens." See too the comments on gematria, ibid., 163-64, where they conclude, "The name, David, is the key to the pattern of Matthew's genealogy.

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47. Beaton, Isaiah's Christ in Matthew's Gospel, 91.


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51. Davies and Allison, Matthew, 1:62.

52. Foukes ("The Acts of God," 343) writes that the prophets and historians of Israel "could assume... that as he had acted in the past, he could and would act in the future."
wilderness would become as the Garden of Eden (Isa. 51:3). With all these blessings would come a "branch from the stem of Jesse" (Isa. 11:1). His reign would be marked by the Spirit of Yahweh (11:2), resulting in just judgment (11:3-5) and the end of the age-old enmity between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent (11:8). There is little indication that these promises would not all be realized together, so the already/not yet dimension of the Kingdom Jesus brings is a surprise for all who are looking for the consolation of Israel.

After the genealogy, the opening chapters of Matthew show the recapitulation of the history of Israel in the life of Jesus. Following Matthew 1:18-25, which will receive more attention shortly, Jesus is presented as in danger from an evil ruler, much as Moses was. Just as the nation found itself in Egypt, and just as Moses was to command Pharaoh to release God’s son Israel, so now God’s son Jesus is summoned from Egypt. Just as there was weeping when the nation went into exile, so there was weeping after Herod slaughtered the infants of Bethlehem. Just as a voice in the wilderness hailed the return from exile, so John the Baptist prepared the way for Jesus. Just as the nation was tested in the wilderness before passing through the Jordan to possess the land, Jesus was baptized in the Jordan before being tested in the wilderness (see Matt. 1-4). At the head of these correspondences (and several others) between the life of Jesus and the history of Israel stands the account of Jesus’ birth in Matthew 1:18-25.

In Isaiah’s day, Judah was under threat from Syria and Ephraim. In the days Matthew narrates in his opening chapters, the nation is under threat from Rome, whose constant presence testified to the nation’s ongoing subjugation.54 In Isaiah’s day the king, though a descendant of David, was faithless. In the days described in the first chapters of Matthew, the king over Jerusalem is also faithless, but now he is not even Jewish, to say nothing of the fact that he is not a descendant of David.54 On the name of the child Carter observes a possible connection, "As with Isaiah’s Immanuel, the child Jesus is a sign of resistance to imperial power. The name Immanuel contests imperial claims that Domitian is a deus praesens (Status, Siv. 5.2.170) or theos empoikhés.55 It seems that in Isaiah’s day a believing remnant hoped to experience the fulfillment of the promises of God. Isaiah encouraged this remnant to believe that the birth of a child of promise was God’s way of guaranteeing that he would deliver those faithful to him (Isa. 8:20). A believing remnant within Israel persisted in the first century,56 and for them too, the birth of a child of promise is a sign that God is going to keep his promises. Indeed, the early Christians saw all the promises confirmed in Jesus (cf. 2 Cor. 1:20).57

In addition to the historical correspondences between the details of Isaiah 7 and the time of the birth of Jesus, there is also an aspect of escalation, whereby the meaning of these events is intensified by the coming of the Messiah and the period in salvation history that begins with his arrival. Just as the significance of the time is increased, so also are the details from Isaiah 7 to Matthew 1. When we compare Isaiah 7 with Matthew 1, we see that whereas a woman who, perhaps, was a virgin conceived a child when Isaiah drew near (Isa. 7:14; 8:3), Joseph “was not knowing her until she bore a son; and he called his name Jesus” (Matt. 1:25). So while the woman in Isaiah 7:14 may or may not have been a virgin, Matthew testifies that Mary was and makes it explicit that she remained so until after Jesus’ birth. Whereas the deliverance guaranteed by the birth of a child in Isaiah has to do with the threat from Syria and Ephraim, the deliverance guaranteed by the birth of the child in Matthew goes deeper: “he will save his people from their sins” (Matt. 1:21).58 The child of which Isaiah speaks will be named “Immanuel” because his birth testifies to God’s faithfulness to his promise not to abandon his people Israel (e.g., Deut. 31:6).59 The child whose birth Matthew narrates, by contrast, will represent in his own person God’s presence with his people (cf. Matt. 28:20).60

On this understanding, the sense in which Matthew’s narrative fulfills Isaiah 7:14 has everything to do with historical correspondence and escalation.

56. See esp. Luke 2:25-35, 36-38, where Simeon and Anna are representatives of this remnant who welcome the birth of Jesus.
57. Carter (“Evoking Isaiah,” 510-11) points out that these correspondences “are part of a larger pattern of God’s ways of working.” He cites themes of “resistance and the refusal to trust God’s saving work, of imperial power as a means of divine punishment, and of God’s saving the people from imperial power,” and notes that “similar themes … could be elaborated in relation to the exodus, to prophetic views of Babylon’s roles … to the Deuteronomic view of exile … to a Maccabees’ perception of Antiochus Epiphanes as punisher of the people and as the one from whom God will liberate the people … and to Pompey’s violation of Jerusalem and the temple.”
58. Similarly Ricki E. Watts, “Immanuel,” 213: “In this case, at least ‘fulfilment’ seems better understood in paradigmatic terms: if Yahweh had acted in the past, so he would act again. Matthew sees Isa. 7:14 not as a proof-text for some long-forgotten virgin birth … but instead as a scriptural elucidation of the significance of Jesus, which elucidation works only if Jesus is already believed to be the climax of Israel’s history.”
59. For more on this theme in the Pentateuch, see James M. Hamilton Jr., “God with Men in the Torah,” WET 65 (2003): 113-33.
60. Cf. also Carter, “Evoking Isaiah,” 511.
whereas it has to do with predictive fulfillment only when Isaiah 7:14 is read as a contribution to Isaianic Messianism rather than as a contribution to Isaiah 7. Thus, Matthew can be seen to be respecting the context of Isaiah 7–8 and claiming that Isaiah 7:14 is indeed fulfilled (typologically) in the birth of Jesus. Davies and Allison write, “Later Judaism apparently did not understand Isa. 7:14 messianically; at least we have no positive evidence that it did. What Jewish traditions we do have connect the verse with Hezekiah (Justin, Dial. 43; Exod. Rab. on 12.29; Num. Rab. on 7:48). Thus the application of Isa. 7:14 to the Messiah is evidently peculiarly Christian.”56 This peculiarly Christian reading of Isaiah 7:14 is informed by the peculiar events of the birth of Jesus.

If this proposal is on the mark, the nuance of the Hebrew word ‘almah, so much discussed, is irrelevant. Taking Matthew’s citation of Isaiah 7:14 as an instance of typological fulfillment, we see that there is historical correspondence and escalation, regardless of whether the Hebrew word refers strictly or primarily to a virgin. Thus, the charge made by Bultmann and many others that “the Old Testament text only becomes of use when it is understood in a sense contrary to the original wording, according to the LXX text”57 is evincedated. The whole discussion of what ‘almah means, particularly in Proverbs 30:19 and Song of Songs 6:8, turns out to have been a red herring. Isaiah 7:14 does not predict that one day 700 years in the future the virgin Mary will give birth to the Messiah, nor does Matthew claim that it did. Matthew saw a particular pattern of events in Isaiah 7–8, and he claimed that this pattern of events was fulfilled in the corresponding, intensified pattern of events surrounding the birth of Jesus at the dawn of the new age. In the life of Jesus the pattern came to its fullest expression.

Typological Fulfillment in Matthew

If we reject typological fulfillment as a hermeneutical key with which to unlock the fulfillment language in Matthew, we are forced either to ignore the OT context or to conclude that “Matthew shows little awareness that the prophets might actually have been delivering oracles of crucial relevance to their original audiences.”58 With this perspective, it would indeed be difficult to “remove the interpreter’s frustration with Matthew’s use of the OT,”59 and this would support the conclusion that Matthew’s exegetical methods are illegitimate and should not be practiced by modern interpreters of the Bible. If, on the other hand, typological fulfillment is practiced in the NT, might the NT’s interpretations of the OT serve as an example of how modern interpreters should read the text?

The following brief explanations are offered in an attempt to embrace the perspective that might have driven Matthew’s “fulfillment” formulas. Hosea 11:1 is famously cited in Matthew 2:15. In its OT context, this verse is manifestly not a prediction that one day the Messiah will be summoned from Egypt. Rather, the reference in Hosea 11:1 to God’s son is a reference to the nation, as the statements preceding and following the words Matthew cites show. Before the words “and out of Egypt I called my son” (Hos. 11:1b) are the words, “When Israel was a youth I loved him” (11:1a). Then 11:2a reads, “They called to them, thus they went from before them” (so BHS), or, as most English translations have it (taking into account the Greek and Syriac translations), “Just as I called them, so they departed from my presence.” This seems to be a reference to the nation of Israel being brought out of Egypt and sustained in the wilderness only to rebel against Yahweh, who had redeemed them. Matthew neither introduces this quotation because he is unable to find a better “proof-text” nor because he has failed to understand what Hosea was saying. Rather, Matthew cites these words because just as the nation, the collective son of God, was led out of Egypt by the pillar of fire and cloud to failure in the desert, so Jesus, the singular Son of God, was summoned out of Egypt and then led out to the desert by the Spirit to succeed against temptation (Matt. 4:11–11).60 The historical circumstances correspond to one another, but the stakes are higher and Jesus is found faithful where the nation grumbled and rebelled.61 The fulfillment of Hosea 11:1 in Matthew 2:15 is typological, as the elements of historical correspondence and escalation show.

France describes Jeremiah 31:15 as a “note of gloom in a chapter of joy.”62

66. For a similar assessment, see Daniélou, From Shadows to Reality, 156–60. Against what I have articulated, John H. Sailhamer writes, “When Matthew quoted Hos 11:1 as fulfilled in the life of Christ, he was not resorting to typological interpretation. Rather, he was drawing on the sensus literalis from the book of Hosea and it, in turn, was drawn from Hosea’s exegesis of the sensus literalis of the Pentateuch” (“Hosea 11 and Matthew 2:15,” WTJ 63 [2001]: 91). I am sympathetic with Sailhamer’s presentation, particularly with his argument that the OT is thoroughly messianic. He appears to have reservations about the legitimacy of typology (he refers to Matthew “resorting to” it again in his conclusion [96]). For somewhat more harsh objections to his argument, see Dan McCartney and Peter Enns, “Matthew and Hosea: A Response to John Sailhamer,” WTJ 63 (2001): 97–105.
The chapter is replete with announcements that Yahweh will bring his people back from exile, but that good news necessarily entails the bad news — exile is coming. So, for example, there are references to those who survive the sword (31:2), to rebuilding and return to joy (31:4-5), to a return to the land (31:8), to the fact that the one who scattered Israel will shepherd them (31:10). But all of these promises of restoration assume that destruction is coming. Thus, it is not precisely correct to say, “In citing Jer. 31:15, Matthew has chosen the one verse in Jeremiah that is negative in outlook.” The promises of restoration in the future are simultaneously promises of destruction in the present, as the broader context of Jeremiah shows. The reality of these coming woes accentuates the relief guaranteed by Yahweh's everlasting love for his people (31:3). Verse 15 is in this same vein: a matriarch of Israel, Rachel, is depicted as a figurative mother weeping for those slain in the devastating judgment that will come, but this is immediately followed by the call not to weep (31:16) because the future is hopeful (31:17).

The historical correspondences here are not hard to recognize. The historical situation is anything but “thoroughly disregarded.” In Jeremiah's day, the devastation wrought by the enemies of the people of God is going to be swallowed up in the merciful salvation Yahweh will work for Israel. At the birth of Jesus, the wicked king Herod calls for the cruel murder of the babies of Bethlehem, but the lamentation deepens the joy felt that the Messiah escapes to bring salvation. And the salvation he brings is enriched because the pain has made it more precious. Jeremiah's promises of the return from exile included God raising up David their King to lead them (30:9). The people returned to the land and waited for the Messiah, and Matthew proclaims that now, at long last, Jeremiah's oracles of the return from exile are fulfilled in the coming of Jesus. Jeremiah is pointing to the future restoration of God's people in these chapters, but the words cited in Matthew 2:18 are not predictive words. Rather, it seems that Matthew is pointing to the correspondence between the weeping of the nation as it was sent into exile and the weeping of the women of Bethlehem when their babes were slain. Just as the nation was exiled, Jesus was exiled to Egypt, from which, like the nation, he would be summoned to conquer the land. From these historical correspondences — and from the increased significance of the Messiah's conquest of the land — the fulfillment in view in Matthew 2:17-18 appears to be of a typological rather than a predictive stripe. If we reject typological fulfillment in these Matthean “fulfillment formulas,” we must conclude with Knowles, “Matthew's use of Jer. 31:15 does not take account either of its biblical context or of its predominant interpretation in the Jewish schools and synagogues.” Since Matthew is seeking to persuade his contemporaries, and since there is evidence of typological interpretation in both the OT and in early Jewish literature, this way of viewing the material seems more plausible.

There is no OT text that states that the Messiah will be called a Nazarene, prompting many explanations of the words, “that what was spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, that he shall be called a Nazarene” (Matt. 2:23). Eusebius connects the villages of Nazareth and Cochabba to those who were able to trace their Davidic descent (Hist. eccl. 1.7.14), which might indicate that families of the line of David had used words like “branch” (יִשְׂרָאֵל) (Isa. 11:11) and “star” (גֶּרֶם) (Gen. 49:10).

68. Knowles, Jeremiah in Matthew's Gospel, 38.
69. Pace Knowles, Jeremiah in Matthew's Gospel, 41: “references to the context of Jeremiah 31 prove altogether elusive”; and Soares Prabhu, Formula Quotations, 385: “scarcely anything in the narrative links up with the quoted text.”
(Aramaic, ד[result]/מך) (Num. 24:17) to name their villages because of the messianic significance of these terms. The fulfillment formula in Matthew 2:23 might thus refer to the way that the hope for a shoot from the root of Jesse is realized. Most explanations of this fulfillment formula appeal in some way to the word "branch" (יהודה) in Isaiah 11:1. The lack of a text predicting what Matthew claims here makes it difficult to see this instance of the fulfillment formula in Matthew as the fulfillment of a prediction about the future from the standpoint of the OT prophet. The "fulfillment" is, again, pointing to the broader hope for the Davidean "branch," and the move to Nazareth corresponds to this hope reflected in the naming of the village. When Jesus moves to Nazareth, the hope for the Davidean branch reflected in the naming of the village comes home.7 When this is correct, Matthew is claiming that Jesus is the fulfillment of the prophecies of a "branch man." A typological understanding — emphasizing historical correspondence and escalation — would then be able to incorporate a text like Zechariah 6:11-12, where the high priest Joshua is heralded as "the Branch."

Conclusion

I have argued that Isaiah 7:14 points to a child who will be born during the lifetime of King Ahaz, and that Matthew respects the historical context of this prophecy in Isaiah 7, claiming in Jesus a typological rather than a predictive fulfillment of Isaiah 7:14. The chief characteristics of typological interpretation are historical correspondence and escalation, and I have argued that this approach can help us understand the "fulfillment" language in Matthew 2:15, 17-18, and 23. This seems to have been a common method of interpretation, as we can see from the words of Matthew's contemporaries. For instance, it seems that Matthew was not the only early Christian to use "fulfillment" language to point to typological fulfillment. Bock argues that the citation of Isaiah 61 in Luke 4:17-19 as being "fulfilled" in Jesus (4:21) is an instance of "typological-prophetic" fulfillment.75

75. This explanation of Matt. 2:23 would appear to be strengthened by Carter’s observation ("Evoking Isaiah,” 506): “An audience elaborates the gaps or indeterminacies of a text to build a consistent understanding not by supplying whatever it likes but by utilizing the tradition it shares with the author. The common traditions provide the audience with a frame of reference, the ‘perceptual grid’; for its interpretive work. Precisely this phenomenon is evident through the Gospel’s opening genealogy (Matt. 1:1-17). The list of names (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, etc.) requires the audience’s elaborative work by evoking its knowledge of much more extensive and common traditions.”

76. Bock, Proclamation from Prophecy and Pattern, 108-11, 276. See also the fulfillment language in Luke 2:16, where Jesus says that he will not again eat the Passover until it is “fulfilled” in the Kingdom of God. Dollinger writes, "The passover is a reminder of deliverance from Egypt; along these lines the OT and the eschatological events are perhaps contrasted as type and antitype” (“προειδολογία,” in TDNT, 6:296).

77. LAB 1213, as translated by Donald J. Harrington in OTP 2:120 (original italics removed and emphasis added). I gladly thank Preston Sprinkle for alerting me to this reference. The nearest parallel to this in Pseudo-Philo seems to be 56a, "And in that time the sons of Israel desired and sought for a king, and they gathered to Samuel and said, ‘Behold now you are old, and your sons do not walk in your ways. And now appoint over us a king to govern us, because the word has been fulfilled that Moses said to our fathers in the wilderness, saying, ‘Appoint from your brothers a ruler over you.’” The text alluded to, Deut. 17:15, is a command rather than a prediction. See the other comparisons with earlier events in Israel’s history in Pseudo-Philo cited in n. 73 above.