

Fulfilling the Scriptures:

What It Means When It Says Jesus Fulfilled the Scriptures, and Why It Matters (With Special Focus on Isaiah 7:14 and Matthew 1:27).

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I. INTRODUCTION

What do I mean by my title? Well, often times a reference is made to how Jesus fulfilled somewhere around 360-400 Old Testament prophecies (the number varies). He did indeed do that. However, Old Testament prophecy and its fulfillment aren't nearly as simple as something being predicted to happen, and then on one later occasion it did. Most of these nearly 400 prophecies you'll find are not like that at all, and I will go into why most of them are not useful in making an apologetic argument for believing in Jesus. The biggest reason is simply that, for one to accept most of them, they must be accepted on the testimony of Jesus or the New Testament authors, who we wouldn't be listening to if we didn't already believe Jesus was the Christ. That doesn't mean that there aren't a number that are clear explicit prophecies of future events that specifically spoke of Jesus and were fulfilled by Him (there are). And it doesn't mean He is not the Christ (He is). What it does mean is that when we look to the ways that Jesus has "fulfilled" the scripture, we need to know exactly what we are saying.

It is common to see it argued that Jesus' virgin birth was specifically what Isaiah was talking about in Chapter 7, verse 14, and therefore it is direct evidence that Jesus is the Messiah. After all, if it was undeniably prophesied hundreds of years before that the Messiah would be born of a virgin, and Jesus was born of a virgin (the only such birth I am aware of), then that is a key argument. However, it is also common to see it argued by detractors, quite well indeed, that that is a bad interpretation of Isaiah. However, detractors take this point too far, for even if they are right, this doesn't disprove Jesus' Christhood in the least. It just means many of us have been looking at Matthew 1:27 in the wrong light. It is true that you can't look at what Isaiah actually says in the whole prophecy and say it's speaking directly of Jesus. I will argue my point there in a little bit. First, however, I must explain why I am not saying that Matthew was wrong in saying

Jesus fulfilled Isaiah's words.

NOTE: I use the terms "Christ" and "Messiah" interchangeably because they mean the same thing. I used "Christ" in the title because of the connotations the term "Messiah" has (namely, that people often associate the term with the one the Jews expected to come, which Jesus certainly was not, more so than the one the Old Testament actually speaks of).

II. SCRIPTURE IS “FULFILLED” IN MANY DIFFERENT WAYS

Grant my argument just for now, that Isaiah wasn't speaking, directly at least, about the Messiah. If I am correct, how can it be that Matthew was not wrong? It is my belief that Matthew was fully aware of what Isaiah 7:14 was saying. A young woman was to give birth to a child 700 years before Christ, a child who would not yet be fully grown when the Assyrians attacked Judah. However, many Old Testament prophecies have relevance beyond what they initially speak of. Though they are literally fulfilled, they also have secondary fulfillments that Jesus fulfills. For every literal, straightforward prophecy about the Messiah (e.g Psalm 110, Isaiah 11 and presumably 53, Micah 5:2), there are many prophecies that were previously fulfilled, and even statements that made no future predictions, that Jesus fulfilled with His life, death, and resurrection. This interpretation wasn't new with Christians; prophecies in scripture were looked at this way centuries earlier. Author Rick James refers to this ancient Jewish practice as “telescoping” (134).

We see this laid out for us many times in the New Testament. In John 13:18, Jesus cites Psalm 41:9, which says “even my close friend in whom I trusted, who ate my bread, has lifted up his heel against me” (NASB), as being fulfilled by Judas betraying Him. Now, in context, it's clearly a Psalm of David speaking of His own military conquest, and this would have been clear to any Jewish reader who skeptics say the Gospel authors were trying to fool. In fact, the Psalm cannot be literally about Jesus: the Psalmist explicitly says that he has sinned against God (verse 4). But while it literally spoke of David in that day, part of it, the passage Jesus cited, also applied to Jesus, and this was not an accident. The words written in the God-breathed Psalms were put there as they were on purpose. There was more to it than just the literal words. Likewise, Isaiah's prophecy had its literal, direct, surface fulfillment long before Jesus (as I will explain in

part II). However, the words also applied to the coming Messiah, and this, I believe, was done on purpose (which comes up later).

To say that a scripture is “fulfilled” in no way needs to say that there is a prophecy to come true. According to James 2:23, Abraham, by being willing to sacrifice Isaac, “fulfilled” Genesis 15:6, that “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness” (NASB). The point there was that Abraham had faith, was called righteous by God, and proved it with his actions. There was no actual prophecy. He just simply confirmed that God was right to call Him righteous for his faith, because he responded with righteous action. And “pléroó” is used here, as well as in Matthew 1:22, John 13:18, and many others (“pleroo”).

There are plenty of examples of this. I’ll cite just a few more. According to John 19:36 Jesus’ death, in which no bones were broken, fulfilled the scripture that “not one of his bones will be broken” (NIV). The NIV, in the footnotes, cites Exodus 12:46 and Numbers 9:12 (in which God commands the Israelites not to break the bones of the Passover lamb), as well as Psalm 34:20 (which says that the bones of the righteous man will not be broken). The first two had nothing at all, in their original context, to do with the Messiah (and Psalm 34 almost certainly was referring to more than just Jesus, although He of course is the only truly righteous man). But there was more to those passages than just what they literally spoke of. Jesus is our “Passover lamb” (1 Corinthians 5:7). Passover foreshadowed Him. Matthew says that Hosea 11:1 was fulfilled when it says “out of Egypt I have called my son” (NIV). That wasn’t even a prediction – it was God speaking in the past tense about Israel. However, Matthew saw the parallels. And it’s no surprise he would. In Luke 24:45, we learn that Jesus opened the minds of His disciples to understand the scriptures. You don’t need the Holy Spirit to understand that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2), where Jesus was born. I would imagine that

Jesus was enlightening them to all the ways the scripture hinted at Him indirectly, like in the examples above.

Now, for the skeptics, why do I believe this is what Matthew is saying (as opposed to him being wrong)? First of all, like I said regarding “telescoping,” it wasn’t that unusual of a practice to see prophecies as having additional meaning and fulfillment beyond the text. In this case, Matthew points out that the child would be called “Immanuel.” Jesus wasn’t named Immanuel; Matthew was well aware that he was named Jesus (well, actually, probably Yeshua or something like that, but Matthew is written in Greek, so, Jesus). To the skeptic, I would point out that, if one were to misread a prophecy, to somehow see just that single verse and be completely ignorant following verses that make it abundantly clear that the child was to be born long before Jesus (which I go into in Section III), it would be odd for him to see that the child would be called Immanuel and not think “maybe this is saying the baby will be named Immanuel, which doesn’t fit here...” However, Matthew points to how the name Immanuel happens to mean “God with us.” Although nowhere in the Gospels does any one call Jesus “Immanuel,” and with the exception of John 20:28 it almost if not always Jesus Himself who implies He is God (like John 8:58), it makes sense that the Holy Spirit would show Matthew the reference to “Immanuel” and its significance. After all, Jesus is, in His very nature, God (Philippians 2:6). So therefore, even though I don’t think Isaiah 7:14 literally speaks of the messiah being born of a virgin (and therefore it is useless in proving Jesus is the Messiah), I still don’t think Matthew was wrong.

III. WHY ISAIAH 7:14 IS NOT A LITERAL PREDICTION OF THE MESSIAH

This is probably the more important question, but I had to address, initially, why I am not saying Matthew or the bible are wrong, despite what I am about to argue here. I have made the claim that Isaiah 7:14 is speaking of a child to be born during Isaiah's time, not Jesus (though God did inspire the prophecy so that it would also indirectly speak of Jesus, as Matthew points out). Now, I will explain why I say that.

Isaiah 7:14 wasn't made in a vacuum. There's a lot more to the prophecy than that verse; it takes up most of the second half of the chapter. Here are verses 13-17, enough to make my point, from the NASB translation:

"Listen now, O house of David! Is it too slight a thing for you to try the patience of men, that you will try the patience of my God as well? Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel. He will eat curds and honey at the time He knows enough to refuse evil and choose good. For before the boy will know enough to refuse evil and choose good, the land whose two kings you dread will be forsaken. The LORD will bring on you, on your people, and on your father's house such days as have never come since the day that Ephraim separated from Judah, the king of Assyria. While the boy in question, Immanuel, is still a child, the King of Assyria will come."

If you read on, it speaks of the havoc he will wreak. Now, was there a king of Assyria in Jesus' time? No. The Assyrian empire was defeated in approximately 612 B.C (Gascoigne). There hadn't been a king of Assyria for 600 years before Christ. However, in the late 8th century B.C, the king of Assyria did come, just as Isaiah predicted. This is recorded in history, as well as in scripture. It was the Assyrians who took the northern kingdom into exile (2 Kings 17:6), and who, by the end 8th century B.C, conquered large portions of Judah (2 Kings 18:13), culminating in the final showdown as they beseiged Jerusalem (2 Kings 18-19). By this time Ahaz was replaced by his son Hezekiah, who, unlike Azah, was faithful to God. This is when God, overnight, killed 185,000 Assyrian troops as they slept (2 Kings 19:35), effectively ending the

Assyrian conquest of Judah.

Just as Isaiah predicted, the king of Assyria came, and although he didn't conquer all of Judah as had occurred in the Northern Kingdom, he did conquer much of it for a time. And the Assyrians were known for their wanton and gratuitous cruelty towards those they conquered. To say that this conquest and multi-year siege in Jerusalem was unlike any tribulation Judah would have seen since Israel split-up would not be a stretch. All these things were fulfilled by the coming of Assyria, just as directly and explicitly Isaiah said. None of these things could have happened in Jesus' time – there were no king of Assyria. If we say Isaiah is speaking specifically of Jesus, then we have to say that the rest of the prophecy was false. However, since the bulk of what he said, without any real dispute, came true, all we have to assume to make his prophecy accurate (and therefore of God) is that at some point during that time, an unnamed woman somewhere in the entire kingdom of Judah gave birth to a boy named Immanuel, one who was just a child when the Assyrians attacked. That's not a very risky assumption...

What then of the fact that she is a "virgin"? Actually, a good deal of controversy revolves around that. The Hebrew word "almah" can mean virgin, but it can also mean simply a young woman. It is perhaps like how in earlier times, people may have referred to any unmarried woman as a virgin. It's not quite the same thing, because the assumption there, whether accurate or not, was that they were actual virgins, but the general point used wasn't that the person was a virgin but that they were unmarried. If "almah" can simply refer to a young woman, that might be how Isaiah meant it here. The Revised Standard Version (RSV) translates it this way. The NIV keeps the "virgin" translation" but makes a note that it can mean young woman.

Now, let's say for the sake of argument that this speaks of simply a young woman. How then can it refer to a literal virgin in Matthew? After all, the Greek "parthenos" isn't so

ambiguous – it means virgin (Yehoshua). Well, if God inspires scripture, then I would simply say that He probably inspired Isaiah to use “Almah” because it is ambiguous. When Isaiah says it, in Hebrew, he is saying a young woman. However, it also, indirectly and secondarily, refers to a virgin, being Mary. Had Isaiah meant to say virgin and only virgin, he could have used “Betulah,” a common word that simply means virgin (Singer). Alternatively, had he meant to just say “young woman,” there are any number of words he could have used, like “na’arah” or “yaldah” (“girl”). Instead, he used the word that can have either meaning, which need not be coincidence.

It is also possible that Isaiah was speaking of a literal virgin. Aside from possibly claiming there would be a virgin birth in his day (which would be pretty outlandish), he could also be saying that one who was a virgin at the time he was speaking would, in the near future, give birth. After all, he was speaking directly to an audience (he says “house of David,” though literally at the moment he was telling it to king Ahaz). He could have been saying “in a fairly short time, when one who is now unmarried will be married, a child will be born, and then...” Interestingly, the Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Old testament completed about two centuries before Christ (All About God Ministries), translates “almah” in Isaiah 7:14 as “par-thay-nos” (partheneos), which does mean “virgin” (Yehoshua). Of course, the Septuagint wasn’t inspired by God, but it definitely doesn’t hurt the case of those who argue that Isaiah is speaking of a literal virgin. Conveniently for me, I’m not making any argument based on the meaning of “almah.” The point is, this baby was born before the Assyrians attacked the Northern kingdom, which means it was not Jesus.

One last thing that has been brought up is this: it could be suggested that just some unnamed woman having a child in the near future isn't much of a sign. This is true, but in the

context of the passage, that is actually quite appropriate. God told Ahaz to ask a sign from Him (presumably through Isaiah), and he refused, which brought about the rebuke of Isaiah, and in the course of this, he made the prophecy. The inane unremarkability of this "sign" was probably the point. Ahaz was not faithful to God, and to not ask for a sign when told to was, as Isaiah put it, to "try the patience of my God also" (NIV, verse 13). "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign..." (ibid, verse 14), and that sign was not a sign at all. The destruction would come without a sign, without any clear warning. Isaiah, the most poetic and figurative of the prophets, was making a point, something to the effect of "you won't ask for a sign, then your sign will be something utterly useless to you; not a sign at all."

IV. CONCLUSION

There's not too much to say here. Why can't we use these kinds of prophecies as evidence that Jesus is the Messiah? Why is it wrong to use the argument that "Jesus fulfilled 396 prophecies" (or whatever it is) as evidence that He is who He says he is? Because, to do so is to engage in blatant circular reasoning. If you just read what Isaiah said about Immanuel, on its own there is nothing to show it that also speaks of the Messiah. We only know about the hidden meaning, the "telescoping" that is going on, because the Holy Spirit revealed it to the apostles and we trust their testimony. But we only trust their testimony because we believe they are the apostles of Jesus, and that He is the Son of God, the Christ. If Jesus didn't say that Psalm 41:9 had meaning beyond how it applied to David, it would not be seen by anyone as a reference to the Messiah that was fulfilled in Him. We only believe that it is so because He said so and we believe Him. However, we wouldn't believe Him if we didn't believe He were the Messiah, which means anyone who does not grant that he is the Messiah would not accept this as evidence that He is the Messiah (since to do so requires you to already believe that He is the Messiah).

There are straightforward prophecies that Jesus fulfilled. The Messiah to be from Bethlehem (Micah 5:2), and Jesus was. The Messiah (or at least, a "suffering servant") would be innocent, yet would die and suffer to atone for the sins of the people, and would be raised to life (Isaiah 53). A supernatural coming king was predicted in Zechariah 9:9 to come on the colt of a donkey, and Jesus did just that in Matthew 21:1-5. Granted, they don't all explicitly say "Messiah," but keep in mind that the idea of a "Messiah" was largely an idea of the intertestamental period developed from these less detailed predictions made in the scripture. The scripture spoke in broken pieces about this figure (who was Jesus) that to come, a figure occasionally called in scripture (and regularly referred to later) as the anointed one, the Messiah.

Anyway, you don't need to believe that Jesus is the Messiah to see these prophecies and those like them as being Messianic. You can come to that conclusion and still not be a Christian, yet if you do come to that conclusion, you can point to the fact that Jesus, as recorded in scripture, did fulfill them.

NOTE: This only deals with the argument over whether or not the things the bible says about Jesus, if true, fulfill His role as the Messiah. Whether or not the scriptures are accurate in what they say about Him – which I obviously believe they are - is a whole different discussion. Of course, if one can show Jesus is not the Messiah, then the scriptures which speak of Him as such are shown false, so this is very relevant.

Jesus is the truth, the way, and the life. He is the Lord. The only question is, how do we best show this to others?

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---. RSV (including Apocrypha)

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