

HOW MANY VIRGIN BIRTHS ARE IN THE BIBLE? (ISAIAH 7:14): A PROPHETIC PATTERN APPROACH

PAUL D. WEGNER*

There is little doubt that Isa 7:14 and its reuse in Matt 1:23 is one of the most difficult problems for modern biblical scholars. For centuries, attempts have been made to provide a clear rationale as to how Matthew can pick up this passage from Isaiah which appears to have its own historical context and apply it to Jesus. The idea that this passage refers to Christ goes back at least as far as Tertullian (c. AD 160–c. 220), an early North African Church father who stated the following:

But we need to show why the Son of God had to be born of a virgin. It is to be expected that the one who was going to inaugurate a new birth had to be born in a new way, and Isaiah had foretold that the Lord would give a sign of this. What was the sign? *Look, a virgin shall conceive in her womb and bear a son.* Accordingly, a virgin did conceive and bore *Emmanuel*, God with us.¹

However, it is very difficult to see how Matthew could apply this verse to Jesus given its present context. NT scholars understandably emphasize the NT's use of this Isaianic text and its fulfillment in Jesus. Dr. Walter Kaiser's emphasis on the "single intent of the author" seems to demand such a reading. However, the more one examines Isaiah 7 and its near context, the more problems arise. Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard nicely summarize the problem:

Though Kaiser has done an admirable job of defending his case in several problematic texts, we doubt that he has succeeded in each instance, or that it is possible to demonstrate that the OT writers did in fact intend all the meaning that NT writers later found. We suggest there are instances where NT authors found meaning in an OT text that the OT author did not intend.²

If they are correct, then at least three questions need to be addressed: (1) How is Isa 7:14–17 related to its context? (2) How is Isa 7:14–17 fulfilled in Christ? and (3) Is there more than one virgin birth in the Bible?

* Paul Wegner is professor of Old Testament at Phoenix Seminary, 4222 E. Thomas Rd., Suite 400, Phoenix, AZ 85018.

¹ *Isaiah Interpreted by Early Church and Medieval Commentators* (translated and edited by Robert Louis Wilken; The Church's Bible; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007) 98.

² William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (2d ed.; Dallas: Word, 2004) 121.

I. HOW IS ISAIAH 7:14–17 RELATED TO ITS CONTEXT?

Isaiah 7 is a part of the “so-called” Isaianic Memoir (6:1–9:6 [ET7])³ and describes events surrounding the Syro-Ephraimite War (735/34–733/32 BC).⁴ Toward the middle of the eighth century BC, Assyria was beginning to expand its empire; part of its goal was to reach Lebanon. Syria (Aram) recognized Assyria’s intent and realized that Assyria would view them as a major road block to reaching their goal. Syria and Israel (called Ephraim)⁵ therefore formed an alliance to repel the Assyrians. This new alliance hoped to gain further strength from the surrounding nations, but Ahaz, the king of Judah, was unwilling to join forces with them. This placed Syria and Israel in a precarious position (i.e. Assyrian forces would likely come from the East and North, while Judah, a possible enemy, lay to the South). Thus the coalition of Syria and Israel was getting ready to descend upon Jerusalem to neutralize the possible threat to their plans. This is the historical context of Isaiah 7. The first two verses of the chapter provide the setting of the oracle by summarizing the events that led up to the Syro-Ephraimite War. The readers are made aware that the coalition’s hopes would not be realized, but Ahaz and his people were not privy to this information and were terrified at the prospect of an attack on Jerusalem by the much stronger coalition of Syria and Israel (v. 2).

God sends Isaiah and his son Shear-jashub to Ahaz to encourage him to trust in Yahweh as their protector and not to fear the coalition, but Ahaz demonstrates an amazing lack of trust in Yahweh. God then provides four additional means of encouragement for Ahaz to trust him; nevertheless, Ahaz ultimately calls on Assyria for help against the coalition instead. The four means of encouragement are:

1. *God’s assurance that the coalition will not harm them (vv. 3–7).* God sends Isaiah and his son to Ahaz to the conduit of the upper pool, most likely while Ahaz was monitoring their water supply to make sure Judah could sustain a prolonged attack from Syria and Israel. But God’s message to Ahaz

³ The “so-called” Isaianic Memoir (6:1–9:6 [ET7]) is enclosed in a larger, palistropic structure whose parallel units span Isaiah 5–12:

1. Song of Judgment (5:1–7)

2. “Six Woes” Pronounced upon the Wicked (5:8–24)

3. “Uplifted Hand” Oracle: Culminating with the Destruction by Assyria (5:25–30)

4. *The Isaianic Memoir* (6:1–9:6)

3’. “Four Uplifted Hand” Oracles: Culminating with the Destruction by Assyria (9:7–10:4)

2’. “Woe” Pronounced upon Assyria (10:5–34) that Gives Rise to a Restoration of Judah (11:1–16)

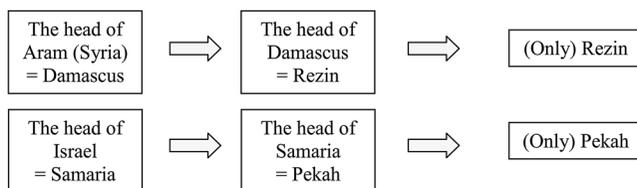
1’. Song of Thanksgiving (12:1–6)

⁴ See also 2 Kgs 16:5–9; 2 Chr 28:5–21; B. Oded, “The Historical Background of the Syro-Ephraimite War Reconsidered,” *CBQ* 34 (1972) 153–65; H. Donner, “The Syro-Ephraimite War and the End of the Kingdom of Israel,” in *Israelite and Judaeon History* (ed. J. H. Hayes and J. M. Miller; OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977) 421–34; M. E. W. Thompson, *Situation and Theology: Old Testament Interpretations of the Syro-Ephraimite War* (Sheffield: Almond, 1982); Roger Tomes, “The Reason for the Syro-Ephraimite War,” *JSOT* 59 (1993) 55–71.

⁵ Named after its main tribe or after the Ephraimite highlands because they may have been the only part of the Northern Kingdom left at this point.

is: do not fear these two countries, for their power is nearly depleted (they are pictured as smoldering coals of a burned out fire). Their elaborate plan of capturing Jerusalem, tearing down its walls, and setting up the puppet king, Tabe'el, will not come to pass.⁶

2. *A circumlocution* (vv. 8–9).⁷ This interesting figure of speech was intended to encourage Ahaz to take his eyes off of the two powerful countries sitting on his northern border and to realize instead that they are controlled by two mere men. God can certainly take care of them (cf. Isa 2:22). Once he has done that, the two countries will no longer be a threat. The structure is as follows:



Why be afraid of two mere men?

This section ends with an interesting play on the Hebrew word *'Aman*: in the Hiphil form it carries the nuance “to believe” but in the Niphal form it means “to stand” or “to be established.”⁸

3. *An offer of a sign* (vv. 10–13). Again God sends Isaiah to Ahaz (the timing between these two messages is uncertain) to offer Ahaz the chance of requesting a sign from God. The sign is only limited by Ahaz’s imagination, and a merism is used to indicate its breadth (i.e. “as deep as Sheol” or “as high as heaven”). Paul Kruger notes that the essence of a “sign” (*’ôl*) is that it is “a means of transmitting information. The content of this information is determined by the context in which it is used.”⁹ The sun, moon, and stars are used as “signs” to signal the change in times and seasons (Gen 1:14). The rainbow is a “sign” signifying to mankind that God will not flood the earth again (Gen 9:12–13, 17), but the word can also be used merely to signify a banner or standard (Num 2:2). Most of the eighty occurrences of the word “sign” signify some type of miraculous event (Exod 7:3; Deut 4:34; 6:22; 7:19;

⁶ Hans Wildberger, *Isaiah 1–12: A Commentary* (trans. Thomas H. Trapp; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) 293–94, 300–301. Cf. W. F. Albright, “The Son of Tabe’el,” *BASOR* 140 (1955) 34–35; E. Vogt, “Filius Tab’el,” *Bib* 37 (1956) 263–64; A. Vanel, “Ṭabe’el en Is. VII 6 et le roi Tubail de Tyr,” *VTSup* 26 (1974) 17–24.

⁷ See R. E. Clements, *Isaiah 1–39* (NCBC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 85.

⁸ R. Smend, “Zur Geschichte von מַחֲזִיקֵי,” *VTSup* XVI (1967) 284–90; John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1–39* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) 193. See esp. J. T. Willis for various English translations (*Isaiah* [The Living Word Commentary on the Old Testament; Austin, TX: Sweet, 1980] 154–55).

⁹ Paul A. Kruger, “מִטָּעִים (#253),” *NIDOTTE* 1.331.

13:2 [ET 1]; 26:8; Judg 6:17; 2 Kgs 20:8; Neh 9:10; Isa 38:22; etc.). But it can also refer to a common, everyday occurrence that has significance because of what it means, foretells, or predicts (Exod 31:13, 17; Josh 2:12; 4:6; Isa 20:3; Ezek 4:3). In Isaiah 7:12, the sign could have been anything from the miraculous to Ahaz's mere whim, but the emphasis would clearly have been on the miraculous (since it was intended to convince Ahaz of God's protection). Ahaz feigns trust by stating that he does not need a sign to believe Yahweh and that accepting God's sign would be testing him;¹⁰ God through Isaiah quickly and easily rebuffs this. Verse 13 suggests that Ahaz's indecision had been frustrating to his people, but his lack of faith will prove to be trying to God's patience as well. A subtle change takes place in these verses for the sign was offered "from the LORD your God," but Ahaz's lack of faith demonstrates that he does not trust in Yahweh; Isaiah therefore asks at the end of the verse if Ahaz will also try the patience of Isaiah's God (implying Yahweh is obviously not Ahaz's God).

4. *The sign from God (vv. 14–17).* Ahaz has rejected the divine sign and yet God still provides one; however, this one may not be to his liking since it will be God's choice. Nevertheless, God's sign is extremely gracious. The sign will contain both positive (vv. 14–16) and negative (v. 17) elements. The first part of the sign (v. 14) has three parts: a young woman is pregnant, she will have a son, and she will call his name "Immanuel" (most likely to be understood as: "God [is] with us").¹¹ Already Ahaz has some reason to be encouraged, for children will continue to be born (at least one) and the mother must have some reason to express such significant trust in God.

The identity of the *עִלְמָה* is highly uncertain. This is not the place for a thorough discussion of the meanings of the two Hebrew words *עִלְמָה* *ʿalmâ* and *בְּתוּלָה* *betûlâ*, but a summary of the relevant evidence is crucial for a proper understanding of Isaiah 7:14.¹² It is difficult to differentiate all the specific nu-

¹⁰ Possibly implying the events surrounding Exod 17:7 or Deut 6:16.

¹¹ A rare use of the preposition *כַּ* can mean "against" (Josh 8:14; Ps 94:16), so that the name "Immanuel" may also mean "God is against us."

¹² The relevant bibliography includes: *HALOT* 1.166–67; 2.835–36; *NIDOTTE* 1.781–84; 3.415–19; *TDOT* 2.338–43; R. G. Bratcher, "A Study of Isaiah 7:14," *BT* 9 (1958) 97–126; G. Gerleman, "Die sperrende Grenze: Die Wurzel *ʿlm* im Hebraischen," *ZAW* 91 (1979) 338–49; C. H. Gordon, "*ʿAlmah* in Isaiah 7:14," *JBR* 21 (1953) 106, 240–41; E. Hammershaimb, "The Immanuel Sign," *ST* 3 (1951) 124–42; A. Kamesar, "The Virgin of Isaiah 7:14: The Philological Argument from the Second to the Fifth Century," *JTS* 41 (1990) 51–75; M. Rehm, "Das Wort *ʿalmah* in Is 7,14," *BZ* 8 (1964) 89–101; A. Schoors, "Is *liv* 4," *VT* 21 (1971) 503–5; J. Scullion, "An Approach to the Understanding of Isaiah 7:10–17," *JBL* 87 (1968) 289–93; J. E. Steinmueller, "Etymology and the Biblical Usage of *ʿalmah*," *CBQ* 2 (1940) 28–43; B. Vawter, "The Ugaritic Use of GLMT," *CBQ* 14 (1952) 319–22; T. Wadsworth, "Is There a Hebrew Word for Virgin?" *ResQ* 23 (1980) 161–71; J. Walton, "Isa 7:14—What's in a Name," *JETS* 30 (1987) 289–306; P. D. Wegner, *An Examination of Kingship and Messianic Expectation in Isaiah 1–35* (Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 1992) 106–22; G. J. Wenham, "BETULAH 'A Girl of Marriageable Age,'" *VT* 22 (1972) 326–48; H. Wildberger, *Isaiah 1–12: A Commentary* (trans. Thomas H. Trapp; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) 306–14; J. T. Willis, "The Meaning of Isaiah 7:14 and Its Application in Matthew 1:23," *ResQ* 21 (1978) 1–17; R. D. Wilson, "The Meaning of *ʿAlma* (A.V. 'Virgin') in Isaiah VII.14," *PTR* 24 (1926) 308–16; H. M. Wolf, "A Solution to the Immanuel Prophecy in Isaiah 7:14–8:22," *JBL* 91 (1972) 449–56.

ances of the Hebrew words *עַלְמָה* and *בְּתוּלָה* since little additional information is given in the passages in which they occur and there may be a significant overlap in the meanings between these words.¹³ The cognate languages and the Hebrew masculine forms suggest that *עַלְמָה* is a young girl,¹⁴ and at least the Ugaritic cognate *ġlmt* should not be translated as “virgin.”¹⁵ Of the seven occurrences of the word *עַלְמָה* in the OT (Gen 24:43; Exod 2:8; Ps 68:25[26]; Prov 20:22; Song 1:3; 6:8; Isa 7:14) and the five abstract plural forms of *עַלְמוֹת* (Job 20:11; 33:25; Pss 89:45[46]; 90:8; Isa 54:4), the clearest passages describing the characteristics of an *עַלְמָה* are Gen 24:43, Isa 7:14, and Song 6:8. In Genesis 24, Rebekah was depicted as young (*נַעֲרָה* *na‘arā*, “girl”; vv. 16, 55, 57), unmarried (vv. 28, 36–51), of marriageable age (context), and a “virgin” (v. 16 *בְּתוּלָה וְאִישׁ לֹא יָדָעָה*). One very telling incident in this passage is that the first time the servant prays to God about how to determine the right girl, he says “now may it be that the girl (*נַעֲרָה*) to whom I say. . . .” But when he retells the story later to Rebekah’s family, he uses the word *עַלְמָה* in place of the word *נַעֲרָה* suggesting that these words are at least somewhat interchangeable. Later in Isaiah 7:14, it states that the *עַלְמָה* is pregnant (*הָרָה* *hārā* is most likely a predicate adjective suggesting that the maiden is in the state of pregnancy),¹⁶ thus it is unlikely that *עַלְמָה* on its own means a *virgo intacta*. Our final passage, Song 6:8, distinguishes three categories of women in the king’s harem, namely queens (*מְלָכוֹת* *mēlakōt*), concubines (*פִּילָגְשִׁים* *pilāgšim*), and maidens (*עַלְמוֹת* *‘alāmōt*). John Walton has argued that these are three distinct and mutually exclusive groups within the king’s harem:

Many commentators have suggested that these represent three classifications within the royal harem. If this is true, it is not likely that one of the categories could be identified as virgins. On the other hand, it would be logical to differentiate between those who had borne royal offspring and those who had not. In this case the queens would be the favorites of higher status or important political wives; the concubines would be principally sexual partners and slave girls; the *‘alāmōt* [sic] may be either those who have not yet borne children, or those whose primary function in the harem is childbearing.¹⁷

While Walton may be right about these categories, there would certainly be considerable overlap between “concubines” and “maidens.” The fullest description of a king’s harem (at least from the Persian Empire) is in Esther 2. Initially, young virgins were in one harem (most likely the harem of the “virgins”); then, after spending the night with the king, they went into the harem of the “concubines” (see v. 14). This second harem was guarded by the king’s eunuch

¹³ John Walton correctly points out: “Perhaps responsible for some of these lexical difficulties is our unwarranted assumption that categories classifying individuals in any society are definable by a single feature rather than being multifaceted. So, for instance, ‘spinster’ in English has elements of age, marital status, and, less definably, sexual status all as criteria. In a similar way we suggest that *b‘tūlā* has age, marital status, and sexual status as criteria” (“*בְּתוּלָה* (#1435),” *NIDOTTE* 1.782).

¹⁴ See John Walton, “*עַלְמוֹת* (#6596),” *NIDOTTE* 3.415–16.

¹⁵ Ugaritic text *CTA* 24:7 reads *hl ġlmt tld bn* “behold the *ġlmt* bore a son.”

¹⁶ Ronald J. Williams, *Williams’ Hebrew Grammar* (3d ed.; rev. and exp. by John C. Beckman; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007) 32, §75.

¹⁷ Walton, “*עַלְמוֹת* (#6596),” *NIDOTTE* 3.417.

to assure no further sexual encounters occurred with these women. These verses describe quite clearly what distinguishes these two groups of women, namely spending the night with the king implying a sexual encounter. These girls were called “young virgins” (נְעֻרוֹת בְּתוּלוֹת)¹⁸ earlier in Esther 2:2; “youngness” could also therefore include the idea of innocence or inexperience—in this case in the sexual area. If this passage can be used to enlighten the passage in Song of Solomon, then Walton may not be entirely correct, for a king can indeed still have “virgins” in his harem. Thus the word עַלְמוֹת in Song 6:8 may fit this group of young women well, for some may be technically belong to the category *virgo intacta*, but some would not. This idea is also suggested by the phrase “and maidens without number” (וְעַלְמוֹת אֵין מִסְפָּר) (וְעַלְמוֹת אֵין מִסְפָּר), for it is unlikely (though admittedly possible) that the king could have had relations with all of them. As we noted above, an עַלְמָה could be pregnant (i.e. Isa 7:14), thus it appears that the word עַלְמָה could include both women that are virgins and those that are not, just as we found in our other two passages above. Therefore it is most likely that the word עַלְמָה emphasizes “youngness,” but does not necessarily demand the idea of virginity.

But the question then arises as to when a “maiden” (עַלְמָה) becomes a “concubine” (פִּילְגֶשִׁים). The options are: (1) after the king has had relations with her (as in the Esther passage); (2) when he legally takes her as a secondary wife (Hagar and Abraham; Gen 16:2); or (3) when a woman has actually borne royal offspring (see 1 Chr 3:9; cf. 2 Sam 20:3).¹⁹ In Isa 54:4 the abstract plural form of עַלְמוֹת appears to refer to a married woman (and thus most likely not a virgin), thus suggesting once again the emphasis is on “youth or youngness.” Oswalt explains Isa 54:4 as follows:

Commentators have suggested that *youth* is meant to refer to the Egyptian sojourn and widowhood to the Babylonian exile. This is possible, especially with the apparent references to Israel’s history commented on above. At the same time, it does not appear necessary. The terms may be simply parallels to each other designed to encompass the woman’s entire life. From the earliest days of her marriage to her later years, this woman, like Sarah or Elizabeth, has lived with unremitting reproach and contempt.²⁰

Walton correctly states, “The very fact that an *‘almâ* can be barren (Isa 54:4) suggests that such a description cannot be exclusively applied to someone who has not had the opportunity to bear children (i.e. a virgin).”²¹ We also believe that Walton is correct when he concludes: “To say this another way, a woman

¹⁸ This phrase would be a needless duplication if Wenham is correct that בְּתוּלוֹת means “a girl of marriageable age” (Wenham, “BETULAH” 326–48).

¹⁹ One of the primary purposes for the concubines was to supply children (2 Sam 5:13; 2 Chr 11:21); see the OT passages that mention “sons of concubines” (Gen 25:6; 1 Chr 3:9). See also 2 Sam 20:3 which says that upon David’s return to Jerusalem, he provided for the concubines that he had left behind in the palace, but he did not go into them again and they lived in widowhood the rest of their lives. J. A. Thompson points out that in texts from Ugarit a man “who possessed a concubine was called a *bʿl ššlmt*, ‘the possessor of a female who completes (the family)’” (“Concubine,” *IBD* 1:308).

²⁰ John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 40–66* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 418.

²¹ Walton, “עַלְמוֹת (#6596),” *NIDOTTE* 3.417.

ceases to be an *ʿalmâ* when she becomes a mother—not when she becomes a wife or a sexual partner.”²²

The significance of the Hebrew word בְּתוּלָה is even more difficult to determine though it occurs fourteen times throughout the OT. The Semitic background of the word does not seem to provide a conclusive meaning, but suggests the idea of a “young girl,” though not necessarily a “virgin.”²³ Wenham notes a particularly important piece of evidence in an Aramaic spell of a barren wife from Nippur which states: *btwlt’ dymhbl’ wl’ yld* “a virgin travailing and not bearing,” suggesting that the word does not refer to a *virgo intacta*.²⁴ However, a Middle Assyrian law A55 dated to the twelfth century BC containing the term *batultu* certainly does suggest the idea of a *virgo intacta*:

In the case of a seignior’s daughter, a virgin [*batultu*] who was living in her father’s house, whose [father] had not been asked (for in marriage), whose hymen had not been opened since she was not married, and no one had a claim against her father’s house, if a seignior took the virgin by force and ravished her, either in the midst of the city or in the open country or at night in the street or in a granary or at a city festival, . . . If he has no wife, the ravisher shall give the (extra) third in silver to her father as the value of a virgin (and) her ravisher shall marry her (and) not cast her off.²⁵

While the evidence from the Semitic cognates of the word בְּתוּלָה does not conclusively point to a *virgo intacta*, there may have been a shift in meaning by the time of the OT.

There are several important biblical passages that must be examined to determine how בְּתוּלָה is used in the OT and we want to take seriously Walton’s contention that words may carry several nuances at one time, but first let us see how various scholars have understood this word. Wenham argues that the word בְּתוּלָה refers to “a girl of marriageable age.”²⁶ However, Walton has correctly pointed out that neither the girls in Esth 2:17, or the girl in Joel 1:8 are indeed “marriageable” since “they are officially spoken for.”²⁷ Walton thus summarizes his understanding of the sexual status of a בְּתוּלָה in the OT as follows:

It is likely that a young girl is not considered a *b^etûlâ* until she reaches puberty. . . . Then, as mentioned above, at least certain types of sexual activity preclude one’s being considered a *b^etûlâ* (e.g., Tamar). Nevertheless, it is not clear that any sexual activity disqualifies one from this category. Esth 2:19, Ezek 23:3–8 are the primary mitigating contexts, with the cognate material contributing to the uncertainty. Perhaps one’s sexual reputation is more at issue. In such a case rape or prostitution eliminate the possibility of a girl being considered a

²² Ibid.

²³ See Walton for a good discussion of the Semitic background “בְּתוּלָה” (#1435),” *NIDOTTE* 1.781). A particularly interesting piece of evidence is that the Akkadian root (*batultu*) suggests a “young adolescent or nubile girl” (*CAD*, B, 173a), though in later neo-Babylonian marriage contracts the word suggests the more specialized meaning of “virgin” (*CAD*, B, 174a).

²⁴ Wenham, “*BETULAH*” 326–27.

²⁵ *ANET*³ 185.

²⁶ Wenham, “*BETULAH*” 326–48.

²⁷ Walton, “בְּתוּלָה” (#1435),” *NIDOTTE* 1.782.

b^etûlâ. Consequently, it is preferable to speak of a girl as being reputable. This would assume no wanton behavior.²⁸

Walton strives to make this distinction based upon his understanding of Esth 2:19 and Ezek 23:3–8, but we question whether it also fits all of the evidence. In Gen 24:16 and Judg 21:12, the word is clarified by the phrase “and a man had not known her.” Wenham may be correct in stating that if the word בְּתוּלָה means “virgin,” this explanation would be redundant.²⁹ However, it is more likely a gloss explaining the meaning of the word, similar to how the word מַבּוּל *mabbûl*, according to some scholars, is clarified by the following phrase “waters upon the earth” in Gen 6:17.³⁰ This suggestion is even more likely if C. H. Gordon is correct when he states, “There is no word in the Near Eastern languages that by itself means *virgo intacta*,”³¹ thus Hebrew may have invented or modified the meaning for this word. Either way it appears that a בְּתוּלָה can indeed refer to a “virgin,” as the additional phrase “and a man has not known her”³² indicates, but may not be restricted only to this meaning. Several other passages add the word “young” (נַעֲרָה) to the word בְּתוּלָה, suggesting that the idea of youngness is not necessarily inherent in the meaning of this word (Deut 22:23, 28; Judg 21:12; 1 Kgs 1:2; Esth 2:3).³³ A good example would be Abashag, the young girl used to keep David warm in his old age, who was said to be a “young virgin” (נַעֲרָה בְּתוּלָה). In this passage, it would be crucial to make sure that any child born from this situation would indeed be king David’s son, which would also make the child a legitimate heir to the throne. Thus it is of vital importance for Abashag to be a *virgo intacta*. Both Hebrew words therefore supply an important aspect to our understanding of the passage. What is even more important for our purposes, is that the phrase נַעֲרָה עַלְמָה “a young *almâ*” never occurs, suggesting these two words overlap significantly. Exodus 22:16 and Deut 22:23–28 suggest that a בְּתוּלָה may or may not be betrothed, but if she is betrothed, she will be dealt with the same as if she was married. Leviticus 21:14 (cf. Lev 21:7) states this is the only type of woman a priest could marry, after ruling out a widow (אַלְמָנָה *almânâ*), a divorced woman (גְּרוּשָׁה *g^erûšâ*), a defiled woman (חֲלָלָה *hālâlâ*), or a harlot (זִנָּה

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Wenham, “*BETULAH*” 336. It is interesting that the only two contexts where the clarification phrase is found explaining a בְּתוּלָה are ones where marriage is an issue (Gen 24:16 and Judg 21:12), possibly clarifying to the readers that the girls are fitting candidates for marriage.

³⁰ BHS; Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 1–17* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) 283. It is possible that the wāw joining the phrase “a man had not known her” with the word בְּתוּלָה is either explicative—used to clarify the word (*Williams’ Hebrew Syntax*, 154 §434) or emphatic (*Williams’ Hebrew Syntax*, 155 §438).

³¹ Cyrus H. Gordon, *Ugaritic Textbook: Grammar Texts in Transliteration, Cuneiform Selections, Glossary* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1965) 378a. See also *JBR* 21 (1953) 106, 240f. However, the Middle Assyrian law (A55) is probably trying to be especially clear so that no mistakes are made.

³² This phrase seems to be very similar to the phrases in the Middle Assyrian law (A55): “a virgin [*batultu*] who was living in her father’s house, whose [father] had not been asked (for in marriage), whose hymen had not been opened since she was not married, and no one had a claim against her father’s house.”

³³ Deuteronomy 32:25 appears to make an interesting contrast between a “young man” and “a virgin” and a “suckling child” and a “man of grey hair.” If these are contrasts, then the Hebrew word בְּתוּלָה is contrasted to the word בָּחוּר “young man.”

zōnâ). The contrast within this verse seems to be stronger than just “a young woman of marriageable age” since any of these categories could contain a young woman (cf. Joel 1:8; Gen 34:2–3; Deut 22:21; and possibly Amos 2:7).

The abstract plural form בְּתוּלִים *bētûlîm* also appears to emphasize the idea of “virginity,” especially in Deut 22:14–20 where a husband can question the virginity of a wife and the girl’s parents must produce “evidence of their daughter’s virginity.” What specifically this “garment” or “wrapping” (הַשְּׂמֵלָה *hassîmlâ*) is, is not important at this point; however, the punishment seems quite severe if Wenham’s suggestion is correct that this girl is merely preadolescent or prenubile. Wenham argues that the בְּתוּלִים are blood-stained garments: “This interpretation of *bētûlîm* as a blood-stained garment fits very well with translating *bētûlâh* as a ‘girl of marriageable age’, since the onset of menstruation would be the clearest sign that she had attained that age.”³⁴ The strongest argument against Wenham’s view is verse 21 which states that if the girl cannot be cleared, she shall be stoned because “she played the harlot in her father’s house.” The meaning of the Hebrew word “to play a harlot” (זָנָה *zōnâ*) is clear in the OT—it means “to commit fornication.”³⁵ This phrase fits the idea of losing her virginity much better than simply being too young to menstruate; stoning someone merely for being too young seems harsh and unlikely. The passage goes on to say that if the man who made the charge against the woman is proved to be wrong, then he will not be able to divorce her all her days which is a similar outcome to one who has raped a girl in Deut 22:29. This latter passage states that a man will not be able to divorce her all of her life because “he has humbled her” (similar to the phrase in this context, i.e. “publicly defamed” or “brought an evil name upon a *bētûlâ* of Israel”).

The story of Tamar in 2 Samuel 13 is also pertinent to our examination. After being raped by Amnon, Tamar ripped her robe. This robe is described as one that the “virgin” (הַבְּתוּלִית) daughters of the king wore (vv. 18–19). Wenham argues that this was merely a common sign of intense grief.³⁶ But this does not really account for the detailed description of the purpose of the garment as one that the “virgin” daughters of the king’s wore. The intense grief undoubtedly comes from being raped and her unfitness to wear the robe after the rape.

Another important passage is Joel 1:8 which states that a בְּתוּלָה is mourning for the *ba‘al* of her youth (בְּעַל נְעוּרֶיהָ *ba‘al ne‘ûreyhâ*). Most scholars believe this refers to her husband, as David Hubbard explains:

the grief of a betrothed woman whose intended husband (*bridegroom of her youth, i.e., one to whom she is legally pledged, probably at an early age, but not yet married; on youth, see Ho. 2:15*) dies before they can enjoy sexual intercourse and who sorrows because her husband’s name has been cut off before he can produce an heir.³⁷

³⁴ Wenham, “BETULAH” 335.

³⁵ HALOT 1.275; NIDOTTE 1.1122–25.

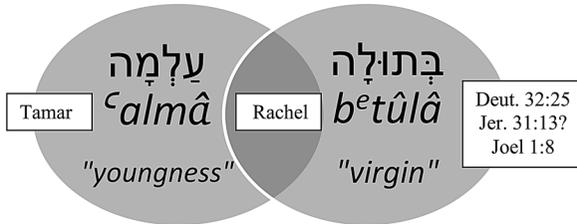
³⁶ Wenham, “BETULAH” 342.

³⁷ David A. Hubbard, *Joel & Amos: An Introduction and Commentary* (TOTC; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1989) 46. See also H. W. Wolff, *Joel and Amos: A Commentary on the Books of the Prophets Joel and Amos* (trans. by W. Janzen et al.; Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress,

This explains both the purpose for the grief in the passage and why a בְּתוּלָה could have a husband.

The evidence from Esth 2:19 and Ezek 23:3–8 appears to be Walton’s major arguments against בְּתוּלָה meaning “virgin.” In Esth 2:17–19, these young women appear to be called “virgins” even after spending the night with the king. This may be accounted for in two ways: (1) some of the women in the harem were still virgins in preparation since it is unlikely that Esther was the very last virgin to go into the king; and (2) the author had already referred to the group by this title and chose to retain the same term for them so the readers would understand to whom he referred.³⁸ The Ezekiel 23 passage just seems to be speaking about a time before Israel played the harlot in Egypt when her untouched bosom (i.e. “virgin bosoms” connotes never having been caressed or handled previously).³⁹ If this is a correct understanding of Ezekiel, then it argues for a time when Israel was pure and indeed in her “virginal innocence.” Walton also argues that a בְּתוּלָה is young based upon the parallel phrases with young men (Deut 32:25; 2 Chr 36:17; Ps 148:12). However, not all of these passages are equally convincing since at least Deut 32:25 may be understood as a contrast instead of a parallel. Still, it is most likely that a בְּתוּלָה would indeed be young since it was common to marry young or at least be betrothed at a young age in this historical and social context.

Thus while these words certainly overlap in meaning, it is reasonable to argue there are also some significant differences, which can be pictured as follows:



If עַלְמָה emphasizes “youngness” and בְּתוּלָה emphasizes “virginity,” then there will be occasions when their meanings overlap as well as instances when they carry nuances distinct from each other.

If this עַלְמָה was pregnant as suggested by the adjective, then within nine months she would have a son and call his name Immanuel (i.e. “God with us”). This name carries a particularly positive meaning, considering that the child

1977) 30; cf. James L. Crenshaw, *Joel. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 24C; New York: Doubleday, 1995) 97–98.

³⁸ For various views, see Carey A. Moore, *Esther. Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (AB 7B; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971) 30.

³⁹ Daniel Block states: “the time when the pattern of behavior was set is described as *their youth* (*nē'ûrêhen*), their premarital state. These women’s addiction to immoral sexual activity ante-dates their marriage to Yahweh at Sinai” (*The Book of Ezekiel, Chapters 1–24* [NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997] 734).

would be born during a time of war. However, the historical context may provide the reason for such a positive name. The sign appears to be given when Ahaz is checking his water supply shortly before the Syro-Ephraimite army arrived outside of Jerusalem. The child would have been born about 734 BC when the Syro-Ephraimite army had left to defend Damascus. At one point then, the people of Jerusalem faced almost certain doom, yet shortly afterwards the armies were gone. This would be convincing evidence that God had indeed delivered them.⁴⁰ We believe that the woman had good reason to name her child “Immanuel” based upon the historical situation.

The rest of the sign is more fully developed in verses 15–16 which are in the form of a chiasm:

- a. He will eat curds and honey
- b. at the time he knows enough to refuse evil and choose good
- b'. for before the time the boy will know enough to refuse evil and choose good
- a'. the land whose two kings you dread will be forsaken.

The sign relates directly to Ahaz’s predicament and has a positive tone up to this point. The two kings he dreads (i.e. Syria and Ephraim) will be destroyed. However, the next verse changes in tone. It states that a terrible time is coming—one that will rival the time when Ephraim separated from Judah back in 931 BC. Assyria is coming upon Ahaz and his house (i.e. Judah). Historically, we know that Ahaz called on Assyria for help, but it is uncertain how this passage relates to the timing of his call for assistance. However, the ominous nature of this sign should have caused Ahaz to abandon any plans for an alliance with Assyria. The eight verses following describe in considerable detail the destruction that Assyria (and Egypt) would wreak on the land.

It is relatively simple to determine when the parts of this sign were fulfilled:

Biblical Passage	Event and Date	Result
V. 16: The land of the two kings Ahaz dreads will be forsaken	Syro-Ephraimite War (c. 734–732 BC)	Damascus was conquered; most of Israel’s army was probably killed or taken prisoners
V. 16: By 722 BC both nations have been destroyed by Assyria	Samaria conquered by the Assyrians 722 BC	Samaria destroyed
V. 17: The king of Assyria will come	Sennacherib comes against Jerusalem—but God spares them (701 BC)	Assyria came against Jerusalem, but God stepped in and spared them

⁴⁰ The Syro-Ephraimite War is so-named because it was a battle between the coalition of Syria and Israel (known as Ephraim at this point) against Assyria (though we admit it may be a poor title). It started in 734 BC with Assyria’s attack on Damascus, the capital city of Syria, and ended in 732 BC with the fall and defeat of the coalition.

Historically, by 701 BC everything described in this sign was fulfilled. The sign makes perfect sense in its historical context; once Ahaz saw the birth of this child, he would know that God had spared them.

II. HOW IS ISAIAH 7:14–17 FULLFILLED IN CHRIST?

The dilemma with this passage is readily apparent—the sign is entirely fulfilled in its context; Matthew, however, picks it up and says that it is fulfilled in Christ. First, it is important to remember this is not a prophecy, but a sign. So why is a sign fulfilled by Christ? Scholars have offered a variety of explanations as to how NT writers could use OT passages and apply them to different situations. While there is not room for a full discussion of this issue, we will at least give a brief overview.⁴¹

1. *The author intends one meaning, but it can have many applications or significances.* In general, this appears to be the best way to interpret biblical passages. E. D. Hirsch provided a significant foundation for this principle.⁴² Walter Kaiser, a strong proponent of this view, states: “No NT writer ever finds more, or different, meaning in an OT text than was intended by the author.”⁴³ However, as Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard state, there are times when “NT authors found meaning in an OT text that the OT author did not intend.”⁴⁴ For example, it is hard to see how Hos 11:1 or Jer 31:15 in their original contexts referred to events in Jesus’ life.

2. *An author intends to convey multiple meanings or levels of meaning.* Some scholars have suggested that the author intended a literal sense, while at the same time also intending a spiritual sense. Some early Church fathers (e.g. Clement of Alexandria, Origen) have understood this as an allegory,⁴⁵ a parable (e.g. wheat and the tares, Matt 13:24–43), or a fable (Judg 9:7–21). However, if the biblical text intends a parable or fable, there are typically hints in the passage suggesting such; most of these prophecies do not give any such hints.

3. *A later author invents or reads into a biblical text a meaning not intended by the author.* This idea is commonly suggested by those holding a reader-response method. For example, W. G. Jeanrond states:

The reading of a text is, rather, a dynamic process which remains in principle open-ended because every reader can only disclose the sense of a text in a process and as an individual. This signifies in its turn that reading is in each case more than deciphering of the signs printed on paper. Reading is always also

⁴¹ Information summarized and amended from Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard, *Introduction* 120–32.

⁴² *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967).

⁴³ Walter Kaiser, *The Uses of the Old Testament in the New* (Chicago: Moody, 1985).

⁴⁴ Klein, Blomberg, Hubbard, *Introduction* 121.

⁴⁵ See Gal 4:21–31 where Paul uses allegory, but clearly labels it as such.

a projection of a new image of reality, as this is co-initiation by the text and achieved by the reader in the relationship with the text in the act of reading.⁴⁶

Some reader-response advocates have argued that the NT authors had every right to read the OT passages in ways that were appropriate for their interpretive community.⁴⁷ The main objection to using a reader-response method to interpret Scripture has to do with the purpose of Scripture. If God desired to give us both revelation about himself and commands he intended us to obey, then there must be a specific intent/meaning within the text and not merely words that we can interpret as we choose.

4. *There is a literal sense intended by the human author, but alongside this literal meaning is a hidden meaning embedded by the Holy Spirit that was unknown to the human author.* This may simply be another way of expressing *sensus plenior*, but J. R. McQuilkin argues that in the process of inspiration God could make a NT author aware of a meaning that the original writer did not see. McQuilkin goes on to say, “the second (hidden or less apparent) meaning . . . might have been only in the mind of the Holy Spirit, who inspired the author.”⁴⁸ *Sensus plenior* (Lat. “fuller sense”) means there is a “deeper meaning intended by God but not intended by the human author.”⁴⁹ We agree with Kaiser in questioning whether a passage can have multiple meanings. Nevertheless, the NT authors sometimes add new, different, or fuller meaning to an OT passage.⁵⁰ C. H. Dodd argued somewhat differently that when the whole context of the OT passage was examined, the NT authors were able to see this meaning in the context.⁵¹ However, we question even this possibility in several OT passages.

⁴⁶ W. G. Jeanron, *Text and Interpretation as Categories of Theological Thinking* (New York: Crossroad, 1988) 104. See also W. Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978); U. Eco, *The Role of the Reader* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University, 1979); S. Croatto, *Biblical Hermeneutics: Toward a Theory of Reading as the Production of Meaning* (Mayknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987); E. V. McKnight, *The Bible and the Reader* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985); idem, *Post-Modern Use of the Bible: The Emergence of Reader-Oriented Criticism* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988).

⁴⁷ S. Fish, *Is There a Text in this Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980) 14.

⁴⁸ J. R. McQuilkin, *Understanding and Applying the Bible* (Chicago: Moody, 1983) 29.

⁴⁹ According to Kaiser, this word was coined by F. Andre Fernandez in 1927, but popularized by Raymond E. Brown (“Single Meaning, Unified Referents: Accurate and Authoritative Citations of the Old Testament by the New Testament,” in Stanley N. Gundry *et al.*, *Three Views on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007] 47). Brown defines *sensus plenior* as: “That additional, deeper meaning, intended by God but not clearly intended by the human author, which is seen to exist in the words of a biblical text (or group of texts, or even a whole book) when they are studied in the light of further revelation or development in the understanding of revelation” (*The Sensus Plenior of Sacred Scripture* [Baltimore: St. Mary’s University, 1955] 92).

⁵⁰ See Douglas Moo, “The Problem of *Sensus Plenior*,” in *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon* (ed. D. A. Carson and J. D. Woodbridge; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986) 199.

⁵¹ C. H. Dodd, *The Old Testament in the New* (The Ethel M. Wood Lecture delivered before the University of London on March 4, 1952; London: Athlone, 1952).

5. *A biblical author intended the text to have a single meaning, but a later biblical author may have discovered an additional meaning in that text.* This additional meaning was more than likely one the original author did not intend.⁵² This interpretive method has been arrived at in a variety of ways:

1. *Midrash*: taking opaque or ambiguous texts and applying them to the contemporaneous situation. Two fairly well-known midrashic methods used in the NT are: *gezerah shewah* which combines various texts because of verbal correlations (see Acts 2:25–35); and *qal wahomer* which is an argument from lesser to greater (see Matt 10:25; Luke 11:13; 12:28; Heb 9:13–14; 10:26–29).
2. *Pesher*: applying a biblical passage directly to a contemporary situation. Werblowsky and Wigoder describe the pesher method as follows: “The authors of *pesharim* believed the scriptural prophecies to have been written for their own time and predicament, and they interpreted the biblical texts in the light of their acute eschatological expectations.”⁵³ Qumran materials contain several examples of this hermeneutical method. One of the best known is the Habakkuk Commentary which applies passages in the book of Habakkuk to the contemporaneous situations of the Qumran community. It is interesting that more NT prophecies do not appear to have been applied in this method given the fact that they often read the OT in light of its fulfillment in Christ. However, Peter in his Pentecost sermon may have been influenced by this method when he states: “*This is what* was spoken by the prophet Joel . . .” (Acts 2:16). We agree with Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard: “We doubt, though, that at these points the NT authors were totally unconcerned about the original meaning of the OT texts.”⁵⁴
3. *Typology*: understanding a person, thing, or event in the OT as prefiguring an event or aspect of Christ in the NT. Some scholars have suggested that this idea is stated by Paul in Col 2:16–17, “Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.” However, NT authors used the Greek word τύπος only once (Rom 5:14) when Adam is said to be a type of Christ. Thus the NT authors were aware of this hermeneutical method, but used it only sparingly. In a more general sense, Heb 11:19 speaks of Isaac as an illustration of Christ, but this passage uses the Greek word παραβολή (“parable, metaphor, illustration”). Some scholars use the word “typology” in a more general

⁵² Some may argue that since the Holy Spirit inspired the NT author, it is not important to determine how they achieved this meaning, it is merely important that they did. We disagree and believe that it is equally important for us to determine how they arrived at the meaning they did, for it provides examples on how we should do hermeneutics also. It is little help to say this is how NT authors determined the meaning of the text, but we cannot follow their hermeneutical methods.

⁵³ R. J. Z. Werblowsky and G. Wigoder, eds., *The Encyclopedia of the Jewish Religion* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1965) 298.

⁵⁴ Klein, Blomberg, Hubbard, *Introduction* 129.

sense.⁵⁵ Moo, for example, sets it against a background of “promise and fulfillment”; therefore he can see relationships or correspondences between the testaments. He states: “New Testament persons, events, and institutions will sometimes ‘fill up’ Old Testament persons, events, and institutions by repeating at a deeper or more climactic level that which was true in the original situation.”⁵⁶ This method views the NT authors as recognizing some type of “analogy” or “correspondence” between the OT persons, events, or institutions and the NT. The first chapter of the book of Hebrews appears to use OT quotations in this manner (v. 5 quoting Ps 2:7 and 2 Sam 7:14; v. 6 quoting the LXX of Ps 97:7; v. 7 quoting Ps 104:4; vv. 8–9 quoting Ps 45:6–7). Later we will point out how Matthew uses a similar idea only within much stricter limits.

4. Richard Bauckham has suggested another possibility for how NT authors understood some OT passages to refer to Christ. He argues that the early church believed so strongly that Jesus was God that they took OT prophecies that referred to the LORD and applied them to Christ, even though in their original context they would not have been understood that way.⁵⁷

There is little doubt that NT believers read the OT Scriptures in light of Christ’s coming. Even Jesus did so (e.g. Luke 4:21 referring to Isa 61:1–2). But we believe that the NT authors employed a variety of means to apply OT passages to NT situations. While certain methods are rarely used (e.g. allegory and peshet), others are significantly more common (e.g. direct fulfillment, general typology, applying “the LORD” passages to Christ). But how does Matthew take up Isa 7:14 and apply it to Christ?

I believe that the key to how Matthew reuses OT passages can be found within the text itself. Matthew employs the Greek word πληρώω meaning “to make full, fill, fill up, complete,”⁵⁸ to indicate that he believes the OT passage is being “filled up” by Jesus. Matthew thus understands the OT passage as a pattern that is being filled up with more meaning. This is not to say that OT passages are prophesying Jesus, since they can be completely understood within their OT content. However, Matthew takes the patterns presented in these OT passages and applies them to a new situation. It is analogous to a

⁵⁵ R. T. France understands “typology” as “the recognition of a correspondence between New and Old events, based on a conviction of the unchanging character of the principles of God’s working” (*The Gospel According to Matthew*, TNTC [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985] 40). K. Snodgrass speaks about it as a “correspondence in history” (“The Use of the Old Testament in the New,” in *New Testament Criticism and Interpretation* [ed. D. A. Black and D. S. Dockery; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991] 416).

⁵⁶ Moo, “*Sensus Plenior*” 196.

⁵⁷ *God Crucified: Monotheism and Christology in the New Testament* (Eerdmans, 1999).

⁵⁸ A more complete meaning for this word would include: (1) to make full, *fill*; (2) to complete a period of time, *fill (up)*, *complete*; (3) to bring to completion that which is already begun, *complete*, *finish*; (4) to bring to a desired end, *fulfill*; (5) to bring to completion an activity in which one has been involved from its beginning, *complete*, *finish*; and (6) *complete* (a number) (BDAG 828–29).

coffee cup having further meaning “poured” into it. This is distinctly different from *sensus plenior*; for there is no hidden meaning in the OT that the NT author has discovered through divine inspiration. Rather, the meaning was not in the OT context. The concept here is distinct from typology in that it is not simply a general structure that the NT author picked up from the OT and applied to a NT concept. Rather, the NT author is informing the reader of his intentions by using the word $\pi\lambda\eta\rho\acute{o}\omega$ before adding the new meaning to the OT concept. However, these patterns cannot be added to indefinitely for, just like a coffee cup one can only pour in a certain amount of coffee until the cup is “full to the brim” and can hold no more. So it is with a pattern that the NT author chooses “to fill up”; at some point it will hold no more meaning. For example, in Matt 1:21–23 Jesus is said to “fill up,” “A virgin will conceive and bear a son and they will call his name Immanuel which means ‘God with us.’” There is no one who can be more “God with us” than Jesus—he is God incarnate. Another example is the idea of “the Day of the Lord” that continued to develop through the OT, but it is totally filled up with meaning in the NT in the book of Revelation. We know exactly what will happen in the Day of the LORD down to the destruction of the heavens and earth and God’s creation of a new heaven and earth. However, there are two important notes about Matt 1:23: (1) This is a modified form of the LXX in that it uses the word $\pi\alpha\rho\theta\acute{\epsilon}\nu\omicron\varsigma$ (*parthenos* “virgin”), but then says “they”—not “she”—will call his name Immanuel as found in the LXX. The author can thus modify or adapt the LXX passage. (2) There is a development of the Greek word $\pi\alpha\rho\theta\acute{\epsilon}\nu\omicron\varsigma$ which the following diagram demonstrates:



The Greek word $\pi\alpha\rho\theta\acute{\epsilon}\nu\omicron\varsigma$ appears to have developed in meaning over the centuries. In early Greek literature it appears to have had the meaning of “a young woman of marriageable age” (with or without the focus on virginity), but by NT times this word developed the more technical meaning of “virgin.”⁵⁹ This development in meaning is quite similar to our English word “to cleave,” for in King James English it meant “to stick together,” but modern speakers are more familiar with the idea of a meat cleaver which cuts meat apart. That is a 180 degree change in meaning. Because the English language is a living language, its words can evolve in meaning (similar to Greek). If this development is true, then the sign in Isa 7:14 of a young woman ($\eta\mu\acute{\epsilon}\tau\eta$) having a

⁵⁹ BDAG 777; G. Fredrich, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (trans. G. W. Bromiley; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967) 5.826–37.

child would have been a common, natural occurrence. However, the part that would have convinced Ahaz that God could be trusted was that the child would be a boy and that his mother would call the boy “Immanuel.” The translator of the LXX about 250–150 BC chose the Greek word *παρθένος* to translate the Hebrew word *הַבְּלִיַּעַת*; this would have been an excellent word choice to convey what the LXX’s author meant. However, in the intervening time between the LXX and the NT book of Matthew, the word *παρθένος* changed in meaning from “young woman” to “virgin,” thus also making it a suitable term to describe Mary in the first century AD. For a good example of the meaning of *παρθένος* in the LXX, see Gen 34:3 where Dinah is called a *παρθένος* even after she was raped by Shechem.

To be convincing, there need to be more examples of Matthew’s use of *πληρώω* to “fill up” OT patterns. We argue that Jesus coming out of Egypt in Matt 2:15 “fills up” (*πληρώω*) Hos 11:1 which in its original context describes the past event of God bringing his people out of Egypt in the Exodus. Another example is Matt 2:17–18 where the events around the Babylonian Exile are “filled up” (*πληρώω*) by Herod killing the babies in Bethlehem. In Matt 2:23, Jesus is said “to fill up” (*πληρώω*) the prophets that “he shall be called a Nazarene”; this passage appears to be a play on the words of Isa 11:1 where the word “branch” (*נֶזֶר* *nēzer*) sounds like “Nazarene.” There are also places in Matthew where an OT passage is used without being preceded by the word *πληρώω*. For example, Matt 2:5–6 quotes Mic 5:2 and introduces it with “for it is written by the prophet” (*γὰρ γέγραπται διὰ τοῦ προφήτου*) to signify that it is a direct fulfillment of an OT prophecy as distinct from a “filling up” of this prophecy.

As noted above, NT authors use a variety of ways for NT authors to use OT passages. I believe that the NT authors’ “filling up” OT passages are one more way NT authors can use OT passages to apply them to a new situation or person in the NT.

III. IS THERE MORE THAN ONE VIRGIN BIRTH IN THE BIBLE?

The short answer to this question is “no.” In Isa 7:14, an *הַבְּלִיַּעַת* is a young woman who gives birth to a son. The child named “Immanuel” appears to have been born during Isaiah’s lifetime, for Isa 8:8 says that Assyria would overflow into Judah and “fill the breadth of your land, O Immanuel.” Thus Immanuel must have been living in the land of Judah at the end of the eighth century BC when Sennacherib attacked Judah. However, Isa 7:14 is used in Matt 1:21–23 to refer to Mary, who was indeed a virgin (see the statements in context that demand such) and gave birth to Jesus. This is the only virgin birth in the Bible.

IV. CONCLUSION

We have shown that NT authors used OT passages in a variety of ways. The NT reuse of Isa 7:14 is complicated by two issues: the issue of *πληρώω* or “filling up” with meaning, and that of the change in meaning for *παρθένος*

from an emphasis on a “young woman” to the more technical sense of “virgin.” To understand how NT authors used OT passages demands a thorough investigation of the evidence to determine what the authors intended. This process deepens our respect and appreciation for divine revelation and how God guided the overarching plan and message of Scripture. The amazing story of God’s coming to earth through the birth of a son to a virgin once again reminds us that God does things we might never comprehend unless he revealed them to us.