

## DID MATTHEW CONCEIVE A VIRGIN? ISAIAH 7:14 AND THE BIRTH OF JESUS

GREG RHODEA\*

### I. INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

In the last couple hundred years, the historicity of Matthew's and Luke's infancy narratives has fallen on hard times. Among the Gospel stories, "it is the infancy narratives which pose in the most acute form the question of the historical value of the Gospel narratives."<sup>2</sup> These stories are often viewed as part of the last layer of gospel tradition in the NT, and as such their historicity is discounted by some.<sup>3</sup>

This is particularly seen with reference to the virginal conception of Jesus. As a supernatural element of the infancy narratives that does not have *explicit* support elsewhere in the NT, the virginal conception is often understood as a fiction of some sort—whether a theologoumenon to “push back” the Christological moment to Jesus' conception, an apologetic effort to bolster Jesus' credentials, or one of a variety of other reasons.

One skeptical suggestion is that Matthew or other early Christians invented the virginal conception as a fiction to fulfill the prophecy of Isa 7:14. J. K. Elliott writes that the tradition developed when Matthew felt the need to fulfill the Septuagint “mistranslation” and thus described Jesus' unique birth accordingly.<sup>4</sup> The radical skeptic Bart Ehrman claimed in his bestselling *Jesus, Interrupted* that “Matthew wrote that Jesus was born of a virgin because that's what he thought Scripture predicted.”<sup>5</sup> Did Matthew or his sources falsely invent the virginal conception to fulfill prophecy, or was Jesus actually born of a virgin and early Christians connected this event with the prophecy? Which came first, the chicken or the egg—the history or the prophecy?

Now at first glance, the invention of a virginal conception to fulfill prophecy seems logical. After all, Isaiah says that a virgin/young woman will give birth to a son and his name will mean “God with us.” All through Matthew's Gospel the evangelist is at pains to demonstrate how Jesus fulfills the OT. He reaches so far

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\* Greg Rhodea resides at 3900 Swiss Ave Apt. 1009, Dallas, TX 75204.

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<sup>2</sup> Gregory W. Dawes, “Why Historicity Still Matters: Raymond Brown and the Infancy Narratives,” *Pacific* 19 (2006) 156.

<sup>3</sup> E.g. Edwin D. Freed, *The Stories of Jesus' Birth: A Critical Introduction* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2001) 11.

<sup>4</sup> J. K. Elliott, *Questioning Christian Origins* (London: SCM, 1982) 10.

<sup>5</sup> Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus, Interrupted: Revealing the Hidden Contradictions in the Bible (and Why We Don't Know About Them)* (New York: HarperOne, 2009) 74.

that he even produces some unusual ideas of fulfillment to our ears (e.g. Matt 2:15). Might this be the case? Did Matthew or the early Christians invent the virginal conception to help Jesus fulfill prophecy?

To evaluate this suggestion, three issues must be examined. First, was Isa 7:14 even understood in pre-Christian times to predict a virginal conception? Second, what is Matthew's process in citing prophetic fulfillment—which generally comes first for him, the event in tradition or the associated O'T prophecy? Third, what might the early tradition of Jesus' Davidic descent imply about Matthew inventing a virginal conception?

## II. MESSIANIC PROPHECY AND A VIRGINAL CONCEPTION

The first step in testing this is to see whether Isa 7:14 was even understood in Matthew's day as predicting a virginal conception.<sup>6</sup> If it was not understood this way, much of the argument that early Christians would invent a virginal conception loses its force. Specifically, we must consider whether the Hebrew or LXX text of Isa 7:14 necessitates a miraculous conception, and then see what evidence exists for pre-Christian understanding of this prophecy.

1. *The wording of Isaiah 7:14.* In 734–732 BC the kings of Israel and Syria battled against Ahaz, king of Judah (Isa 7:1; cf. 2 Kgs 16:5–9; 2 Chr 28:5–21).<sup>7</sup> The Lord dispatches Isaiah to bring a message of assurance, but when told to request a sign to confirm the oracle, Ahaz demurs (Isa 7:3–12). The prophet responds: “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, [העלמה] shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel” (Isa 7:14).<sup>8</sup> The interpretation of this sign forms a notorious crux interpretum, and the scholarly discussion “practically defies documentation.”<sup>9</sup> Yet some of the debate may be avoided by focusing strictly on whether a supernatural birth is envisioned.

First, it should be noted that a “sign” does not necessarily require a miracle.<sup>10</sup> The central meaning of אֹת is something that transfers information, the content of which is determined from the context.<sup>11</sup> While it often has a supernatural quality (Exod 4:8–9, 17; 7:3; Num 14:22; Deut 13:1–5; Josh 24:17; Isa 38:7; Jer 32:20; Ps 65:8 [MT]; Neh 9:10), it also refers to non-supernatural events of significance—including elsewhere in Isaiah (Exod 12:13; 31:13; Deut 11:13; Josh 2:12; 4:6; Isa 8:18; 19:20; 20:3; 37:30; Ezek 4:3). Walton cites four passages similar to Isaiah 7

<sup>6</sup> This is more specific than whether Isa 7:14 was understood as messianic.

<sup>7</sup> Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 2000) 230.

<sup>8</sup> לִבְנוֹ יִתֵּן אֲדֹנָי הוּא לְכֶם אֹת הִנֵּה הָעַלְמָה הָרָה וְיִלְדֵת בֵּן וְקָרְאָת שְׁמוֹ עִמָּנוּ אֵל:

<sup>9</sup> Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah* 233. For a summary, see Paul D. Wegner, “How Many Virgin Births are in the Bible? (Isaiah 7:14): A Prophetic Pattern Approach,” *JETS* 54 (2011) 467–84.

<sup>10</sup> Some argue 7:11 implies a miraculous sign. See Robert L. Reymond, “Who is the עלמה of Isaiah 7:14?,” *Presbyterion* 15 (1989) 2. Yet Reymond admits on the same page that this does not necessitate a miraculous meaning.

<sup>11</sup> Kruger, “אֹת,” *NIDOTTE* 1.331.

where a message of judgment is confirmed with a *non-miraculous* sign (Exod 3:12; 1 Sam 2:34; Jer 44:29–30; 2 Kgs 19:29).<sup>12</sup>

Much of the debate around Isa 7:14 concerns the meaning of *עלמה*, which also impacts whether a miraculous conception is in view. It seems that a majority of scholars, while acknowledging that *עלמה* at times refers to a virgin (see especially Gen 24:43, cf. 24:16), hold that “virgin” is not the essential meaning. Rather, the central idea involves youth and nubility, with glosses akin to “marriageable girl” (Gen 24:43; Exod 2:8; Ps 68:26), “a girl able to be married” (Prov 30:19), or “young woman” here in Isa 7:14.<sup>13</sup> Because such a meaning often could refer to someone who was also a virgin, the potential for imprecision is apparent.<sup>14</sup>

In the usage of Gen 24:43, *עלמה* seems equivalent to *נער* (“a young, unmarried girl,”<sup>15</sup> cf. 24:14), and a different word is brought in to emphasize her virginity (*בתולה*, 24:16).<sup>16</sup> While the three terms certainly overlap, this does not suggest that *עלמה* itself means “virgin” (in fact, the clarifying *בתולה* might suggest otherwise). Proverbs 30:19 describes “the way of a man with an *עלמה*,” and thus might not refer to a virgin.<sup>17</sup> Likewise, the *עלמה* mentioned in Song of Songs 6:8 might be part of Solomon’s harem.<sup>18</sup>

Broader usage also helps. The word is a feminine form of *עלם*, which means “young man.”<sup>19</sup> It refers to David in 1 Sam 17:56 and to Jonathan’s servant in 20:22, and in neither place does sexual chastity appear as the focus.<sup>20</sup> The abstract form does not mean “virginity,” as we would expect if *עלמה* meant “virgin” (Job 20:11; 33:25; Ps 89:45).<sup>21</sup> One use of this abstract even seems to speak of a married woman (Isa 54:4; cf. 54:1, 5).<sup>22</sup> Further afield, the Aramaic cognate is used in the *Targum of Judges* 19:3–5 for the Levite’s concubine.<sup>23</sup> An extrabiblical Ugaritic text (*CTA* 24:7) uses a cognate word and says, “Behold, the *ḡlmt* bore a son.”<sup>24</sup> Walton notes that this suggests a non-miraculous event.<sup>25</sup> Accordingly, *ḡlmt* ought not be

<sup>12</sup> John H. Walton, “Isa 7:14: What’s in a Name?” *JETS* 30 (1987) 294.

<sup>13</sup> These are the glosses and examples given in *HALOT* 1.836. BDB has “Young woman (ripe sexually; maid or newly married)” (p. 761). See also Delling, “παρθένος,” *TDNT* 5.831–32; Robert G. Bratcher, “A Study of Isaiah 7:14,” *BT* 9 (1958) 97–126.

<sup>14</sup> Walton writes that the uses of *עלמה* “over and over again rule out ‘virgin’ as a viable lexical choice for describing the basic meaning of the word. On the other hand there is no question that an *‘almá* can at times be a virgin. This is just semantic overlapping” (“Isa 7:14” 292).

<sup>15</sup> *HALOT* 1.707.

<sup>16</sup> Rebekah is described with all three words (Bratcher, “Isaiah” 99).

<sup>17</sup> Yet this could describe their first coupling (Walton, “עלומים,” *NIDOTTE* 3.415–19).

<sup>18</sup> Though these could refer to harem members who have not yet slept with the king and are still virgins, cf. Esth 3:2, 14 (Wegner, “How Many” 471–72).

<sup>19</sup> *HALOT* 1.835.

<sup>20</sup> Walton, “Isa 7:14” 292.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* Rather, it means “youth,” or “youthful strength” (*HALOT* 1.831).

<sup>22</sup> Wegner, “How Many” 472. So Walton, “עלומים” 3.417; John Goldingay, *The Message of Isaiah 40–55* (London: T&T Clark, 2005) 527; John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 40–66* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1998) 418.

<sup>23</sup> Robert B. Chisholm Jr., *Handbook on the Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002) 31.

<sup>24</sup> Wegner, “How Many” 471.

<sup>25</sup> Walton, “Isa 7:14” 293.

translated “virgin.”<sup>26</sup> In light of all this, Wildberger writes, “Scholarly research has thus, generally speaking, given up on the translation ‘virgin.’”<sup>27</sup>

The time frame of Isa 7:14 is also pertinent. As Walton notes, *עלמה* and the predicate adjective *הרה* (“pregnant”) form a verbless clause, the timeframe of which is usually present or past, depending on the surrounding verb forms.<sup>28</sup> In Isa 7:14 we only have the active participle (*וילדת*), and the timeframe of participles is either action in process or about to begin.<sup>29</sup> So the *עלמה* may in fact already be pregnant at the time of the oracle, just as the TNK translation renders it: “Look, the young woman is with child and about to give birth to a son.”<sup>30</sup> This is confirmed by examining the usage of *הרה* elsewhere in direct speech following *הנה*. In two of the three cases, the woman is pregnant at the time of the statement (Gen 16:11; 38:24–25). In the third case, the woman may already be pregnant or will conceive in the near future (Judg 13:5–7). In a fourth case of direct speech, but without *הנה*, the woman is also pregnant (2 Sam 11:5).<sup>31</sup>

In Isa 7:14, the timeframe is either that the woman is about to conceive, or, as in some parallel uses, has conceived already. If she is pregnant and *עלמה* means “virgin,” some could argue that this indicates a supernatural conception (pregnant *while a virgin*).<sup>32</sup> Yet the pregnant-right-now quality could just as easily go the other way and show that *עלמה* does not strictly mean a virgin.<sup>33</sup> Of course, even if *עלמה* meant “virgin,” the timeframe of the pregnancy might be future. In this case she could be a virgin at the time of the oracle, yet naturally lose that virginity in conception.

<sup>26</sup> Wegner, “How Many” 471. On the Ugaritic text where the cognates of *עלמה* and *בתולה* are used in parallel, see Bratcher, “Isaiah” 98.

<sup>27</sup> Hans Wildberger, *Isaiah: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) 308. Gundry argues that views not seeing a miraculous conception stumble at two points: (1) we would expect *אשה* if marriage were anticipated before conception; and (2) *עלמה* has not been shown elsewhere to refer to a young married woman (Robert Horton Gundry, *The Use of the Old Testament in St. Matthew's Gospel* [Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1967] 226–27). Concerning (1), if the time frame was future, the woman might not have been married. In that case using *עלמה* makes sense. On the other hand, if the time frame was present and she was already pregnant, we might indeed expect *אשה*. Yet *עלמה* still does not demand a supernatural conception. Perhaps Isaiah wanted to emphasize her youth instead of a married state (remembering that *עלמה* focuses on youth, not virginity). Furthermore, *נערה* can be used instead of *אשה* when talking about marriage or sex (Deut 22:19; Judg 19:3–6, 8; Ruth 2:6; especially Ruth 4:12; Amos 2:7), and as we saw above, *נערה* seems similar in meaning to *עלמה*. This suggests that *אשה* need not always be used in such contexts. As for (2), perhaps one cannot find an instance where *עלמה* can be *proved* to be a young married woman—yet possibilities exist (Prov 30:19; Song 6:8), and some of the evidence suggests married women (e.g. Isa 54:4). The lexical data does not abound, and Isa 7:14 might itself be an example of a young married woman. To make a supernatural conception ride on the meaning of a word that does not primarily mean “virgin” seems precarious. Furthermore, exclusively seeing a birth of the messiah at Isa 7:14 stumbles at how the development of the prophesied child will be significant to Ahaz in the near future (7:15–16).

<sup>28</sup> Walton, “Isa 7:14” 290. Cf. GKC §141.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. GKC §116.

<sup>30</sup> So Edward J. Young, *Studies in Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954) 165; Gundry, *Use* 226–27.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Chisholm, *Handbook* 31–32.

<sup>32</sup> So Gundry, *Use* 226–27.

<sup>33</sup> Thus Wegner writes, “it is unlikely that *עלמה* on its own means a *virgo intacta*” (“How Many” 471).

The LXX evidence is also significant. Typically, the LXX translates **עלמה** with **νεάνις**.<sup>34</sup> This word means “young woman.”<sup>35</sup> In Isa 7:14, however, the translation is **παρθένος** (also in Gen 24:43).<sup>36</sup> Because **παρθένος** more properly means “virgin,” some see this choice as evidence of a developing messianic or supernatural understanding of Isa 7:14.<sup>37</sup>

Yet this is not necessarily so. **παρθένος** apparently developed in meaning over the years, going from a more general meaning of “of a young woman of marriageable age, with or without focus on virginity,”<sup>38</sup> on to, by NT times, more technically “virgin.”<sup>39</sup> “Therefore the LXX is not necessarily betraying an interpretation as virgin by choosing this term.”<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, the grammar is future (**ἡ παρθένος ἐν γαστρὶ ἔξει καὶ τέξεται υἱόν**). “The pregnancy lies in the future (cf. Jgs. 13:3, 5); nothing indicates that the woman is also a virgin after the conception.”<sup>41</sup>

In Gen 34:3, **παρθένος** is even used for Dinah, who has just been raped: “And when Shechem the son of Hamor the Hivite, the prince of the land, saw her, he seized her and lay with her and humiliated her. And his soul was drawn to Dinah the daughter of Jacob. He loved the young woman [**παρθένος**] and spoke tenderly to her” (Gen 34:2–3). This shows that in the LXX, **παρθένος** need not refer to a *virgo intacta*, which means that **παρθένος** in Isa 7:14 need not refer to a virgin either.

Furthermore, the LXX translation of **עלמה** as **παρθένος** in Gen 24:43 shows that both words could be associated and that Isa 7:14 need not be exceptional. Because of these ambiguities, Delling writes, “On purely lexical grounds it is impossible to say whether the translator is expressing true virginity when he uses **παρθένος** at Is. 7:14. The total picture of LXX usage demands no more than the sense of a ‘woman untouched by a man up to the moment of the conception (of Immanuel).’”<sup>42</sup>

<sup>34</sup> It is translated with **νεάνις** in Exod 2:8; Ps 68:26 (67:26 LXX); Song 1:3; 6:8; and with **νεότης** in Prov 30:19. The plural in a musical context (with an uncertain meaning) is transliterated in 1 Chr 15:20 and replaced by **ὑπὲρ τῶν κρουθίων** in Ps 46:1 (45:1 LXX). This leaves only Gen 24:43 and Isa 7:14.

<sup>35</sup> T. Muraoka, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint* (Louvain, Belgium: Peeters, 2009) 472.

<sup>36</sup> Hindson writes that “the LXX generally uses **παρθένος** for **עלמה**” (Edward E. Hindson, *Isaiab’s Immanuel: A Sign of His Times Or the Sign of the Ages?* [Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1978] 67). Yet surely this is incorrect—unless two out of seven times equals “generally” (two out of nine times if one counts the uncertain musical plurals). Interestingly, in Genesis 24, **παρθένος** translates **הנער** (24:14, 16), **בתולה** (24:16), and **עלמה** (24:43). Yet **הנער** is also twice translated by **παῖς** (24:28, 57). Bratcher notes that how the LXX uses **παρθένος** to translate all three words in Genesis 24 shows that using **παρθένος** in Isa 7:14 does not prove that **עלמה** means “virgin” (“Isaiah” 99).

<sup>37</sup> Craig Blomberg, “Matthew,” *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007) 4; Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1–13* (WBC; Dallas: Word, 2002) 20; Hindson, *Isaiab’s Immanuel* 67–70.

<sup>38</sup> BDAG 777.

<sup>39</sup> Wegner, “How Many” 482–83.

<sup>40</sup> Walton, “Isa 7:14” 293.

<sup>41</sup> Tsevat, “בתולה,” *TDOT* 2.343. So W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (2 vols.; ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988) 1.214.

<sup>42</sup> Delling, “**παρθένος**,” *TDNT* 5.833. Yet he also says, “On the basis of LXX usage it is also possible that the translator of Is. 7:14 envisaged a non-sexual origin of the virgin’s son” (*ibid.*).

The evidence, then, does not demand a miraculous conception in either the Hebrew or LXX of Isa 7:14. And yet, *עלמה* is “flexible enough to accommodate the New Testament’s application of the prophecy to the Virgin Mary, Jesus’ mother.”<sup>43</sup>

But this raises an important question about Matthew’s legitimacy in applying Isa 7:14. If an actual virginal conception was not predicted, did Matthew err in finding a fulfillment in Jesus’ virginal conception? Not at all. While *πληρώω* (Matt 1:22) certainly can have the specific meaning of fulfilling a prediction or promise, the broader meaning is simply “to make full.”<sup>44</sup> This means that Matthew could also have understand the virginal conception of Jesus as “making full” the sign of Emmanuel in ways other than a direct fulfillment of a predictive prophecy.<sup>45</sup>

In summary, Isa 7:14 did not demand a miraculous conception in its original setting. While Isa 7:14’s ambiguities, messianic overtones, and parallels with the birth of Jesus could allow Matthew to find a later connection, Isa 7:14 itself does not seem sufficient to prompt the wholesale invention of a virginal conception.

2. *Isaiah 7:14 in Jewish messianic understanding.* Did first-century Jews understand Isaiah 7:14 as predicting a virginal conception? At the outset, a clarification is necessary. In light of the themes of kingship (7:1), the house of David (7:13), and the later developments in chapter 8 and 9, one could indeed read Isaiah 7 messianically—but this still does not demand seeing miraculous conception in 7:14.<sup>46</sup>

Unfortunately, we have no clear pre-Christian writings that give insight into Isa 7:14.<sup>47</sup> Accordingly, one of the primary evidences offered for an expectation of virginal conception is the translation of the LXX itself.<sup>48</sup> But this is not conclusive, as we have seen above. Blomberg mentions that later Jewish texts sometimes connect Isa 7:14 with Hezekiah (e.g. *Num. Rab.* on 7:48), who was understood as a type of Messiah. He writes, “It is not likely that a messianic interpretation was first suggested in an era when Christians were already known to use this text in their apologetics.”<sup>49</sup> This may be granted. But again, a messianic interpretation is not a virginal conception. The earliest extrabiblical reference to the virginal conception is Justin’s *Dialogue with Trypho*, where Justin has his opponent reject a virginal conception in Isa 7:14 and says it refers to Hezekiah (43:8; 66:2; 67:1; 71:2–73:6; 77–78; 84:1).

<sup>43</sup> Chisholm, *Handbook* 31.

<sup>44</sup> BDAG 828–29.

<sup>45</sup> Here typology (or “correspondence in history”) can be invoked (e.g. R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* [NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007] 57). Another suggestion is a concept of “narrative embodiment,” where Jesus’ life follows the patterns of Israel’s story—not by accomplishing specific prophecies, but by “filling up” the story of Israel in new and surprising ways (J. R. Daniel Kirk, “Conceptualising Fulfillment in Matthew,” *TynBul* 59 [2008] 77–98, 94). The filling up in this case would correspond both to Isaiah’s birth announcement and the promise of God’s presence: “Jesus fills up the story of Israel through a supernatural birth, and becoming both the child of promise and God with God’s people” (ibid. 91). See also the similar suggestions by Wegner (“How Many” 478–83).

<sup>46</sup> For such a reading, see H. G. M. Williamson, “The Messianic Texts in Isaiah 1–39,” *King and Messiah in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (ed. John Day; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998) 253–54.

<sup>47</sup> Blomberg, “Matthew” 4.

<sup>48</sup> See Hagner, *Matthew* 20.

<sup>49</sup> Blomberg, “Matthew” 4.

It seems that a majority of scholars believe that Isa 7:14 was not considered messianic by Jews and that—even if considered messianic—a virginal conception was not expected. “No other Jewish sources reflect any virginal conception motif.”<sup>50</sup>

Hindson is a conservative who sees a virginal conception in both the Hebrew and Greek of Isa 7:14. Beyond 7:14 itself, he argues for a pre-Christian virginal conception on the basis of Rabbinic sources—as presented by Skinner, Badhams, and Edersheim.<sup>51</sup> Skinner’s evidence consists of Mic 5:3, the LXX translation, and the evidence from Badhams.<sup>52</sup> We have addressed the LXX above.

Micah 5:3 (5:2 MT) says, “Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has given birth” (לכן יתנם עד-עת יולדה ילדה). This is possibly messianic, yet a normal birth seems to be in view, and no mention is made of conception. The description of the king in 5:2 (5:1 MT) as one “whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days” (ומוצאתיו מקדם מימי עולם) could be compatible with a virginal conception. Yet it could also portray the origins of the new king as analogous to Adam, or more likely, as coming from David.<sup>53</sup>

Badhams argues for an expectation of virginal conception through a slew of rabbinical sources. The more interesting of these, however, exist only in medieval anti-Jewish Christian works that claim to quote rabbinic documents.<sup>54</sup> Other references do not clearly relate to a virginal conception.<sup>55</sup> These are all post-Christian, none specifically describe a virginal conception, and none mentions Isa 7:14. Badhams admits that one’s feeling after reading the list is “certainly disappointment,” and “parthenogenesis as a qualification for the Messiah can never have been established definitely.”<sup>56</sup>

<sup>50</sup> John Nolland, *Luke 1–9:20* (WBC; Nashville: Nelson, 1989) 47. See also Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993) 149; Bratcher, “A Study” 110–11; Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) 25; S. Talmon, “The Concepts of MĀŠĪĀH and Messianism in Early Judaism,” *The Messiah: Developments in Earliest Judaism and Christianity* (ed. James H. Charlesworth; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) 94–96; J. Duncan M. Derrett, “Shared Themes: The Virgin Birth (Matthew 1:18–2:12),” *JHC* 4/2 (1997) 59; Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009) 84; Gundry, *Use* 195.

<sup>51</sup> Hindson, *Isaiah’s Immanuel* 68–70.

<sup>52</sup> J. Skinner, *The Book of the Prophet Isaiah Chapter I.–XXXIX.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1897) 63–64.

<sup>53</sup> Amos 9:11 speaks of David’s days as “the days of old,” כימי עולם (Ralph L. Smith, *Micah–Malachi* [WBC; Dallas: Word, 2002] 43–44). Cf. Neh 12:46; Chisholm, *Handbook* 423.

<sup>54</sup> E.g. “As Israel fell in a virgin, fell with Aholah and Aholibah, and was chastised with the ravishment of her virgins by the Babylonians, so in a virgin should she be healed, according to the promise in Jeremiah xxxi. 22, ‘Return, O Virgin of Israel; for the Lord hath created a new thing upon earth, a woman shall encompass a man’. The man encompassed is King Messiah, of whom God spake, ‘This day I have begotten thee.’ This passage is quoted from Ber. R. by Martini, Hieronymo, Vincenti and Fini” (F. P. Badhams, “Virgo Concipiet,” *The Academy* 1205 [1895] 485–86).

<sup>55</sup> “Ber. R. 23. ‘Eve said, “God hath appointed me another seed in the place of Abel.” What is this seed which comes from another place? It is King Messiah” (ibid. 486).

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

Hindson also cites Edersheim as saying Isa 7:14 was messianically supported in the Talmud.<sup>57</sup> But Edersheim actually says this about Isa 8:14.<sup>58</sup> Yet earlier in the book, Edersheim does speak to Jewish expectation of a virginal conception: “Steinmeyer ingeniously argues against the mythical theory that, since Isa. 7:14 was not interpreted by the ancient Synagogue in a Messianic sense, that passage could not have led to the origination of ‘the legend’ about the ‘Virgin’s Son’ .... We add this further question, Whence did it originate?”<sup>59</sup>

### III. MATTHEW’S FULFILLMENT CITATIONS

Another line of inquiry is to examine Matthew’s usage of the concept of scriptural fulfillment. This is one of Matthew’s characteristic emphases, and he includes over sixty quotations from the OT—over twice as many as any other Gospel.<sup>60</sup> Do these citations suggest that Matthew created the story of Jesus’ birth to fulfill Scripture?

1. *The choice of messianic prophecies.* In light of the previous section, it seems that if Matthew wanted to bolster Jesus’ messianic status, the choice of Isa 7:14 was a poor one. Staying merely in the same section of Isaiah, why not rather choose 9:6, where the child is called exalted names without the difficulty of a virginal conception? While Mic 5:2 is used with reference to Bethlehem (in Matt 2:6), why not highlight Mic 5:2 for the birth itself? Surely some story element could be manufactured to connect with either of these prophecies.

The significance of the problem grows when one considers the sum total of biblical passages cited in Matthew’s infancy narrative: Isa 7:14 (in Matt 1:23), Mic 5:3 (in Matt 2:6), Hos 11:1 (in Matt 2:15), Jer 31:15 (in Matt 2:18), and the enigmatic Ναζωραῖος κληθήσεται (in Matt 2:23). As Down writes, “It is as rum a collection of verses from the OT as you could make, and includes one ‘prophecy’ not from the OT at all, or any other known source.”<sup>61</sup> The only one that seems a decent source for a made-up narrative would be Mic 5:3.<sup>62</sup> As concerns Hosea 11:1, Jeremiah 31:15, and the Ναζωραῖος κληθήσεται citation (Matt 2:23), they do not seem to be the sort of prophecies which would inspire the creation of messianic narratives.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Hindson, *Isaiah’s Immanuel* 69.

<sup>58</sup> Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (2 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962) 2.723. In Hindson’s defense, due to how the Roman numerals are printed on the page, it is easily misread.

<sup>59</sup> Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah: New Updated Edition* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993) 110 (emphasis original).

<sup>60</sup> Hagner, *Matthew* liv.

<sup>61</sup> M. J. Down, “The Matthaean Birth Narratives: Matthew 1:18–2:23,” *ExpTim* 90 (1978) 52.

<sup>62</sup> This was considered messianic; cf. John 7:42 (Krister Stendahl, *The School of St. Matthew and its Use of the Old Testament* [Uppsala, Sweden: C. W. K. Gleerup, 1954] 99).

<sup>63</sup> Wallace suggests that Matt 2:23 might be indirect discourse. This alleviates the problem of Matthew citing a specific Old Testament Passage (Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996] 457). On this passage and its supposed invention, Gundry writes, “Why the invention of tradition for which a need is felt to apologize by appeal to OT prophecy?” (*Use* 195).



These facts suggest the converse—that Matthew added the fulfillment citations to existing traditions about the birth of Jesus. Confirmation comes from how intelligible and seamless Matthew’s narrative is when the fulfillment citations are removed (leaving Matt 1:18–21, 24–25; 2:1–5a, 7–15a, 16, 19–23a). This leaves “a coherent, indeed in most cases a more flowing story.”<sup>64</sup> More than that, as Down notes, it leaves a story corroborated at several points by the parallel yet independent account in Luke’s Gospel—Jesus was born of a virgin, born in Bethlehem, and was raised in Nazareth.<sup>65</sup>

It is also significant to note that the account of Jesus’ virginal conception in Luke has no explicit reference to Isa 7:14.<sup>66</sup> This shows the tradition could be sustained without a concept of prophetic fulfillment: “At most, reflection on Isa. 7.14 colored the expression of an already existing Christian belief in the virginal conception of Jesus.”<sup>67</sup>

2. *The fulfillment citations compared with broader usage.* Such a practice matches Matthew’s usage elsewhere, where he adds fulfillment citations to illustrate his source.<sup>68</sup> In 4:12–16 and 21:4–5 we have two examples of Matthew adding citations to material he received from tradition.<sup>69</sup> A parallel situation seems operative in the infancy narrative.

This practice of finding Scripture to support tradition also fits the early church’s handling of the OT. Longenecker summarizes:

Comparable in many respects to the hermeneutics of the Dead Sea covenants and some of the other Jewish apocalyptic writers of the period, the New Testament writers used biblical material, in the main, to highlight the theme of fulfillment. Two distinctive features can be observed in this usage. The first is that the New Testament writers began in their understanding of fulfillment from a stance outside the biblical materials themselves and used Scripture mainly to support that stance—that is, rather than beginning with a biblical text and then seeking to contemporize it, they began from outside the texts and used those texts principally to support their extrabiblical stance. Second, they understood fulfillment in broader terms than just direct prediction and explicit verification—that is, rather than viewing fulfillment as simply a linguistic or conceptual

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<sup>64</sup> R. T. France, “Scripture, Tradition, and History in the Infancy Narrative of Matthew,” *Gospel Perspectives: Studies of History and Tradition in the Four Gospels* (ed. R. T. France and David Wenham; 2 vols.; Sheffield: JSOT, 1981) 2.249. So Davies and Allison, *Matthew* 1.191.

<sup>65</sup> Down, “Birth Narratives” 52.

<sup>66</sup> For a discussion and rejection of possible allusions, see Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke (I–IX)* (AB; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981) 336. For the view that Luke betrays an influence from Isa 7:14, see Davies and Allison, *Matthew* 1.212.

<sup>67</sup> Brown, *Messiah* 149. This matches the practice of the early church. “What is certain is a conforming of descriptive phraseology to OT language to make patent the latent correspondence between prophecy and event” (Gundry, *Use* 204).

<sup>68</sup> Raymond E. Brown, Karl P. Donfried, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and John Reumann, eds., *Mary in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978) 91–92. Cf. Raymond E. Brown, *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus* (New York: Paulist, 1973) 64.

<sup>69</sup> Davies and Allison, *Matthew* 1.191.

reenactment of an ancient prophecy, they understood it in a fuller and more personal manner.<sup>70</sup>

Because of the peculiarity of the passages in Matthew's formula citations, Matthew's handling of fulfillment, and the early church's wider use of the OT, it seems that "Matthew started with the infancy traditions and found biblical texts that fit (albeit adjusting the telling of both in the process)."<sup>71</sup> France writes, "It is generally agreed that these, together with the other formula-quotations of the Gospel, were added at a late stage (i.e. by the evangelist himself) as comments on already existing narratives."<sup>72</sup>

#### IV. MATTHEW AND JESUS' DAVIDIC DESCENT

We have seen that because Isa 7:14 was not understood to predict a virginal conception, there was little reason for Matthew to invent it. Furthermore, he seems to have added fulfillment citations to his traditions, not the other way around. Additionally, there exist certain factors that might have resisted an invention of the virginal conception. One such factor is how a virginal conception would seem to threaten early Christian belief in Jesus' descent from David through Joseph.<sup>73</sup>

1. *Jewish messianic expectation included Davidic descent.* It is important to realize the place Davidic descent held in first-century messianic expectation. Anticipation of a Davidic savior arose out of the OT promises to David (2 Sam 7:12–13, 16) and the hopes of a Davidic heir who would be raised up accordingly (Isa 11:1–2; Jer 23:5; 33:15; Ezek 34:24; 37:25; Hag 2:23; Zech 3:8; 6:12; and perhaps 1 Sam 2:10; Pss 2:2; 6–9; 89:49–51; 132:10–18).<sup>74</sup>

This theme continued to develop in later Judaism.<sup>75</sup> The author of the Psalms of Solomon wrote, "See, Lord, and raise up for them their king, the son of David [ἰὸν Δαυΐδ], to rule over your servant Israel in the time known to you, O God."<sup>76</sup>

The Dead Sea Scrolls contain at least two significant texts. One document explains the promises made to David in 2 Sam 7:12–14: "This (refers to the) 'branch of David' who will arise with the Interpreter of the law who [will rise up] in

<sup>70</sup> Richard N. Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) xxvii. See also Gundry, *Use* 194; C. H. Dodd, *History and the Gospel* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1938) 61; Klyne Snodgrass, "The Use of the Old Testament in the New," *Interpreting the New Testament: Essays on Methods and Issues* (ed. David Alan Black and David S. Dockery; Nashville: B&H, 2001) 216; John J. O'Rourke, "The Fulfillment Texts in Matthew," *CBQ* 24 (1962) 402.

<sup>71</sup> Keener, *Matthew* 82. See also Charles Thomas Davis, "Tradition and Redaction in Matthew 1:18–2:23," *JBL* 90 (1971) 404–21.

<sup>72</sup> France, "Scripture, Tradition, and History" 2.249. So Davies and Allison, *Matthew* 1.191. See also Davis, "Tradition" 220.

<sup>73</sup> For this argument I am indebted to John McHugh (*The Mother of Jesus in the New Testament* [Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1975] 276–77, 283, 320–21).

<sup>74</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003) 619.

<sup>75</sup> In addition to the three sources adduced in this paragraph, see 4 *Ezra* 12:31–32 and *T. Jud* 24:1–5.

<sup>76</sup> R. B. Wright, "Psalms of Solomon," *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (ed. James H. Charlesworth; 2 vols.; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2009) 2.667. This is actually the first occurrence of the phrase "son of David" in Jewish literature.

Zi[on] in the [l]ast days” (4Qflor 1:10–14, cf. Jer 23:5; 33:15).<sup>77</sup> Along the same lines, a second document addresses the promises made to David and speaks of “the messiah of righteousness, the branch of David” (1Q242 5:1–4).<sup>78</sup>

E. P. Sanders wrote, “It is inadequate to define the national hope in terms of a Davidic Messiah, which is one of the least frequent themes in Jewish literature.”<sup>79</sup> This may be true, as far as it goes. Messianic expectation clearly varied, both in its very existence, emphases, and anticipated figures. Yet the three passages considered above demonstrate that certain strains of Judaism did expect a Davidic messiah. One scholar writes, “Although there was much diversity in messianic speculation among individual Jewish groups, a general consensus emerged within later Judaism that the messiah would be Davidic along the lines set out by the exilic prophets.”<sup>80</sup> A recent study by John J. Collins concurs: “There was a dominant notion of a Davidic messiah, as the king who would restore the kingdom of Israel, which was part of the common Judaism around the turn of the era.”<sup>81</sup>

2. *Matthew’s Son of David.* What was Christian belief on this subject? How did this Davidic expectation relate to Jesus? While this study is focused on Matthew, evidence for Christian belief in Jesus’ Davidic heritage appears in a wide cross-section of NT texts—the other Synoptic Gospels, Acts, Paul’s epistles (both disputed and undisputed), Hebrews, and Revelation.<sup>82</sup> While not as prominent as some other themes, its presence across so many strata of the NT is significant.

Matthew himself highlights this theme in significant ways. He calls Jesus “the son of David” at the very beginning (1:1). He also traces Jesus’ Davidic descent through a highly schematized genealogy that some suggest may result in David’s name by *gematria* (1:2–17).<sup>83</sup> In the infancy section the angel calls Joseph “son of David” (1:20),<sup>84</sup> and Jesus is born in Bethlehem, the very City of David (2:1).

Matthew includes two accounts also shared by Mark and Luke. Outside Jericho two blind men address Jesus as υἱὸς Δαυὶδ (Matt 20:30–31), and while both

<sup>77</sup> Florentino Garcia Martinez and Eibert J. C. Tigchelaar, ed., *The Dead Sea Scrolls Study Edition* (2 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 1997) 1.353.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.* 505.

<sup>79</sup> E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 117.

<sup>80</sup> D. R. Bauer, “Son of David,” *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (ed. Andrew T. Le Peau; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992) 767.

<sup>81</sup> John J. Collins, *The Scepter and the Star: Messianism in Light of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010) 237.

<sup>82</sup> Mark 10:47–48; 12:35–37; Luke 1:27; 32; 2:4; 3:31; 18:38–39; 20:41–44; Acts 2:30–31; cf. 2:34; 13:23; Rom 1:3; 2 Tim 2:8; Rev 3:7; 5:5; 22:16. Especially significant is Rom 3:1, where the parallelism and language of this passage suggests that it may be traditional Christian material upon which Paul draws (Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* [NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996] 45). This means that by the year 57 or so, belief in Jesus’ Davidic descent was widespread enough to be used by Paul as a touch-point with a church he had never visited. While there is no direct mention of Jesus’ Davidic descent in Hebrews, one silence is particularly interesting. When the author wants to present Jesus as a new high priest, he has to resort to aligning Jesus with the mysterious Melchizedek instead of Aaron’s line (Heb 4:14–5.10; 7). Why? “There was evidently sufficient knowledge regarding Jesus’ descent for it to be obvious to all concerned that he did not have a priestly lineage” (Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* 655).

<sup>83</sup> See Davies and Allison, *Matthew* 1.163–65.

<sup>84</sup> Although some scholars believe this is redactional. Cf. *ibid.* 207–8.

Jesus and Matthew pass over the appellation in silence, it may be significant that Jesus responds with healing. Perhaps the blind see what others cannot?<sup>85</sup> Not long after, Matthew includes the account of the “whose son is the Christ” controversy (22:41–46), an enigmatic encounter where Jesus challenges the messianic assumptions about the “Son of David.” But Jesus need not be rejecting his own Davidic heritage here.<sup>86</sup> Certainly other early Christians did not understand it that way.<sup>87</sup>

Yet Matthew goes beyond the other Synoptic Gospels and uses the title “Son of David” five additional times (9:27; 12:23; 15:22; 21:9, 15). Out of the ten total uses of “Son of David” as a Christological title, Matthew seems to himself be responsible for its inclusion six times (1:1; 9:27; 12:23; 15:22; 21:9, 15).<sup>88</sup> Two of these betray a clear redactional emphasis where Matthew seems to have added the title to his sources (15:22; 21:9). From all this it may be seen that Matthew is especially concerned to present Jesus as coming from the line of David.

Despite the early and widespread nature of evidence for Jesus’ Davidic heritage, some scholars see Jesus’ Davidic descent as a mere theologoumenon—a way of confessing that Jesus was the messiah, apart from its being literally true.<sup>89</sup> That is rather insignificant for this study, however. What counts is that early Christians *believed* that Jesus was descended from David, a fact that seems clear. It is “a view firmly embedded in Christian tradition from an early date.”<sup>90</sup>

3. *Jesus’ Davidic parent.* It is also important to note how Jesus is understood to be related to David. Only Matthew and Luke explain it, and both apparently show that descent as coming through Joseph. Joseph is explicitly said in both accounts to be a descendent of David (Matt 1:20; 2:4; Luke 1:27), and both authors try to prove Jesus’ Davidic heritage by means of genealogy (Matt 1:1–17; Luke 4:23–38).<sup>91</sup> It looks like this genealogy is traced through Joseph in each case (Matt 1:16; Luke 3:23).<sup>92</sup>

But what about Mary? Could she not have been descended from David? Nowhere in the NT does it say that Mary was from David’s line or even from the tribe of Judah.<sup>93</sup> In fact, the only statement made in the gospels about Mary’s family might suggest differently. In Luke 1:5, Elizabeth is said to be “from the daughters of Aaron,” and when the angel later appears to Mary, he calls Elizabeth Mary’s

<sup>85</sup> Morna D. Hooker, “Who Can This Be?,” *Contours of Christology in the New Testament* (ed. Richard N. Longenecker; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005) 92.

<sup>86</sup> On the contrary, it is a Haggadah type question that seeks to do justice to a seeming contradiction—how the figure in Psalm 110 can be both the lord and son of David. “Both Christological titles are correct” (Eduard Lohse, “υἱὸς Δαυίδ,” *TDNT* 8.484–85).

<sup>87</sup> Richard N. Longenecker, *The Christology of Early Jewish Christianity* (Naperville, IL: Allenson, 1970) 110.

<sup>88</sup> Jack Dean Kingsbury, “The Title ‘Son of David’ in Matthew’s Gospel,” *JBL* 95 (1976) 591.

<sup>89</sup> Brown lists Heitmüller, Goguel, and Conzelmann (*Messiah* 505).

<sup>90</sup> Longenecker, *Christology* 109.

<sup>91</sup> Lohse, “υἱὸς Δαυίδ” 486.

<sup>92</sup> Against Luke’s genealogy being that of Mary, see I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1978) 158, 162; Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 1:1–9:50* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994) 352.

<sup>93</sup> John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus, The Roots of the Problem and the Person* (New York: Doubleday, 1991) 216. Though see Bock on Luke 1:68–69 (*Luke 1:1–9:50* 180–81).

συγγενίς, a word which means “kinswoman” or “relative.”<sup>94</sup> While not certain, this suggests that Mary was also from the line of Aaron instead of Judah.<sup>95</sup> Some have suggested that Luke’s genealogy could be Mary’s.<sup>96</sup> Yet this cannot be, because the genealogy consistently focuses on fathers, and there are no women in the list.<sup>97</sup> “Any attempt to use one of the two genealogies of Jesus to establish Mary’s lineage is doomed to failure.”<sup>98</sup> It is only later in Christian history that Mary is spoken of as being of Davidic descent.<sup>99</sup>

4. *The seeming contradiction.* On one hand, then, we have an emphasis on Jesus’ decent from David through Joseph (Matt 1:20). On the other hand, we have a virginal conception which explicitly excludes Joseph’s fatherhood (Matt 1:18, 25). Some skeptical writers pick up on this difficulty: “The truth of the matter is that if Joseph did not beget Jesus the whole genealogy would be pointless and worthless”;<sup>100</sup> “If Mary was not of Davidic descent, and if Joseph was not the father, the Davidic descent of Jesus fell to the ground.”<sup>101</sup> Perhaps it because of this very tension that later Christians argued for Mary’s Davidic descent.<sup>102</sup>

Yet this problem is actually easy to resolve if one accepts both traditions. Two good routes exist. First, Joseph is most often seen as providing Jesus’ *legal* genealogy, since by acknowledging Jesus as his son Joseph becomes his legal father according to the Jewish way of thinking.<sup>103</sup> Second, by contrast, Levin has studied evidence for Jewish adoption in our period and found it wanting. Instead he suggests Roman adoption as a background to how the evangelists resolved this tension, with parallels to how adoption functioned among some of the early emperors.<sup>104</sup> Whichever route appears more likely, the apparent contradiction between virginal conception and Davidic descent can be resolved after one is presented with both traditions. In fact, the Gospel writers betray no evidence that they saw the situation as problematic.<sup>105</sup>

<sup>94</sup> BDAG 950.

<sup>95</sup> Meier, *Marginal* 216.

<sup>96</sup> See William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel according to Luke* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978) 222–25.

<sup>97</sup> Bock, *Luke 1:1–9:50* 352.

<sup>98</sup> Meier, *Marginal* 238.

<sup>99</sup> See Ign. *Eph.* 18.2; *Smyrn.* 1:1; *Trall.* 9:1; Justin *Dial.* 45; and *Prot. Jas.* 10:1.

<sup>100</sup> Freed, *Stories* 22.

<sup>101</sup> John Martin Creed, *The Gospel According to St. Luke* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1969) 17.

<sup>102</sup> Though, of course, it is also possible that they knew something we do not. Creed points out that Mary could have been descended from David through her father and related to Elizabeth and the priestly line through her mother (ibid).

<sup>103</sup> Davies and Allison, *Matthew* 1.219–20. This is similar to legal paternity involved with levirate marriage, where the biological son of one man is considered the legal son of the dead man (Brown, *Messiah* 138–39; Bock, *Luke 1:1–9:50* 108).

<sup>104</sup> Yigal Levin, “Jesus, ‘Son of God’ and ‘Son of David’: The ‘Adoption’ of Jesus into the Davidic Line,” *JSNNT* 28 (2006) 415–34.

<sup>105</sup> Albright and Mann write, “That there is *formal* inconsistency here is not to be doubted: both evangelists claiming Davidic descent through Joseph, while at the same time giving us a tradition of virginal conception and birth. To make charges of dishonestly or to impugn the motives of the writers is—at this remove of time—perilous. Allowing for the very tenacious traditions with respect to ancestry

Yet here is the real significance of the situation: while one can resolve both traditions after they exist, the tradition of the Davidic descent would still seem to resist a later *creation* of the virginal conception if it were not true. One ought to remember that by skeptical assessment, the virginal conception is a late development. The tradition of Davidic descent in the early church is presumably earlier. If the early church wanted to invent the virginal conception to “fulfill” the rather obscure Isa 7:14, they would at the same time endanger the much more common theme of Davidic expectation. McHugh writes about this issue with reference to the expected Davidic messiah:

If one fact is certain from the New Testament, it is that the early Christians believed Jesus was this messiah. Now since at that time everyone believed that generation took place simply by the implanting of the male seed in the mother’s womb, which was as it were the soil in which the seed grew and matured, the obvious logical step for the early Christians was to prove by every possible means that Jesus was “of the seed of David according the flesh,” and to concentrate all their apologetic on his *paternity*. That they were not insensitive to this need is proved by dozens of texts in the New Testament. Could the idea of the virginal conception, without male seed of the line of David, have made its way into the church, and into the Palestinian Church, if it had first been heard of after A.D. 70, when it seems to destroy the very possibility of Jesus’ having been of the seed of David?<sup>106</sup>

## V. CONCLUSION

This examination considered whether the virginal conception was invented to fulfill the prophecy of Isa 7:14. First, this study looked at both the Hebrew text and the Greek of the LXX, and found that in neither case was a supernatural virginal conception demanded. Neither עלמה nor παρθένης can bear the weight of insisting that the woman in question conceived while remaining a virgin. It also seems that there is no evidence of Jewish expectation for the messiah to be so conceived.

Second, this study looked at the Gospel of Matthew and saw that Matthew appears to add his fulfillment citations to existing tradition, and not the other way around. Matthew’s birth narrative proceeds clearly if the citations are removed, and the OT references are peculiar choices if one could pick any prophecies for Jesus to fulfill. This also matches the practice of early Christians generally—they began with the traditions about Jesus and went looking in the OT for support, and not the other way round.

Third, this study showed that the invention of Jesus’ virginal conception would seem to threaten the early Christian belief in Jesus’ Davidic descent. If Jesus got his heritage from Joseph, then the virginal conception would deny him a biological descent from David. All three of these lines of evidence mitigate against the invention of the virginal conception to fulfill messianic expectation. In short, it

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among Jews at the time of Jesus, we are certainly entitled to say that the both evangelists were faithfully recording the traditions which they had received, whatever the inconsistencies” (W. F. Albright and C. S. Mann, *Matthew* [AB; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1973] 6).

<sup>106</sup> McHugh, *Mother* 276–77.

seems unlikely that “Matthew wrote that Jesus was born of a virgin because that’s what he thought Scripture predicted.”<sup>107</sup>

This, of course, does not prove the historicity of the virginal conception. Such a thing cannot be done as such, much less by merely rejecting one alternative explanation—of which others exist.<sup>108</sup> Ultimately a judgment on the historicity of the virginal conception is inextricably bound up with one’s presuppositions, theology, and broader judgments about the Gospels.

And yet to challenge one alternative explanation and show it to be unlikely is indeed significant. As Cranfield wrote more generally, “It can, for one thing, be said that it is vastly more difficult to explain how the early Church came to believe in the Virgin Birth, if it is unhistorical, than many recent NT scholars have assumed.”<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Ehrman, *Jesus, Interrupted* 74.

<sup>108</sup> Others suggested motivations include: (1) to hide Jesus’ supposed illegitimacy (e.g. Gerd Lüdemann, *Virgin Birth? The Real Story of Mary and her Son Jesus* [Harrisburg, PA: Trinity International, 1997] 141); (2) to copy Greco-Roman legends (e.g. Walter E. Bundy, *Jesus and the First Three Gospels* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1955] 11); (3) to imitate Jewish legends on the birth of Moses (e.g. Roger David Aus, *Matthew 1–2 and the Virginal Conception* [Studies in Judaism; ed. Jacob Neusner; Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2004]); (4) to draw upon Iranian imagery as found in the *Apocalypse of Adam* (e.g. Andrew J. Welburn, *From a Virgin Womb* [Leiden: Brill, 2008]); and (5) as a theologoumenon whereby the virginal conception expresses Christian belief in Jesus’ divinity (e.g. Brown lists Heitmüller, Goguel, and Conzelmann [*Messiah* 505]).

<sup>109</sup> C. E. B. Cranfield, “Some Reflections on the Subject of the Virgin Birth,” *SJT* 41 (1988) 186.