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Glenn D. Pemberton

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Matthew and the Prophets

GLENN D. PEMBERTON

I confess that as a teacher, upon a first reading, I might have given failing marks to the gospel of Matthew: over-citation, over-dependency on a single source, and taking texts out of context. First readings are not always best readings.

To be sure, the Old Testament threatens to overwhelm Matthew's gospel. Matthew begins with 17 verses of Old Testament genealogy (1:1-17) before taking up direct citations and his refrain—"all this took place to fulfill" the prophets—five times in the first two chapters (1:22; 2:5, 15, 17, 23). Remove the Old Testament from Matthew 1-2 and only half of the text remains. The first chapter would consist of only six verses (1:18-21), and the second would be reduced to 17 verses (2:1-4, 7-14, 16, 19-22).

Yet, amazingly, such a truncated edition of Matthew 1-2 still presents a cohesive story: Jesus is born of the virgin Mary and her husband Joseph (1:18-21), the magi visit from the East and outsmart Herod (2:1-4, 7-13), Joseph moves the family to Egypt to avoid Herod's massacre (2:13-14, 16), then brings the family back to live in Galilee (2:19-22). Matthew's *story* is not damaged by excluding his Old Testament references. However, as this article will point out, Matthew's *message* about Jesus is decimated by such exclusion, or as is more often the case—by neglecting or misunderstanding how Matthew uses the Old Testament citations.

Space restrictions do not permit an analysis of each Old Testament reference in Matthew 1-2, much less consideration of Matthew as a whole.¹ Instead, this article will present a case study of three Old Testament citations in Matthew 1-2: 1:22-23 from Isaiah 7:14, 2:15 from Hosea 11:1, and 2:23 from Judges 13:5 (or Isa 11:1). I work here from two assumptions. First, I do not believe that Matthew is ignorant of the original contexts of his citations nor is he deliberately distorting them to fit his agenda. Rather, Matthew knew the Hebrew scripture well enough not only to cite texts but also to redeploy their contexts. This assumption leads to the second. In order to grasp Matthew's redeployment of the Old Testament, at the outset we must understand what Matthew understood: the meaning of the texts in their original settings.² Consequently, this article begins with a brief survey of the citations in their original locations and then turns to Matthew.



THE TEXTS IN THEIR ORIGINAL CONTEXTS

Matt 1:22/Isa 7:14

Thanks to its popularity in Christmas pageants and television shows (one thinks of *A Charlie Brown*

Christmas), Matthew's citation from Isaiah 7:14 is by far the most famous of the book. Less well-known is the original context of the citation, although it is transparent in the text. As Isaiah 7 begins, South Judah faces an invasion from the nations of Aram and Israel (7:1) whose aim is to depose the current king of Judah (Ahaz) and install a king more favorable to their agenda ("the son of Tabeel," 7:6)—an allied revolt against Assyria. Ahaz, the king of Judah, and his people are terrified (7:2). In response, the Lord sends Isaiah to encourage Ahaz, urging him not to be afraid of these "two smoldering stumps of firebrands" (7:4).³ Their plans "will not stand" and will not "come to pass" (7:7); their leaders are mere humans (7:8); and Ephraim (Israel) will be shattered within 65 years (7:8b). Ahaz must stand firm in faith or he "will not stand at all" (7:9).⁴

In a move designed to bolster Ahaz's faith, the Lord offers to give him a sign—any sign (7:11). Ahaz refuses and piously claims that he will "not put the Lord to the test" (7:12). His piety is a sham. Ahaz refuses a sign because his mind is already made up. He has decided to send to Assyria for help against this invasion rather than trusting God to deliver him (cf. 2 Kgs 16:7). Isaiah, in frustration declares that the Lord will give him a sign anyway:

Look, the young woman (*almah*) is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted. (7:14b-16)

Because of Matthew's usage of this text within the context of Mary's virgin birth, the focal point for many discussions of this sign in Isaiah is the correct translation of *almah* ("young woman" or "virgin"). The sign for Ahaz, however, is not the young woman but the child Immanuel. By the time this child is born and grows to the age at which he knows how to "refuse the evil and choose the good" (most likely denoting his choice in food within two to three years, "curds and honey"), the two invading nations will be decimated. The child's name conveys the message: Immanuel—God is with us. Ahaz must believe the sign and trust God during this crisis.

Matt 2:15/Hos 11:1

Hosea was a prophet in North Israel whose career partially overlapped with Isaiah's ministry in the south.⁵ Under the reign of Jeroboam II (Hos 1:1), the northern nation flourished economically but plunged deep into apostasy (2 Kgs 14:23-27). In Hosea 11, the prophet makes a passionate appeal to the wayward people. He opens by taking the people back to the beginning of their relationship with God, to the story of the exodus: "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son" (Hos 11:1). Despite the Lord's love and deliverance, the more the Lord called to them, the more they turned away and chased other gods (11:2).

Such action is hard to fathom. The Lord taught his people how to walk, carried them in his arms, led them with love, lifted them in embrace, and fed them (11:3-4). But the people did not recognize God or his love (11:3c); they are ungrateful and unfaithful children. As a consequence of their refusal to return to the Lord the "sword rages in their cities" (11:6) and their destiny is a return to "Egypt," i.e. Assyrian captivity ("Assyria shall be their king," 11:5). And yet, the Lord is conflicted like a parent for a child who deserves severe punishment: "How can I hand you over, O Israel? ... My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender" (11:8).⁶ What is God to do with an unfaithful son?

Matt 2:23/Judg 13:5

The original context for Matthew's citation "He will be called a Nazorean" is more difficult to locate. In fact, any concordance search for Matthew's phrase will end in disappointment; a sentence with this exact wording does not occur in the Old Testament. We might conclude, therefore, that Matthew is drawing from a

non-extant source. On the other hand, it is possible that Matthew is alluding to a text that allows for a subtle word play. Two candidates emerge.

The Hebrew term for “branch” (*neser*) sounds somewhat similar to the Greek term for Nazareth (*nazraios*) and has led to the proposal that Matthew might have had the text of Isaiah 11:1 in mind, “A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch (*neser*) shall grow out of his roots.” If so, Matthew would be making a connection between Jesus and the messianic hope of a “branch” from the line of David; thus, Jesus is the “branch”—the *neser*. Although plausible, one difficulty here is that the Septuagint translates “branch” (*neer*) as *anthos*, thus losing the similarity of sound on which the proposal relies. A closer parallel to Matthew’s citation comes from one of the “Former Prophets,” the book of Judges.⁷ Here, an angel appears to the wife of Manoah and tells her that although she is barren she will give birth to a son (13:2-3) who “will be a nazirite (LXX—*naziraion*) to God from birth” (13:5, cf. Matthew’s “he will be called a Nazorean [*nazraios*]”).⁸

In Israel, nazirites were persons especially devoted to the Lord (Num 6:1-2) and thus, separated from common activities of life: consumption of grape products (e.g., wine), cutting their hair, and contact with corpses (Num 6:3-9). Just as the angel predicted, the wife of Manoah gives birth to a son, Samson (13:24). But for this woman, her “nazirite” son is a massive disappointment. Samson flaunts every aspect of his supposed special devotion to the Lord, his “nazirite” status. He marries a Philistine (Judges 13), displays an out-of-control temper (Judges 14-15), cavorts with prostitutes (Judg 16:1-3), displays poor judgment, and allows his hair to be cut (Judg 16:4-22). Samson may be called a “nazirite,” but his life is far from exclusive devotion to the Lord.

Summary

This survey of the original contexts of Matthew’s citations reveals that in each instance, the prophet or writer has in view an immediate circumstance and its resolution: an invasion (Isaiah 7), the apostasy of Israel (Hosea 11), and deliverance from the Philistines (Judges 13). Strictly speaking, none of the original texts predicts an event beyond a generation: “Immanuel” is born and grows up within a few years of Isaiah’s message to Ahaz (Isaiah 7), Israel is currently under attack for being an unfaithful son and faces exile (Hosea 11), the “nazirite” Samson is born and begins to deliver Israel (Judges 13).

On a first reading, we might assume that Matthew’s primary purpose for quoting the Old Testament is apologetic. In other words, Matthew’s primary claim is that

1. the prophets predicted certain events associated with the coming of the messiah,
2. in the story of Jesus these events occurred,
3. therefore, Jesus is the messiah.

If this is Matthew’s primary objective, these original contexts may be alarming: not only does Matthew fail to convince, he is open to accusations of misusing scripture by making it appear to say or predict things foreign to its context. However, this is a problem only if we assume apologetics is Matthew’s primary purpose, an assumption challenged by the texts—a challenge that should drive us to reread and rethink what Matthew is doing and saying with his citations.

THE TEXTS IN THE CONTEXT OF MATTHEW

Discussions of how New Testament writers employ Old Testament texts usually include explanations such as allegory, double fulfillment, fuller sense, and typology, to name a few.⁹ Although I do not deny the validity of any of these theories, they are not especially helpful for understanding a New Testament writer’s purpose for citing the Old Testament in the first place. In other words, while an analysis of Matthew may reveal one or more of these approaches (e.g., double fulfillment of Isaiah 7), it does not necessarily help us

understand Matthew; it merely resolves a problem created by our own faulty assumptions that “prophecy” is a long-term predictive event and that Matthew’s term “fulfilled” denotes a one-to-one completion of something predicted. In order to understand Matthew’s message and the role of these citations within that message, we must take a different, more literary approach.

Matthew employs the three citations in our case study out of a concern for the identity of Jesus: not to *prove* the identity of Jesus as the messiah, but to *explain* his identity. First, working in reverse order, Matthew explains the young family’s move to Nazareth as a fulfillment of the prophets’ claim “He will be called a Nazorean” (Matt 2:23). On the one hand, the claim appears straightforward; Joseph acted precisely as predicted by the prophets. Perhaps this is Matthew’s purpose for the citation.

On the other hand, as we have seen, the original context of this citation does not predict anyone moving to Nazareth. In context, Judges 13:5 only predicts Samson’s life as a Nazirite. Matthew is not ignorant of this context; his point is more subtle. He alludes to the text about Samson’s identity as a “Nazirite” (LXX—*naziraion*) and associates this to the hometown of Jesus, “Nazareth” (GK—*nazraios*). Thus, Jesus will now be called a “Nazorean” (GK—*nazraios*). Through this play on words, Matthew claims that Jesus is *N-Z-R*. This is Jesus’ identity—a true nazirite, one devoted, holy, and set apart to God *par excellence*. Further, Matthew suggests by drawing on the reader’s knowledge of the context of Judges 13:5, that it is *this* child who will truly begin to deliver Israel.

Our second text makes a similar move. Hosea laments that Israel responded to God’s call from Egypt as an unfaithful son. Matthew picks up on Hosea’s statement, “Out of Egypt I have called my son” and proclaims its positive fulfillment in Jesus. Like his son Israel, God called Jesus out of Egypt. The difference, as Matthew will demonstrate, is that *this* son is faithful, unlike Israel in Hosea 11.

Interpreters of Matthew have long noted that the opening chapters of this gospel parallel the story of Israel.¹⁰ God sends Jacob/Israel and Jesus into Egypt (Gen 46:1-7; Matt 2:13-15) and then calls both out of Egypt (Exodus 2-13; Matt 2:19-22). Both Israel and Jesus cross through the water (the reed sea, Exodus 14; baptism in the Jordan, Matt 3:15-17) and then are led by God into the wilderness and a time of testing (Exod 15:22-18:27; Matt 4:1-11). Finally, Israel and Jesus come to the mountain and a “sermon on the mount”—for Israel the law through Moses (Exodus 19-23), for Matthew the teaching of Jesus (5:1-8:1), which fulfills the law and the prophets (5:17, 7:12). Thus, Matthew’s citation from Hosea (“out of Egypt I have called my son”) evokes the memory of Israel’s unfaithful response and sets into motion this claim for identity: Jesus is the son of God who is the model of faithfulness.

The third citation follows the same pattern. Matthew certainly proclaims the virgin birth of Jesus; this is not in doubt (Matt 1:18). However, the primary purpose of Matthew’s citation from Isaiah is not to prove the virgin birth. Rather, his emphasis is on the name of the child “Emmanuel,” which Matthew makes doubly sure the reader understands by providing his own translation: “God is with us” (Matt 1:23). Jesus is Emmanuel, “God with us.”

The remainder of the gospel demonstrates this claim to identity. Jesus truly is God—living, breathing, in human flesh with us—a sign calling for our trust. This is a major claim, perhaps the major claim for this gospel. Matthew not only begins his book with this assertion, he also ends with it. At the mount of ascension, the disciples gather and the gospel of Matthew concludes with these words from Jesus:

All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations. ... And remember, *I am with you always*, to the end of the age.” (Matt 28:18-20)

The final lines of the gospel echo the beginning. Jesus is God with us—Emmanuel now and forever!

Matthew’s story might suffer little if we abridged his text to exclude all the Old Testament citations. But his citations are what carry the theological freight. If we excise, neglect, or misunderstand these citations as mere apologetics, we rip out the heart of Matthew’s gospel.

The citations are the vehicle through which Matthew asserts the identity of Jesus. This infant is the Nazirite totally devoted to God who will begin to deliver Israel. This Jesus is the one son of God who models fidelity to the father. This Jesus is truly Emmanuel—God with us. Jesus is the fulfillment of all Israel, the complete embodiment of every positive role or person and the reversal of every failure. Without Old Testament citations, these claims do not exist in Matthew 1-2.

GLENN D. PEMBERTON

Dr. Pemberton teaches Old Testament at Oklahoma Christian University.

END NOTES

- 1 For a fuller discussion of Matthew's citations, see Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1-7* (CC; trans. Wilhelm C. Linss; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 156-164; M. Eugene Boring, "Matthew," in *The New Interpreter's Bible* (vol 8; ed. Leander E. Keck, et al; Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 151-154; K. Stendahl, *The School of Matthew and Its Use of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968); and R.H. Gundry, *The Use of the Old Testament in St. Matthew's Gospel* (Leiden: Brill, 1967).
- 2 Where we begin to read Matthew or the prophets makes a significant difference in our results. Readings that begin with Matthew and then turn to the Old Testament texts usually conclude that Matthew uses the citations primarily as an apology (predictive proof for Jesus) and then either ignore or seek to harmonize the prophets' original messages with Matthew's claim of fulfillment in Jesus. This is methodologically backwards from both canonical and literary perspectives. The prophets come first in the canon, followed by Matthew. Further, Matthew presupposes at least some familiarity on the part of his readers with the texts he cites. Otherwise, one must question why Matthew would quote the texts at all. Thus, the beginning point for understanding Matthew's use of the Old Testament must be the citations in their contexts.
- 3 All biblical citations are from the *New Revised Standard Version Bible* (National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., 1989).
- 4 For a more detailed analysis of the Syro-Ephraimitic crisis, see Herbert Donner, "The Separate States of Israel and Judah" in *Israelite and Judean History*, ed. J. H. Hayes and J. M. Miller, (Philadelphia: Trinity Press, 1990), 421-434; and John H. Hayes and Stuart A. Irvine, *Isaiah, The Eighth Century Prophet: His Times and His Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1987), 42-45 and 113-135.
- 5 Scholars generally date Hosea's ministry to the third quarter of the eighth century (746-724 BCE) and Isaiah's ministry to the second and third quarters of this century (742-701 BCE).
- 6 For a more detailed analysis of Hosea 11 in its context, see James Limburgh, *Hosea-Micah* (IBC; Atlanta: John Knox, 1988), 38-43; and Douglas Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah* (WBC; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1987), 173-184.
- 7 Hebrew Bibles denote the books of Joshua, Judges, 1-2 Samuel, and 1-2 Kings as the "Former Prophets." The "Latter Prophets" consist of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Book of the Twelve (the minor prophets).
- 8 For an excellent technical defense in favor of Judges 13 over Isaiah 11, see H.H. Schaefer, "Nazarnos, Nazraios," TDNT 4:874-879; see also Boring, 147, and Luz, 148-150.
- 9 See for example Neale Pryor, "Use of the Old Testament in the New" in *Biblical Interpretation: Principles and Practice, Studies in Honor of Jack Pearl Lewis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986), 276-286; and C.A. Evans, "The Old Testament in the Gospels" in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 579-590.
- 10 See for example Dale C. Allison, Jr., *The New Moses* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 140-180.

