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What Are They Saying About Matthew?

REVISED AND EXPANDED EDITION

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By recalling the flow of history, Matthew reminded his church that such tribulations were not death rattles but the birth pangs of the new age inaugurated by Jesus, an age in which death would ultimately be overcome and a new experience of community, including both Jew and Gentile and those pressed to the margins, made possible. Allegiance to Jesus the messiah meant not just radical changes but new life and new hope. His mission in which the community shared and his healing presence in their midst fulfilled the dreams of Israel and thus provided deep continuity with the past and energetic hope for a new future.

If the precise details of Matthew's historical perspective remain debatable, the overall thrust of his perspective and its pastoral purpose are clear.

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Matthew's Use of the Old Testament

Introduction

Any careful reader of Matthew's gospel is struck by the manner and frequency with which the evangelist appeals to the Old Testament. Matthew connects numerous events of Jesus' life with specific passages from the Hebrew scriptures. Besides these obvious quotations, Matthew's story is full of imagery, subtle allusions and typology drawn from the Old Testament.

The Fulfillment Quotations

Recent studies of Matthew have turned their microscope on this aspect of the gospel, too. The most intriguing texts are the so-called "formula" or "fulfillment" quotations. These are ten (or twelve by some counts, depending on what criteria one uses) quotations from the Old Testament introduced by a stereotype formula stressing the idea of fulfillment and applied to specific events or aspects of Jesus' life.[1] Since these quotations are a unique feature of Matthew's gospel, scholars believe that this material can give us some information about the origin and purpose of Matthew's narrative.

The fulfillment quotations span the entire gospel, covering the events of Jesus' birth (1:23; 2:6, 15, 18, 23), his entry into Galilee (4:15-16), his healings (8:17), his compassion and gentleness (12:18-21), his teaching in parables (13:35), his entry into Jerusalem (21:5), his passion

and death (26:56; 27:9-10). But even though the full spectrum of the gospel is touched, most of the fulfillment quotations are limited to the first thirteen chapters and especially to those passages that are most uniquely Matthean such as the infancy narratives of chapters 1 and 2. Note, too, that many of the quotations are from the prophets.

All of these characteristics feed into the current discussion of the fulfillment quotations. Three major questions stand out: (1) What is the text form of the quotations? In other words, did Matthew draw these quotations from the Hebrew Bible (thus showing his knowledge of Hebrew) and, if so, what version? Or did he use the Septuagint, the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament favored by the Greek-speaking early church? Or did Matthew make his own translation? This issue can be decided, of course, only by a careful comparison of the Greek text of Matthew with the many editions of the Hebrew Bible and Septuagint known to us today. (2) A second question is that of the "origin" of these quotations. Did the evangelist himself select and shape them as he wrote his gospel? Or were they already found in a collection of Old Testament texts that had been applied to Jesus by the early church? Or did they have some other origin such as a collection of texts for use in preaching? (3) A final major issue has to do with the purpose of the quotations. Did Matthew incorporate them to prove that Jesus was the messiah? Or to counteract Jewish arguments against Jesus? Or is there a more positive theological purpose to their presence in the gospel? And is the distribution of the quotations within the structure of Matthew's gospel accidental or does it have particular meaning?

To illustrate some of the answers that modern biblical scholarship has given to these questions we will sample the views of several Matthean interpreters.

The School of Saint Matthew

One of the first major studies of this question in recent decades was that of Krister Stendahl, *The School of St. Matthew and Its Use of the Old Testament*, originally published in 1954 and appearing in a second edition in 1968.[2] Stendahl's basic goal was to study the Old Testament quotations in Matthew, but he placed that question in the broader context of a hypothesis about the setting in which Matthew's gospel itself was produced. He stresses many of those features that distinguish Matthew:

its ordered structure, with the inclusion of extensive discourse material; its concern with church leadership (16:16 and chapter 18) and church discipline (18:15-20); and its studied use of Old Testament quotations. In Stendahl's view these elements give Matthew's gospel the character of a "handbook" for church life. Such a "handbook" was the product of a "school," that is, a loosely organized "milieu of study and instruction" (p. 29). It was a "school for teachers and church leaders" with the gospel assuming the form of a manual for teachers and administrators within the church (p. 35). Such a school had analogies in rabbinic circles but Stendahl believed that the closest parallel may have been Qumran, the quasi-monastic center of strict Judaism that developed on the shores of the Dead Sea from 132 B.C. to A.D. 70. This brotherhood of Jews "acted as a school which preserved and expounded the doctrines and rules of its founder" (p. 31).

Stendahl contended that the "crown jewel" of Matthew's "school" was its use of the Old Testament to interpret the life of Jesus. In fact, this may be the closest affinity between Qumran and the school of Matthew: the way the Qumran group interpreted the Old Testament book of Habakkuk is similar in style to the way Matthew handled Old Testament quotations. For Qumran, as for Matthew, the Old Testament texts were not primarily a source of rules "but the prophecy which was shown to be fulfilled" for both the founder and his followers (p. 35).

Stendahl attempted to demonstrate his thesis by a detailed study of Old Testament quotations in Matthew. He found that in those texts which Matthew has in common with Mark and Luke the form is similar to that of the Septuagint, or Greek Bible. But in the fulfillment texts, or what Stendahl called the "formula quotations," the text form, although composed in Greek, is closer to the Masoretic or standard Hebrew text while showing "deviations from all Greek, Hebrew and Aramaic types of texts known to us" (p. 97). Stendahl attributed this to the creative work of Matthew and his school. "In distinction from the rest of the Synoptics and the Epistles with what seems to be their self-evident use of the LXX (Septuagint), Matthew was capable of having, and did have, the authority to create a rendering of his own" (p. 127).

The analogy to Qumran helped Stendahl explain this peculiarity of Matthew. The Qumran group applied quotations from the book of Habakkuk to their founder, "The Teacher of Righteousness"; they were

convinced that these prophecies found their fulfillment and their ultimate meaning in this person and the community he founded. The quotations they used from the book of Habakkuk are a unique form, indicating that the Qumran group felt free to adapt and shape the text in the light of their convictions about its fulfillment.[3] This type of *pesher* method (from the Hebrew and Aramaic word meaning "interpretation") is what Matthew and his school exercised with the formula quotations. Because they were convinced that Jesus was the fulfillment of the messianic prophecies of the Old Testament, Matthew's school shaped and rendered these key quotations to fit the contours of their traditions about Jesus and his teaching. Thus the formula quotations, according to Stendahl, not only lead us to the strong fulfillment Christology of Matthew but also give us an insight into the structure of Matthew's community.

Notetaker for Jesus

Stendahl's basic thesis about a school setting for Matthew's gospel has not been widely accepted, yet his detailed examination of the text form of Matthew's quotations continues to be a valuable resource and a point of reference. In the preface to the second edition (1968) of his book, Stendahl himself noted that research since the time his work first appeared in 1954 suggested that textual tradition of the Hebrew scriptures was more fluid and diverse than he may have thought and that, therefore, he may have attributed more creativity to the supposed Matthean school than was warranted.[4] Other scholars have also called into question Stendahl's comparison of Matthew's fulfillment quotations to the "*pesher*" method at Qumran; after all, they note, the Qumran method is intended to interpret an Old Testament text; the quotations in Matthew, on the other hand, are interpreting the meaning of Jesus' life.[5]

More recent studies have gone in other directions. One of the most unusual is the work of Robert Gundry, *The Use of the Old Testament in St. Matthew's Gospel, With Special Reference to the Messianic Hope*.[6] Gundry studied not only explicit quotations of the Old Testament in Matthew but even more subtle allusions (an example would be the allusion to Isaiah 63:19 in Matthew 3:16 where there is reference to the "opening of the heavens"). He agrees with Stendahl that such a free form is found only in Matthew's fulfillment quotations. The quotations

Matthew shares with Mark are based on the Septuagint, but all other quotations and allusions in the synoptic materials have evidence of the same kind of "mixed form" as that in the fulfillment quotations.

This led Gundry to further challenge Stendahl's theory about a special Matthean school as the source of the supposedly unique Old Testament quotations Matthew used. Gundry insists that the practice of making one's own translation of Old Testament materials—rather than depending on the Masoretic text or the Septuagint—was more common in the early church than one may have supposed. The Jewish Christians were, after all, used to the rabbinic practice of "targumizing," that is, of free, interpretive renderings of biblical quotations and stories.

But Gundry pushes his case much further. He suggests that the mixture of Hebrew, Septuagintal (i.e., Greek) and Aramaic elements in Matthew's quotations "harmonizes perfectly" with what we know of the trilingual milieu of Palestine in the first century. The only adequate explanation is that the source of these quotations is ultimately Matthew the apostle. Matthew, an educated publican, would be equipped for this role. He may, in fact, have been a "notetaker" among the band of Jesus' disciples, recording events and discourses of Jesus, even the interpretation of the Old Testament that Jesus applied to himself and to his messianic mission. These notes, according to Gundry, would have been the foundation of the tradition upon which the synoptic gospels were built. Gundry holds that the gospel of Matthew depended directly on the Greek gospel of Mark (this accounts for the presence of Septuagintal Old Testament quotations which Matthew brought over from Mark), but the ultimate source was the raw material provided by the tax collector Matthew. Thus Gundry envisages a very early date for Mark and Matthew, somewhere around A.D. 50-60.[7]

The theological meaning of the Old Testament quotations in Matthew is also of importance for Gundry's study. Gundry synthesizes Matthew's theology under the label "messianic hope." Matthew's Old Testament quotations cover a broad spectrum of Israel's hopes for salvation. Each set of quotations and allusions draws on these basic images of hope: Jesus is the royal messiah, the Isaian servant, the Danielic Son of Man, the shepherd of Israel. He fulfills the role of Yahweh himself in saving from sin (1:21), raising the dead (11:5) and giving rest to the weary (11:28-29). He is the greater Moses, the greater

Son of David, the representative prophet like Jeremiah and Elisha; he is the representative Israelite and the true just sufferer of Israel.

Thus, by means of Old Testament quotations and allusions, a wide spectrum of messianic images and types find their fulfillment in Jesus. This interpretation, Gundry believes, was not merely the post-Easter reflection of the church. The validation for that reflection was Jesus' own interpretation of the scriptures in the light of his mission. This interpretation was faithfully transmitted by Matthew's notes.

The Fulfillment Texts and the Plan of Matthew's Gospel

The studies of Stendahl and Gundry concentrated mainly on the form and origin of the fulfillment quotations used by Matthew. The important work of Wilhelm Rothfuchs, *Die Erfüllingszitate des Matthäus-Evangeliums* ("The Fulfillment Quotations of Matthew's Gospel"), tried to appreciate how these quotations fit into Matthew's theology.[8]

Rothfuchs agrees that the text form of the quotations is mixed, a blend of Septuagintal elements with unique translations. But he disagrees with the theory of Stendahl that these came from the exegetical work of a school. He also challenges the proposal of Georg Strecker that these quotations were part of a collection (or "testimonial") of Old Testament quotations used in the early church to prove Jesus' messianic identity. Strecker claimed that the citations in Matthew did not really reflect the evangelist's style, and the quotations give the impression of being forced into the text without an intrinsic relationship to the surrounding context. For example, the quotation from 2 Chronicles 29:30 in Matthew 13:35 speaks of revelation: "I will open my mouth in parables. I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world." Yet, Strecker points out, Matthew uses the term "parable" in a negative sense in this chapter, as a vehicle not of revelation but of concealment for those who reject Jesus: "This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand" (13:13). This shows that the formula quotation is out of step with its context and was imported by the evangelist from a pre-existing collection of quotations. The only function of the Old Testament quotations for Matthew is to stress the "fact" of Jesus' life; the citations are part of a historicizing tendency in Matthew.[9]

But Rothfuchs disagrees on almost all counts. He insists that a careful

study of the form of the quotations and their introductory formulas show that they are integrated with the evangelist's style and perspective, and that their purpose is more theological than Strecker thinks. One factor to keep in mind is the context in which these quotations appear. In the case of Matthew 13:35, for example, it is true that the parables are referred to as veiled speech for those who reject Jesus. But more of the context has to be taken into account. A turning point in the chapter occurs in 13:36, immediately after the Old Testament quotation: Jesus leaves the crowd and teaches the disciples privately in a house. According to Rothfuchs and others, this divides the discourse and, in fact, is a watershed for the whole gospel story.[10] Prior to 13:36 Jesus had spoken to all of Israel and, especially beginning with chapter 11, had experienced misunderstanding and rejection. From now on his mission is turned away from his opponents to the community of the disciples who do understand (13:11, 16, 51).

The fulfillment quotation accurately reflects this Matthean perspective. It is placed not at the end of the discourse but at the turning point after v. 34. Its content echoes the movement of the whole discourse: the first part, "I will open my mouth in parables," parallels the first half of the chapter in which Jesus directed parables to the crowds; the second half, "I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world," coincides with the special revelation of the mystery of the kingdom which is given to the disciples and signaled in the second half of the discourse. Therefore, as this example shows, the fulfillment quotations are not bootlegged from some pre-existing source but were carefully integrated into the gospel by the evangelist.

Rothfuchs applies his redaction criticism method not just to individual occurrences of the quotations but to their distribution in the gospel as a whole. He notes that with the exception of 27:9-10 (the death of Judas) and 21:4-5 (entry into Jerusalem) the fulfillment texts are bunched in the infancy narrative of chapters 1 and 2 or, with the four quotes attributed to Isaiah, applied to Jesus' public ministry in Galilee (4:14-15; 8:17; 12:18-21; 13:35). These quotations, especially the Isaian ones, apply to Jesus' mission to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Jesus carries out God's promised mission of salvation to his people.

This gives Rothfuchs a hint as to the origin of this style of Old Testament interpretation. It developed in the missionary preaching of the

early church's mission to Israel.[11] The church's basic message to the Jews was that the promises were fulfilled in Jesus. But the mission to Israel had become a thing of the past by the time Matthew writes his gospel; now the mission is turned toward the Gentiles (28:16-20). So Matthew's Old Testament interpretation has a new purpose. Now it is the message of the community that the promises of salvation made to Israel and fulfilled in Jesus are, through his risen presence in the church, available to all people. This universal perspective is reflected not only in the explicit mission text of 28:16-20 but in the content of some of the Old Testament quotations themselves (see 12:17 with its quotation of Is 42:1-4).

Toward a Consensus

Each of the authors we have cited offers somewhat different answers to the questions posed at the beginning of the chapter about the form, origin and purpose of the fulfillment quotations. But the state of the art on this question is not pure anarchy. An article by the Flemish scholar Frans Van Segbroeck helps bring some order to the overall discussion of this issue.[12] His framework can serve as a conclusion to our review.

I. *The Form.* Van Segbroeck finds a good bit of consensus here. The thesis of Stendahl and many others that the fulfillment quotations are a mixed text form blending LXX, Hebrew and Aramaic elements has been sustained. Gundry has gone further, asserting that this mixed form is probably true of many other citations of the Old Testament in the gospels. What makes the Old Testament fulfillment quotations in Matthew's gospel unique is not their textual form but the way the evangelist applies these quotations to the life of Jesus. Scholarship also seems to agree that Matthew's quotations were formulated in Greek, thus indicating a Hellenistic church, yet one in close contact with its Jewish roots.

II. *The Origin.* Consensus is not as strong here. The "school" theory of Stendahl has not been widely accepted, nor has the conservative view of Gundry that these quotations come from the original notes of Matthew. Gundry's thesis also places the gospel of Matthew too early and compresses too radically the time span it would take for Mark's gospel to be formulated and for Matthew to be able to revise this gospel in his own format. Many scholars also believe that Matthew's gospel shows signs of being aware of the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70,

and of the changes taking place in post-70 Judaism, and therefore must be dated much later than Gundry suggests.[13]

Strecker's theory that the quotations were part of a collection or testimonial has not been given a warm reception either. Ironically, the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls proved that such collections were known in Judaism; prior to that archeological find the existence of such collections was merely a hypothesis. But most scholars are still not convinced that Matthew drew his quotations from such a source.

More weight seems to be given to the "preaching" milieu suggested by Kilpatrick and refined by Rothfuchs. "Preaching" must be understood in a broad sense to include all of the teaching and communication activities of the church's mission. In this context the early church probably developed a style of applying key Old Testament texts, especially from the prophets and psalms, to the events of Jesus' life, illustrating that he was the fulfillment of Israel's hopes. This process may have begun in the passion story but was soon applied to all of the events of Jesus' life.

This tradition of Old Testament interpretation, developed in the course of the church's mission among Jews, may well have been the origin of the style of interpretation found in Matthew's gospel. Graham Stanton and others have suggested that Matthew himself may be responsible for the particular form of the Old Testament quotations he uses. He notes that although Matthew tends to be a conservative editor regarding his sources, he does introduce some minor changes into the Old Testament quotations already found in Mark's gospel, adapting them to the context in which the evangelist will use them in his own gospel.[14] Virtually all scholars concede that the introductory formula itself is typically Matthean. Likewise, Stanton suggests, many of unique features of the Old Testament quotations found in Matthew reflect the style and perspective of the evangelist or his immediate sources rather than any specific text type.[15]

Therefore, while Matthew may have been prompted to use these fulfillment quotations on the basis of a tradition of interpretation in his community and in Judaism itself, the precise format of the quotations can be traced to Matthew's own editorial preferences, not to any pre-existing collection of quotations.

III. *The Meaning.* Writing in 1971, Segbroeck had observed that

more work needed to be done in this area and more recent studies have taken up that challenge. Rothfuchs' book was one of the first major studies of the Old Testament quotations in Matthew from an explicitly redactional perspective. Yet Rothfuchs did not go far enough, in Van Segbroeck's view. For example, the rationale behind the distribution of the Old Testament quotations in the gospel might be discovered by realizing that chapters 1-13, where most of them occur, are precisely those passages where Matthew takes the freest hand vis-à-vis his source, Mark.[16] This reinforces the suggestion that the quotations are specifically Matthean and are important to his perspective. Van Segbroeck also suggests that the attribution of so many of the quotations to Isaiah is significant. Not only was Isaiah the premier messenger of salvation to Israel (a point made by Rothfuchs) but he was also the prophet who most bemoaned the failure of his mission. This, too, might be a reason for Matthew's use of texts from that prophet, since much of his gospel wrestles with Israel's rejection of Jesus and the Christian mission.

From the vantage point of his rhetorical study of Matthew, David Howell comes to a similar conclusion about the function of the quotations.[17] They fall under the rubric of "generalizations"—that is, appeals outside the narrative world of the gospel to a broader authority for the events taking place in the story, namely the authority of God through the Old Testament. These quotations are bunched at the beginning of the gospel because here is where Matthew introduces the reader to his perspective on Jesus. As the reader enters the narrative world of Matthew, he learns that Jesus' life and mission fulfill God's promise in the Old Testament; Jesus embodies the hope of Israel and thus his life and teaching are imbued with God's own authority. In the early chapters of the gospel, too, the focus in Matthew's story is on Jesus' mission to Israel and the first strong signs of the eventual rejection of that mission. The quotations from Isaiah that fall within chapters 4-13 help give broader meaning to that history. Thus overall the quotations present Jesus as the fulfillment of the Old Testament, as one endowed with God's own authority and therefore as a reliable source within the world of Matthew's gospel, and, finally, the quotations show the gravity of rejecting Jesus.

Ulrich Luz, too, emphasizes that the fulfillment quotations come

early in Matthew's gospel not only because he is freer from the constraints of Mark's story in this part of the gospel but in order to direct the reader to the evangelist's point of view. Through these fulfillment quotations, Matthew emphasizes that the "life of Jesus corresponds from the beginning to the plan of God to which Jesus is completely obedient...."[18] Thereby Matthew also illustrates the movement of the gospel from Israel to the Gentiles who will respond to Jesus and the preaching of the community. In effect, Matthew asserts the Christian claim to the Bible in the wake of the conflict with emerging rabbinic Judaism. In the midst of this strong theological interpretation of the role of the fulfillment quotations, Luz offers a rather prosaic explanation of why the preponderance of the quotations are from Isaiah. Matthew may not have had access to the entire Old Testament, yet his library could have had a full scroll of Isaiah! Thus quotations from other places in the Old Testament may have been by memory.[19] Therefore economy as well as theology may have dictated Matthew's selection of quotations.

The contribution of recent Matthean scholarship on this issue demonstrates that the Old Testament quotations in Matthew are not mere "proof texts" or embroideries on the gospel story but an integral part of the gospel's message, placing the story of Jesus in the broader context of Israel's history and underscoring the messianic authority of Jesus. Although concentrated in the beginning and middle sections of the gospel (perhaps because of his interaction with source material), the quotations highlight almost every aspect of Jesus and his mission—his origin, his ministry of the kingdom, his teaching, his healing, his advent in Israel, in Galilee and into the holy city Jerusalem, his rejection, suffering and death. In all of this, God's promises of salvation to Israel were being fulfilled and embodied in Jesus, and this conviction—proclaimed in concert with the Hebrew scriptures—is what Matthew's gospel wished to proclaim.