

# **THE 'REAL' CHRISTMAS**

## **STUDY 3** **PROPHECY?**

### **Introduction**

In the first study we looked at the Christmas story as we all believe we know it and compared it to the actual texts of the birth narratives in Matthew and Luke. What we found was that there were significant differences between the gospel narratives and these narratives and the traditional story of Christmas we have all grown to accept as 'true'.

We learnt that this was known as 'conflation' - the adaptation of a text or texts to fit the accepted traditional version of a story!

The second study sought to familiarise us with the 'context' in which the birth narratives were written. We looked at the social, political and theological background to the period in which Matthew and Luke were crafted and saw that it is absolutely imperative to understand this context to understand what the two gospels are about.

This third study will examine the Prophetic texts in the birth narratives and seek to understand what Matthew and Luke intends by them, and how easy it is to take prophecy literally and therefore miss the real reason for its use.

**YOU WILL NEED AN OPEN MIND—YOU WILL NEED TO BE WILLING TO THINK FOR YOURSELF—AND YOU WILL NEED TO BE WILLING TO OFFER YOUR THOUGHTS AND BELIEFS TO THE WIDER GROUP..... *So let's begin!!***

### **Think time 1**

What do you understand "prophecy" to be?

What place does it have in your understanding of the Christmas story?

Are the Old Testament prophecies used in these New Testament settings of great or less importance?

## **prophecy**

The fulfilment of prophecy is a major theme of the Christmas stories in Matthew and Luke. Both of the gospels emphasise that Jesus is the fulfilment of God's promises to Israel.

Some of the themes of the story are clearly based on Old Testament images. The story of Pharaoh and Moses shape Matthew's story of Herod and Jesus for instance.

Both Matthew and Luke use the theme of fulfilment as they use texts from the Old Testament in their stories of Jesus's nativity—but they do so in very different ways -

Let's look at Matthew first.

### ***Matthew and the Old Testament.***

Matthew uses Old Testament texts as if they are predictions about Jesus. *This is known as the Prediction/fulfilment formula.*

The writer of Matthew's gospel directly quotes the Old Testament forty times and according to scholars he uses the prediction/fulfilment formula thirteen or fourteen times.

Five of these times are in the birth narratives

### **Talk Time 1**

Would you agree that the Old Testament specifically predicts the birth of Jesus in these five quotes?

Are these only some of a number of 'messianic prophecies' that existed at the time of Jesus?

Are these prophecies truly fulfilled in the New Testament stories of Jesus?

Does this show that the 'Jews' failed to recognise Jesus as the predicted Messiah?

It is not too great a leap to argue that the fact that many Christians in the past (and indeed still some today) believed that the Jews had rejected Jesus as the fulfilment of prophecy that led to much of the hatred and violence perpetrated against them.

The reality is that these prophecies have been misunderstood and misused over the centuries as an examination of the texts clearly shows!

### **They are not predictions!**

If we wish to look at these prophecies as they really are in the Old Testament we need to understand that they are clearly not predictions of the distant future or of the birth of Jesus. Let's look at two predictions because this is a crucial matter. *Be warned that this will seem negative for a time, as if Matthew is being discredited, but the result is a richer, truer understanding of the passages.*

### **Virgin Birth predicted? (Mt. 1:22-23)**

This first prediction is based on Isaiah 7:10-16.

The crucial wording is—

*Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz saying, “ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be as deep as Sheol or high as Heaven.*

*But Ahaz said, “I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test.”*

*Then Isaiah said “Hear tehn, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son and shall name him Imanuel.*

*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.”*



King Ahaz

Ahaz is King of Judah in the 8th. Century BCE. Two neighbouring Kings want to replace him. Ahaz is frightened . Isaiah promises him that a child will soon be born as a sign that the Kingdom will be delivered.

In Hebrew the name given to the child *Immanuel* is not a proper name, but a phrase. “God is with us”. This is the sign to Ahaz—the symbolic naming of a child who is about to be born. This symbolic naming happens in other places in Isaiah ( 7:3 & 8:3) and also in Hosea (1:6 & 1:8). It is not meant to be taken as the actual name of a child.

Isaiah is assuring the people that Jerusalem will be safe in their present crisis—because *God is with them!*

We can also see that Isaiah puts a clear time limit to the birth of this child—by the time it happens the siege would be lifted and the crisis over.

Another interesting factor is that Isaiah 7:14 uses the Hebrew term for *young woman*—saying nothing about virginity. This is because Matthew would be using the greek version of the text from the *Septuagint* which uses the greek for young woman as also the word describing a virgin.

The point of this is that Isaiah concern was not a prediction of a miraculous birth, but the naming of the child!

### **Talk time 2**

How do you respond to this evidence?  
Is there a way to 'explain' the seeming contradictions?

### **Birth In Bethlehem predicted?**

This prediction is spoken by the scribes in Herod's court in reply to his desire to know where the Messiah is to be born. This is the only one of Matthew's prophecies that in it's Old Testament context refers to an indefinite future.

The words are taken from *Micah 5*.

*But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from old, from ancient days.*

*He shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God, & they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; & he shall be the one of peace. (Micah 5:2-5)*

Matthew also uses a short passage from 2nd. Samuel 5:2 a promise given to David: *it is you who shall be shepherd of my people Israel, you who shall be ruler over Israel.*

Is Matthew's use of the combined text from Micah and 2 Samuel a prediction of the place of Jesus birth—namely Bethlehem?  
**NO!**

It is ancient Israel's yearning for a King like David, the great King – the Shepherd King!

**Under the Kingship of someone like David, they shall live secure, for he shall be the one of peace.  
It is hope and promise—not prediction!**

### **Talk time 3**

How do we react to this interpretation?  
Does it matter if we use the Old Testament prophecies differently from their intention?

Today most mainstream scholars see this passage from Micah as the main reason why Christmas stories suggest that Jesus was born in Bethlehem.

It is more probable that Jesus was actually born in Nazareth. Throughout the texts from the ancient world Jesus is described as “Jesus of Nazareth”, or “the Nazorean”. He is also known as a “Galilean”, whereas if he had been born in Bethlehem he would have called a “Judean”. (*See below*)

The reason for Bethlehem as the birth place of course once again relates to the claim that he is from the house of “David”, a “son of David”, the ideal King.

A final point is to look at the last of Matthew’s so called prophecies – when, having returned from Egypt the holy family go to Nazareth rather than Bethlehem—he tells us this is *so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, “he will be called a Nazorean”*.

Matthew was concerned that Jesus had been known as a ‘Nazorean’ and so he had to find a way to explain this and fit it with his story of the Bethlehem birth.

The problem is..... *there is no such prophecy anywhere in the Old Testament or Hebrew writings!*

### **Matthew’s Intent.**

#### **Think time 2**

What reasons might the writer of Matthew have in using the prophecies in his text in the way he does? These prophetic statements are clearly important to Matthew—but should we take them seriously knowing that they are not used as we might think they should have been used.?

**Why does Matthew use these prophetic statements?**

**There are three different ways of seeing what Matthew is doing with this prediction/fulfilment formula**

The first, usually propagated by what might be called conservative evangelical Christians defends what Matthew has done.

It argues that the passages are indeed Messianic prophecies and therefore predictions of Jesus life and birth, despite the fact that they were not understood that way in their ancient Jewish context—if the Bible says they are predictions—then they are predictions. They had one meaning in OT times and a second, fuller meaning in the NT. Thus the prophets were saying more than they knew.

*But this also means that nobody thought of these as predictions until after their fulfilment!*

The second way of seeing Matthew’s use of the formula, is the exact opposite of the first. This does not defend Matthew but sets out to discredit him. He is twisting the OT to make his point.

This attitude sees the whole process as illegitimate and unworthy. It is often used as part of the attempt to debunk the whole of the value of the Biblical texts.

*If Matthew does this—how can we trust anything else the Gospels and the Bible says?*

There is however a third way to understand Matthew, and it does not rely on the prediction/fulfilment model/

If we accept that Matthew is not using these OT texts as predictions, then it is possible to state that neither did Matthew! Nor was Matthew trying to prove that Jesus was the Messiah!

Remembering the contextual work we did last time—we remember that Matthew was writing for insiders, for his own Jewish Christian community—Jews who *already believed that Jesus was the Messiah!*

He was not trying to convince outsiders to believe the claim—but to express the convictions and beliefs of those who already were convinced.

**Matthew’s use of the Old Testament is *TESTIMONY—WITNESS—CONVICTION.***

For Matthew and his community Jesus was the Messiah. As such he was the fulfilment of God’s promise and Israel’s yearning. To express this Matthew ‘mined’ the Old Testament, the sacred scripture of his community, for passages that he could place in his narrative, seeing the stories of Jesus ‘prefigured’ there.

This was an accepted way of using ancient texts at this time -

The Romans themselves did it using the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* of Homer, and Virgil's *Aeneid* to support the Emperor's claim to his position!

Matthew then is not using the OT to *prove* that Jesus was the Messiah, rather he is trying to place Jesus in relationship to their ancient scriptures—which were still of paramount importance to them—they were still Jews!

#### **Talk time 4**

*Does this interpretation seem reasonable to you?*

*Do you feel that it is imperative to see the texts used by Matthew as predictions of the birth of Jesus otherwise they have no value?*

#### **Luke and the Old Testament.**

Luke uses the Old Testament differently to Matthew. He clearly does not use the prediction/fulfilment model.

Indeed he does not quote a single verse from the OT, he does however, proclaim the continuity of Jesus with Israel and his fulfilment of God's promise to Israel in more than one way.

It would take too long to examine Luke's usage—but what follows are some indications for you to follow up in your own time if you wish.

#### **Luke and the Old Testament.**

In the birth narratives the great hymns stand out. Probably better described as chants, these poems reflect the proclamation of the fulfilment of God's promise to the people Israel in the person of Jesus.

The tone of jubilation which rings through these hymns praises the conviction that God's promises are being fulfilled

##### *THE MAGNIFICAT*

*My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my saviour for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant*

##### *BENEDICTUS*

*Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favourably on his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a mighty saviour for us*

##### *NUNC DIMITUS*

*Master now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word, for my eyes have seen your salvation.*

These hymns are clearly based on the great psalms of praise in the Old Testament, where the longing for God to intervene in human history is often expressed in beautiful thought and language.

From 1 Samuel 2;1 Hannah Samuel's mother previously barren proclaims

*My heart exults in the Lord; my strength is exalted in my God.*

**Psalm 35:9**

*Then shall my soul rejoice in the Lord, exulting in his deliverance*

**Habbakuk 3:18**

*Yet I will rejoice in the Lord: I will exult in the God of my salvation*

#### **CONCLUSION**

So, we no longer need to see the birth narratives as responding to some prophetic statement of the OT, but rather as both Matthew and Luke stating their absolute belief that Jesus is the fulfilment of all of the Law and the Prophets. He is the completion of the Law and the Prophets.

That Jesus is the Messiah is not a fact to be proved, rather to call Jesus the Son of God is a confession of commitment, allegiance, and loyalty...