

Was the Birth of Jesus According to Scripture?
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1. Introduction

Each Christmas, churches throughout the world celebrate the birth of Jesus through readings, carols and nativity plays. A major feature of these events is that they are said to be fulfillments of Scripture. Thus according to Matthew's Gospel, Jesus' conception (1:23), place of birth (2:5-6), persecution by Herod (2:10), escape and return from Egypt (2:15), and settling in Nazareth (2:23) were all predicted by Israel's prophets (Isaiah, Micah, Jeremiah, Hosea). More generally, Matthew claims that Jesus was "the son of David, the son of Abraham" (1:1) by including a genealogy that traces his ancestry back to these two great Jewish figures. When Matthew introduces the quotation from Isa 7:14 with the words, "All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet" (1:22), he is effectively summarizing the rest of his Gospel.¹

Luke's Gospel begins with the claim that what he is about to narrate concerns "the events that have been fulfilled among us" (1:1). Included in these events are the angelic announcements of the births of John the Baptist (1:5-25) and Jesus (1:26-38), usually known as the annunciations. There is the *Magnificat* or song of Mary (1:46-55) and the *Benedictus* or song of Zechariah (1:68-79). And there is the witness of two elderly prophets, Simeon (2:29-35) and Anna (2:36-38). These stories are then followed by a genealogy that not only traces Jesus' ancestry back to David and Abraham but all the way back to Adam (3:23-38). Although Luke's Gospel has less formal quotations than Matthew,² it ends with Jesus telling his disciples that "everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled" (24:44).

However, these claims raise a number of questions today. Firstly, if we look up the texts quoted by Matthew, some of them do not appear to be prophecies at all. Hos 11:1 ("out of Egypt I called my son") and Jer 31:15 ("A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping") are references to Israel's exodus and exile respectively, and do not contain any future promises. The text that is said to support Jesus' settling in Nazareth in Matt 2:23 ("He will be called a Nazorean") cannot be found in any biblical manuscript known to us and the wording of many of the quotations differs significantly from the original texts. For example, the NRSV renders the first part of Isa 7:14 as, "Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son," but Matt 1:23 reads, "Look, *the virgin shall conceive* and bear a son." If Matthew's quotations differ from the original texts, can we really speak about fulfillment?³

Second, Matthew and Luke are often our only sources for the events that they narrate. If we ask whether Herod really did murder "all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under" (Matt 2:16), then it has to be acknowledged that there is no reference to it in any other document of the period, including the rest of the

¹ There are approximately 60 quotations in Matthew, drawn mainly from Isaiah (11), the Minor Prophets (10), Deuteronomy (10) and Psalms (9). For a brief overview of Matthew's use of Scripture, see Moyise, *Old Testament in the New*, 34-44.

² Luke includes around 25 quotations, mainly drawn from Psalms (7), Isaiah (5) and Deuteronomy (5). See Moyise, *Old Testament in the New*, 45-62.

³ In the case of Isa 7:14, the differences are partly explained by the fact that Matthew is following a Greek text that used the specific word for "virgin" (*parthenos*), whereas the Hebrew uses a more general word for "young woman" (*almah*).

New Testament. Some would argue that *if* such a catastrophic event really happened, it would surely have been recorded by someone. Indeed, we rely on historians such as Josephus for many of the details of Herod's reign but he makes no mention of this. Perhaps Matthew invented the story in order to support the claim that the birth of Jesus was according to Scripture? On the other hand, it has been estimated that the population of Bethlehem was only about a thousand at the time and so the number of children under two might have been no more than twenty or thirty. Their deaths would of course be tragic but not necessarily newsworthy, given the level of atrocities in those days. Thus care must be taken when using such "arguments from silence," but it remains true that Matthew and Luke are often our only sources for the events being narrated and their historical accuracy cannot be assumed.⁴

Third, there are differences between Matthew and Luke, both in detail and in overall approach. In terms of detail, one only has to compare the two genealogies to see a number of differences. For example, Matthew divides his genealogy into three groups of fourteen (1:17) and says that Joseph's father – Jesus' grandfather - was called Jacob (1:16). Luke has many more names in his genealogy and says that Joseph's father was called Heli (3:23). Various attempts have been made to explain this, as we shall see in due course, but it shows that our study cannot simply be a weaving together of the material in Matthew and Luke. The two Gospels offer very different accounts of Jesus' birth and this is true of their overall approaches. The only texts that Luke actually quotes are to confirm that Mary and Joseph followed the precepts of the law by offering "a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons" (2:24) for the birth of their child (Lev 12:8). Luke's approach to fulfillment is either by allusion, as when Mary says, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior" (1:46-47)⁵ or by telling the stories in such a way that they evoke well-known stories from Scripture. For example, the story of God granting a child to the righteous but barren woman Elizabeth (1:7) clearly echoes the stories of Sarah (Gen 17:17) and Hannah (1 Sam 1:2).

Indeed, there is material like this in Matthew also. The story of Herod murdering the young children of Bethlehem (often known as the "slaughter of the innocents") is clearly intended as a parallel to the story of Pharaoh murdering the Hebrew children in Exod 1:22 ("Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile"). The parallel continues with Jesus' sojourn in Egypt and then his departure, which Matthew explicitly claims to be a fulfillment of Hos 11:1 ("out of Egypt I called my son"). Such parallels are generally known as "typology," from the Greek word *typos*, meaning "pattern" or "example." An explicit example occurs in John 3:14-15, where Jesus says: "And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, *so must* the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life." The major debate is whether such parallels or correspondences can in any sense be classed as fulfillment. There is nothing in the stories of Pharaoh seeking to kill the Hebrew children or the barren Hannah becoming pregnant which "predict" future events. But is "prediction" a necessary requirement for the concept of "fulfillment?"

⁴ Bishop Spong claimed in 1992 that "no recognized New Testament scholar, Catholic or Protestant, would today seriously defend the historicity of these narratives" (*Born of a Woman*, 44) but this is certainly not true today, as we shall see.

⁵ Ps 34:3 ("O magnify the LORD with me, and let us exalt his name together"); Ps 35:9 ("Then my soul shall rejoice in the LORD, exulting in his deliverance").

Some would say Yes, arguing that Matthew and Luke have simply chosen to narrate the stories of Jesus in ways that imitate key figures and events in Scripture. This is clearly important for the way that readers understand the stories but has no bearing on whether Jesus' birth was a fulfillment of Scripture or not. Others, however, are prepared to accept that a later event might be said to "fulfill" an earlier one if there is a sense of "fullness" or "completion" to it. For example, if it is true that Jesus came to deliver people from their sins, as Matt 1:21 claims, this could be seen as the fulfillment of the original exodus, where people were delivered from their physical bondage. Of course, this is a circular argument. For those who do not believe that Jesus can deliver people from their sins, the parallel is artificial and hence irrelevant to the question. But for those who accept this belief, it is a possible line of reasoning. Crossan and Borg, for example, are prepared to speak of the birth stories as fulfillment because Jesus "decisively reveals and incarnates the passion of God as disclosed in the Law and the Prophets – the promise and hope for a very different kind of world from the world of Pharaoh and Caesar, the world of domination and empire."⁶ They do not, however, regard any of Matthew's five quotations as predicting the actual events of Jesus' birth.

2. *The so-called Virgin Birth*

It is only the two infancy passages in the New Testament that speak of the virgin birth or more accurately, the virginal conception, since there is nothing to suggest that the actual birth was unusual. The claim is that Mary became pregnant while still a virgin and not through sexual intercourse and Matthew regards this as a fulfillment of Scripture. Luke's story probably echoes a number of biblical passages (Gen 16:11; Judg 13:3; Isa 7:14; 9:6; 2 Sam 7:14) but there is no attempt to show that Scripture is being fulfilled. Indeed, the parallel between Mary and Elizabeth (Luke 1:36-37) has led some scholars to suggest that Luke was only wishing to make the point that Mary's conception was "of God," not that it took place without a human father.⁷ Readers of the NRSV text above might deduce from verse 31 ("And *now*, you will conceive") that Mary became pregnant at that moment but such an interpretation would not arise from the RSV ("And behold, you will conceive"), NJB (Look! You are to conceive") or the NIV ("You will be with child") and is contrary to the promise of verse 35 ("The Holy Spirit *will* come upon you").

The translation issue is that the Greek word *idou*, which occurs 57 times in Luke, is an interjection that introduces the next element of the narrative (eg. 1:20, 31, 36, 38, 44, 48). The RSV follows the KJV and generally renders it "behold,"⁸ but most modern versions try to give a more contextual meaning. Thus when Zechariah is struck dumb because of his unbelief (1:20), the context suggests that the effect is immediate and so the word "now" is appropriate ("And *now* you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens" - NIV). On the other hand, the context of Luke 1:36 makes it clear that Elizabeth's conception is not about to happen because she is already in her sixth month. The NIV thus translates, "*Even* Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child." The point is that immediacy is not intrinsic to the word but depends on context and since Luke 1:35 contains a future promise ("The Holy Spirit *will* come upon you"), it is clear that Luke does not envisage Mary conceiving at this precise moment.

⁶ Crossan and Borg, *The First Christmas*, 224.

⁷ Schaberg, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus*, 101-27.

⁸ Forty one out of fifty seven in RSV; fifty two out of fifty seven in KJV. The NRSV never uses the word "behold" in the New Testament.

Nevertheless, Luke does envisage the conception happening fairly soon after the angel's visit, for Elizabeth is said to be in her sixth month (1:26) and has still not given birth when Mary's pregnancy is revealed (1:41). Thus Mary must have conceived within a few months of the angelic announcement. However, the more difficult question is whether Luke envisages the conception as taking place while Mary is *still* a virgin. Three reasons are usually offered in support of this. The first is that Luke twice uses the term "virgin" (*parthenos*) to introduce Mary (1:27). The word occurs over sixty times in the LXX for an unmarried girl, as in the description of Rebecca in Gen 24:16: "The girl was very fair to look upon, a virgin, whom no man had known." However, the lack of sexual experience is not always to the fore and the word is sometimes translated "girl" or "maiden," as in Gen 34:3 ("And his soul was drawn to Dinah daughter of Jacob; he loved the girl, and spoke tenderly to her"). Thus Luke's use of *parthenos* does not in itself suggest that she was *still* a virgin when she conceived.

Second, Mary's reply ("How can this be, since I am a virgin") suggests that Mary did not take the angel's words as referring to the time after her betrothal, when according to Jewish custom, she would move into Joseph's home.⁹ Given Matthew's statement that Mary's pregnancy would lead to public disgrace (Matt 1:19), it is possible that Mary understood the angel's words to mean that she and Joseph would break their betrothal vows.¹⁰ However, if that was her understanding, one would have expected a "why" question rather than a "how" question. Mary's reply to the angel is literally, "How is this, since I know not a man," using the verb "to know" in its "biblical" sense (Gen 4:1, 17). In today's language, we would say: "How can this be true since I am not in a sexual relationship?" The angel's answer is suggestive ("the Holy Spirit will come upon you") but in the light of the scriptural stories of Sarah and Hannah, it is hardly proof that a human father will not be involved.

The third reason is that when Luke introduces his genealogy in chapter 3, he says: "Jesus was about thirty years old when he began his work. He was the son (as was thought) of Joseph son of Heli" (3:23). That Joseph was understood to be Jesus' legal father can be seen from Matt 13:55 ("Is not this the carpenter's son?") and John 1:45 ("We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth"). What then does Luke mean by "as was thought?" The most natural meaning is that someone else was Jesus' father, either because Mary was unfaithful to Joseph or that she became pregnant against her will. Most scholars reject the first possibility as out of keeping with the strong morality of the passage and the second as incompatible with the angel's words, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you" (Luke 1:28), which is hardly true if Mary is about to be seduced or raped. Brown also notes that the parallelism between what is said of John and what is said of Jesus leads the reader to expect an even more miraculous conception than that of the aged and barren Elizabeth. This is hardly true if someone other than Joseph was Jesus' father and so although a virginal conception would

⁹ There are important differences between "betrothal" and what we would understand by "engagement." According to later Jewish sources, betrothal would normally take place around the age of 13 and was legally binding: infidelity was regarded as adultery and "splitting up" was like divorce. The girl would generally remain with her parents for another year and then move into the groom's house. For further details, see Schaberg, *Illegitimacy of Jesus*, 41-62.

¹⁰ Evidence from later Jewish sources suggests that sexual abstinence during the period between betrothal and marriage was not always a requirement.

be without precedent in Jewish writings, he concludes that it is the most plausible interpretation of Luke's words.¹¹

Some would wish to add a fourth reason based on the words, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you" (Luke 1:35). Clearly this could support a virginal conception but the verb here translated "come upon you" (*eperchomai*) has no sexual connotations. For example, in Acts 1:8, Jesus promises that the Holy Spirit will "come upon" the disciples so that they are equipped to evangelize the world (see also Acts 8:24; 13:40; 14:19). It does not mean that the Holy Spirit would do the work for them; rather, they will be empowered by God to accomplish their task. This is also the meaning in Luke 1:35. Mary will be empowered by God or the Holy Spirit to conceive and give birth to one who will be called "Son of God." It is not suggesting that God or the Holy Spirit will take the place of a human father; only that Mary will be enabled to perform her role. Thus the verse does not offer additional evidence that Luke believed in a virginal conception, though it is clearly compatible with such a view.

Is Luke intending an allusion to Isa 7:14 as he narrates his story? A literal rendering of the LXX of Isa 7:14 is: "Behold, the virgin will conceive in the womb and give birth to a son and you will call his name Emmanuel." We have already noted Luke's double mention of "virgin" in 1:27, and in 1:31 he records the angel's words as, "And *behold*, you will conceive *in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus*" (RSV) The words in italics are where the Greek is identical and so it is certainly possible that Luke intends his readers to think of Isa 7:14. On the other hand, it has been argued that his use of a different word for "conceive" and the fact that the child is called "Jesus" rather than "Emmanuel" (as it is spelt in the LXX) suggests that he does not have Isa 7:14 in mind. Are these two points convincing?

The difficulty with the first point is that there is some doubt as to the original reading of the LXX of Isa 7:14. The Hebrew text uses the adjective *hareh* ("pregnant"), which the LXX generally translates by the idiom *en gastri echei* (literally, "have in the womb") and this is accepted as the original reading of Isa 7:14 by both the leading editions of the LXX.¹² However, some important manuscripts use the verb *lambano* ("receive"), which puts the emphasis more on conception ("receive in the womb") rather than pregnancy ("have in the womb").¹³ Luke is closer to the latter but uses the compound form *sunlambano*, which is the verb the LXX generally uses for conceiving.¹⁴ Since the LXX never uses *sunlambano* in conjunction with *en gastri*, it could be argued that Luke is following his own style and is not pointing to Isa 7:14. On the other hand, Luke uses *sunlambano* to describe Elizabeth's conception (1:24) and may have added *en gastri* in 1:31 because he did have Isa 7:14 in mind.

As for the second point, Matthew has a very similar statement in 1:21 ("She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus"), but then goes on to cite Isa 7:14 in full, along with an explanation that "Emmanuel" means "God is with us" (1:23). Again, one could argue

¹¹ Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 298-309.

¹² The most popular edition of the LXX was edited by Alfred Rahlfs in 1935 and is the version usually found in Bible programmes such as Logos and Bibleworks. Its weakness is that its text was largely constructed on the basis of just three manuscripts, Sinaiticus (4th c. CE), Vaticanus (4th c. CE) and Alexandrinus (5th c. CE). The other edition is known as the Göttingen series (from its place of publication) and takes into account a far greater number of manuscripts, though it is not available for every book of the LXX.

¹³ Menken (*Matthew's Bible*, 121-4) argues that this was the original reading because: (1) It is more likely that scribes would be tempted to change *lambano* to the more usual *echei*; and (2) They would be tempted to conform Isa 7:14 to Matt 1:23.

¹⁴ Eg., Gen 4:1, 17; 16:4; 19:36; 21:2; 25:21; 29:32, 33, 34, 35.

that if Luke had Isa 7:14 in mind, he would surely have wanted to make something of the term “Emmanuel,” but this is an argument from silence. As we shall see later, Matthew has his own reasons for emphasizing the abiding presence of God/Jesus with his people but this theme is less prominent in Luke. Thus he may simply have thought that explaining the meaning of “Emmanuel” at this point in his narrative would only complicate matters (as some readers might be thinking about my previous paragraph). Brown thinks the question must be left open but Nolland finds it difficult to accept that Luke had Isa 7:14 in mind.¹⁵ Before we consider Matthew’s explicit use of the text, we will first look at the context of the verse in the book of Isaiah.

3. *Isaiah 7:14 in context*

¹In the days of Ahaz son of Jotham son of Uzziah, king of Judah, King Rezin of Aram and King Pekah son of Remaliah of Israel went up to attack Jerusalem ... ²When the house of David heard ... the heart of Ahaz and the heart of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind. ³Then the LORD said to Isaiah, Go out to meet Ahaz, you and your son Shear-jashub, ... ⁴and say to him, Take heed, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart be faint because of these two smoldering stumps of firebrands, because of the fierce anger of Rezin and Aram and the son of Remaliah ... ¹¹Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. ¹²But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test. ¹³Then Isaiah said: “Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? ¹⁴Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. ¹⁵He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. ¹⁶For 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. ¹⁷The LORD will bring on you and on your people and on your ancestral house such days as have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah - the king of Assyria.” (Isa 7:1-4, 11-17)

If this is a faithful rendering of the Hebrew text, it is clearly not a prediction of a virginal conception or indeed of anything in the distant future. Verse 16 links back to verse 1 and the threat to Jerusalem posed by an alliance between Syria (Rezin) and Israel (Pekah), which can be dated to 734 BCE. Isaiah’s word to Ahaz is that a “young woman is with child” and before the child has the moral capacity to distinguish good from evil, the threat will be over. Unlike Jer 31:15 and Hos 11:1, the text is indeed a prophecy (“*will* be deserted”) but its fulfilment lies within the near future. If we ask who this child might be, the son born to Isaiah in the next chapter (8:3) is the most likely candidate, for he is linked with the term “Immanuel” (8:8), is specifically called a “sign” (8:18), and the threat posed by Rezin and Pekah will have disappeared “before the child knows how to call ‘My father’ or ‘My mother’” (8:4). Although this metaphor suggests a couple of years, whereas distinguishing between good and evil points to an age of twelve or so, the general import is the same: the threat posed by Rezin and Pekah will soon be over. As Brown says:

¹⁵ Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 300; Nolland, *Luke 1-9:20*, 51.

The sign offered by the prophet was the imminent birth of a child, probably Davidic, but naturally conceived, who would illustrate God's providential care for his people. The child would help preserve the House of David and would thus signify that God was still "with us."¹⁶

It is not difficult to see how such a prophecy could be interpreted typologically. The birth of a child is a fairly obvious sign of new life and in the context of a conquered nation, could easily point to future deliverance. Since Matthew believes that Jesus has delivered God's people from their sins (1:21), he would no doubt have thought of this as an "even greater deliverance" than what Isaiah predicted. Isaiah had a "young woman" in mind (perhaps his wife), who would shortly give birth to a son and this would be a sign of Jerusalem's deliverance from the "two smoldering stumps of firebrands." For Matthew, it would have seemed obvious that this "prefigures" the even greater deliverance brought about by the conception and birth of Jesus. If Matthew is only thinking of (what we would call) typological fulfillment, then the claim is not particularly controversial.

Before we consider this, there is more to be said about the Isaiah passage. Firstly, there is the question of the translation of Isa 7:14, as can be seen from the following:

Behold, a *virgin* shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel (KJV).

The *virgin* will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel (NIV).

Behold, a *young woman* shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel (RSV)

Look, the *young woman* is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel (NRSV).

The first issue is the translation of the Hebrew word *almah*. Most scholars agree that its general meaning is "young woman" and it rather looks like the choice of "virgin" by the KJV was theologically motivated. On the other hand, if we look at the six other occurrences of the word in the Hebrew Bible,¹⁷ the KJV uses "virgin" for three of them (Gen 24:43, Song 1:3; 6:8), and so this suspicion does not appear to be justified. Most modern translations use "young woman" in Isa 7:14 but the NIV sides with the KJV and also uses "virgin" for Song 6:8. More significantly, the LXX translator used the specific word for virgin (*parthenos*) in Gen 24:43 and Isa 7:14 and *neanis* ("young girl") or *neotes* ("youth") in the others. So while the Hebrew word tends to emphasize youth rather than virginity, it would appear that context can sometimes suggest that "virgin" is an appropriate translation.¹⁸

The second issue follows on from this, for if the meaning of *almah* in Isa 7:14 is "virgin" and the adjective *hareh* means "pregnant," then we appear to have a virginal conception in the eighth century BCE. This is because there is no connecting word between the noun "virgin" and the adjective "pregnant" in the Hebrew text, so the most likely translation is, "Behold, the virgin *is* pregnant." Such a meaning is avoided in the NRSV because it renders *almah* with "young woman" and so the translation, "the young woman is

¹⁶ Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 148.

¹⁷ Gen 24:43; Exod 2:8; Ps 68:25; Prov 30:19; Song 1:3; 6:8; Isa 7:14.

¹⁸ It is not that *almah* can only mean "young girl" and *parthenos* can only mean "virgin;" it is a matter of emphasis.

with child,” means that someone is currently pregnant and will in the near future give birth to a son. It cannot therefore refer to Isaiah’s son, whose conception is narrated in Isa 8:3 (“And I went to the prophetess, and she conceived and bore a son”).

For those translations that render *almah* with “virgin” (including the LXX), a future tense is adopted from the rest of the sentence and hence, “The virgin *will* be with child and *will* give birth to a son, and *will* call him Immanuel” (NIV). However, because the conception now lies in the future, we would need a strong indication in the text that the conception is to be understood as taking place without a human father. Indeed, we do not know of any Jewish writing which understood Isa 7:14 as involving anything but a normal conception. It is also unlikely that Isaiah’s wife is in mind, for she has already borne him a child (Shear-jashub) and is not, therefore, a virgin.¹⁹ Justin knows of a Jewish tradition that identified the child with Hezekiah, probably because of his prominence in Isaiah 36-39 and his reputation as a reforming king. However, 2 Kgs 18:2 speaks against this, as Hezekiah is said to be aged twenty-five at his accession and was therefore born at least six years before this promise.

A further difficulty with the passage is that verse 17 (“The LORD will bring on you ... the king of Assyria”) and what follows in verses 18-25, suggests that hardship rather than deliverance is in mind. Yes, Rezin and Pekah will be destroyed but life under Assyrian rule will be no picnic: “On that day every place where there used to be a thousand vines, worth a thousand shekels of silver, will become briars and thorns” (Isa 7:23). Of course, one could argue that servitude is better than annihilation but it is hard to see how it constitutes “deliverance.” Thus the meaning of Isaiah’s prophecy is obscure, not to say enigmatic, and this may have contributed to the idea that its ultimate fulfillment lies in the distant future.

Another factor that might have contributed to such a view is the notion of “sign.” When Isaiah tells Ahaz that he can ask for a sign, he is told that it can be as “deep as Sheol or high as heaven.” Although he refuses to ask for such a sign, probably because he has already decided on an alliance with Assyria rather than trusting in God, he is given one anyway, and it is not unreasonable to interpret it in such grandiose terms. Thus it could be argued that a sign that is as “deep as Sheol or high as heaven” points beyond the immediate context and if this is combined with the extraordinary name *Immanuel*,²⁰ which means, “God (is) with us,” a case can be made for some sort of miraculous intervention. Indeed, it may suggest that it should be connected with the promised son in Isa 9:6-7:

For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. (Isa 9:6-7)

It is still difficult to see how this specifically points to a conception without a human father but the exalted language (“Mighty God, Everlasting Father”) could suggest something

¹⁹ Although it is possible that Isa 8:3 (“And I went to the prophetess, and she conceived and bore a son”) could refer to a different woman than the mother of Shear-jashub, perhaps because she had died.

²⁰ The Hebrew name *Immanuel* consists of the preposition “with” (*im*) combined with the suffix for “us” (*nu*) and the ordinary word for God (*el*). It occurs again in Isa 8:8 (“its outspread wings will fill the breadth of your land, O Immanuel”) but in Isa 8:10, it is part of ordinary speech (“it will not stand, for God is with us”). The LXX translates the term in Isa 8:8 and 10 but transliterates it in Isa 7:14 as Emmanouel. It is doubtful that a Greek speaker would understand the name Emmanouel to mean “God with us,” hence the need for an explanation in Matt 1:23.

beyond the normal. Is Matthew's assertion that Isa 7:14 was fulfilled in the virginal conception of Jesus a credible interpretation of this line of thinking?

4. Matthew's use of Isaiah 7:14

If the meaning of Isa 7:14 is somewhat obscure, there does not appear to be any doubt as to how Matthew understood it. He begins by telling us that Mary became pregnant while betrothed to Joseph "but before they came together" (1:18). This is probably a reference to the time when Mary would leave the family home and move in with Joseph, though "came together" could have a sexual connotation. The point is reiterated at the end of the narrative, when Joseph takes Mary as his wife "but had no marital relations with her until²¹ she had borne a son" (1:25). This denial that Joseph is Jesus' natural father is paralleled by two references to the conception being "from the Holy Spirit" (1:18, 20). Thus whatever the original meaning of Isa 7:14, it appears that Matthew understood it as a prophecy of a future virginal conception and he claims that this was fulfilled in Jesus.

Matthew prepares for the quotation by echoing its language in the preceding narrative. Thus the phrase, "to be with child" (Matt 1:18), uses the same idiom as the LXX of Isa 7:14 (lit. "having in the womb"),²² while the words in Matt 1:21 ("She will bear a son, and you are to name him") reproduce the Greek of Isa 7:14 exactly. The effect is to increase the correlation between event and quotation but it also highlights an important difference: the child was not named "Emmanuel," as in Isa 7:14, but "Jesus" (Matt 1:21, 25):

All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." (Matt 1:22-23)

Most commentators believe that the explanation for this lies in a change of wording from Isa 7:14 (Hebrew and LXX). The original uses a second person singular ("you shall name") but Matthew has a third person plural ("they shall name"). In English, this remains puzzling but the Greek verb "to name" also means "to call" and so Matthew's text refers to an unspecified group of people who will call the child Emmanuel, which means, "God is with us." This is often then linked with two other texts in Matthew's Gospel which speak about the abiding presence of God/Jesus:

For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them. (Matt 18:20)

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age. (Matt 28:19-20)

If this is correct, then the fulfillment of this aspect of Isa 7:14 does not lie in the actual naming of Jesus but how he will come to be viewed by his followers. It is surely no coincidence that the Gospel begins with a promise of God's presence and ends with the

²¹ There has been much debate as to whether the word "until" implies that he did have sexual relations after the birth of Jesus, which has tended to be the Protestant view. The Roman Catholic view is that Mary remained a virgin all her life.

²² Or at least one part of the tradition; other manuscripts have "receive in the womb."

claim that Jesus will be with his disciples “to the end of the age.” Jesus is the promised “Emmanuel,” not because this was his name but because he mediates the presence of God. According to Matthew, God calls Jesus “Son” at his baptism (3:17) and has Jesus say that, “no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him” (11:27). If Matthew wants a text to support this, then Isa 7:14 is a good choice, for it promises the birth of a child who will be called “Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.” All he had to do was change *kaleseis* (“you shall name/call”) to *kalesousin* (“they shall name/call”).

As with the previous quotations, some will find it difficult to accept that Matthew’s readers would have found this convincing given that he has had to modify the text to make his point. We have already suggested several answers to this objection but there are two features of Matthew’s introduction to the text that might be relevant in this case. Firstly, he begins with the words, “*All this* took place to fulfill.” This could suggest that the purpose of the quotation is not so much to prove the virginal conception but to show that everything that is happening is part of the divine plan that God would one day dwell with his people (Lev 26:12; Ezek 37:27; Zech 2:10). This was encapsulated in the promise of the child called “Emmanuel,” though the context of Isa 7:14 made the identification of this child difficult. Matthew believes that the promised child is Jesus and also knows traditions that his conception was “from the Holy Spirit” (Matt 1:18, 20). Isa 7:14 was therefore an apt verse to quote and the fact that the LXX rendered the Hebrew *almah* with *parthenos* (“virgin”) was a bonus.

Second, the text is introduced as, “spoken by the Lord through the prophet.” Now this could simply be an acknowledgement that it was the Lord who commanded Isaiah to speak to Ahaz but perhaps there is something else, namely, that Matthew was aware that his quotation differs from what is written in Isaiah. In other words, Matthew believed that he was offering the divine meaning of the text, the meaning *the Lord* intended but not necessarily understood by Isaiah. We today would indicate this in a series of hermeneutical steps but in Matthew’s day, it was common practice to combine them by offering a modified quotation. The insertion of the “by no means” into the Bethlehem quotation is the clearest example in Matthew, because the change from “least” to “by no means least” was hardly intended to deceive. The change from “you will call” to “they will call” is only slightly less obvious.

There is an alternative explanation for the third person plural “they will name/call,” namely, that this was simply the form that Matthew found in his text. Maarten Menken has shown that some of the differences between Matthew’s quotations and the LXX manuscripts that have come down to us are difficult to understand as deliberate changes. They do not make a point that would enhance Matthew’s argument or necessarily conform to his style. In the case of Isa 7:14, he disputes the view that Matthew would have seen a contradiction between the names “Jesus” and “Emmanuel,” as if the meaning, “he will save his people from their sins” was applicable at his birth but “God is with us” only later, once he had gained followers. He also notes that the Hebrew manuscript designated 1QIsa^a found at Qumran has a third person singular ending, probably to be understood as an impersonal, “one will call.” He concludes that Matthew knew a text of Isa 7:14 that used a third person plural and he quotes it, without any sense that it contradicts the fact that the child was called Jesus. Such a contradiction, he says, lies only in the minds of modern scholars.²³

²³ Menken, *Matthew’s Bible*, 117-131.

5. *Is a virginal conception believable?*

Many Christians would answer this question by quoting the words of the angel to Mary in Luke 1:37: “For nothing will be impossible to God.” If scientists point out that Jesus would not have the requisite chromosomes without a human father, the response is: “For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible” (Matt 19:26). However, we have already seen that at least one element of the birth narrative cannot be taken literally (a star that can point out a particular house) and so perhaps the same is true of the virginal conception. Is it a symbolic story designed to illustrate the truth that Jesus’ conception and birth are “from the Holy Spirit” and is not meant to be taken literally? After all, no one takes this phrase to mean that the Holy Spirit supplied the seed to make Mary pregnant. So why take the rest of the story literally?

The obvious answer to this is that Matthew appears to take it literally but then the same could be said for the “sat-nav” star and also for the events that are said to have accompanied the crucifixion:

Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened, *and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised*. After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many. (Matt 27:50-53)

This story is written in the same “matter of fact” style as the infancy narrative but many scholars regard it as symbolic: Jesus’ resurrection is not an isolated incident but marks the beginning of the general resurrection. There are two main reasons for this. First, it is not mentioned in any of the other Gospels or in any other source. If “many” people were reunited with their loved ones shortly after Jesus’ death, it would surely have been noted somewhere. Second, given Matthew’s emphasis on the fulfillment of Scripture, this looks like a fulfillment of Ezek 37:13: “And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people.” Readers in the first century, it is argued, would not have read Matthew’s narrative and gone looking for their past relatives; they would have intuitively realized that it is making a theological point about the significance of Jesus’ death and resurrection. The question then is whether the same might be true of the virginal conception?

There is of course a significant difference in that the resurrection story only alludes to a scriptural passage, whereas the virginal conception is supported by a specific proof-text. However, this raises the question of whether the proof-text has generated the story rather than the story prompting the proof-text. We have seen in previous chapters that this is unlikely to be the case for Hos 11:1 or Jer 31:15, as they are not prophecies in their original context. It is possible that the future promise of Mic 5:2 (“from you *shall* come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel”) could have generated the Bethlehem stories, especially Luke’s (mis)timing of the census, though this remains a matter of debate.

The case for Isa 7:14 generating the virginal conception of Jesus depends on how that text was understood. If it was understood to be speaking of a virginal conception in the future, as some conservative scholars maintain, then one can see how the early church might have assumed that it applies to Jesus, whether they had any specific evidence for it or not. Put another way, given their beliefs about Jesus, they would hardly have thought that it applies to anyone else. On the other hand, most scholars do not regard Isa 7:14 as

predicting a virginal conception and there is not a single Jewish document that expects the messiah to be born of a virgin. Thus according to Evans, it is much more likely that Matthew knew traditions about the virginal conception and was led to Isa 7:14 in order to explain them.²⁴

Of course, this does not mean that the traditions themselves were historically reliable. Perhaps a virginal conception was invented not to specifically fulfill Isa 7:14 but to show that Jesus is greater than any of the heroes and gods of contemporary religion. For example, the conception of Perseus, Romulus, Alexander and Augustus were all believed to be miraculous. If the Christians wanted to claim that Jesus was the true Lord, greater and mightier than any of these figures, then he would need a birth story more miraculous than those attributed to them. However, these stories usually involve a god coming down and impregnating a woman and thus giving birth to a special person. Brown argues that the early Christians would have found such stories morally repugnant and would hardly have attempted to emulate them. One could perhaps argue that the virginal conception was an attempt to remove the “pagan” element from these stories but if this was the case, it is surprising that he speaks of conception “from the Holy Spirit,” which would almost certainly be taken as divine impregnation. The emphasis on the purity and blamelessness of Mary and Joseph makes it unlikely that the virginal conception is based on “impregnation” myths.²⁵

A more likely scenario is the theory offered by Roger Aus. He thinks the inspiration for the virginal conception, like so much of the infancy narratives, is to be found in Jewish traditions concerning the birth of Moses. For example, when Pharaoh ordered all the male children to be thrown into the Nile (Exod 2:22), there is a tradition that states that Amram divorced his wife Jochebed, so that this fate would not befall their children. However, Miriam persuaded him that this course of action would lead Israel to lose their female children also and was therefore worse than Pharaoh’s decree. Amram thus vowed to take back Jochebed “quietly” but when this was put to the Sanhedrin,²⁶ he was urged to do it publically as an example to the people. Aus thinks that this is the inspiration behind Joseph wanting to divorce Mary “quietly” but was then persuaded by the angel to take her (openly) as his wife.

However, Aus’s main point is that Jochebed’s ability to conceive Moses in her old age was regarded as a miracle, for the “signs of maidenhood” returned to her. She became a “youth” again and Aus regards the Aramaic term as equivalent to the Hebrew *almah*. Although we are not talking about a virginal conception, as Amram is regarded as the father of Moses, the miracle is that having already borne Miriam and Aaron, Jochebed’s virginity was miraculously restored. He notes that similar things are said about Sarah’s conception of Isaac in her old age and it is these traditions that provided the inspiration for the virginal conception of Jesus. It is a “typically Jewish Christian haggadic embellishment of the birth of Israel’s final redeemer,” based on stories of the birth of Israel’s first redeemer.²⁷ It is not “historical” in the modern sense of the word but it does convey “religious truth,” in a form that would have been convincing at the time. Aus completely denies that any form of

²⁴ Evans, *Matthew*, 63.

²⁵ Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 517-533.

²⁶ This anachronism is typical of such writings. The Jewish council known in the first century as the Sanhedrin is read back into the narratives about Moses.

²⁷ Aus, *Matthew 1-2*, 84.

deception is involved; it was the most natural way for a Jewish Christian like Matthew to express the profound truth that Jesus is “Israel’s final redeemer.”²⁸

Another possible source for the virginal conception is Philo. In *Cher* 40-52 (XII-XV), Philo draws a distinction between natural conception, which gives birth to the physical, and divine conception, which gives birth to “the virtues.” As is often the case with Philo, it is difficult to ascertain whether his allegorical interpretations bypass the literal meaning of the texts or build on them. Consider the following antithesis between human and divine begetting:

A husband unites with his wife, and the male human being with the female human being in a union which tends to the generation of children, in strict accordance with and obedience to nature. But it is not lawful for virtues, which are the parents of many perfect things, to associate with a mortal husband. But they, without having received the power of generation from any other being, will never be able by themselves alone to conceive anything. Who, then, is it who sows good seed in them, except the Father of the universe, the uncreated God, he who is the parent of all things? (*Cher* 43-44)

On its own, one would assume that Philo is talking about the begetting of “ideas” and thus has no relevance to an actual virginal conception. Notice, for example, the reference to the “soul” in the following quotation: “For the association of men, with a view to the procreation of children, makes virgins women. *But when God begins to associate with the soul*, he makes that which was previously woman now again virgin” (50a). However, this divine “association” is closely tied to the *actual* conceptions of Sarah (45), Leah (46) and Rebecca (47) and he specifically says of Rebecca that “when the all-wise Isaac addressed his supplications to God, Rebecca, who is perseverance, *became pregnant by the agency of him who received the supplication*” (47). It is unlikely that Philo is intending to deny the human role of Isaac in Rebecca’s conception but it is secondary to the divine begetting required to produce “the virtues.” Although the thought-world is very different, it is possible that the early church thought a “divine begetting” was equally necessary to produce the “Son of God.”²⁹

Moving in a completely different direction, it has been suggested that the virginal conception was an attempt to defend Jesus from the charge of illegitimacy. Both Tertullian and Origen in the second century had to defend Jesus from such a charge and it is possible that it lies behind the dialogue found in John 8. Jesus is claiming that God is his father and accuses his hearers of not recognizing this because they do not know God.

“I testify on my own behalf, and the Father who sent me testifies on my behalf.” Then they said to him, “*Where is your Father?*” Jesus answered, “You know neither me nor my Father. If you knew me, you would know my Father also.” ... They answered him, “Abraham is our father.” Jesus said to them, “If you were Abraham’s children, you would be doing what Abraham did, but now you are trying to kill me, a

²⁸ Crossan and Borg agree: “Our conclusion is that Matthew very, very deliberately based Jesus’ conception closely on the midrashic versions of Moses’s conception already current in the first century” (109).

²⁹ So Aus, *Matthew* 1-2, 61-3. Brown speaks of it as a “serious possibility” but nevertheless concludes that “we remain without real proof of the existence in Judaism of that idea of a virginal conception that might have influenced Jewish Christians in their thinking about Jesus” (*Birth of the Messiah*, 524).

man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did. You are indeed doing what your father does.” They said to him, “*We are not illegitimate children; we have one father, God himself.*” (John 8:18-19, 39-41)

The dialogue can be understood solely in terms of God the father but it is possible that their initial question (“Where is your father?”) contains a personal challenge, because they know that Jesus cannot produce one. Similarly, their denial (“We are not illegitimate children”) could contain an unspoken, “unlike you,” especially as a literal rendering of the Greek is, “We were not born of fornication” (RSV). Misunderstanding between “earthly things” and “heavenly things” is common in John’s Gospel (3:12; 4:11; 6:52), so it is difficult to be sure that an accusation of illegitimacy is present, but it is accepted by a number of commentators.³⁰

The other piece of New Testament evidence is the unusual designation of Jesus in Mark 6:3 (“the carpenter, the son of Mary”). The fact that Matthew has “the son of the carpenter” (13:55) and Luke has “the son of Joseph” (4:22) could suggest that they found Mark’s designation objectionable, and indeed some manuscripts of Mark 6:3 also read “son of the carpenter.” One explanation for this is that Joseph died soon after the birth of Jesus, and so Jesus was known in the village as the “son of Mary,” but this does not explain why later writers and scribes were so eager to change it. Although the evidence is slight, it does appear that rumors of illegitimacy were current in Jesus’ day.

Schaberg accepts this tradition but does not think that Matthew and Luke turned it into a story of a virginal conception; that was the work of the later church. If Matthew and Luke are read in the light of Scripture and not later church doctrine, readers are far more likely to interpret the story as God bringing deliverance from disaster rather than an unprecedented suspension of nature. For example, the function of the four women in the genealogy is that they are all “wronged or thwarted by the male world,”³¹ yet miraculously protected by God. The story of a young girl conceiving a child without a human father (and without the pain of childbirth, according to later tradition) is hardly a parallel to their situation, but a girl who has been violated while betrothed to another man, fits very well. It is the natural meaning of Luke’s statement that Joseph was only “thought” to be Jesus’ father and explains the parallel with her relative Elizabeth, who exclaims: “This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the *disgrace* I have endured among my people” (Luke 1:25). The even greater “miracle” for Mary is not a virginal conception, as Brown insists, but protection and deliverance from an even greater disgrace, namely, rape. It also explains the use of *tapeinosis* in Mary’s song (Luke 1:48), which should probably be translated as, “he has looked upon the *humiliation* of his servant.” The NRSV’s use of “lowliness” and the NIV’s use of “humble estate” turns it into a virtue to be rewarded (“Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed”) rather than a humiliation that has been overcome.

To support this view, Schaberg notes that there is a close verbal link between Luke’s description of Mary as a “virgin engaged to a man” (1:27) and the laws concerning a “young woman, a virgin already engaged to be married” in Deut 22:23-29.³² The laws aim to clarify

³⁰ Smith, *John*, 189; Barrett, *Gospel According to St John*, 288. Brown (*Birth of the Messiah*, 542) says the matter must be left open.

³¹ Schaberg, *Illegitimacy*, 32.

³² The Greek of Luke 1:27 (*parthenon emnesteumenen andri*) is almost identical to the LXX of Deut 22:23 (*parthenon memnesteumene andri*).

the difference between seduction and rape and in verse 29, the perpetrator is said to have “violated” (*tapeinoo*) the young girl. This then provides the background for understanding Luke’s narrative and in particular, Mary’s song, which gives thanks for God’s *mercy* (Luke 1:50), a strange term to use for a miraculous conception. We have already seen that read on its own terms, the evidence for a virginal conception in Luke’s account is marginal, but most commentators assume that Matthew’s explicit quotation of Isa 7:14 makes it certain for his Gospel and thus tilts the balance for Luke also. However, given that Isa 7:14 was not referring to a virginal conception in its original context and was not interpreted as such by any later writer, Schaberg questions this assumption. Is it not more likely, she asks, that Matthew understood Isa 7:14 as a sign of God’s deliverance from an imminent threat, which fits remarkably well with Mary’s situation (violated while betrothed)? Thus if Matthew’s readers had heard rumors that Jesus was illegitimate, they would most likely have understood his narrative in this way:

When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, *she was violated*, but the child she carried was from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife *even though you are not the father*, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.”³³

Is this a plausible understanding of the infancy stories? It clearly makes sense of some of the details (women in the genealogy; overcoming Elizabeth’s disgrace; God’s mercy to Mary; Joseph not the father) and offers a more straightforward interpretation of Matthew’s quotation of Isa 7:14. Far from taking it out of context or importing an unprecedented virginal conception into the meaning of the words, Matthew is simply asserting that the conception and birth of a child has led to an even greater deliverance (and perhaps also judgment) than in Isaiah’s day. In that sense, it is consistent with the other quotations, where the consequences of Jesus leaving Egypt and Herod’s slaughter of the young children are said to fulfill Hos 11:1 and Jer 31:15 respectively. That it contradicts nearly two thousand years of church doctrine will be a stumbling block for many but Schaberg insists that this must be balanced by the actual arguments used in the early church to support it. For example, few people today will find Tertullian’s logic convincing:

Christ cannot lie. He said he was the son of man. Therefore he had a human parent. But God was his father. Therefore Mary, his mother, was the human parent. But if so, she was a virgin. Otherwise he had two fathers, a divine and a human one, the thought of which is ridiculous, like the stories of Castor and Hercules. Moreover, the

³³ It should be noted that Schaberg does not paraphrase the passage like this; it is my attempt to convey how she thinks it would have been understood.

prophecy of Isaiah is alone fulfilled by the exclusion of a human father and the acceptance of the virginity of Mary ...³⁴

On the other hand, it is difficult to reconcile a forthcoming rape with the angel's words in Luke 1:28 ("Greetings, *favored* one! The Lord is with you") and Luke 1:30 ("Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have *found favor* with God"), or indeed Mary's consent in Luke 1:38 ("let it be with me according to your word"). Schaberg responds to the latter by saying that Mary consents "in ignorance of her specific fate, but in trust that she will be empowered and protected by God,"³⁵ but Luke's use of "favored/found favor" remains a difficulty. It is also to be noted that rumors of illegitimacy (John 8:41) are not necessarily evidence for Schaberg's position, for they are equally explainable on the theory of a virginal conception (i.e., Mary gave birth rather soon after she and Joseph began living together). Indeed, Paul's statement in Gal 4:4 ("born of a woman, born under the law"), which is often used to show that he was unaware of a "virginal conception" tradition, also states that Jesus was born "under the law." Brown suggests that Paul would hardly have said this if he thought that Jesus was in fact illegitimate.³⁶ Indeed, if Schaberg is correct that Luke intended to portray an illegitimate conception, Brown concludes that Luke must be regarded as incompetent, for it went unnoticed for nearly 2000 years, and even now that it has been "discovered," most scholars still find it difficult to recognize. If it is possible to talk of a consensus on such a controversial matter, it is probably this: the historical evidence for a virginal conception is very thin but none of the alternative theories are especially convincing.³⁷

6. Conclusion

Since there are significant debates about the meaning of Isa 7:14 in its original context, as well as the precise meaning of the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke, I will begin by outlining four possible answers to the question of this chapter:

1. Isa 7:14 was referring to a future virginal conception and this was fulfilled when Mary conceived by the Holy Spirit without a human father.
2. Isa 7:14 was not referring to a future virginal conception but was typologically fulfilled when Mary conceived by the Holy Spirit without a human father.
3. Isa 7:14 was not referring to a future virginal conception but was typologically fulfilled when Mary conceived (by Joseph or someone else) but was "overshadowed" by the Holy Spirit and became a sign of an even greater deliverance.
4. Isa 7:14 was not referring to a future virginal conception, Jesus was not born of a virgin and it has been a mistake to speak about "fulfillment."

The first has been the traditional view in the church but this meaning of Isa 7:14 has always been disputed by Jewish commentators and biblical scholarship now largely agrees. Earlier debates focused on the meaning of the Hebrew word *almah* and its translation as *parthenos*

³⁴ Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 4:10, cited in Schaberg, *Illegitimacy*, 188.

³⁵ Schaberg, *Illegitimacy*, 138.

³⁶ Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 697-712.

³⁷ Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 527. Bruner (*Matthew*, 43) says, "if the counterarguments are so often bizarre, why not take a relatively modest leap of faith and believe that Matthew and Luke – our only two documentary witnesses – are giving us what they claim to be giving us: credible accounts of Jesus' birth?" Of course, for those who reject the virginal conception, like Bishop Spong, this is not a "modest" leap but a descent into irrationalism.

in the LXX, but today the issue is more to do with historical context. It is difficult to avoid the “plain” sense of the words in Isa 7:14-16 that the passage is speaking about a child in the eighth century BCE and a future deliverance before he reaches maturity. If Isaiah had in mind a birth some eight centuries later, then his message to Ahaz was cruelly misleading. Many scholars would wish to argue that this does not necessarily exhaust Isaiah’s meaning but nevertheless agree that its primary meaning is referring to an event in the eighth century BCE.

The second view is popular and depends on the flexibility of the term “typological.” For example, Blomberg uses the idea of “double fulfillment” to suggest that the text was fulfilled in Isaiah’s generation but the “larger, eschatological context, especially of Isa 9:1-7”³⁸ points forward to a more complete fulfillment in Jesus. Hagner speaks of a “secondary level of meaning,” which was prompted by two things: the significance of the name Emmanuel and the promise of a “golden age” in Isaiah 9 and 11 (and 2:2-4). This is what prompted the LXX translator to use the specific word *parthenos*, because he understood the text to have “supernatural associations.”³⁹ Keener says that because Isaiah spoke of the child as a sign, “Matthew was right to recognize in Immanuel (compare Isa 8:8) a sign pointing to the ultimate presence of God and triumph for Judah in the Davidic Messiah who would be born to Israel.”⁴⁰ All three would agree that it is appropriate to speak of this aspect of Jesus’ birth as a “fulfillment” of Scripture.

The third view consists of those who think of Jesus as either illegitimate (Schaberg) or naturally born (Aus, Crossan and Borg) but still think “fulfillment” is an appropriate term. For Schaberg, the idea of God overcoming Mary’s disgrace is a more fitting “fulfillment” of the scriptural parallels than an unprecedented virginal conception. For Aus, it is Matthew’s way of demonstrating that Jesus is Israel’s final redeemer, based on stories and traditions concerning the birth of Moses. Neither thinks that Matthew and Luke were responsible for turning this into a miraculous virginal conception; that was the work of the later church and needs to be challenged. Crossan and Borg think that Matthew and Luke are not so easily exonerated but nevertheless agree that “fulfillment” is an appropriate word since the story “decisively reveals and incarnates the passion of God as disclosed in the Law and the Prophets – the promise and hope for a very different kind of world from the world of Pharaoh and Caesar, the world of domination and empire.”⁴¹

The fourth view arose in critical scholarship around the mid-nineteenth century, when Bauer sought to “restore the marriage from which Jesus came as what it was – as a marriage that had already been consummated.”⁴² Interestingly, very few commentaries on Matthew’s Gospel categorically deny the virginal conception but Luz calls it “quite improbable” and since this was not the original meaning of Isa 7:14, suggests that it is wrong to speak of “fulfillment.”⁴³ In Bruce Chilton’s imaginative “life of Jesus,” he envisages Joseph traveling to Nazareth from nearby (Galilean) Bethlehem,⁴⁴ perhaps to do repairs on Mary’s house. They were soon betrothed but did not wait until they lived together to have sex. This was not in itself a scandal but in order to “shield her from Nazareth’s wagging tongues,”

³⁸ Blomberg, “Matthew,” 5.

³⁹ Hagner, *Matthew*, 20.

⁴⁰ Keener, *Matthew*, 87.

⁴¹ Crossan and Borg, *First Christmas*, 224.

⁴² Cited in Luz, *Matthew 1-7*, 100.

⁴³ Luz *Matthew 1-7*, 100.

⁴⁴ Chilton, *Rabbi Jesus*, 8-9. Chilton thinks this is the Bethlehem mentioned in Josh 19:15 and lies just seven miles from Nazareth. This became confused with the Judean Bethlehem when Mic 5:2 was used as a proof-text.

Joseph took her to his house in Bethlehem to have the baby. Thus Jesus grew up under the suspicion of being a *mamzer*, an outcaste of unknown paternity, and Chilton sees this as significant for understanding the figure we find in the Gospels:

A critical, independent child with an ironic turn of mind, Jesus must have spent much of his time alone, wandering through the hills of Galilee, talking to the shepherds and vagrant rabbis who were regarded as shady characters in small communities like Nazareth. All the while, without training or conscious articulation, he was developing a sense of Israelite society that was radically inclusive and a vision of God that was not limited to the strictures of local institutions.⁴⁵

To my mind, solution one is the least likely, as I cannot see how Isa 7:14 can be understood as predicting a virginal conception in the distant future, without disregarding the basic rules of vocabulary and grammar. Equally, for those who insist that “fulfillment” must involve “prediction,” as most modern people probably would, then solution four is the only viable option, especially as a virginal conception goes against modern scientific knowledge. However, these writings come from the first century, when words like “fulfillment” were taken in a much broader sense, and so it would be unfair (and anachronistic) to insist that Matthew and Luke conform to modern modes of thought. On this view, some of the scholars mentioned in solution two might well be correct, though I am more hesitant than Brown to completely dismiss solution three. It goes against nearly 2000 years of church tradition and some will find it blasphemous but as Schaberg has shown, it does explain a number of points that otherwise seem odd (women in the genealogy, overcoming humiliation, shown mercy).

On the other hand, I think Brown is correct that it is very unlikely that this is what Matthew and Luke were trying to convey. Schaberg is correct that we must be careful not to simply read these stories in the light of church tradition but even setting that aside, many still find it difficult to see what she does. The question then is whether Matthew and Luke knew that Jesus was illegitimate and tried to cover it up with a theory of virginal conception, or that they both received this idea from traditions handed down to them? If they were writing independently, as most scholars believe, then the latter is more likely, as it would be quite a coincidence for both of them to fasten on such an unprecedented explanation. This means that the tradition must have developed fairly soon after Mark’s Gospel, so as to be both available and authoritative for Matthew and Luke. Brown thinks this period is too short for such a momentous development to be credible and thinks that it tips the balance in favor of the historicity of the virginal conception. On the other hand, it is difficult to explain the complete silence on the subject until Matthew and Luke wrote their Gospels some 70-80 years after Jesus’ birth. Despite the desire to find something that “tips the balance,” perhaps it is better not to go beyond the evidence and repeat Brown’s conclusion: the historical evidence for a virginal conception is very thin but none of the alternative theories are especially convincing.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Chilton, *Rabbi Jesus*, 17.

⁴⁶ Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 527.