

Does the NT Quote the OT Out Of Context?

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The use of the OT in the NT presents a particular challenge to upholders of the inspiration of Scripture. In pre-critical times, it was easy to accept that the meaning of an OT passage was the meaning assigned to it by the NT author. Indeed the author of 2 Peter attempts to espouse a theory about it:

First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God (2 Pet. 1:20-21).

Thus in Peter's Pentecost sermon, Luke tells us that after quoting Ps. 16, Peter argued that David was not talking about himself but 'Being therefore a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would set one of his descendents upon his throne, he foresaw and spoke of the resurrection of the Christ' (Acts 2:30-31a). In John's Gospel, the author sees the rejection of Jesus as a fulfilment of the words of Isaiah: 'He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart, lest they should see with their eyes and perceive with their heart, and turn for me to heal them' (John 12:40 quoting Isa. 6:10). If it is asked how the author knows that the words of Isa. 6:10 refers to the rejection of Christ, it is because Isaiah 'saw his glory and spoke of him' (John 12:41). Indeed, according to Luke 24:44, Jesus is the subject of the Law, the Prophets and the Psalms.

However, with the advent of modern biblical criticism, this view has come under increasing attack. The adoption of the historical-critical method led to the idea that texts must be interpreted in the light of their own age, not of the views of a later period. For example, whilst it may be true that the parables of Jesus are relevant to every age, we simply cannot go along with Origen that the two coins given to the innkeeper in the parable of the Good Samaritan are the sacraments of baptism and eucharist or Augustine's view that the animal which takes him to the inn means belief in the Incarnation.¹ Chilton says:

Once Jesus was seen primarily as a person within the Trinity, his sayings were regarded not so much as those of a historical figure as words which needed to be explained within the Trinitarian faith.²

¹ A convenient summary of these 'allegorical' views can be found in C. H. Dodd, *Parables of the Kingdom*, Fount, Glasgow 1978 and A. M. Hunter, *Interpreting The Parables*, SCM, London 1960.

² B. Chilton, *The Kingdom of God*, SPCK, London 1984, p 4.

In contrast, historical criticism insisted that Jesus' words should be interpreted in the light of ideas current in the first century, not creeds formulated in the fourth and fifth. Of course, there were differences of opinion about how terms like 'Messiah' or 'Son of man' would have been understood in the first century but there was wide agreement that the original meaning should take priority over later interpretations or applications. As Bauckham says:

No exceptions must be allowed to the principle that the historic meaning of the text must be a meaning which readers at that time could perceive.³

However, this becomes problematic when applied to the use of the OT in the NT, for there are two contexts to consider. If we are to do justice to the OT context, we must insist on interpreting the words in terms of ideas current in that age. For example, if we put out of our minds the NT use of the passage, it can hardly be doubted that Isa. 7:14 refers to a contemporary of Isaiah. The promise in vv 7-9, that the nations who are presently threatening Jerusalem will be destroyed, is ratified by a sign:

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold a young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.

The words are familiar to us from Matthew's infancy story (1:23) but we are probably less familiar with the words that follow Isaiah's famous text:

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 (Isa. 7:16).

It is clear from these words that Isaiah expects a young woman to become pregnant and promises that before the child is weaned, the danger will have passed. It makes utter nonsense of the story to suppose that Isaiah had in mind the birth of Jesus some 700 years hence. Yet if we read Matthew's account of the birth of Jesus, we are specifically told that 'this was to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet' (Matt. 1:22).

Or take Paul's argument in Gal. 3:16, that the promise given to Abraham and his offspring refers uniquely to Christ, since 'offspring' is singular and not 'offsprings' (plural). Now besides the fact that 'offspring' (seed) is here used as a collective term, it is clear from the Genesis passage that a multitude is meant, for Abraham is first asked if he can 'number the stars', and is then told 'So shall your descendants be' (Gen. 15:5). Further, the promise is also used in Stephen's speech, where it is elaborated by saying that they will be 'aliens in a land belonging to others' (Acts 7:6). How then can Paul say that the singular 'offspring' implies only one person and that person is Christ? In the OT context, it is clear that a multitude is meant.

Or take the verses Paul uses in Rom. 3:10-18 to show that all human beings are guilty before God. One of the accusations is that 'there is no fear of God before their eyes' but in the original Psalm, this is not talking about everybody but the wicked. The phrase comes from the second half of Ps 36:1, the first half of which reads, 'Transgression speaks to the wicked deep in his

heart'. Far from declaring that all are sinful and guilty before God, the Psalm presupposes a division of humanity into the wicked and the righteous. The wicked person 'plots mischief while on his bed' (v 4), 'mischief and deceit' comes out of his mouth (v 3) and he imagines his 'iniquity cannot be found out' (v 2). In contrast, the author belongs to those whose refuge is in God (v 7), who feast on the abundance of his house and drink from the river of his delights (v 8). To say that these accusations apply to all people undermines the whole standpoint of the psalmist. As Edgar says:

The verses Paul adduces in Rom. 3 to prove the universality of sin do not, in their original contexts, refer to all men, but in most cases to the wicked, the enemies of Israel.⁴

Thus the wide-spread adoption of the historical-critical method and the consequent view that texts should be interpreted in the light of their own age proves problematic to those OT texts that also appear in the NT.

Possible solutions

One way out of this dilemma would be to say that God is the true author of scripture and was therefore able to reveal to the NT author the meaning that he put into the OT text. Thus Hendriksen declares that it was the same Holy Spirit who inspired Genesis as inspired Paul to write Gal. 3:16. Nevertheless, Hendriksen feels called upon to defend Paul's exegesis and says:

God's promise to Abraham, in its richest, spiritual meaning, was to be fulfilled in connection with one — and not more than one — definite person, Christ, the true seed... and had it been otherwise, that is, had the promised blessings been dispersed indiscriminately among an indefinite aggregate of individuals, such plurality would have been definitely indicated.⁵

By using terms like 'dispersed indiscriminately' and 'indefinite aggregate of individuals', Hendriksen hopes to persuade his readers that everything is as it should be. Unfortunately, his argument is flawed by the simple fact that the word 'seed' (RSV 'offspring'), both in Hebrew and Greek, is a collective term and rarely found in the plural. It would be as strange for a Hebrew writer to use the plural as it would for an English speaker to say, 'this promise is for you and your offsprings'. Further, we have already seen how the OT presupposes a multitude by using such phrases as 'number the stars'. Thus positing God as the author of both the OT text and the NT interpretation does not automatically solve the problem. Whether our question is about the true meaning of a text or the meaning that God intended (presumably the same thing), we are still left with a discrepancy between the meaning required by the OT context and that given to it by a NT author.

A second solution would be to set NT exegesis in its contemporary context. Just as we recognize that the NT does not use the language of the Creeds (e.g. nature and substance) to describe Christ but terms drawn from its own age, so also its methods of exegesis. For example, in the Dead Sea

3 R. Bauckham, *The Bible in Politics*, SPCK, London 1989, p 17.

4 S. L. Edgar, 'Respect for Context in Quotations from the O.T.', *New Testament Studies* 9 (1962-63), p 56.

5 W. Hendriksen, *Galatians*, Banner of Truth, London 1968, p 137.

Scrolls, the words of Hab. 2:2 ('Write the vision; make it plain upon tablets, so he may run who reads it') is taken by the Qumran author to refer to the community's teacher:

Interpreted, this concerns the Teacher of Righteousness, to whom God made known all the mysteries of the words of His servants the Prophets.

Despite the fact that Habakkuk was told (according to the text) to make the vision plain, the author of the commentary thinks that its true meaning remained hidden until God revealed it to the community's teacher. Further on, the well known words of Hab. 2:4, 'the righteous shall live by faith', is given the meaning:

Interpreted, this concerns all those who observe the Law in the House of Judah, whom God will deliver from the House of Judgement because of their suffering and because of their faith in the Teacher of Righteousness.

It is unlikely that 'faith in the Teacher of Righteousness' means the same thing as 'faith in Christ' but the parallel is nevertheless striking. The authors of the Dead Sea Scrolls interpreted the Scriptures in the light of their concerns, just as the NT authors did in the light of Christ and the emergence of the Church. Grollenberg says:

As already becomes clear in Matthew's prologue, the first Christians were not concerned with what the authors of the ancient text had wanted to say. That is something that we moderns ask about. They inferred the meaning of the ancient text from the events brought about by God in which they themselves were involved.⁶

To give a further example, John assures the Church at Philadelphia that the Jews who are persecuting them will one day 'come and bow down before your feet' (Rev. 3:9). The allusion is to Isa. 49:23; 60:14, but in the original reference, it is not the Jews who will come and bow down but the Gentiles, who will prostrate themselves before the Jews! Thus not only has John taken the words out of context, he has actually turned them against the very people for whom they were written. It is not difficult to suggest why. In John's opinion, the Christian Church has become the people of God, so that whoever persecutes the Church is persecuting God's people and is therefore an enemy of God. This being so, texts that speak of God's people being vindicated can be applied to the Church, even if the enemies happen to be Jewish. The point to notice, however, is that such an exegesis presupposes the existence of the Church and would have been quite impossible before then.

Thus a possible answer to our dilemma would be to freely admit that the NT authors did take texts out of context but to defend it as understandable given the age in which they lived. Just as we can hardly expect the NT authors to know about modern medicine or the abolition of slavery, neither should we criticize them for lacking the historical consciousness that so marks our age. Numerous studies have shown that the methods of exegesis used by the NT authors can be paralleled in the Qumran literature and later

6 L. Grollenberg, *Unexpected Messiah*, SCM, London 1988, p 7.

Rabbinic works and so this is to be expected.

There is, however, a difficulty with this view. If the NT authors used methods of exegesis that are now considered questionable, what does that do to the status of the conclusions reached by such methods? Is it possible to accept the results of NT exegesis whilst denying the validity of the methods used to obtain them? This appears to be the position of Longenecker, who says:

It is my contention that... Christians today are committed to the apostolic faith and doctrine of the NT, but not necessarily to the apostolic exegetical practices as detailed for us in the NT.... We can appreciate something of how appropriate such methods were for the conveyance of the gospel.... But let us admit that we cannot possibly reproduce the revelatory stance of peshet interpretation, nor the atomistic manipulations of midrash, nor the circumstantial or *ad hominem* thrusts of a particular polemic of that day — nor should we try.⁷

Longenecker is to be commended for articulating the difficulty but few will find his solution credible. If Paul (or Jesus?) used 'atomistic manipulations' to arrive at his conclusions, it is hard to see why such conclusions should continue to command respect. A building is only as strong as its foundations. If we cannot accept the validity of the methods used, then the conclusions are left hanging in mid-air. Of course there will be cases when the conclusions commend themselves on other grounds. For example, we might agree with Paul that we all fail to show a proper respect (fear) for God even though the psalm was only referring to the wicked. However, in such cases, we should be aware that we are not adopting the position on the basis of the proof-text but on other grounds (experience of human nature, for example).

Intertextuality — a restatement of the problem

One of the weaknesses of the views so far expressed is that they seek to answer a problem which has been formulated without reference to literary questions. This is the more surprising since the study of how texts relate to their subtexts has been on the agenda of literary critics since the sixties. A major impetus to this was an article in 1967 by Julia Kristeva,⁸ who first coined the term '*intertextualité*', though literary critics have always been interested in how texts relate to their subtexts. In order to give a brief account of it, we must start with the general observation that alluding to a past work sets up a link or correspondence between the two contexts. The reader is asked to follow the current text whilst being mindful of a previous context. This inevitably leads to a tension since context is vital for meaning. As Michael Worten and Judith Still state in their introductory essay on Intertextuality: 'every quotation distorts and redefines the 'primary' utter-

7 R. N. Longenecker, "'Who is the prophet talking about?'" Some Reflections on the New Testament's use of the Old', *Themelios*, Oct/Nov, 1987, p 8.

8 J. Kristeva, 'Word, dialogue and novel', now in T. Moi, ed., *The Kristeva Reader*, Oxford 1986.

9 M. Worten & J. Still, eds, *Intertextuality: theories and practices*, MUP, Manchester 1990, p 11.

ance by relocating it within another linguistic and cultural context.⁹

On the other hand, the quoted text does not accept this 'relocation' without a fight (so to speak) but reminds the reader that it once belonged to a different context. A dynamic is thereby established where the new affects the old and the old affects the new. As H. Davidson says of T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*: 'the work alluded to reflects upon the present context even as the present context absorbs and changes the allusion.'¹⁰

The significance of this for our study is two-fold. Firstly, it gives a rather different perspective to the observation that some of the OT quotations are taken out of context. As Worten and Still observe, all quotations are out of context in the sense that they have been relocated 'within another linguistic and cultural context'. Now since context is essential for meaning, there is in fact no possibility that a quotation can bear the same meaning in a new composition as it did in the old. The actual words might be the same but all the factors that affect interpretation have changed. For example, in response to a question about the greatest commandment (Mark 12:28ff.), Jesus quotes Deut. 6:4 ('love the Lord your God') and Lev. 19:18 ('love your neighbour as yourself'). On one level, Jesus is simply directing the enquirer to two OT texts that answer his question. However, Christians down the ages have found tremendous significance in the bringing together of these two commands as a summary of the Law. By placing them in such close juxtaposition, the reader/hearer is asked to interpret each in the light of the other. Love for God must not be interpreted as turning away from one's fellow human beings nor vice versa. The new context has a significant effect on the interpretation.

The second point is that the presence of a quotation or allusion means that the clues that enable interpretation to take place are coming from two separate sources. Like a radio dial that is incorrectly tuned, the listener hears several 'voices' simultaneously and may have to choose which to concentrate on. The effect of the radio dial is usually annoyance but if an author has consciously chosen a particular quotation, we can expect the interaction to be more productive. Thus the question concerning the presence of OT quotations in the NT is not whether or not the author has respected the context but in what ways do the two contexts interact? Continuing the 'sound waves' metaphor, has the author chosen a quotation which leads to 'harmonies' or does it simply produce 'interference'?

Intertextuality — towards a solution

In his study of Renaissance poetry, Thomas Greene¹¹ uses four categories to describe the relation between a poet's work and its predecessors.

His first category is called 'reproductive' or 'sacramental'. It is when a poet imitates a previous work with such precision that it is virtually a copy. The original is treated as a sacred object, 'beyond alteration... whose greatness can never be adequately reproduced'.¹² The author perceives the

10 H. Davidson, *T. S. Eliot and Hermeneutics*, Louisiana 1985, p 117.

11 T. Greene, *The Light in Troy: Imitation and Discovery in Renaissance Poetry*, YUP, Yale 1982, pp 16-19, 37-53.

12 *Ibid.*, p 38.

subtext as coming from a golden age which is now over. All that can be done is to rewrite the subtext 'as though no other form of celebration could be worthy of its dignity'.¹³

The early Christians certainly treated the OT as a great authority but there is very little in the NT that would correspond to this category. Thus even the ten commandments are quoted with a degree of freedom. In Matt. 19:18f., Jesus mentions killing, adultery, stealing, false testimony, honouring father and mother and loving one's neighbour. In Luke's account (18:20), we have adultery, killing, stealing, false testimony and honouring father and mother whilst Mark 10:19 speaks of killing, adultery, stealing, false testimony, fraud and honouring father and mother. As well as appearing in a different order from Exod. 20:12ff. or Deut. 5:16ff., Matthew includes loving one's neighbour (Lev. 19:18) and Mark has a command about fraud. Thus even the ten commandments do not appear to be 'beyond alteration... whose greatness can never be adequately reproduced'.

Greene's second category is called 'eclectic'. This is where the author draws on a wide range of sources, seemingly at random, without laying special emphasis on any one of them. At its weakest, this can be mere plagiarism but in skilled hands, the author has access to a 'vocabulary of a second and higher power, a second keyboard of richer harmonies'.¹⁴ Greene says:

The art of poetry finds its materials everywhere, materials bearing with them the aura of their original contexts, charged with an evocative power implanted by the poet or the convention from which they are taken.¹⁵

For example, it is clear than many of the NT authors are aware of the parallels between God's act of liberation in the Exodus and that which comes through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Each of them, however, expresses this in a different way. In Matthew, we are told that the holy family journeyed to Egypt and that their departure was a fulfilment of the words 'Out of Egypt have I called my son' (Matt. 2:15). Now it is a simple observation that these words, in their original context, do not refer to Christ:

When Israel was a child, I loved him, and *out of Egypt I called my son*.
The more I called them, the more they went from me; they kept sacrificing to the Baals, and burning incense to idols (Hos. 11:1-2).

The reference is clearly to Israel and the Exodus and few would wish to apply 11:2 to Christ! Nevertheless, there is far more involved than Matthew taking a verse out of context with no interest in the original meaning (as Grollenberg asserts). By using these words, he gains access to a 'vocabulary of a second and higher power'. The words are highly charged. They speak of deliverance, calling, and adoption and hence set a context for the reader to interpret the life of Christ. The point is not argued didactically but when we go on to read of Herod's decree to kill the young (2:16), Jesus going up the mountain (5:1), his transfigured face (17:2) and the words 'This is my

13 *Ibid.*

14 *Ibid.*, p 39.

15 *Ibid.*

beloved son' (17:5), the 'voices' are becoming a veritable chorus. By quotation and allusion, Matthew makes his point with a 'keyboard of richer harmonies'.

The third category is 'heuristic'. This is where the new work seeks to define itself through the rewriting or modernising of a past text. In so doing, the poem becomes a sort of 'rite de passage' between a 'specified past and an emergent present'.¹⁶ It establishes a distance between new and old, not to leave the reader in an hermeneutical chasm but to make way for an act of resolution. The new is not a pale imitation of the old but its true successor. Greene says:

Heuristic imitations come to us advertising their derivation from the subtexts they carry with them, but having done that, they proceed to distance themselves from the subtexts and force us to recognise the poetic distance traversed.¹⁷

Heuristic imitation is a good description of those discursive passages where the author argues for a particular interpretation of Scripture. The fact that he feels the need to state his position in relation to the OT is itself significant, though he usually has a specific resolution in mind. For example, in Rom. 4, Paul quotes Gen. 15:6 and Ps. 32:1-2 and then proceeds to interrogate the text with questions like 'Is this blessing pronounced only upon the circumcised...?' (Rom. 4:9); 'How then was it reckoned to him?' (Rom. 4:10). In this way, Paul urges the reader to accept his interpretation of the texts, even though the epistle of James shows that Gen. 15:6 can be used to make a different point (Jas. 2:23f.).

Lastly, Greene speaks of 'dialectical imitation'. This is when the poem engages the precursor in such a way that neither is able to absorb or master the other. In exposing the vulnerability of the subtext, it exposes itself to 'potential aggression'.¹⁸ As an example, he quotes Erasmus's *In Praise of Folly*, which draws repeatedly on Lucian but in the last hymn, 'introduces values totally incompatible with Lucian and ancient comedy'.¹⁹

The effect is to create 'a kind of struggle between texts and between eras which cannot easily be resolved'.²⁰ In other words, 'anachronism becomes a dynamic source of artistic power'.²¹ As an example in the NT, consider the words of the risen Christ in Rev. 1:18: 'Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one; I died, and behold I am alive for evermore....'

The title 'first and last' is usually traced to either Isa. 44:6 or 48:12 and is a statement of the eternity of God. Here, however, it is placed next to a statement concerning Christ's death and resurrection. No help is offered as to whether we should read the statement of eternity in the light of the death and resurrection or the death and resurrection in the light of God's eternity. One could argue that John is assuring his readers that their crucified founder is none other than the eternal 'first and the last' and that this would help

16 Ibid., p 41.

17 Ibid., p 40.

18 Ibid., p 45.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid., p 46.

them to remain faithful. On the other hand, modern theology would find it appealing to find John re-interpreting the divine glory in the light of the cross of Christ. As it stands, death and eternity are placed side by side and mutually illuminate one another.

Conclusion

Ever since the rise of historical study, scholars have been aware that the meaning assigned to a text in the NT is frequently different from any meaning that it could have had in its own time. This has often led to a polarisation of views, some insisting that the NT interpretation is the 'true' meaning of the text (to the chagrin of OT scholars), others seeing it as an arbitrary distortion. A more appreciative version of the latter is to recognise that the exegesis belongs to its own period and was considered valid at the time. However, this then raises a problem concerning the results of such exegesis. How can we continue to respect such conclusions if we cannot endorse the methods used to produce them?

This article has sought to further the discussion by drawing on literary theories of intertextuality. Such theories make it clear that a quotation will always mean something different in its new setting because it has been 'relocated'. This being so, the question to ask is not whether a given quotation has been taken out of context but what is the effect of such a quotation on a reading of the text? For example, the most obvious challenge to the reader of Matthew's infancy story is the discrepancy between the names of the child:

she will bear a son, and you shall call his name *Jesus*, for he will save his people from their sins (1:21).

All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: 'Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called *Emman-u-el*' (which means, God with us) (1:22f.).

Matthew's introductory formula ('this took place to fulfil') leads the reader to expect either a text that says 'and his name shall be called Jesus' or one about saving people from their sins. In the event, the text quoted is Isa. 7:14, where the child is called 'Emman-u-el' and is to be a sign of imminent deliverance. The use of the word 'virgin' (following the LXX) chimes in with the earlier reference that the conception was 'before they came together' (Matt. 1:18) but the difference in names shows that the interaction is more complex. Indeed, it is unclear which of the statements in Matt. 1:21 is being fulfilled? If it is the first, the birth of a son, then the quotation from Isa. 7:14 enriches this bare statement by reminding the reader of an earlier son, one promised by God in Isaiah's time, as a sign of political deliverance.

On the other hand, if it is the name of Jesus that is the focus of fulfilment, then the reader must 'puzzle out' the relationship between 'Jesus' and 'Emman-u-el'. In this respect, it may be significant that the best manuscripts of Matthew use the third person ('they shall call his name')²² rather than the second person ('you shall call his name'). The implication of this may be that

22 RSV renders with a passive 'his name shall be called', which leaves open the possibility that it may refer to his parents (and hence be equivalent to 'you shall call') or to other unspecified persons.

it is not the naming of the child by the parents that is in view but the fact that later generations will come to see that 'God was in Christ', as Matthew clearly has.

A similar complexity is involved in a reading of Gal. 3:16. On its own, it might be thought that Paul is involved in a linguistic 'sleight of hand', but that is to miss his conclusion in 3:29: 'And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.'

It is in fact vital for Paul's argument that 'offspring' can refer both to a multitude (Christians) and to an individual (Christ). His argument is akin to the shape of an hour glass. Abraham's 'offspring' is moving from being defined by physical descent to the criteria of faith in Christ. What allows Paul to make this move is his belief that Christ was supremely Abraham's 'offspring' (the centre of the hour glass) and that those who are 'in Christ' are therefore heirs of the promise. Thus the attempt to try and show that the original meaning of 'offspring' is singular is to miss the point completely. Paul's argument depends on the fact that it can mean both and he provocatively challenges the reader to think this through by means of the 'linguistic land-mine' planted in 3:16.

Thus even in texts which advertise their dependence with words like 'fulfilment', the actual reality is far more complex. The reader is asked to listen to a number of voices, which are themselves interacting with one another. Indeed, one might suggest that this is precisely how texts 'get under our skin' and become part of us. Just as we find ourselves humming tunes (even ones we do not like!), so the Scriptures can come alive for us with songs new and old. As the author of Hebrews put it, 'the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart' (4:12). This is presumably a consequence of 'inspiration' but on a human level, some of the things mentioned in this article help us to see how this comes about. For example, words are used which recall a previous context and so come to us, in Greene's words, 'charged with an evocative power'; or when texts are juxtaposed so that their mutual interaction becomes both a 'puzzle to ponder' and a 'dynamic source of artistic power'. It has been the purpose of this article to show that this is a far more productive way of looking at how the NT authors used the OT, than traditional studies which focus on whether the text has been taken out of context or not.

It is appropriate to finish by saying something about the limitations of the methods proposed in this article. Literary studies, such as those used here, can help us to understand how texts influence readers and how readers influence texts. For example, they can help us to see the dynamics created by Matthew's linking of Jesus' birth with Isa. 7:14. They could also go on to describe the role the 'virgin birth' plays (or does not play) in the rest of the Gospel and how this affects the reader's growing appreciation of Jesus. What they cannot do, however, is pronounce on historical questions, such as whether the 'virgin birth' really happened? It would appear that Matthew believed in it and probably also Luke (3:23), though we do not know on what basis they came to this belief. As in the early Church, the doctrine has

recently been challenged and by way of defense, some have sought to prove that Isa. 7:14 really does prophesy a 'virgin birth'. The issue turns on whether the Hebrew word *'almah* (RSV 'young woman') also implies virginity, as in the LXX.²³ We will not reproduce the detailed arguments here but merely note the inherent difficulties with this line of defense. For example, we have already seen that the context of Isa. 7:14 concerns the political threat in the eighth century BCE, which God promised (according to the text) will vanish before the son is old enough to know right from wrong. Now if Isaiah is speaking of a 'virgin birth', then either the promise associated with this son was not kept or there was a 'virgin birth' in the eighth century!

Secondly, if Matthew believed that the Messiah had to be born of a virgin (though there is no evidence that any one else did), this does not automatically add to the evidence for the 'virgin birth'. In fact, critics would argue that if Matthew was convinced that the Messiah had to be born of a virgin, then he would assume this was true of Jesus, whether he had any evidence for it or not. In the light of this, those who wish to defend the 'virgin birth' might do better to admit that Isa. 7:14, in its original context, did not mean this. The implication would then be that Matthew was drawn to Isa. 7:14 because he believed in the 'virgin birth' on other grounds, though we can only guess what they might have been.

In conclusion, literary studies can offer much in terms of how texts affect readers but they cannot settle historical questions. For that, there is no alternative but to search for historical evidence.

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²³ It should be noted that it is by no means certain that the LXX implies a virgin birth. It may mean that she who is now a virgin will soon conceive (having got married) and bear a son (so W. D. Davies & D. Allison, *Matthew* 1-7, T & T Clark, ICC, Edinburgh 1988, p 214).