

An Inquiry into Apostle Matthew's Perspective On Continuity  
and Discontinuity in his use of Isaianic Text in Matt. 1:23  
and 8:17.

By

A. K. Lama

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*Dr. John S. Feinberg*

Trinity Evangelical Divinity School  
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## Introduction

What is the nature of relationship between the Old (OT) and the New Testaments (NT)? It is true that "the NT is concealed in the OT and the OT is revealed in the NT", but what about the theological ambiguity on the issues of Continuity and Discontinuity between the two testaments? What do we do with the OT laws in the light of the NT grace? How do we interpret OT prophecies in the light of NT revelation? How do we interpret the five fold eschatological hope of the OT: the land, the city of Jerusalem, the temple, the Davidic Kingdom, and the Nation of Israel in the light of the NT teachings? Any serious theological reflection on questions such as these would lead a bible scholar either into the camp of Continuity or Discontinuity.<sup>1</sup> It is also possible that one may find oneself to be in continuity on certain issues while being in the Discontinuity camp and likewise in discontinuity while being in the Continuity camp.<sup>2</sup>

The problem between Continuity and Discontinuity is not only theological, but also methodological. Those who are in the Continuity camp believe that the NT uses of the OT give an explicit methodology for interpreting the OT texts. They

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<sup>1</sup> John S. Feinberg, "Systems of Discontinuity" *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspective on the Relationship of the Old Testament and New Testaments*, (ed. John S. Feinberg; Westchester: Crossway Books, 1988), 63.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

interpret the OT from NT perspective and seek spiritual meaning of the OT promises and prophecies.<sup>3</sup> They believe that the NT gives a pattern for exegesis of the OT. But those who are in the Discontinuity camp reject this approach. They neither see a single pattern of interpretation nor consider any such pattern in the NT to be prescriptive.<sup>4</sup> They view such method imposes the NT on the OT. Mere spiritualization of the OT Text from the NT perspective also violates the canonical integrity of OT.

Brevard S. Childs, well known for his orthodoxy on the unity of canon, believes that "the task of Old Testament theology is, therefore not to christianize the Old Testament by identifying it with the New Testament witness, but to hear its own theological testimony to the God of Israel who the Church confess also to worship."<sup>5</sup> One cannot ignore Paul D. Feinberg who suggests that OT text may have "a single determinative meaning but multiple fulfillment."<sup>6</sup> Do the OT

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<sup>3</sup> According to Hans K. LaRondelle, the interpretation of the OT must be done with reference to the NT theology. See in Hans K. LaRondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy: Principles of Prophetic Interpretation* (Michigan: Andrew University Press, 1983), 13.

<sup>4</sup> John S. Feinberg asks "if the NT interpretation becomes OT passage's meaning, how can one determine what the OT passage means since the NT interpret may interpret it several different ways?" See in John S. Feinberg, "Systems and Discontinuity," *Continuity and Discontinuity*, 76.

<sup>5</sup> Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 9.

<sup>6</sup> Paul D. Feinberg, "Hermeneutics of Discontinuity," *Continuity and Discontinuity*, 118.

predictions refer multiple fulfillments? It is at this crucial juncture that the Continuity and Discontinuity regard each other's method to be literal and inconsistent.

Amidst such ongoing debate, the author will examine Matthew's perspective on interpreting the Isaianic texts. What hermeneutical methodology did Matthew apply to interpret them? What kind of NT pattern or theology did apostle Matthew use when he was using the OT text in his writing? Does his methodology give any insight into his perspective on Continuity or Discontinuity?

### **Research Proposal and Methodology**

Apostle Matthew, one of the twelve disciples of Jesus Christ (Matt. 10:2-4), originally known as Levi the Tax collector (Matt. 9:9), was a moderate Hellenistic Jewish Christian, and was liberated from the Jewish Christianity that upheld the Pharisaic view of law and opposed mission to the gentile.<sup>7</sup> Most scholars agree that Matthew's church was in tension for connection between the Synagogue and the breakaway Jewish Christian. Probably, he wrote the gospel at Antioch (sometime between AD 80-90) to help the Church amidst such transition. The genre of his writing, which is strikingly Jewish in style, also supports this view. The major themes of

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<sup>7</sup> John P. Meir, "Gospel of Matthew," *ABD* 4:625.

theological concerns are Christology, Kingdom of heaven, salvation history, church, discipleship, and morality. These characteristics of Matthew's writing make this research proposal suitable for an inquiry into his perspective on Continuity and Discontinuity.

Matthew has nine Isaianic texts (Matt. 1:23; 3:3; 4:15-16; 8:17; 12:18-21; 13:14-15; 15:8-9; 21:5; 21:13). Out of which two are attributed to Jesus, two are implicit, and five are quoted by Matthew. In this paper the writer will focus on Matt. 1:23 and 8:17. First, he will interpret the text in its own historical context for its meaning in terms of its sense, reference, and significance. Second, he will interpret the quote in Mathew's context and then compare the meaning with the meaning in its original context. Third, he will make observations for differences and similarities of methodologies in order to extrapolate theological implications. Fourth, he will inquire if an element of Continuity or Discontinuity can be attributed to Mathew's interpretation? If yes, how and why?

This research presupposes the divine inspiration of the texts both in Isaiah and Matthew. It also assumes that the message can be recovered comparatively better by a grammatical, syntactical, and semantic examination of the text in its historical context. This is not to negate the use of other methods for interpreting a text, but this method is

preferred in this research in order to remain close to the text.

### **Matthew's Uses of Isaianic Texts**

#### **I. Isa. 7:14 in Matt. 1:23**

The context of Isa. 7:14 is Syro-Ephramite Crisis<sup>8</sup> in 734 BC. The people of Judah and especially King Ahaz (v.2) were gripped with fear because the alliance of Syria and Israel were planning to attack Judah and replace King Ahaz with "son of Tabeel" (v.6). Earlier King Ahaz had refused to join them against the Assyrian king Tiglath Pileassar III. God sent prophet Isaiah to reassure the king "not to fear" (v.4), but to trust God (v.9). King Ahaz was given an opportunity to confirm God's assurance by asking a sign. But he declined to test God and thus God, "He himself", gave a sign (a Child being born). Isaiah also predicts the birth of two other children, Shear-jashub (v.3) and Maher-shalal-hashbaz (ch.8:1), who are also signs (ch.8:18). John T Willis correctly points out that "A sign, then, is something that points beyond itself to that which it signifies."<sup>9</sup> In both predictions (ch. 7:16 and ch. 8:4) the sign was time-bound ("Before the boy knows"), indicating that the birth and the

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<sup>8</sup> Isa. 7:1-25, 2 Kings 16:1-6, 2 Chron. 28:1-18.

<sup>9</sup> John T. Willis, "The Meaning of Isaiah 7:14 and Its Application in Matthew 1:23," *ResQ* 21 (1978), 1-18.

growth of these children would enable King Ahaz and Judah to anticipate the destruction of their enemies.

In Matthew this text is quoted as one among many proofs<sup>10</sup> for Messianic identity of Jesus. Notice that Matthew's focus is on three important spiritual elements in this text: First, Jesus is introduced as the one who will save his people from their sin. Second, he is born of a virgin (an element of miracle). Third, the word "Emanuel" means "God with us". The word ἡ παρθένος meaning "the virgin," is quoted from LXX to emphasize the divine conception of Mary. Matthew ignored the first half of the sentence, where the emphasis was on σημεῖον "sign", and redacted it to emphasize on "virgin" and "Emmanuel." The definite article in הַעֲלָמָה in MTS remains ambiguous in absence of specific identity of the female individual. Either the identity of the women is very obvious that a detail was considered unnecessary or the identity is not at all important. Some Scholars suggest by referring from ch. 8:1-4 that הַעֲלָמָה is Isaiah's wife, but that cannot be supported from the text. The word הַעֲלָמָה which simply means "a female who

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<sup>10</sup> First, Matthew shows it through the long list of genealogy; second, through the divine conception of Mary; third, through mysterious encounter of Joseph with angel; fourth, through the significance of the name "Jesus"; and fifth, by claiming that the birth of Jesus is the fulfillment of the promise of God (Matt. 1:22).

has reached the age of puberty"<sup>11</sup>, implies that the emphasis in the MT is not on the virginity because the appropriate word for virgin is בְּחֻלָּה (Gen. 24:16). Donald A. Hagner believes that the Greek translator in 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C. saw this text as unrealized and having some deeper meaning and so they translated הַעֲלָמָה as ἡ παρθένος meaning "the virgin,".<sup>12</sup> E. J. Young says that the virginity of a female who has reached the age of puberty is assumed in the Jewish law.<sup>13</sup> If the text really meant virgin birth, then it is difficult to concede how the prophet or the redactors would undermine a report on the miracle of a virgin birth. Moreover, the concept of a virgin birth in the Isaiah's text would also obscure the unique birth of Jesus Christ.

The word עִמָּנוּ אֵל on the other hand, which means "God is with us," does not occur anywhere in the Old Testament. What did Isaiah mean by the statement: "the Child will be called Emmanuel"? One cannot interpret from the text that the child would embody the presence of God in himself, but rather a sign that God was on the side of King Ahaz.

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<sup>11</sup> Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 66.

<sup>12</sup> Donald A. Hagner, *Word Biblical Commentary: Matthew 1-13* (Texas: Word Books Publisher, 1993), 20.

<sup>13</sup> E. J. Young, *Studies in Isaiah* (London: Tyndale, 1954), 169.



The text is primarily a divine prediction of a historical and political event for the nation of Judah and King Ahaz. The fulfillment of the prediction is unconditional and time-bound ("before the boy knows"). The purpose of prediction is to comfort the people of God and build trust in Yahweh. The prediction involves "sign" that signifies the presence of God on their side. Oswalt suggests that "Had Ahaz received it in faith, Immanuel would have appeared solely as the vindication of the house of David."<sup>14</sup> This cannot be substantiated from the text. Such speculations can come from eisogesis rather than exegesis of the text. Based on ch.7:14 and ch.7:16, which included the sign of its fulfillment ("But before the boy knows"), one can extrapolate that ch.7:14 must have already been fulfilled. But Matthew uses it to prove the Messianic identity of Jesus by emphasizing on "virgin birth" and "Emmanuel". What methodology enabled Matthew to do so?

## **II. Isaiah 53:4 in Matthew 8:17**

Isa. 53:4 is commonly agreed to be part of a literary work known as Servant Songs<sup>15</sup>; however, the immediate context of the text, according to Childs, is 52:13-53:1-12.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapter 1-39* (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), 209.

<sup>15</sup> Isa. 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12.

<sup>16</sup> Childs, *Isaiah*, 413.

The entire passage is about a servant whose identity is described in the form of his vicarious suffering and his accomplishments. He is a servant who will have a lowly and humble lineage (v.2), will be rejected by people (v.3), will suffer for the transgression of the people of God (v.5), will suffer silently like a lamb (v.7), and he will die and be buried with the wicked (v.9), and finally, after his suffering he will see the light of life and justify the iniquities of his people (v.11).

Once again, the context of Matt. 8:17 is different than Isa. 53:4. Jesus healed Peter's mother-in-law from fever. And then, that same evening he healed all others who were brought to him for healing. Matthew used this miraculous event as an opportunity to present Jesus Christ as the promised Messiah of the Old Testament. He described the miraculous healings performed by Jesus as the fulfillment of Isa. 53:4. In order to do so, Matthew perhaps used MT, rather than LXX. Although the first word אֶכֶן is omitted the rest of the text are directly translated from MT.<sup>17</sup> It may be because in LXX, the word חֲלִינִי meaning "sickness" is given spiritual rendering by translating it to τὰς ἀμαρτίας ἡμῶν meaning "our sin." The vicarious suffering of servant, is not yet to be evident in

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<sup>17</sup> Hoong Hing Wong, "Matthew's Use of Isaiah" (MTh. Diss. Westminster Theological Seminary, 1986), 25.

this passage,<sup>18</sup> and yet Matthew acknowledges it as fulfillment. Perhaps he is not concerned with the theology of vicarious suffering of the servant in this context, but the identity of the servant. He adopts the temporal and physical sense of text to make his case. What does it reflect about Mathew's methodology and theological understanding of the text? Why his methodology, which was slanted on spiritual interpretation in Matt 1:21, is now suddenly seen concerned with physical emphasis? Is he concerned to prove the identity of Jesus ignoring the theological and historical significance of the text?

### **Matthew's Methodology**

Consider the word "fulfill" in Matt. 1:22 and Matt.53:4. Mathew explains the quotes in terms of prediction and fulfillment. Extrapolating from the pure exegesis of the text, one cannot find such a direct connection. How then does Mathew affirm it as fulfillment? Does the word πληρόω have different meanings? Evangelical scholars in the continuity camp suggest different nuances for the word πληρόω that may signify something like "deepen", or "extend."<sup>19</sup> On the other hand,

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<sup>18</sup> Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 211.

<sup>19</sup> Douglas J. Moo, "Hermeneutics of Discontinuity," *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments*, (ed. John S Feinberg; Westchester: Crossway books, 1988), 205.

from the Discontinuity camp, both Elliot E. Johnson and Derrell L. Bock propose the idea of "expanded meaning."<sup>20</sup> Due to brevity of space this cannot be discussed in detail here.

Since Matthew used Isa. 7:14 and 53:4 in order to prove the identity of Jesus as Messiah, it implies that these texts must have been popular and easily recognized as Messianic texts among his audience, lest his use would not be understood or support his case, rather make it more ambiguous. Does it mean that both Matthew and his audience believed that Isa.7:14 and 53:4 were not fulfilled or only partially fulfilled (πληρωθη) in the OT? Does the fulfillment in Matthew refer or signify continuity of the OT texts? No doubt, Matthew used the text differently from its original sense, reference, and significance and his interpretation is error free. It is appropriate, therefore, to assume that Matthew had some additional information about the text, which is not accessible merely by grammatical-historical examination of the text. Probably, he had a different theological revelation or a different methodology which might answer the question— Why did he see virgin birth of Messiah as the fulfillment of Isa. 7:14?; or, why did he reduce the vicarious healing of the servant as the physical healing? According to John T. Willis,

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<sup>20</sup> Elliott E. Johnson, "A Traditional Dispensational Hermeneutic," *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism: A Comparison of Traditional and Progressive Views* (ed. by Bateman, Herbert W.; Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1999), 68.

there are eight logical ways<sup>21</sup> of explaining the use of Isa. 7:14 in Matt. 1:23:(1) Allegorical use like Paul used the story of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar in Gal. 4:21- 5:1, (2) Accommodation of his reasoning to the method of argumentation prevalent in his day, (3) Drawing analogy or parallelism, (4) Double meaning of the text, (5) Typological, (6) *Midrash* Interpretation, (7) *Sensus plenior*. Since the scripture does not state "specifically how the virgin birth of Jesus is "fulfilled," according to Willis, it is impossible to be dogmatic about Matthew's use of Isa. 7:14. On the other hand, Hagner suggests that Matthew's quotes belong to the genre that can be best labeled as *Midrashic haggadah* where the theological purpose is the primary goal.<sup>22</sup>

Due to brevity of this paper, a detail discussion on each methodological options recommended by Willis cannot be discussed here; however, the scholars from both Continuity and Discontinuity camps may agree that in these two texts Matthew obviously believed more than one fulfillment— material, which was fulfilled in OT and the spiritual, which took place in Jesus Christ. Can we imply from this that Mathew also might have expected a historical and political fulfillment of those prophecies that has not yet been fulfilled in the OT? Can we apply the same concept of more than one fulfillment to the

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<sup>21</sup> Willis, "The Meaning of Isaiah 7:14," 1-18.

<sup>22</sup> Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 16.

eschatological expectations of the land, city of Jerusalem, the temple, and nation of Israel in the OT? The traditional Dispensationalist, Elliott E. Johnson writes, "Our principle is that the meaning of these statements is stable in spite of the perspective gained by further revelation. And the truth of these statements made by prophets is also stable in spite of subsequent revelation."<sup>23</sup> He adds, "The original sign may be followed by a second sign, but the original sign does not change to become a second sign." On the other hand, in the same camp, the hermeneutical methodology of Derrel Bock, a progressive Dispensationalist, has different explanation. According to Bock there is only one meaning of the text, which the author originally intended, but it can have different significance in the subsequent uses.<sup>24</sup> Could it be that Mathew meant significance rather than meaning when he said about the fulfillment of the text? Whatever may be the case, this inquiry reveals that Matthew did not have a specific and explicit hermeneutical principle in this case. In order to affirm with LaRondelle's suggestions that the New Testament gives hermeneutical method for reading the Old Testament and the Old Testament can be interpreted from the perspective of the New Testament theology, a comprehensive research into the

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<sup>23</sup> Johnson, "A Traditional Dispensational Hermeneutic," 67.

<sup>24</sup> Derrel L. Bock and Craig A. Blaising., *Progressive Dispensationalism*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993), 64.

usage of the Old in the New is essential. Nevertheless, it is apparent from this paper that LaRondelle's methodology cannot be approved without ignoring or spiritualizing the historical meaning of the Old Testament text in this case.

### **Matthew's Perspective**

An exegetical analysis of other Isaianic texts in Matt. 3:3; 4:15-16; 12:18-21; 13:14-15; 15:8-9; 21:5; and 21:13, reveals that Matthew was least concerned with the original context of the text. He saw these texts directly or indirectly as Messianic. Even a non-predictive text such as Hos. 11:1, which is a historical record on the nation of Israel, is directly applied to Jesus as fulfillment. What does his methodology indicate? Did he subscribe to simple spiritualization of OT texts? Is it a typological interpretation? Was he thinking like some Continuity scholars think<sup>25</sup> that Israel as nation was already rejected and therefore political element in the interpretation does not arise? In absence of an explicit comment from Matthew himself, and also the inconsistent pattern of his usage no definite

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<sup>25</sup> Williamson points out that Isaiah intentionally uses the verb "hear," and "weary" in v. 13 are used with plural suffixes indicating that the rejection denial not only meant for Ahaz individually, but for the whole house of Israel. Also the change from "your God" in v.11 to "my God" in v. 13 is indicative of this. H. G. M. Williamson, *Variations on a Theme: King, Messiah and Servant in the Book of Isaiah* (Cumbria: Paternoster Publishing Press, 1998), 106.

answer can be given. It is impossible to answer the questions of Continuity or Discontinuity from his use of these two and other Isaianic texts.

If one were to argue from silence, the scholar in Continuity camp may ask- If Matthew were in Discontinuity camp, it would be an utter surprise why Matthew while writing to a Jewish Church in transition would not write explicitly about the possibility of the political and material blessing to the biological descendents of Israel through Jesus Christ? To such a statement the scholar in the Discontinuity camp may reply—"if God makes a point once (the OT), why must he repeat it in the NT for it is still true and operative?"<sup>26</sup> The scholars in the Continuity camp may argue in return that if repetition in the NT is not to be expected then the texts such as Rom. 9-11 and Gal. 6:16 should also not be expected to support the view on Discontinuity. Moreover, if Mathew presented the purpose of Messiah's first coming as non-political and non-ethnic rather spiritual (Matt 1:21) and universal, how can one comprehend that Matthew would hold a material or political view of discontinuity for Messiah's second coming. Matthew's theme is explicitly Kingdom of Heaven rather than kingdom of Judah. His theology is focused on salvation history, church, discipleship, and morality.

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<sup>26</sup> John S. Feinberg, "Systems and Discontinuity," *Continuity and Discontinuity*, 76.



Indeed, Matthew's preoccupation to prove Jesus as the Messiah and his silence about the future fulfillment the OT texts does not necessarily put him in the camp of Continuity. One cannot be dogmatic on the conclusions purported from silence. It would be simplistic and irrational to confine Matthew in either of the camp simply by analyzing his use of Isa. 7:14 and 53:4.

### **Conclusion**

The problem between Continuity and Discontinuity is partly related to the problem of Biblical theology. Is there any theology that unifies the theologies in the Bible? We may not need any balm in Gilead, but we are yet to find the glue in the Gilead that will unite the fragmented evangelicals. Or, Do we at all need to unite? Unity is not necessarily to be found in uniformed methodology. Nevertheless, amidst these contentious differences, it is encouraging to note that the theologians from both camps have begun to understand each other's position and have continued the dialogue in Christian humility and charity. Both camps have reformed some of their extreme positions and they are willing to listen to each other. Indeed the issue related to Continuity and Discontinuity is not as simplistic as often they are presumed by some extreme type opinionated laities in the pew. It is not even about being loyal to a certain heritage or tradition, but

a corporate search for methodology and principle that are epistemologically consistent and faithful to the text. The problem of knowledge in this dispute is a blessing in disguise for it gives fuel to research and the right attitude towards God who has the ultimate answer to all epistemological queries. "The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law."<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Deut. 29:29.

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