

Matthew Chapter 1-2 – Fulfillment

Introduction

What is prophecy?

What is fulfillment?

What does it mean that an event fulfills what had been spoken?

Typically, fulfillment of prophecy is thought of as literal and direct. As early as 1700, scholars within Christendom began a movement in which it was argued that a literal interpretation of the Old Testament does not support Messianic interpretations by Matthew and other New Testament material.

For example: Jeremiah 31:15 – This passage, when read in context, has zero prophetic value. Yet in Matthew 2:16-19, Matthew writes that the event of Herod killing all babies two years old and younger fulfills what was spoken through Jeremiah the prophet.

In one respect, the critics of a literal interpretation of Scripture have a point. One cannot read Scripture literally and come to the same conclusion as Matthew. They conclude that an allegorical interpretation is preferred over a Literal, Grammatical, Historical interpretation. They pose a good question, but they do not arrive at a good answer.

In response to this question, others began to espouse a dual-fulfillment understanding of Scripture, especially when dealing with Messianic text.

For example: Hosea 11:1 – This text is nearly universally accepted as a review of the history of Israel and not prophetic. Yet in Matthew 2:14-15, Matthew says that Joseph taking Jesus and fleeing to Egypt and then returning from Egypt fulfills what the Lord had spoken through the prophet.

The argument states that Hosea 11:1 has an initial or original meaning in the text as determined by a Literal, Grammatical, Historical interpretation. Then later, there is a fuller or a broadening of the meaning of the text. This sounds like a good solution, but this robs from the original meaning of the text and discredits the predictive elements of the Hebrew Scriptures.

As history progressed, arguments ensued with various positions being suggested. In the end, the majority of Bible scholars line up with one of seven different views:

1. Historical Fulfillment – There is no Messianic prediction, rather Christianity is the outgrowth of history, Jesus did not fulfill history, rather He just progressed through history.
2. Dual Fulfillment – There is an immediate fulfillment to seemingly Messianic predictions but also an ultimate fulfillment (fuller sense).
3. Typical Fulfillment – The predictive element has a literal historical figure in mind which is also a type of Messiah.
4. Progressive Fulfillment – The predictive element is a seed that grows and is fulfilled through various historical figures, landing eventually upon Messianic fulfillment.
5. Relecture Fulfillment – The predictive element refers to someone in the day of the prophet and is then reappropriated to have a new meaning. The new Messianic reading fills up the original meaning.

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6. Midrash or Peshet Fulfillment – This borrows the intertestamental Jewish method of biblical interpretation. The predictive text involves the current situation but is then handles the passage in a creative way to show their fulfillment in contemporary events.
7. Direct Fulfillment –
 - a. The New Testament writers as inspired by the Holy Spirit are the final arbiter of the meaning of the Old Testament. What they say it means is what it means.

The mind of the typical Western believer seeks for and even forces a literal fulfillment upon every use of the Old Testament by a New Testament writer. This first subset of Direct Fulfillment is guilty of this. Because of the disingenuous nature of handling the text, a rebuttal of allegorical understanding occurs.

We need a clear understanding of how the writers of the Greek Scriptures used the Hebrew Scriptures without negating the Literal, Grammatical, Historical

7. Direct Fulfillment –
 - b. The text of the Hebrew Scriptures is written with a Messianic intent. The accounts concerning the Messiah are read with the Hebrew text in mind.

This was proposed by John Sailhamer and is the most widely used understanding by those who hold to the LGH Hermeneutical Method.
8. Dr. Cone’s Parallelism and Foreshadowing – This understanding falls in line with Sailhamer’s with some clearer explanations. “The NT utilizes these [fulfillment] passages as illustrations, prefigurings, or signs pointing to a future antecedent. Not all OT instances make a future antecedent evident, nonetheless, the later (NT) reference underscores the reality that many OT events were prefiguring things to come.”

Three Types of Fulfillment in Matthew

A fulfillment that has no direct relationship to prophecy – It does not claim to fulfill prophecy and there is no reference to an Old Testament statement. Matthew 3:15, 5:17, 13:14, 22:32

Fulfillment with prediction signifiers – In Matthew, there are ten examples of this fulfillment.

The first is 1:22-23 in relation to Isaiah 7:10-16 (8:3-4). The text in 8:3-4 is clearly foreshadowing the events to come in the conception and birth of Jesus the Messiah.

Matthew 2:23 – There is no direct text that is being referenced. The prophets said He shall be called a Nazarene. There are two possibilities. The Hebrew word for *branch* is “נֶצֶר nēṣer,” which is translated “ῥίζα rhiza” in the LXX. The Greek word for *Nazarene* is “ναζωραῖος nazōraios.” This may have been a play on the transliteration of “נֶצֶר nēṣer” from Hebrew to Greek, but I find this unlikely.

It’s more probable that the prophetic utterances are about the Messiah being hated, despised, and discounted. Compare John 1:46 to Psalm 22:6-7 and Isaiah 53:3.

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Fulfillment without prediction signifiers – There are three instances where this is used.

The first is Matthew 2:15. This text, as seen earlier, quotes Hosea 11:1. The reference read in the text does not seem to indicate any predictive elements.

Our good friend, Paul Miles, has a theory that Hosea may have a clear predictive element. He suggests that the translation, the conjunction, and the verb (*I called*) may be understood as “Then a youth of Israel, I loved him, then out of Egypt I will call my son.” It is also noted that the pronouns in verse 1 are singular, and the rest of them in the chapter are plural.

But even if this is not predictive by the author nor understood this way by the initial audience, this can be seen as a foreshadowing of events. Matthew 2:15 does not seek to change Hosea’s meaning it simply parallels the history of Israel with the events in the life of Jesus the Messiah.

If the Old Testament was written and the events of Israel are Messianic in nature, then to draw a picture of the Messiah using the history of Israel is both appropriate and beautiful.

Matthew 2:17 also would fall into this category. Jeremiah 31:15 - As we noted earlier this is probably the most obscure of the texts that claim a predictive nature, but the observation remains.

The events of the Babylonian captivity have. Israel going into captivity into a foreign nation while the rest that stayed and remained in Israel dies and were no more. Once again If the Old Testament was written and the events of Israel are Messianic in nature, then to draw a picture of the Messiah using the history of Israel is appropriate and gripping.

Fulfillment word Study

The word group is very consistent, even within the most obscure cognates. In context, the word “πληρώω plēroō” has a wide semantic range: to make full; fill, to fill something, to be filled with power, greed, love, etc..., to complete a period of time; complete, the time is full..., to bring to completion that which has already begun; complete, finish..., to bring to a designed end; fill an obligation or promise.

In the context of prophecy, the idea of satisfying or accomplishing is a good understanding, especially if there are no (or no clear) predictive elements. If the prophetic element is using a historical event as a precursor or foreshadowing of the Messiah, the translation *satisfies* or *accomplishes* may be better.

When the word is used with specific predictive elements, then *complete* or *fulfill* is a better translation.

Matthew 1:22 – Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

Matthew 2:15, 17, 23 – He remained there until the death of Herod. This was to accomplish what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "OUT OF EGYPT I CALLED MY SON." ... Then what had been spoken through Jeremiah the prophet was accomplished: ... and came and lived in a city called Nazareth. This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophets: "He shall be called a Nazarene."