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Isaiah's Prophecy of the Birth of Immanuel (Isaiah 7:14) in Matthew's Account of the Birth of Messiah (Matthew 1:23)*

Your Grace, esteemed colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,**

First, I would like to express my great pleasure and gratitude to the organizers for giving me the chance to participate in this significant symposium.

I will try to shortly expose the problematic regarding the best-known example of quoting the Old Testament text inside the New Testament.

First fulfillment citation

Isaiah's prophecy of Immanuel is mentioned in Matthew's account of the birth of Jesus Christ. This is the first in the row of the so-called "fulfillment citations" (Erfuellungsitate) or "reflective citations", as they are called in modern biblical science since the middle of the 19th century, i.e. since the publication of well-known Wilhelm Rothfuchs's dissertation entitled "Die Erfuellungsitate des Mattheus Evangeliums". Modern biblical science in the West has shown great interest for "fulfillment citations", especially in Matthew's Gospel. This great scientific interest for the Old Testament prophecies in the text of Matthew's Gospel might be explained by the efforts to solve the enigma of the origins of first canonical Gospel – an enigma that is yet to find its solution. Almost all researchers of Matthew's "fulfillment citations" assume the existence of pre-Matthew collection of Old Testament excerpts assembled and inputted in the context of the New Testament by certain group or school of literati. Before the Gospels were written, the Church had a collection of Old Testament citations that were placed in the context of New Testament, beside Tanakh or Hebrew Bible. Along with the Old Testament, this collection was regarded as an inspired text and honored as the very core of identity and spirituality of the first generation of Christians. This collection became the integral part of the Gospel due to editing process. The thesis of possible pre-Matthew origin of the Old Testament citations in Matthew's Gospel has opened new horizons. It enables us to treat the texts of the

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Gospels that contain fulfillment citations as evidence of Christology in the earliest period of Church in Palestine. The Christology of those texts is, therefore, significantly older than the Christology of the remainder of Gospel texts. The thesis that assumes the existence of pre-Matthew collection of excerpts is quite important for the subject of this symposium, for it points at Matthew's account of Virgin birth of Christ as the oldest testimony of Theotokology of Early Christianity.

A Virgin that gives birth – a sign

In Matthew's citation of Isaiah's prophecy, the most important and most interesting is the word *Parthenos*. The statement that the Virgin (*betula – parthenos*), and not (*alma – neanis*), will give birth to a Son and call him Immanuel, characterizes this event as marvelous and supernatural. Isaiah 7:14 states: "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: the Virgin will conceive and give birth to a Son, and will call him Immanuel." The word "sign" (*simion*) stands for miraculous and supernatural event. If Christ had been born from a woman and not from Virgin, than this would not be a sign i.e. this would not be a miracle. Entire patristic hermeneutical tradition holds to this argument in interpretation. For example, Saint Justin the Philosopher states: "If a young woman gives birth due to intercourse with her husband – that would not be such a great miracle" (*Dialogue with Trypho*, PG 6, 673V). We might find identical line of thought in the writings of other Fathers. Saint Basil the Great states: "Oste ei mh parthenos tekusa, poion touto simion?" (PG 30, 436B); Saint John Chrysostom: "Why would prophet call something that happens every day a sign?" (PG 57, 57, 3); Theodoret of Cyrrihus: "How can one proclaim natural line of events to be a miracle?" (SC 008.3.384.); Euthymius Zigabenos: "Is there anything new when a woman, who had intercourse, conceives and gives birth? The sign is something above nature and not something according to nature." (PG 129, 133A)

Contrary to Christian patristic exegesis, Jewish exegesis claims that, in this prophecy, Isaiah is not talking about Messiah but about his contemporaries. *Alma* is not a mother of Jesus Christ; she is mother of Hezekiah, the son of Ahaz. The words of prophet Isaiah do not relate to supernatural conception by the Holy Spirit; they are not related to Messiah at all.

The irreconcilable positions of Christian and Jewish exegesis made the interpretation of this particular text a paradigm of Church's attitude toward the Old Testament, as well as paradigm of Neo-Judean attitude toward the New Testament. This ancient Judeo-Christian debate over the translation is best illustrated in Justin's work *Dialogue with Trypho*. Justin mentions the prophecy of Isaiah, translation of this prophecy in Septuagint and in Gospel of Matthew, and defends the belief in ever-virginity of Theotokos against Trypho who claims that Messiah, "the Son of David", can only be "a man from a man", and from Ebionites' claim that Joseph was natural father of Jesus Christ.

Virgin birth and non-biblical legends of supernatural births

Therefore, what makes birth of Messiah miraculous, and this text specific, is birth from a Virgin. The birth and conception without natural father is not, however, something exclusively tied to the New Testament. Hellenistic and Egyptian literatures quite often contain the accounts of divine conception and birth of kings, heroes, philosophers, etc. For example, there are such legends regarding the birth of Alexander the Great, Plato, etc. E. Blumethal wrote an entire study in which he compares biblical accounts of the birth of Messiah with old Egyptian texts. Nevertheless, such ideas can hardly be found in Judaism. The very concept of sexual act with the deity, which results in conception, is foreign to Jewish biblical tradition. One of rare Jewish legends that is somewhat similar to Matthew's account (Matthew 1:18-20) is a legend of the virgin birth of Melchizedek in Slavonic Enoch (71:11-23). In this Jewish apocryphal work from 1st century CE, preserved only in Old Slavonic, Nir, the husband of Melchizedek's mother Sopianim and brother of Noah, reminds us of Joseph in Matthew 1:18-20. Nir also has a problem accepting his "unfaithful" pregnant wife. As for the remainder of Jewish tradition, certain unclear parallels with first chapter of Matthew can be found only in Jewish legends of the birth of Moses.

There are not enough clear parallels in Jewish tradition that would help us in drawing the conclusion that Matthew borrowed the idea of supernatural Virgin birth from it. Such an idea is foreign to this tradition almost completely. There are, however, few such texts, but it is impossible to harmonize them with Isaiah's prophecy and Matthew's text. Therefore, it is impossible to suggest that some Judeo-Christian community is a traditional milieu of the story of Christ's birth. The similarities of Matthew's text with these parallels were overemphasized.

Two explanations for similarities of Matthew's text to pagan motives and Jewish legends

Nevertheless, some modern Western commentators and historians of religion pay a lot of attention to these similarities between Matthew's account of Christ's birth and certain motives from pagan and Jewish literature. There are many researchers interested in this topic, but I will mention two authors that represent two different ways of understanding these parallels or similarities. The first is Roger Aus (2004) who claims that Christianity is a syncretistic religion. He explains these similarities as Christian borrowings of ideas from non-Christian sources. In his opinion, the author of first canonical Gospel borrows the motive of supernatural birth from the Virgin from pagan and Jewish literature, and combines them in order to create his own story, which is a haggadic beautification of Jesus' birth.

The second way of understanding the similarities is represented by Rabinovitz (1989). He thinks that the decisive factor in this story is, actually, the auditorium of Matthew's Gospel. Matthew's story is oriented toward its auditorium – the readers of the epistle who have had established cultural ethos. The readers of the epistle were Christians, and

author knew that it was important to emphasize the divine origin of Christ. In order to explain this fact, the author of the Gospel borrows from Greek literature certain motives of divine origin of people from mythical and historical past. This explains the presence of Greek material. However, the Christians who were readers of the Gospel were not only the heirs of Graeco-Roman tradition; they had their own, however short, Christian tradition. Two aspects of this Christian tradition demand special attention:

1. The Gospel of Mark, which is older than Matthew's and Luke's Gospels, does not contain the story of Christ's birth. Mark's Gospel opens with the account of Christ's baptism by John the Baptist, and Jesus Christ is already an adult man.
2. Some Christians, i.e. Christian heretics, believed that man's initiative in relationship with God is of decisive importance. God's answer comes after man's initiative, i.e. after virtuous life, as a reward. That is why a Judeo-Christian half-Gnostic Cerinthus, according to Saint Irenaeus of Lyons, believed that Jesus was not born from Virgin – he was a son of Joseph and Mary, conceived and born in natural way. However, due to him being more just, more prudent, and wiser than other men, Christ had come down on him in the form of pigeon after his baptism.

Gospel of Mark, lacking the account of Christ's birth, is quite fitting for this sort of interpretation: Jesus was a virtuous man and worthy of God's reward, so he became Christ. Jesus is, therefore, an example of discipline and an example of virtue. Christians should follow his example. If this was important for Christ, it should be important for his followers as well.

Matthew and Luke were using Mark's Gospel as a source, but they have enriched their Gospels with the accounts of Jesus' birth. In other words, the visible life of Jesus can only be a product of a direct act of God, i.e. an act of creation. Jesus did not deserve to become a Christ by his life; he is Christ (Messiah) because he is Son of God, Logos incorporated. He is Christ by his nature, and not by merit. Matthew, according to this interpretation, wants to say that, in relationship between God and man, the primacy belongs to God's grace and not to man's initiative, as Cerinthus has claimed. Therefore, the story of divine origin of Jesus Christ was necessary to Matthew and Luke in order to explain to their auditorium Christ's extraordinarily virtuous life. It is quite clear that this kind of interpretation originated in Protestant circles inclined toward Luther's principle "sola gratia".

Both ways of understanding similarities between Matthew's text and certain texts from Hellenistic and Jewish literature, however, are grounded on weak arguments. We have already shown that Jewish literary testimonies of divine origin of individuals from mythical and historical past, comparable to that of Matthew's account, are scarce. It is improbable that the author of the Gospel was combining Greek and Jewish legends in order to create his own. After all, Matthew's Gospel is a text written by a Judeo-Christian for Judeo-Christians. Matthew is interested in Old Testament prophecies; he borrows them, and puts them into the context of New Testament. That is interesting to him and

to his readers, both Judeo-Christians. Pagan myths of divine origin of individuals from mythical and historical past are foreign to him and to his readers.

One must also separate the auditorium of the Gospel from the auditorium of the account of Christ's birth. The idea of Matthew who borrows material from Mark, i.e. of Mark's Gospel as the oldest of Gospels, is correct, but it does not refer to Matthew's account of Christ's birth (Matthew 1), which is, as indicated, older than Matthew, and it is quite probable that, due to fulfillment citations contained in it, it is as old as the first generation of Christians in Palestine. The community that delivered the account of birth of Jesus Christ from Matthew 1 did not have a reason to refute beliefs such as those of Cerinthus, even if the very author of the Gospel might have had those reasons.

In conclusion, the thesis represented by some historians of religion, who claim that Matthew's account of Jesus' birth, along with entire Christian Theotokology and Christology, was built on borrowed pagan and late-Judean myths and legends and thus historically incorrect, cannot be sustained. Church's teaching of Virgin mother of Jesus Christ is not retelling of old legends but quite original teaching that, as we have shown, existed before the Gospels were written. Even in the oldest epoch – an epoch before Gospels, when the Church of Palestine created the compilation of Old Testament excerpts and put them in the context of New Testament – Christians believed in Mary's ever-virginity and divinity of Jesus Christ as Son of God. The first Christian community expressed this faith by placing Isaiah's prophecy of the birth of Immanuel at the beginning of compilation. The Evangelist has strengthened this faith by incorporating the compilation in his Gospel.

However, we should emphasize that the "virginity" in moral sense of the word is not the focus of this story. In the West, especially in writings of Jerome and Ambrose, the virginity of Mary has an ascetic meaning. Matthew, on the other hand, mentions Mary's virginity in order to express Christological truth – that Jesus is the Son of God, and that he has divine origin, since Joseph is not his biological father. The virginity of Theotokos was Matthew's means of explaining that Christ is "Immanuel" – God is with us. It is precisely Immanuel and not virginity in vulgar sexual sense that is a true focus of Matthew's account of Christ's birth. Ulrich Luz, modern Swiss biblical scholar, remarks that Eastern Christian tradition of interpretation regards Mary's virginity as a means of expressing "Christology of preexistence", while the Western tradition, starting from the 4th century, regards the virginity of Mary in the context of sin, sexuality, sinfulness, and immaculacy. That is why the historicity of Mary's virginity is suspected in our times, and not just in Protestant, but sometimes even in Roman Catholic theology. For Orthodox Christians, the virginity of Mary is one of the foundations of faith, but that virginity is a miracle of God, and it cannot be explained by methods of historical scholarship, nor can it be degraded to vulgar virginity in sexual or ascetic sense. Theotokos is a Virgin in a much higher sense.

I thank you for your attention.