

COMMENTS ON “FULFILL”

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We may wonder what definition to put on “fulfill” if it covers such a wide range of ideas as (1) a prediction’s coming to pass, (2) an event that illustrates a generalized principle (Acts 1:20?), (3) the accomplishment of something that was also the purpose of something else (the gospel’s fulfilling the Mosaic law: Matthew 5:17; cp. Romans 3:31?), (4) an obedience that accomplished what was commanded (Romans 13:8-10), (5) a necessary inference from another passage, (6) a meeting of the requirements for something (“*This course fulfills the requirement*”), and (7) a mere formal similarity (? Matthew 2:18, 23; perhaps 2:15).

The question about such a wide range of meanings is answerable from linguistic theory. In the case of words with multiple meanings, (a) we may find a common thread of meaning running through all its applications even if the number of applications is considerable. “Spirit,” for example, has no less than eight or nine different usages, but “invisible reality” seems to be a common element in them. However, (b) we do not assume there is a common thread in the multiple meanings of all words. To be sure, there must be some kind of historical, logical, or formal connection between individual meanings, but that connection need not be a common element throughout all meanings. The original meaning cluster may involve a feature that also appears in another case and so someone begins attaching the word to the new case. In turn, a new characteristic in the second usage may appear in a third, to which then someone may apply the word, and so forth. This possibility explains first why we need not find a common element in all usages of “fulfill.” In each usage we determine what “fulfill” apparently means as judged by context and the nature of the case. In regard to “fulfill,” however, we may be able to identify a common thread: “answers to” is a loose enough English expression to accommodate all seven nuances listed above.

One added comment on #7 above. If Matthew 2:23 is simply drawing attention to the interesting similarity between (*נֶצֶר*, *nēzer*) in Isaiah 11:1 and the terms *Nazareth/Nazarene* (*Ναζαρέτ/Ναζωραῖος*, *Nazaret/Nazōraios*), he is not “interpreting.” At best, Matthew is making his own truth claim—not Isaiah’s or Zechariah’s—that Jesus is the root of Jesse predicted by the prophet, a point Matthew makes memorable by connecting it with the city of Messiah’s childhood. What Matthew does is like Paul’s

Hagar-Sarah analogy in Galatians 4,
 his baptism unto Moses in 1 Corinthians 10:2,
 his Rock that was Christ in 1 Corinthians 10:3,
 his First and Second Adam in Romans 5 and 1 Corinthians 15,
 his altar to the Unknown God in Acts 17, as well as
 Christ’s serpent in the wilderness in John 3,
 his manna from heaven in John 6.

None of these are interpretative efforts. They represent a pedagogical/rhetorical technique for making concepts memorable and psychologically engaging. The concepts themselves are truth claims made by the present writers, not truth claims based on the originally intended meaning of the cited text or resident in the events or persons the writers site. They differ little from Jesus’ parables and other graphic imagery or from Paul’s use of our baptism in Romans 6 and Christ’s ascension in Colossians 3 to picture transcendent living or his Olive Tree parable in Romans 11

to encourage fruitful faithfulness. The difference is that these latter images are created by the speaker-writer rather than lifted out of materials already familiar to the audience. Interpretation always involves deriving intended meaning from an author's communication at least as a requisite part of the larger interpretation enterprise. This is true even in "theological interpretation," which stresses the move from "what it meant" to "what it means" as applied by principle in the current situation.

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