

# The Biblical Meaning of Fulfillment

## Introduction

In recent years Bible scholars have debated how New Testament authors used quotations from the Old Testament. There are several views and it is not an easy question to answer. Dr. Roy Zuck explains:

The use of the Old Testament in the New Testament is one of the most difficult aspects of Bible interpretation. As you read the New Testament, you are no doubt struck by the numerous times it quotes or alludes to the Old Testament.

Examining the quotations closely, you notice they are not always exact word-for-word quotations.<sup>1</sup>

If it can be demonstrated that the authors of the New Testament changed the meaning of texts from the Old Testament, then that could be an argument to justify the use of allegorical interpretation. Some Bible scholars claim that the writers of the New Testament changed the meaning of Old Testament texts. In contrast, Normative Dispensationalists maintain that the text of the Old Testament has only one meaning. They contend that the meaning of the Old Testament authors was not changed by the writers of the New Testament. While the New Testament may explain further details about the text of the Old Testament, it does not change the meaning. Bible teachers who oppose this view say that the Old Testament text has more than one meaning. However, this is a denial of historical-grammatical interpretation.

In this lesson, we will consider how the New Testament writers used quotations from the Old Testament with respect to prophecy. Throughout the New Testament we often see the use of a phrase which seems to indicate a “fulfillment” of prophecy. For example, Matthew used the phrase, “This was to *fulfill* what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, ‘Out of Egypt I called My Son’” (Mt. 2:15). By reading the English text you would assume that this is a fulfillment of prophecy. But if you look at the context in the

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<sup>1</sup> Zuck, Roy B. *Basic Bible Interpretation: A Practical Guide to Discovering Biblical Truth*. Ed. Craig Bubeck Sr. Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 1991. 250. Print.

book of Hosea, you will discover that the original statement in the Old Testament has nothing to do with a prophetic utterance. Hosea was simply stating a historical fact. Did Matthew change the meaning of Hosea's statement of historical fact? We will consider that topic in another lesson. But in this lesson, we will examine the Biblical meaning of the word *fulfill*. We will see that the Greek word translated *fulfill* in our English Bibles does not always mean the *fulfillment* of prophecy.

### Fulfill Does Not Always Mean Fulfill

One of the problems in translating words from one language into another language is that usually there are no exact equivalents of terms between two languages. A word in any particular language has a range of meaning. When you look up a word in a Greek-English lexicon, you will typically find a number of possibilities. This is true for the Greek word that is translated *fulfill* in our English Bibles.

The Greek word *πληρόω* has a number of definitions in the Greek-English lexicon. It is used ninety times in the New Testament. In twenty-eight of those occurrences, it seems to be related to prophecy. In the remaining sixty-two occurrences, it has no connection with prophecy.

Charles Dyer identifies five basic areas of meaning for the Greek word *πληρόω*.

- *To fill [something] with content.* “When it [a fishnet] was filled (*πληρόω*), they drew it up on the beach” (Mt. 13:48; NASB).
- *To fulfill a demand or claim.* “So that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled (*πληρόω*) in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit” (Rom. 8:4; NASB). Paul is not saying that the Law is being fulfilled prophetically. He is merely saying that the requirement of the law is being met or accomplished.
- *To fill up completely a specific measure.* “And when he [Moses] was full (*πληρόω*) forty years old, it came into his heart to visit his brethren the children of Israel” (Acts 7:23; KJV). Young's Literal Translation says, “And when forty years were *fulfilled* to him.” In this case a measurement of time (40 years) had been completed or had elapsed.

- *To complete.* “When He had completed (*πληρώω*) all His discourse in the hearing of the people, He went to Capernaum” (Lk. 7:1; NASB).
- *To complete or fulfill prophetic sayings.* “When evening had come, they brought to Him many who were demon-possessed. And He cast out the spirits with a word, and healed all who were sick, that it might be fulfilled (*πληρώω*) which was spoken by Isaiah the prophet, saying: “He Himself took our infirmities And bore our sicknesses” (Mt. 8:16-17; NKJV).

Of these five basic areas of meaning for the Greek word *πληρώω* only one relates to prophetic statements. Less than one-third of the occurrences of the word *πληρώω* in the New Testament falls into this fifth category.

Therefore, we can say that the Biblical meaning of the word *fulfill* (*πληρώω*) does not necessarily mean *fulfill* as in the sense of *fulfilled* prophecy.

### A Fulfillment Formula Does Not Always Mean Fulfillment of Prophecy

It is true that the Greek word *πληρώω* might not necessarily relate to prophecy. However, you would think that when *πληρώω* is used in a fulfillment formula then it certainly would indicate a prophetic statement coming to pass. The New Testament uses a number of fulfillment formulas such as, “This was to *fulfill* what had been spoken by the prophet.” But when you examine the original quotation in the Old Testament you find that the author was not even making a prophetic utterance.

Matthew 2:16 describes the slaughter of children in Bethlehem by King Herod. In verse 17, Matthew says this event “fulfilled what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet.” However, Jeremiah actually described the mothers in Ramah weeping as their children were carried into Assyrian exile in 722 B.C. He was not predicting what would occur in Bethlehem many years later. The original quote from Jeremiah 31:15 was not a direct prediction of Herod’s act.

Those who want to make a case for an allegorical method of interpretation claim that Matthew changed the original meaning of Jeremiah’s words. Since the word *πληρώω* is used by Matthew in a fulfillment formula then it seems like they have a good case. However, we know that the range of meaning for *πληρώω* is not just limited to the fulfillment of prophecy.

As we examine the description of the separate events by both Jeremiah and Matthew, a pattern between the two incidents becomes clear. Dr. Roy Zuck explains:

The slaughter of the infant boys of Bethlehem corresponded to or was analogous to the Old Testament event, but was not identical to it. Both speak of God's people suffering under a cruel ruler. When Matthew said Herod's oppression "fulfilled" what Jeremiah wrote, he was saying it was analogous to the earlier event. And since Christ was involved, it was a heightening of the earlier event.<sup>2</sup>

Dr. Charles Dyer adds:

Is Jeremiah 31:15 even a remote prediction of the death of babies in Bethlehem? If so, it's a prophecy that names the wrong city (Ramah versus Bethlehem), the wrong action (captivity versus death), and the wrong outcome (return from captivity versus no return from death). The only point of comparison is the sadness felt in the hearts of both groups of women. And it is that point of comparison that Matthew is making by using *plēroō*. He is not saying that Jeremiah was predicting the death of babies in Bethlehem. Instead, he is indicating that the measure of grief experienced by the women in Ramah who watched their sons being carried off into captivity was "seen in full" or "filled completely" by the women in Bethlehem who watched their sons being slaughtered. Once again, even though Matthew uses *plēroō* with a fulfillment formula, the passage being quoted was not a prediction being fulfilled at that time.<sup>3</sup>

Dr. Zuck examined eight Old Testament passages in which a fulfillment formula was used in the New Testament which included the word *πληρόω*. When examining the original quotations in the Old Testament, it was obvious that none of these passages were prophetic predictions. He states:

It is clear that these eight Old Testament passages were not written as direct predictions of Jesus Christ or related events. The contexts in each case show that the Old Testament verses had no initial reference to Jesus. Yet, as the passages

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 268.

<sup>3</sup> Wesley Willis and John Master, *Issues in Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 57.

were quoted in the New Testament, we can now see that the Old Testament passages were looked on in the New Testament as being “heightened.” They were “fulfilled” in the sense that they were filled with more meaning. Seen from the vantage point of the New Testament, we see that the statements, though having local significance in the Old Testament, were heightened by New Testament writers to refer to Jesus.

This is not to suggest that the New Testament writers saw “hidden” meanings in the Old Testament passages. They were not changing the meanings of the statements in the Old Testament.<sup>4</sup>

In some cases, writers of the New Testament used *πληρόω* in a fulfillment formula to create an analogy from an Old Testament event. This is similar to Paul’s use of allegory in Galatians chapter 4 in order to illustrate a point. In such cases, the Old Testament author being quoted was not even predicting a future event. He may have been simply stating a historical fact. However, the New Testament author was using the Old Testament quotation to draw an analogy. For instance, Matthew drew parallels or comparisons between events that he was writing about and historical events in the Old Testament. As he described New Testament events, he used the Old Testament to “fill in” or “complete” (*πληρόω*) the scene that he was depicting.

## Conclusion

In the next lesson, we will look at how Matthew used a quotation from the book of Hosea. As we examine the details of this quotation, we will see further evidence that the Greek word *πληρόω* does not necessarily mean fulfilled prophecy.

In this lesson, we examined the range of meaning from the Greek word *πληρόω*. We also considered its usage in fulfillment formulas. The evidence does not justify the claim that the New Testament authors used allegorical interpretation of the Old Testament. The authors of the New Testament did not change the meaning of Old Testament texts.

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<sup>4</sup> Zuck, Roy B. *Basic Bible Interpretation: A Practical Guide to Discovering Biblical Truth*. Ed. Craig Bubeck Sr. Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 1991. 269. Print.