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MATTHEW AND HOSEA:
A RESPONSE TO JOHN SAILHAMER

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The vexing problem of Matt 2:15 and Hos 11:1 is well known, and another look at it is always worthwhile. John Sailhamer claims to have found a solution by portraying Matthew's use of Hos 11:1 as essentially in harmony with the modern grammatical-historical method.

To be sure, Sailhamer has properly reminded us that Hosea was writing within a Hebrew prophetic tradition that had at least an incipient messianism right from the start, and that Matthew shared that tradition. Further, Sailhamer has reminded us that references to the exodus are always fraught with the significance of both past and future, since God is both the God who saved and the God who will save. In addition, Sailhamer rightly refuses simply to dismiss Matthew's hermeneutic as arbitrary, and also rightly wishes to aver both the semantic integrity of both Hosea and Matthew, and the historical referentiality of those texts which claim to report as well as evaluate events.

Nevertheless, as attractive and as well-presented as Sailhamer's solution might appear to be, it poses a number of serious difficulties which render the argument questionable in the current debate over the apostolic use of the OT.

First, claiming to follow the lead of B. S. Childs, Sailhamer's argument rests on the foundation that Hosea is thinking in chapter 11 not just of the past, but of the way the past acts as an indicator of the future activity of God. This may be an accurate way of reading this section of Hosea, although it would need to be more clearly argued in order to support his argument to follow. But even if we took such a reading for granted, the connection between Hosea and Matthew is still not as direct as Sailhamer contends.

a) First, Hosea does not actually say anything explicit about the Messiah, or anything that could be easily construed as such. It is only by Sailhamer's extensive manipulation (i.e., his own midrash) that a messianic *assumption* can be worked into Hosea. If Hosea himself had intended to say something about Messiah, surely he could have said it more clearly than by a convoluted and mysterious play on an alleged subvocalized theme in the Pentateuch.

b) This is not to deny that the Pentateuch evinces an eschatological and even messianic trajectory. But it appears to us that our ability to see this trajectory from our Christian vantage point cannot be used to argue that the trajectory

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can be found in the Pentateuch via grammatical-historical exegesis without reference to the NT. Further, even if we grant Sailhamer's contention that the Pentateuch itself presented the exodus as not just a paradigm but a prediction of God's future messianic delivery of his people, it is still not the same as making the exodus, *considered in the Pentateuch itself*, a prophecy of an event in the infancy of the Messiah.

c) Sailhamer weakens his argument even more when he makes the extravagant claim that "lying behind the composition of the canonical Pentateuch is a *fully developed* messianic eschatology in which the exodus is an intentional and deliberate metaphor" [italics ours]. Sailhamer's theory requires that this messianic eschatology be already fully developed everywhere in the OT, but if it is fully developed, why is it such hard work for even those who share Sailhamer's Christian convictions to see it? And what need is there for any later revelation if it is already fully developed? Sailhamer's approach effectively flattens redemptive history.

d) It is highly debatable whether Hosea's meaning is eschatological in 11:1-7 except in a negative sense of warning against judgment. Though the book as a whole evinces the promise of God's eschatological deliverance, the first part of chapter 11 is concerned with the *indictment* of God against Israel and Judah for not responding to the fact that God called his son out of Egypt (i.e., away from idolatry), and the *threat* of punishment by exile. Hence, "out of Egypt have I called my son" is a reminder of God's past deliverance, not with a view to comfort or hope for the future, but with a view to rebuke. Not until 11:8 does Hosea's hope for God's ultimate deliverance from this future exile appear.¹

In fact, Sailhamer's approach is in trouble whether or not Hosea's focus in 11:1 is eschatological. If it is, then Hosea appears *not* to be thinking of Egypt as literal Egypt. It appears more likely, however, that Hosea in his larger context is drawing a connection between the *past* deliverance from (literal) Egypt and the *future* deliverance from Assyria (figurative Egypt). In this case, the verse that Matthew actually quotes (11:1) is in fact not itself a future reference but a past one. Either Matthew is *literalizing* what was for Hosea a figurative and eschatological reference to Egypt, or else he is further "metaphoricalizing" Egypt as equivalent to contemporary Israel, with Herod as the new Pharaoh,² but in no case is he restricting himself to Hosea's original meaning.

e) Sailhamer gives little treatment to the immediate context of Matt 2:15. Matthew's quotation appears in a series of references which he understands as indicating the Messiah's recapitulation of Israel's history.³ Neither Hosea nor

¹ Though it is arguable that Matthew, in quoting v. 1, was intending to call attention to the entire context of Hos 11, the connection to Jesus' departure from Israel and sojourn in Egypt is clearly made by virtue of the words of v. 1, not the words of later verses.

² C. Keener, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 109.

³ In Matt 2, both the messianic birth in the city of David, and the rescue of the anointed one from the slaughter of infants (along with the lamentation of the matriarch Rachel at the occasion of the exile), as well as our passage's reference to the exodus, connect Jesus events with Israel events. As

Jeremiah nor Micah have any passage the literal meaning of which suggests that Messiah would recapitulate Israel's history.

f) From the perspective of the NT, and now that the Christ *has* come, we are able to see that Isaiah's servant of the Lord (which in the first place was Israel), is in Isaiah progressively narrowed until there is eventually only one Servant, who stands in the place of Israel for its redemption, and not Israel's only, but also the nations'. Therefore we can share Matthew's view that Jesus, as the true Israel, re-lives Israel and fulfills her calling, but one can hardly find these connections without first having heard the story of Jesus, and hence it cannot be identified with Hosea's or Jeremiah's *sensus literalis*. So Sailhamer's contention that "if Childs is correct in his reading of Hosea then the *sensus literalis* (historicus) of Hos 11:1 is precisely that of Matthew's Gospel" is a very large dose of overstatement. Childs himself makes no such claims, because Childs does not try to impose a uniformity of meaning on all stages of the tradition of the text, and because even with the expanded canonical meaning of Hosea, Matthew is still taking it a few steps further. Though they need not be regarded as incompatible, eschatological meaning is *not* "precisely the same as" christological meaning.

Our point in all this is that, although Sailhamer claims the high road of faithfulness to grammatical-historical exegesis (in distinction from us who would acknowledge that some things cannot be explained by that method), he is not in point of fact strictly following such a limited enterprise. Strict grammatical-historical exegesis in fact demonstrates to us that the apostles were doing something other than grammatical-historical exegesis.

A more important, and more fundamental, difficulty with Sailhamer's argument is that he has made the unfortunate but all too common mistake of treating the NT in isolation from its hermeneutical environment in Second Temple Judaism, in spite of the fact that the points of similarity between the NT's use of OT Scriptures and that of other Jewish groups (particularly Qumran) are conspicuous and endemic. Admittedly these similarities make some people uncomfortable, and we find recurring attempts in evangelical scholarship to argue that the similarities are only superficial. Acknowledging similarities is thought to concede that the meaning of the Bible is somehow relativized to culture, which raises the specter of arbitrariness in interpretation. But there are better ways of dealing with this specter than removing the Bible from its own world.⁴ If Jesus

many commentators have noted, the idea runs throughout Matthew, e.g., the temptation in the wilderness, the giving of teaching (torah) on a mountain, the sending of the twelve to "conquer" the land, feeding the multitudes with miraculous bread, etc.

⁴ See P. Enns, "The 'Moveable Well' in 1 Corinthians 10:4: An Extra-Biblical Tradition in an Apostolic Text," *BBR* 6 (1996): 23-38. We should also point out that removing the Bible from its world does not eliminate the specter. The attempts made in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to control and "prove" single meaning by reference to authorial intent have not one whit reduced the variety of meanings which even the scholars who share such methodological commitments maintain. As McCartney argues elsewhere ("The New Testament Use of the Old Testament," in *Inerrancy and Hermeneutics: A Tradition, A Challenge, A Debate* [ed. H. Conn; Grand Rapids: Baker,

and the apostles used the language, the thought forms, the idioms, and the cultural norms of their own time, why would we not expect them to use the hermeneutical methods of their time? Why is it deemed problematic to acknowledge that they interpreted Scripture using methods similar to those used at Qumran for example, especially given the great similarities in their eschatological outlooks? Why is the hermeneutical context of the first century, in which the apostles thought and wrote, so easily ignored when the hermeneutical question of how they handled their Scripture is precisely the point of discussion? Given that the similarities of NT interpretation with that of the Dead Sea Scrolls are *much greater* than the similarities with our own post-Enlightenment methods,⁵ it seems we ought to listen closely to their own hermeneutical praxis rather than try to make these ancient writers conform to our hermeneutical expectations.

Yet Sailhamer's whole project seems driven by the perceived necessity that for evangelicals the canonical meaning supposedly *must* conform to (read: "be semantically equivalent to"⁶) the "original" meaning, that original meaning being defined as the meaning of the original human author.⁷ But it is not so clear to us why the church should be enslaved to a hermeneutical assumption thrust upon us by the Enlightenment rationalism that insists that the Bible's human meaning is its only meaning, that the meaning of a text is somehow absolutizable as a pure proposition, and that that proposition is identical and isolatable by reference to a supposedly accessible "human authorial intent." We are not speaking here of the Reformer's insistence on a "plain" meaning of a text, which is based more on the inherent features of language and the text itself than on some reconstruction of authorial intent, and which furthermore assumes that all the Bible should be interpreted with reference to all the Bible. Rather we are challenging the notion that the "plain" meaning must be strictly in accord with what the original human author's horizon of meaning can be

1988], 101-16), it is not methodology that determines exegetical result, but the larger theological purposes or goals.

⁵ Cf., e.g., J. A. Fitzmyer, "The Use of Explicit Old Testament Quotations in Qumran Literature and in the New Testament," *NTS* 7 (1960-61): 297-33; D. Patte, *Early Jewish Hermeneutic in Palestine* (SBLDS 22; Missoula, Mont.; Scholars Press, 1975); R. Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975).

⁶ If the demand for "conformity" meant no more than the expectation that, as parts of the same story, the passages may later be seen to be organically connected, we would have no quarrel, but Sailhamer clearly means more than this.

⁷ We must leave aside here the complex question of "which human author." In the case of Hosea, as Sailhamer demonstrates, it is at least arguable that the final form is the product of one author (Hosea), but this is not always the case. In the recording of Jesus' words, for example, who determines the meaning of the words, Jesus or the Gospel writer? If the answer is Jesus, then is the meaning of the words of Epimenides in Titus 1:12 that of Paul or of Epimenides? (Epimenides was probably constructing a philosophical conundrum over the fact that he himself was a Cretan, an authorial intent that would be hard to find in Paul's use of it.)

expected to support. Such a notion owes much more to our humanist heritage than it does to the study of the actual hermeneutics of the apostles.⁸

It seems clear to us that if we reject the anti-supernaturalism of modernism and accept that the Scriptures are ultimately divine, then we would *expect* those Scriptures to transcend the limitations of human authorial intent, even were that intent directly ascertainable.⁹ In fact, it is precisely because the NT writers regarded the OT as divine communication that they so often appear relatively unconcerned with the meaning of the original human author (and likewise unconcerned with the precise text form). The NT writers were certainly not operating with some general reader-response theory of hermeneutics, but they were interpreting the Bible on the basis of the twofold conviction that (1) Scripture was God's vehicle of communication to Israel, and (2) that communication had seen its completion in the person and work of Christ. They were indeed interested in authorial intent, but for them the author was God who has worked redemptively and climactically in Christ. The effort to restrict biblical meaning to the human author's intent is a peculiarly anti-supernaturalist effort; it assumes that the Bible is not a unique book.

Now Sailhamer is by no means an anti-supernaturalist. So, his alternative is to undergo contortions in averring that the OT's human authors somehow were able to have notions that are only with great and dubious labor supportable from within the contexts of their own worlds. Admittedly, as supernaturalists ourselves, we would allow that God *could* have made known to Hosea that his words were *actually* a prophecy of an event in the infancy of the future Messiah, but there is simply no indication in the text of Hosea itself that God did so.¹⁰

If we do not follow Sailhamer's explanation of Matthew as simply reproducing the (unspoken) messianic expectations of Hosea, then how do we explain Matthew's somewhat surprising use of Hos 11:1? And, if we allow that the divine author's meaning may be more than the human author's, how do we

⁸ Astute readers will at this point call to mind 1 Pet 1:10-12, which indicates that although the prophets did not understand everything, they did understand that their message was about the messianic sufferings and attendant glory, and that they were ministering to a future generation. We would be among the first to concur that the true message of the OT is christocentric, and that the eschatological and messianic trajectories were really there in the OT prophets. But this is hardly to say that the human authors *all the time* understood the specific christological dimensions of their words. The remarks in 1 Pet 1 are, like those in 1 Cor 15 and Luke 24, indications of the core message of the OT *as a whole*, and do not apply equally to every single verse of the OT understood strictly within its original setting.

⁹ And indeed we would expect them to transcend our own ability to control what meaning they might have. This is not to allow that the divine meaning can be simply divorced from its human author, though perhaps at least once it was, when Caiaphas inadvertently prophesied (John 11:49-52).

¹⁰ No doubt this formulation will be frustrating to Sailhamer, since he is arguing precisely that Hosea *did* have a future messianic deliverance in mind in the context of the whole of Hosea, but even if we granted this, there is still a leap from "future messianic deliverance" to "future journey to/from Egypt by the infant Messiah." To say that Hosea had an eschatological and even messianic thrust to his overall message is not to say that he thought of 11:1 as in any way a reference to the eschatological Christ.

limit that meaning so that it does not mean everything (and therefore nothing in particular)? We offer here an outline of how we think this question ought to be approached.

First, we ought to observe that Matt 2:15 is one of a series of messianic fulfillment texts in the opening chapters of Matthew, most of which are interpreted in ways that might seem surprising to a modern interpreter. Although the reference to Mic 5 (which, after all, Matthew presents not as his own observation but as that of the Jerusalem religious authorities) may fairly be taken as signaling the expectation of a latter-day David, the quotation of Jer 31:15 is not so easy to relate directly either to the slaughter of the children by Herod, or to the departure of the Messiah from the land. Likewise, even the virgin-birth prophecy of Isa 7:14 is, in its original context, not immediately obvious as a prophecy of a future messiah.¹¹ Whatever is happening in Matthew's citation of Hos 11:1, it seems likely to be more than Hosea himself could have known, or than is apparent in his book. To answer the question of what Matthew is doing with Hos 11, we should therefore at least examine the methods, assumptions and goals involved in his interpretation of Jer 31 and Isa 7 as well.

Second is the fact that the NT writers (not just Matthew) engage the OT with the conviction that the expected eschatological reversal has taken place in Jesus Christ.¹² Things have been turned upside down, and this opens up whole new understandings of the OT for Christians that were not available prior to the coming of Christ. God's redemption in Christ is now the interpretive key that unveils the things hidden from of old.

Third, place names are sometimes treated in Scripture and in subsequent Jewish literature as symbolic. Hosea has done this in referring to Assyria as a kind of Egypt (Hos 11:5). This kind of place-name symbolism runs straight through the accompanying material in Matt 2,¹³ which seems to connect a symbolic place-name meaning with a literal place associated with the infant Jesus. Thus the Ramah of Jer 31 connects the Ramah north of Jerusalem where the deportees were gathered, with the "ramah" or high place south of Jerusalem which was reported to house Rachel's tomb, and which may have been the same hill as Bethlehem is situated on. And the enigmatic reference to "Nazareth" is probably a symbolic reference to the prejudice with which Judean Jews regarded the peasantry of Galilee (note the astonished doubt of Nathanael in John 1:46). The reference in 4:14-15 to Galilee of the Gentiles also seems to connect a symbolic name with Jesus' literal presence in an area.

¹¹ Cf. John H. Walton, "Isa 7:14: What's in a Name?" *JETS* 30:3 (Sept 1987): 289-306. We certainly believe that these texts are indeed prophecies of Jesus, and that Isa 7:14 prophesies his virgin birth, but this can hardly be said to be clear until the fulfillment actually happens in the first century.

¹² Cf., e.g., Mary's song (Luke 1:46-55), John the Baptist's proclamation in Matt 3:10 (= Luke 3:9), several parables of Jesus (e.g., Matt 21:33-46 & par.), Peter's speech in Acts 2, Paul's contrast of human power and God's "weakness" in 1 Cor 1 & 2 and in 2 Cor 12, Christ's victory over death (1 Cor 15:55) and over the evil powers (Col 2:15; 1 Pet 3:21-22), and many, many other passages.

¹³ For more on this, cf. Krister Stendahl, "Quis et Unde? An analysis of Matt. 1-2," in *Judentum Urchristentum Kirche: Festschrift für Joachim Jeremias* (ed. W. Eltester; Berlin: Töpelmann, 1960), 94-105.

In addition, the NT combines this symbolic use of place names with the eschatological reversal theme in interesting ways. The Apocalypse of John presents the wicked religious power of the world as a “Babylon” which is great but is overthrown. (Most take Babylon to refer to Rome, but it could also be Jerusalem—Rev 18:24 intimates that the “Babylon” that John the Seer has in mind is literal Jerusalem.) Similarly Paul seems to reverse the normal expectations regarding Sinai and Jerusalem in Gal 4, where literal Jerusalem and literal Israel become figurative Sinai and Hagar. And most notably, in Rev 11:8 the place of Jesus’ crucifixion is spiritually called “Egypt.”¹⁴ Hence, Matthew does not quote Hos 11:1 on the occasion of Jesus’ *return* from literal Egypt, but regards it as fulfilled by Jesus’ departure from Israel *into* Egypt. For Matthew, literal Israel has become “Egypt” and the king of literal Israel (Herod) is a new “Pharaoh” that tries to kill the promised deliverer by slaughtering infants, whereas literal Egypt becomes a place of refuge.¹⁵

Fourth, and most significantly, Jesus is understood in early Christian tradition as fulfilling the place of Israel.¹⁶ Matthew is certainly not alone in this. Jesus is the true “servant of Yahweh,” and so his life recapitulates Israel,¹⁷ or one might even say that for Matthew Israel’s life pre-capitulates the life of the true Israel, Jesus. Thus, when Hosea says that God called his “son” Israel out of Egypt, Matthew can understand that calling, as well as every other consideration in the OT of Israel as God’s son, as ultimately pointing to Jesus, the true Israel, the true Son of God.

Finally, the word πληρώω in Matthew is clearly more than just a bringing-to-pass the conditions expressed in some prediction. For example, in Matt 3:15 Jesus’ baptism “fulfills” all righteousness—this hardly means he meets the

¹⁴ C. H. Dodd (*According to the Scriptures: The Substructure of New Testament Theology* [London: Nisbet, 1952], 103) suggested on the basis of Rev 11:8 that Hos 11:1 may first have been applied to the deliverance of God’s people in Christ, and then later to Christ as representative of his people. Whether or not this is the case, the equating of literal Jerusalem with spiritual Egypt may have begun prior to either Matthew or Revelation, in that Jesus’ death, which occurred in Jerusalem, was regarded as an ἐξοδος (Luke 9:31).

¹⁵ A similar interpretive move occurs in the well known Damascus Document (CD), which is called that because it makes such frequent *positive* reference to Damascus. Apparently the first Teacher of Righteousness found refuge in Damascus or gathered his original band there, and consequently there is a connection with literal Damascus. In the Damascus Document then, whenever in the OT the word Damascus is encountered, it is assumed that this has some kind of positive meaning, associated with the founding of the community. Thus the reference to Amos 5 in CD 7:14 treats Damascus not as a source of idolatry as it is in Amos itself, but as a refuge for the righteous.

¹⁶ Sailhamer refers somewhat disparagingly to Delitzsch’s comment that Israel’s history is a “material prophecy” of the coming Christ. But many other commentators have recognized that Matthew is using Israel’s history as anticipating the history of Jesus (cf., *inter alios*, Davies & Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew* [3 vols; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988–1997], 1:263; D. A. Carson, *Matthew* [The Expositor’s Bible Commentary 8; ed. F. Gaebelein; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984], 92–93; D. Hagner, *Matthew 1–13* [WBC 33a; Dallas: Word, 1993], 36.) This is all built of course on the recognition that “my son” in Hos 11:1 refers to Israel, which according to D. Daube (*The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism* [London: Athlone Press, 1956], 191) was recognized by the rabbis as well.

¹⁷ See n. 3.

terms of a prediction. In 5:17 Jesus says he came to “fulfill” the Law and the Prophets.¹⁸ These passages are not saying that the Law and the Prophets are just predictions of future events, nor is it saying that Jesus simply fulfills the parts of the Law and the Prophets which happen to be predictions. It means Jesus is the true purpose and goal of the OT. Thus in Matt 2:15, the escape of Jesus from Herod’s slaughter into Egypt is a necessary feature of bringing to its true purpose the whole expectation of redemption, of which Hosea’s words reminding Israel of the exodus are a part.

Our point is that it is entirely wrongheaded to impose the necessity that NT writers limit themselves strictly to an “original” *sensus literalis* meaning when they quote the OT. To maintain that they did so will sometimes result in contortions to both OT and NT texts, and semantic gymnastics that may make Origen’s exegesis look restrained. Further it is out of accord with what Christians and the apostles themselves have always believed about the Scriptures, that since they are ultimately God’s word, we can *expect* that they will exceed the “horizons” of their original human authors. And finally, such a limitation lifts the NT writers from their historical contexts, and treats them as though they were modern, hermeneutically self-conscious, grammatical-historical exegetes.

It is simply a fact that neither Matthew nor any other NT writer exhibits an exegetical methodology that directs them to ask first what an original author meant in his own time—they go immediately and without hesitation to the meaning (or “significance” for those who prefer to make Hirsch’s distinction) the text now has for the contemporary audience in the light of messianic fulfillment. Matthew is convinced that Jesus is the embodiment of all the promises of God, and that the OT, God’s word to his people, is therefore ultimately about Jesus (cf. Luke 24:44-47; 1 Pet 1:10-12). Hence, the hopes expressed in Isaiah for deliverance from Damascan harassment, the terror and sadness of Jeremiah’s time in seeing the people of God devastated and deported, and also the promises of God in Hosea that as God delivered from Egypt he will deliver from Assyria, all of it is brought to its full flowering (fulfilled) in the experience and actions of the true Israel, God’s ultimate Son, the focal point of all revelation, Jesus the Christ.

We are more than sympathetic to Sailhamer’s (or anyone’s) attempt to explain a biblical problem within the parameters of an evangelical view of Scripture. Further we are sympathetic to the effort to find the organic connection between the meaning of Hos 11:1 in its original setting and its re-interpretation in Matthew. But such attempts should not be made at the expense of what the text is actually saying. It is perhaps a great irony that the grammatical-historical method, which Sailhamer employs to explicate the plain meaning of Hos 11, can only achieve Sailhamer’s desired result through a series of contortions that yield anything but a plain meaning. To put it another

¹⁸ Similarly, though the word *πληρῶ* is not used, in 11:13 Jesus claims that all the prophets and the Law prophesied until John (the Baptist).

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way, Sailhamer's argument, which rests on a subtle and heretofore undiscovered interpretive key, is midrash—the very charge from which he seems concerned to protect Matthew. In the end, Sailhamer offers an explanation that will only be pleasing to those who share his preconceptions about how Scripture ought to behave, and his solution tells us more about modern Evangelicalism than it does about either Matthew or Hosea.