

Prophecies of the Messiah

Dr. Michael Gleghorn argues that the Bible contains genuine prophecies about a coming Messiah that were accurately fulfilled in the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus.

The Place of His Birth

Biblical prophecy is a fascinating subject. It not only includes predictions of events that are still in the future. It also includes predictions of events that were future at the time the prophecy was given, but which have now been fulfilled and are part of the past. This latter category includes all the prophecies about a coming Messiah that Christians believe were accurately fulfilled in the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus. If the Bible really does contain such prophecies, then we would seem to have evidence that's at least consistent with the divine inspiration of the Bible. One can see how an all-knowing God could accurately foretell the future, but it's not clear how a finite human being could do so. Thus, if there are accurately fulfilled prophecies in the Bible, then we have yet another reason to believe that the biblical worldview is true.



Let's begin with a prophecy about the Messiah's birthplace. "Messiah" is a Hebrew term that simply means "anointed one." When translated into Greek, the language of the New Testament, the term becomes "Christ." Christians believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah promised in the Hebrew Scriptures (see Mark 14:61-62).

In Micah 5:2 we read, "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though

you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.” This prophecy was given in the eighth century B.C., more than seven hundred years before the birth of Jesus!

Notice, first, that it refers to a future ruler who will come from the town of Bethlehem. When King Herod, shortly after Jesus’ birth, asked the Jewish religious leaders where the Christ (or Messiah) was to be born, they told him that he was to be born in Bethlehem and cited this verse from Micah as support (Matt. 2:1-6). Both Matthew and Luke confirm that Jesus was born in Bethlehem (Matt. 2:1 and Luke 2:4-7). So He clearly meets this necessary qualification for being the promised Messiah.

But that’s not all. Micah also says that the origins of this ruler are “from of old, from ancient times.” How should we understand this? One commentator notes, “The terms ‘old’ . . . and ‘ancient times’ . . . may denote ‘great antiquity’ as well as ‘eternity’ in the strictest sense.”^{1} Dr. Allen Ross states, “At the least this means that Messiah was pre-existent; at the most it means He is eternal.”^{2} Micah’s prophecy thus suggests that the Messiah will be a supernatural, perhaps even divine, person. And this astonishing conclusion is precisely what Jesus claimed for Himself!^{3}

The Time of His Appearing

Let’s now consider a fascinating prophecy that, in the opinion of many scholars, tells us when the Messiah would make His appearance. It’s found in Daniel 9.

Daniel was one of the Jewish captives who had been brought to Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar. The prophecy in Daniel 9 was given in the sixth century B.C. While much can be said about

this passage, we must focus on a few important points.

To begin, verse 24 gives us the time parameters during which the prophecy will unfold. It reads, "Seventy 'sevens' are decreed for your people and your holy city to finish transgression, to put an end to sin," and so on. Although we can't go into all the details, the 'seventy 'sevens'" concern seventy distinct seven-year periods of time, or a total of 490 years.

Next, verse 25 tells us that from the issuing of a decree to rebuild Jerusalem until the coming of the Messiah, there will be a total of sixty-nine "sevens," or 483 years. There are two views we must consider. The first holds that this decree was issued by the Persian ruler Artaxerxes to Ezra the priest in 457 B.C.{4} Adding 483 years to this date brings us to A.D. 27, the year many scholars believe Jesus began His public ministry! The second view holds that the reference is to a later decree of Artaxerxes, issued on March 5, 444 B.C.{5} Adding 483 years to this date takes us to A.D. 38. But according to this view, the years in question should be calculated according to a lunar calendar, consisting of twelve thirty-day months.{6} If each of the 483 years consists of only 360 days, then we arrive at March 30, 33 A.D. Dr. Allen Ross says "that is the Monday of the Passion week, the day of the Triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem." {7} The views thus differ on the date of Jesus' death, but each can comfortably fit the evidence.{8}

Finally, verse 26 says that after the period of sixty-nine "sevens" the Messiah will be "cut off" and have nothing. According to one scholar, "The word translated 'cut off' is used of executing . . . a criminal." {9} All of this fits quite well with the crucifixion of Jesus. Indeed, the accuracy of this prophecy, written over five hundred years before Jesus' birth, bears eloquent testimony to the divine inspiration and truth of the Bible.

The Nature of His Ministry

In Deuteronomy 18:15 Moses told the Israelites, “The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him.” This verse promised a succession of prophets who would speak God’s words to the people. Ultimately, however, it refers to Jesus Christ. One commentator notes that the Messianic interpretation of this passage is mentioned not only in the New Testament, but also among the Essenes, Jews, Gnostics, and others.[{10}](#) Peter explicitly applied this passage to Jesus in one of his sermons (Acts 3:22-23).

But not only was the Messiah to be a great prophet, it was also foretold that he would be a priest and king as well. The prophet Zechariah was told to make a royal crown and symbolically set it on the head of Joshua, the high priest. The Lord then said, “Here is the man whose name is the Branch . . . he will . . . sit and rule on his throne. And . . . be a priest on his throne. And there will be harmony between the two” (Zechariah 6:12-13). ‘The title “Branch” is a messianic title.’[{11}](#) So the scene symbolizes the future Messiah, here referred to as “the Branch,” uniting the offices of king and priest in one person.

But why is it important that the Messiah be a priest? As a prophet he speaks God’s word to the people. As a king he rules from his throne. But why must he also be a priest? “Because priests dealt with sin,” says Michael Brown, a Christian scholar who is ethnically Jewish. “Priests bore the iniquities of the people on their shoulders.”[{12}](#) And this, of course, is precisely what Jesus did for us: “He . . . bore our sins in his body on the tree” (1 Pet. 2:24).

Dr. Brown points to a tradition in the Talmud that says that on the Day of Atonement there were three signs that the animal sacrifices offered by the high priest had been accepted by God. According to this tradition, in the forty years prior to

the temple's destruction in A.D. 70, all three signs turned up negative every single time.^{13} Dr. Brown comments, "Jesus probably was crucified in A.D. 30, and the temple was destroyed in A.D. 70."^{14} So during this forty-year period God signaled that he no longer accepted these sacrifices. Why? Because final atonement had been made by Jesus!^{15}

The Significance of His Death

Without any doubt, one of the most astonishing prophecies about the promised Messiah is found in Isaiah 52-53. The verses were written about seven hundred years before the birth of Jesus. They largely concern the death of the Lord's "Suffering Servant." According to many scholars, a careful comparison of this passage with the Gospels' portrayal of Jesus' suffering and death reveals too many similarities to be merely coincidental.

In some of the most-cited verses from this intriguing passage we read: "He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isa. 53:5-6). Here we have a vivid depiction of substitutionary atonement. The Lord lays upon His servant "the iniquity of us all" and punishes him "for our transgressions." In other words, God's servant dies as a substitute in our place. This is precisely what Jesus claimed for himself, saying, "the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45).

The parallels between Isaiah's "Suffering Servant" and Jesus are certainly impressive. But some scholars have suggested that Isaiah's "servant" is actually the nation of Israel and not the Messiah. Dr. Michael Brown dismisses this notion

however, insisting that 'nowhere in the . . . foundational, authoritative Jewish writings do we find the interpretation that this passage refers to the nation of Israel. References to the servant as a people actually end with Isaiah 48:20.'" {16} What's more, he says, "Many . . . Jewish interpreters . . . had no problem seeing this passage as referring to the Messiah . . . By the sixteenth century, Rabbi Moshe Alshech said, 'Our rabbis with one voice accept and affirm . . . that the prophet is speaking of the Messiah, and we shall . . . also adhere to the same view.'" {17}

For his part, Dr. Brown is so convinced that this passage prophetically depicts the suffering and death of Jesus that he feels "as if God would have to apologize to the human race and to the Jewish people for putting this passage into the scriptures" if Jesus is not the one in view! {18} Although this is a strong statement, it's not unjustified. For Isaiah 53 not only foretells the death of God's servant for the sins of the people, it also implies his resurrection!

The Mystery of His Resurrection

In the opinion of many scholars, Isaiah 53 not only foretells the death of God's servant; it also implies his resurrection from the dead!

It's important to notice that Isaiah 53 makes it absolutely clear that the Messiah is put to death. It says that "he was cut off from the land of the living" (v. 8), and that 'he poured out his life unto death" (v. 12). On the other hand, however, it also says that 'he will see his offspring and prolong his days" (v. 10), and that after his suffering "he will see the light of life and be satisfied" (v. 11). So the text teaches both that the Messiah will die and that he will live again. And although the passage doesn't explicitly teach the Messiah's resurrection, it's certainly consistent with it. This is really staggering in light of the compelling

historical evidence for the death and resurrection of Jesus!{19}

Let's now pause to consider what we've learned in this brief article. Micah 5:2 teaches that the Messiah would come out of Bethlehem, the birthplace of Jesus. Also, by teaching the preexistence, or even eternality, of the Messiah, the prophecy suggests that he'll be a supernatural, possibly even divine, figure. In Daniel 9:24-27 we saw that the Messiah would appear to Israel sometime around A.D. 27 – 33, precisely the time of Jesus' public ministry! Deuteronomy and Zechariah teach that the Messiah would minister as prophet, priest, and king. As a prophet, Jesus spoke God's word to the people. As a priest, he offered himself as a perfect sacrifice for our sins. And while he didn't reign as king during his first advent, he was called "the king of the Jews" (Matt. 27:11, 37). And Christians believe that he's in some sense reigning now from heaven and that he'll one day reign on earth as well (Luke 1:32-33). Finally, Isaiah 53 teaches that the Messiah would die for our sins—and then somehow live again. This is consistent with the New Testament's record of Jesus' substitutionary death and bodily resurrection.

Of course, we've not been able to consider all the prophecies. But hopefully enough has been said to conclude with Dr. Brown that if Jesus isn't the Messiah, "there will never be a Messiah. It's too late for anyone else. It's him or no one."{20} Well, you've now heard the evidence; the verdict is up to you.

Notes

1. Thomas E. McComiskey, "Micah," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 7 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1985), 427.
2. Allen Ross, "Messianic Prophecies," at www.bible.org/page.php?page_id=2764. Accessed on September 6, 2007.

3. See, for example, Matthew 11:27; John 8:58 and 10:30.
4. Gleason L. Archer, Jr., "Daniel," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 7 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1985), 114. See also Ezra 7:11-26.
5. J. Dwight Pentecost, "Daniel," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, eds. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Colorado Springs, CO: Victor Books, 1985), 1362. See also Nehemiah 2:1-8.
6. See, for example, the discussion in Ross, "Messianic Prophecies," at www.bible.org/page.php?page_id=2764. Accessed on September 6, 2007.
7. Ibid.
8. The first holds that He was crucified in A.D. 30, the second in A.D. 33.
9. Pentecost, "Daniel," 1364.
10. Earl S. Kalland, "Deuteronomy," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 122.
11. F. Duane Lindsey, "Zechariah," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, eds. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Colorado Springs, CO: Victor Books, 1985), 1558. See also Zechariah 3:8.
12. Michael Brown, interviewed in Lee Strobel, *The Case for the Real Jesus* (Advance Reader Copy) (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2007), 199.
13. See Babylonian Talmud, Yoma 39a.
14. Brown, interviewed in Strobel, *The Case for the Real Jesus*, 201.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., 213.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid., 212.
19. For a defense of this important claim, please see some of the excellent articles by William Lane Craig at www.reasonablefaith.org. For more scriptural support, please compare Peter's sermon in Acts 2:22-36 with Psalm 16:8-11.
20. Brown, interviewed in Strobel, *The Case for the Real*

Why the Stories of the Virgin Birth Fit Together

Tom Davis answers the charge that the two nativity accounts in the gospels contradict each other, showing how well they complement each other by contributing details from two different perspectives.

It is December again, the time of year that western culture celebrates Christmas. Historically Christians claimed that Jesus was born on December 25 as early as the late second century.^{1} The primary biblical and historical sources for Jesus' birth are found in Matthew chapters 1 and 2, and Luke chapters 1 and 2. These chapters tell us the history of God becoming one of us through the virgin conception and birth of Jesus. The birth of Jesus is important because it is the beginning of God fulfilling his promise to send a savior to Israel. Many opponents of Christianity reject these stories as myths or fanciful stories. Their view is that these stories are made up to fulfill prophecy. They claim that these accounts are two completely different stories that are incompatible with each other.

Some Alleged Problems

One skeptic in particular, New Testament scholar Bart Ehrman, claims that "The problem is that some of the differences between Matthew and Luke are very difficult to reconcile with one another."^{2} When reading objections like this it sounds

as if the early Christians were not aware that the four Gospels were not identical in the way that they told the story of the life of Jesus.

However, the early Christians were aware that each Gospel tells us about the life of Jesus from a particular point of view. When these stories are examined, they complement each other and give a more complete account of the birth of Jesus. The end process of examining these issues and giving a complete account is called a harmony. The first harmony, the Diatessaron, was written by a Christian named Titian around A.D. 170. {3}

Ehrman raises an issue that he thinks is irreconcilable: "Where was Joseph and Mary's home town?" {4} Ehrman points out that Luke says Joseph and Mary live in Nazareth and have to travel to Bethlehem because of a census, while Matthew does not mention them living in Nazareth before the birth of Jesus. But is this really a contradiction? No! Luke tells us about the things that happened in Nazareth while Matthew chooses not to address those things.

Ehrman points out that there are wise men in Matthew, but there are shepherds in Luke. {5} But Luke tells us that the shepherds visited Jesus on the night of his birth, while Matthew says that the wise men came some time, probably more than a year, after Jesus was presented at the Temple.

Ehrman also points out that Matthew tells us Herod wants to kill Jesus, while Luke tells us Caesar wants a census taken. {6} But these are not contradictory claims. There is no reason to say that if one happened the other could not.

We have seen in a brief overview how the claim that the stories of Jesus' birth in Matthew and Luke are not compatible with one another can be resolved. But how do the stories fit together? I will summarize the narratives in Matthew and Luke, then combine the narratives to show that when they are

combined they fit together to make one fuller narrative.

Matthew's Narrative (Matthew 1:18-2:23)

As I summarize the birth narrative in Matthew, who is visited by angels? Who is making the decisions? From whose perspective is the story being told? These questions help tell us who is the possible source of the story.

Matthew begins his narrative with Joseph. Joseph and Mary were engaged to be married. In ancient Israel, engagements lasted a year. Mary is pregnant before they are married. Joseph does not want to marry Mary, but also does not want to disgrace her family. He decides to make the divorce private.

While Joseph was thinking these things over, an angel from God tells him that Mary's pregnancy is an act of God. Joseph will have a son, and the son's name will be Jesus. Jesus will save his people from their sins.

When Joseph wakes up he changes his mind and marries Mary. Joseph and Mary do not have sexual relations and she is a virgin when her son is born. They named their son Jesus as the angel instructed Joseph. Matthew tells us that Jesus was born in Bethlehem.

Later, some Magi, probably from Persia, show up looking for the one who was born King of the Jews. These Magi claim to have seen this king's star, so they came to worship him.

King Herod does not like the news that the Magi bring. He is the king and there is no room for another king. So Herod goes to the chief priests and the scribes to find out where the Christ is supposed to be born. They search the scripture and tell Herod that the Christ will be born in Bethlehem. Herod tells the Magi that the new king was born in Bethlehem. Herod asks the Magi to stop by on their way back to Persia and tell him where the new king will be found so he can go and worship him too. However, Herod wants to kill this new king, because

he is the king and there will not be another king.

As the Magi are approaching Bethlehem they see the star again. The star leads them to the house where Mary, Joseph, and Jesus are staying. The Magi worship Jesus and give him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. The Magi are warned in a dream not to go back to see Herod, so they go back to Persia without stopping in Jerusalem.

An Angel appears to Joseph in a dream and tells him that Herod wants to kill Jesus, and that he needs to go to Egypt to escape Herod. Joseph wakes up and takes Mary and Jesus to Egypt.

Herod realizes that the Magi went back to Persia without telling him where the new king was born. Herod is furious! He sends soldiers into Bethlehem with orders to kill every boy under the age of two.

Joseph, Mary, and Jesus live in Egypt until Herod dies. Then, an angel appears to Joseph in a dream and tells him to return to Israel. Joseph wants to return to Judea, but he is afraid the new ruler, Archelaus, will kill Jesus so he moves to Nazareth.

Notice that in Matthew the narrative focuses on Joseph's role in the events surrounding Jesus' birth. Matthew 1 gives Jesus' genealogy through Joseph's lineage. The narrative begins with Joseph having to decide whether he should divorce Mary, or continue with their engagement and marriage. Joseph is visited by an angel in his dreams three times. This focus on Joseph suggests that this narrative is told from Joseph's point of view. Next I will summarize Luke's narrative.

Luke's Narrative (Luke 1:5-2:52)

As we did with Matthew, ask, who is the main character in the story? Who does the story focus on?

Zechariah, a priest faithful to God, had no children because his wife, Elizabeth, could not have children. Zechariah was selected to enter the sanctuary of the Temple to burn incense when the angel Gabriel appeared to him. Gabriel tells Zechariah that Elizabeth will become pregnant and they will have a son who is to be named John. Zachariah is skeptical, so Gabriel makes him unable to speak. As Gabriel said, Elizabeth becomes pregnant.

Six months later Gabriel is sent to Nazareth to visit a virgin, Mary. Mary is engaged to Joseph. Gabriel tells Mary that she has found favor with God and she will conceive and have a boy who is to be named Jesus. Mary does not understand how this can be. Gabriel explains that it is the work of the Holy Spirit.

Mary goes to visit Elizabeth, who happens to be Mary's cousin. When Mary arrives John, who is not yet born, recognizes that Mary's child, Jesus, is the coming Messiah. Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit and recognizes that Mary's child will be blessed.

Elizabeth gives birth to John. After John was circumcised her neighbors and relatives wanted to name the child after Zechariah. Elizabeth tells them the child is to be named John. This causes an argument among the people because he has no ancestor named John. Zechariah regains his speech and ends the discussion by proclaiming that his son's name is John. This amazes the people and news of this spread throughout Judea.

Mary is back in Nazareth when Caesar calls for a census. Joseph, her husband, is from the lineage of David, who is from Bethlehem. This means that Joseph and Mary have to travel to Bethlehem for the census. While they are there, Mary gives birth to Jesus. Mary wraps Jesus in blankets and lays him in a manger because there is no room in the guest room.

There were shepherds in the area who were watching over their

flocks of sheep. Suddenly an angel from God appeared to them. This frightened the shepherds. The Angel told them not to be afraid. He brought them good news, the Messiah was born in Bethlehem. Then a group of angels appeared proclaiming, "Glory to God in the highest heaven and peace on earth to people he favored."

When the angels leave, the shepherds decide to go to Bethlehem to see the child. When they arrive, they find Mary, Joseph, and the baby in a manger just like the angels told them they would. The shepherds tell Joseph and Mary about the visit of the angels and what they said about the child. The shepherds leave praising God. Mary continues to think about these things.

After eight days Joseph and Mary take Jesus to the Temple to be circumcised. While at the Temple Joseph and Mary are approached by Simeon, who has been told by the Holy Spirit that he would see the Messiah before he died. Simeon shares this with Mary and Joseph, telling them that Jesus would be a light to the Gentiles and would bring glory to Israel. Then Anna, a prophetess, comes to see Jesus in the Temple. Anna thanks God and tells the people about Jesus.

After all the requirements of the law were fulfilled, Mary and Joseph return to Nazareth.

Notice that in Luke, the angels appear to Mary. Luke includes Mary's journey to visit Elizabeth, and that John and Jesus are relatives on Mary's side of the family. The genealogy in Luke 3 goes through Heli, who is Mary's father. Luke's account of the birth of Jesus seems to come from Mary's perspective.

Combining the Stories

Finally I will place the two stories together to make one story. Do the transitions from Luke to Matthew, or from Matthew to Luke, flow smoothly? Are there any contradictions

or irreconcilable differences?

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When we combine both narratives we can see that we have two narratives that are told from two different perspectives.

These differing perspectives lead to an emphasis on different details. When the accounts are harmonized we can see that these details are not contradictory, they are complementary. The narratives fit nicely together, like the pieces of a puzzle, to make a more complete larger picture of the events surrounding the birth of Jesus.

Conclusion

God became one of us. God did what he promised he would do in the Old Testament. The conception and birth of Jesus is the beginning of the defeat of death and sin. Jesus' birth is directly tied to His death and resurrection. The power of sin, death, and Satan is broken. This is the reason that Christians celebrate this event every year. As the angels said, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace on earth to people he favors." (Luke 2:14 SCB)

Notes

1. "The traditional date for the birth of Christ from as early as Hippolytus (ca. A.D. 165-235) has been December 25th." Hoehner, Harold W. *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977), 25.
2. Ehrman, Bart. *Jesus: The Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium*. (New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 1999), 36.
3. Thomas, Robert, L. *A Harmony of the Gospels with Explanations and Essays*. (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, 1978), 269.
4. Ehrman, 37.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.