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. Gaebelein, 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. Gaebelein, 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. Gaebelein, 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*

Jesus, 203.

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Authority of the Bible – A Strong Argument for Christianity

Dr. Pat Zukeran examines some of the compelling evidence for the reliability and the authority of the Bible. The uniqueness and astounding accuracy of this ancient text is an important apologetic for Christianity.

 *This article is also available in Spanish.*

There are many books today that claim to be the Word of God. The Koran, the *Bhagavad Gita*, The Book of Mormon, and other religious works all claim to be divinely inspired. The Bible claims to be the only book that is divinely inspired and that all other claims of inspiration from other works should be ruled out. Does the Bible confirm its exclusive claim to be the Word of God? The totality of evidences presents a strong case for the divine inspiration of the Bible.



The strongest argument for the divine inspiration of the Bible is the testimony of Jesus. Jesus claimed to be the divine Son of God and confirmed His claims through His sinless, miraculous life and resurrection. The events of His life have been recorded in the four Gospels, which have proven to be historically accurate and written by first century eyewitnesses.{1} Since Jesus is God incarnate, whatever He

taught is true, and anything opposed to His teaching is false.

Jesus directly affirmed the authority of the Old Testament and indirectly affirmed the New Testament. In Luke 11:51, Jesus identified the prophets and the canon of the Old Testament. He names Abel as the first prophet from Genesis, and Zechariah the last prophet mentioned in 2 Chronicles, the last book in the Jewish Old Testament (which contains the same books we have today although placed in a different order). In Mark 7:8-9, Jesus refers to the Old Testament as the commands of God. In Matthew 5:17, Jesus states that the Law and the Prophets referring to the Old Testament is authoritative and imperishable. Throughout His ministry, Jesus made clear His teachings, corrections, and actions were consistent with the Old Testament. He also judged others teachings and traditions by the Old Testament. He thus demonstrated His affirmation of the Old Testament to be the Word of God.

Jesus even specifically affirmed as historical several disputed stories of the Old Testament. He affirms as true the accounts of Adam and Eve (Matthew 19:4-5), Noah and the flood (Matthew 24:39), Jonah and the whale (Matthew 12:40), Sodom and Gomorrah (Matthew 10:15), and more.

Jesus confirmed the Old Testament and promised that the Holy Spirit would inspire the apostles in the continuation of His teaching and in the writing of what would become the New Testament (John 14:25-26 and John 16:12-13). The apostles demonstrated that they came with the authority of God through the miracles they performed as Jesus and the Prophets did before them. The book of Acts, which records the miracles of the apostles, has also proven to be a historically accurate record written by a first century eyewitness.

Prophecy

Many religious books claim to be divinely inspired, but only the Bible has evidence of supernatural confirmation. We have

seen that Jesus, being God incarnate, affirms the inspiration of the Bible. Another evidence of supernatural confirmation is the testimony of prophecy. The biblical authors made hundreds of specific prophecies of future events that have come to pass in the manner they were predicted. No book in history can compare to the Bible when it comes to the fulfillment of prophecy.

Here are some examples. Ezekiel 26, which was written in 587 B.C., predicted the destruction of Tyre, a city made up of two parts: a mainland port city, and an island city half a mile off shore. Ezekiel prophesied that Nebuchadnezzar would destroy the city, many nations would fight against her, the debris of the city would be thrown into the ocean, the city would never be found again, and fishermen would come there to lay their nets.

In 573 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the mainland city of Tyre. Many of the refugees of the city sailed to the island, and the island city of Tyre remained a powerful city. In 333 B.C., however, Alexander the Great laid siege to Tyre. Using the rubble of mainland Tyre, he built a causeway to the island city of Tyre. He then captured and completely destroyed the city.

Today, Tyre is a small fishing town where fishing boats come to rest and fisherman spread their nets. The great ancient city of Tyre to this day lies buried in ruins exactly as prophesied. If we were to calculate the odds of this event happening by chance, the figures would be astronomical. No, it was not by coincidence.{2}

Here's another example. There are nearly one hundred prophecies made about Jesus in the Old Testament, prophecies such as His place of birth, how he would die, His rejection by the nation of Israel, and so on. All these prophecies were made hundreds of years before Jesus ever came to earth. Because of the accuracy of the prophecies, many skeptics have

believed that they must have been written after A.D. 70—after the birth and death of Jesus and the destruction of Jerusalem. They have thereby tried to deny that they are even prophecies.

However, in 1947 the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered. These scrolls contained the book of Isaiah and other prophetic books. When dated, they were found to be written from 120 to 100 B.C.,{3} well before Jesus was born. It would have been an incredible accomplishment for Jesus to have fulfilled the numerous prophecies. Some say these prophecies were fulfilled by chance, but the odds against this would be exceptionally large. It would take more a greater leap of faith to believe in that chance happening than in the fact that Jesus is God and these prophecies are divinely inspired.

The record of prophecy is thus evidence for the unique and supernatural origin of the Bible.

Unity

The Bible is the only book with supernatural confirmation to support its claim of divine inspiration. The testimony of Christ and the legacy of prophecy are two proofs for inspiration. A third line of evidence is the unity of the Bible.

The Bible covers hundreds of topics, yet it does not contradict itself. It remains united in its theme. Well, what's so amazing about that? you may ask. Consider these facts. First, the Bible was written over a span of fifteen hundred years. Second, it was written by more than forty men from every walk of life. For example, Moses was educated in Egypt, Peter was a fisherman, Solomon was a king, Luke was a doctor, Amos was a shepherd, and Matthew was a tax collector. All the writers were of vastly different occupations and backgrounds.

Third, it was written in many different places. The Bible was

written on three different continents: Asia, Africa, and Europe. Moses wrote in the desert of Sinai, Paul wrote in a prison in Rome, Daniel wrote in exile in Babylon, and Ezra wrote in the ruined city of Jerusalem.

Fourth, it was written under many different circumstances. David wrote during a time of war, Jeremiah wrote at the sorrowful time of Israel's downfall, Peter wrote while Israel was under Roman domination, and Joshua wrote while invading the land of Canaan.

Fifth, the writers had different purposes for writing. Isaiah wrote to warn Israel of God's coming judgment on their sin; Matthew wrote to prove to the Jews that Jesus is the Messiah; Zechariah wrote to encourage a disheartened Israel who had returned from Babylonian exile; and Paul wrote addressing problems in different Asian and European churches.

If we put all these factors together—the Bible was written over fifteen hundred years by forty different authors at different places, under various circumstances, and addressing a multitude of issues—how amazing that with such diversity, the Bible proclaims a unified message! That unity is organized around one theme: God's redemption of man and all of creation. The writers address numerous controversial subjects yet contradictions never appear. The Bible is an incredible document.

Let me offer you a good illustration. Suppose ten medical students graduating in the same year from medical school wrote position papers on four controversial subjects. Would they all agree on each point? No, we would have disagreements from one author to another. Now look at the authorship of the Bible. All these authors, from a span of fifteen hundred years, wrote on many controversial subjects, yet they do not contradict one another.

It seems one author guided these writers through the whole

process: the Holy Spirit. 2 Peter 1:21 states, “No prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.” The unity of the Bible is just one more amazing proof of the divine inspiration and authority of the Bible.

Archaeology

We’ve studied the testimony of Jesus, prophecy, and the unity of the Bible as providing supernatural confirmation of the divine inspiration of the Bible. Another line of evidence is archaeology. Archaeology does not directly prove the Bibles inspiration, but it does prove its historical reliability.

Middle Eastern archaeological investigations have proven the Bible to be true and unerringly accurate in its historical descriptions. Nelson Glueck, a renowned Jewish archaeologist, states, No archaeological discovery has ever controverted a biblical reference.{4} Dr. William Albright, who was probably the foremost authority in Middle East archaeology in his time, said this about the Bible: There can be no doubt that archaeology has confirmed the substantial historicity of the Old Testament.{5} At this time, the number of archaeological discoveries that relate to the Bible number in the hundreds of thousands.{6}

Archaeology has verified numerous ancient sites, civilizations, and biblical characters whose existence was questioned by the academic world and often dismissed as myths. Biblical archaeology has silenced many critics as new discoveries supported the facts of the Bible.

Here are a few examples of the historical accuracy of the Bible. The Bible records that the Hittites were a powerful force in the Middle East from 1750 B.C. until 1200 B.C. (Genesis 15:20, 2 Samuel 11, and 1 Kings 10:29). Prior to the late nineteenth century, nothing was known of the Hittites outside the Bible, and many critics alleged that they were an

invention of the biblical authors.

However, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, archaeologists in Turkey discovered a city which proved to be the capital of the Hittite empire. In the city they discovered a massive library of thousands of tablets. These tablets showed that the Hittite language was an early relative of the Indo-European languages.

Another example is the story of Jericho recorded in the book of Joshua. For years, skeptics thought the story of the falling walls of Jericho was a myth. However, recent archaeological discoveries have led several prominent scholars to conclude that the biblical description of the fall of Jericho is consistent with the discoveries they have made. One of the leading archaeologists on Jericho presently is Dr. Bryant Wood. His research has shown that the archaeological evidence matches perfectly with the biblical record.{7}

Archaeology has also demonstrated the accuracy of the New Testament. One of the most well attested to New Testament authors is Luke. Scholars have found him to be a very accurate historian, even in many of his details. In the Gospel of Luke and Acts, Luke names thirty-two countries, fifty-four cities, and nine islands without error.{8} A. N. Sherwin-White states, For Acts the confirmation of historicity is overwhelming. . . . Any attempt to reject its basic historicity must now appear absurd. Roman historians have long taken it for granted.{9}

There is no other ancient book that has so much archaeological evidence to support its accounts. Since God is a God of truth, we should expect His revelation to present what is historically true. Archaeology presents tangible proof of the historical accuracy of the Bible.

The Bible Alone Is God's Word

We have given several proofs for the divine inspiration of the

Bible. These include the testimony of Jesus the divine Son of God, prophecy, unity, and archaeology. Accepting the divine inspiration of the Bible leads to the conclusion that all other works cannot be divinely inspired. This does not mean other works do not contain truth. All people are created in the image of God and can articulate principles that are true. However, only the Bible proves to be divinely inspired by God and therefore, other claims of divine inspiration should be ruled out for several reasons.

The Bible is the only book that gives supernatural confirmation to support its claim of divine inspiration. Other scriptures which contradict it cannot, therefore, be true.

The law of non-contradiction states that two contradictory statements cannot be true at the same time. If one proposition is known to be true, its opposite must be false. If it is true that I am presently alive, it cannot also be true to say that I am presently not alive. This is a universal law which is practiced daily in every part of the world. Even if you claim, the law of non-contradiction is false, you are asserting this statement is true and its opposite is false. In other words you end up appealing to the law you are trying to deny thus making a self-defeating argument.

Since we have good reason to believe the Bible is the inspired word of God, any teaching that contradicts the Bible must be false. The Bible makes exclusive claims regarding God, truth and salvation that would exclude other scriptures. The Bible teaches that any deity other than the God of the Bible is a false deity (Exodus 20). Jesus declared that he is the divine Son of God, the source of truth, and the only way to eternal life (John 1 & 14:6).

A look at a few works from other religions illustrates this point. The Hindu scriptures include the Vedas and the Upanishads. These books present views of God that are contrary to the Bible. The Vedas are polytheistic, and the Upanishads

present a pantheistic worldview of an impersonal divine essence called Brahma, not a personal God.

The Koran, the holy book of Islam, denies the deity of Christ, the triune nature of God, and the atoning work of Christ on the cross (Sura 4:116, 168). These are foundational truths taught in the Bible. The Pali Canon, the holy scriptures of Southern Buddhism, teach a naturalistic worldview (or pantheistic, as some schools interpret it). It also teaches salvation by works and the doctrine of reincarnation. The worldview of the Pali Canon and its view of salvation contradict biblical teachings. Since these works contradict biblical teaching, we reject their claim to divine inspiration.

The Bible alone proves to be divinely inspired and its exclusive claims rule out the claims of other books.

Notes

1. For more information refer to the articles "The Historical Reliability of the Gospels" (probe.org/historical-reliability-of-the-gospels/) and "The Uniqueness of Jesus" (www.probe.org/uniqueness-of-jesus).
2. Ralph H. Alexander, "Ezekiel," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary,* ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 869.
3. Norman Geisler and William Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible,* (Chicago, IL.: Moody Press, 1986), 364-367.
4. Nelson Glueck, *Rivers in the Desert: A History of the Negev* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Cudahy, 1959), 31.
5. William F. Albright, *Archaeology and the Religion of Israel* (Baltimore: John Hopkins, 1953), 176.
6. Randall Price, *The Stones Cry Out* (Eugene, OR.: Harvest House Publishers, 1997), 25.
7. Ibid., 152-53.
8. Norman Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), s.v., Archaeology, New Testament.

9. Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (San Bernardino: Here's Life Publishers,1999), 66.

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Are You Listening? Do You Hear What I Hear?

Have you ever missed a great opportunity because you weren't listening carefully? Twenty centuries ago some clues to impending good news of monumental import eluded most folks. Fascinating prophecies of Jesus' birth and life bring revealing insights into your own life today.

Have you ever missed a great opportunity because you weren't listening carefully?

If Mark{1} hadn't been willing to listen, he might have missed some great news. He enjoyed an adequate income, fulfilling work, a comfortable home, and many close friends. Then his employer offered a promotion requiring a move to another state. At first resistant, he eventually decided to listen to the offer and make the move.



Mark's job responsibilities expanded, his growing reputation opened doors for wider influence, and he met and married Gail. Reflecting twenty-five years later, he was glad he had carefully listened to news of the offer.

At a business convention Joan heard a brief announcement of an advanced degree program. Distracted by current concerns, she dismissed it. When the announcement was repeated the next day,

Joan caught something she had missed. The degree would be from one of the most prestigious universities in the world. Her company was encouraging managers to participate, promising them time to study, and offering to help pay for it. Joan investigated, enrolled, and her career was greatly enhanced. "To think that I almost missed the good news about this program because I was distracted," Joan reflected. "What a tragedy that would have been."

Perhaps you, too, have encountered news that first seemed insignificant but later became momentous. Great news isn't always trumpeted by headlines or television broadcasts. Sometimes the best news could slip right by if you're not attuned to its importance.

Twenty centuries ago some clues to impending good news of monumental import eluded most folks. A baby born in relative obscurity in the Middle East was hailed by a few as a future king who would rescue people from their troubles. "Good news of great joy for everyone!" said one announcement of Jesus' birth.{2}

Relatively few contemporaries acknowledged His importance. His followers later showed numerous clues to His identity, prophecies written many years before His birth. You may not share the faith of those early believers, but perhaps you'll find it interesting to eavesdrop on some of the clues, the prophecies. Consider just a few.{3}

Prophecies Fulfilled in Jesus' Birth

The Hebrew writer Micah told around 700 B.C. of deliverance through a coming Messiah or "Anointed One." He indicated this deliverer would be from Bethlehem. He wrote, "But you . . . Bethlehem . . . are only a small village in Judah. Yet a ruler of Israel will come from you, one whose origins are from the distant past." {4}

Matthew, a first-century biographer, noted that ". . . Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea. . . ."{5}

Isaiah, writing around 700 B.C., foretold an unusual aspect of the Messiah's birth, that He would be *born of a virgin*. He wrote, "The Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel."{6}

The name "Immanuel" means "God is with us." The indication—to all who were listening—was that God Himself would be physically present with humans through this child. What a promise! What good news to people who often felt abandoned by God.

Matthew recorded this about Jesus' birth:

> Now this is how Jesus the Messiah was born. His mother, Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. But while she was still a virgin, she became pregnant by the Holy Spirit. . . . Joseph . . . brought Mary home to be his wife, but she remained a virgin until her son was born. And Joseph named him Jesus.{7}

Jewish prophets mentioned several clues about the Messiah's lineage. He was to be a *descendant of Abraham*. Moses, a famous Jewish leader writing fourteen hundred years before Jesus' birth, recorded a prophecy about the Jewish patriarch Abraham. He wrote, "Through your [Abraham's] descendants, all the nations of the earth will be blessed."{8}

The Messiah was also to be a *descendant of Isaac*. Moses recorded another promise. He said, "God told Abraham, ' . . . Isaac is the son through whom your descendants will be counted'."{9} In other words, something important was going to come through the descendants of Abraham and specifically through the line of Isaac, one of Abraham's two sons.

The Messiah was also to be a *descendant of Jacob*. Abraham's

son Isaac himself had two sons, Jacob and Esau. Some ancient Jewish scholars{10} believed that another prophecy that Moses recorded prefigured the Messiah. Moses wrote, “A star will rise from Jacob; a scepter will emerge from Israel.”{11}

Luke, a first-century physician, traced Jesus’ lineage through these three Jewish leaders. He wrote of “Jesus . . . the son of Jacob, the son of Isaac, the son of Abraham. . . .”{12}

Jesus was born in Bethlehem, of a virgin, and from the line of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The pieces of the prophetic puzzle were starting to become clearer. The details of His life would fulfill the prophecies further.

Prophecies Fulfilled in Jesus’ Life and Death

Though Jesus was born in humble circumstances, learned leaders traveled great distances to hail the child as a king. In His youth, scholars marveled at His wisdom. In His thirties He began to publicly offer peace, freedom, purpose and hope to the masses. His message caught on.

His enemies plotted His demise and paid one of his followers to betray Him. His closest friends deserted Him. He was tried, convicted, sentenced and executed. In agony during His execution He cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”{13}

Many hurting people feel forsaken by God. But Jesus’ cry of desperation carried added significance because of its historical allusion. The words had appeared about a thousand years earlier in a song written by Israel’s King David.{14} It said, “All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads.”{15} “They have pierced my hands and my feet.”{16} “They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing.”{17} Historians record precisely this behavior during Jesus’ execution.{18} It was as if a divine

drama were unfolding as Jesus slipped into death.

Researchers have uncovered more than 300 prophecies that were literally fulfilled in Jesus' life and death. He would be preceded by a messenger who would prepare the way for His work.{19} He would enter the capital city as a king, but riding on a donkey's back.{20} He would be betrayed for thirty pieces of silver,{21} pierced,{22} executed with thieves{23} and yet, though wounded,{24} would suffer no broken bones.{25}

In His dying cry from the cross, He reminded His hearers that His life and death were in precise fulfillment of a previously stated plan. According to a biblical perspective, at the moment of death He experienced the equivalent of eternal separation from God in our place. He suffered the divine penalty due all the shortcomings, injustice, evil, and sin of the world, including yours and mine. Then—again in fulfillment of prophecy{26} and contrary to natural law—He returned to life. As somewhat of a skeptic I investigated the evidence for Christ's resurrection and found it to be one of the best-attested facts in history.{27} To the seeker He offers true inner peace,{28} forgiveness,{29} purpose,{30} and strength for fulfilling living.{31}

Jesus' birth, life, and death fulfilled many prophecies. Many of these fulfillments involved details that were beyond His human control. But could this be coincidence? Could the prophecies have been fulfilled by chance?

Prophecies Fulfilled by Chance?

My good friend and mentor, Bob Prall, likes to make a distinction between prediction and prophecy{32} and uses a sports analogy to illustrate that distinction. I got to know Bob when I was a student at Duke University and he was the Campus Crusade for Christ director. Now, sports fans will know that Duke's men's basketball team often has contended for the national title. Alas, the Duke football team has suffered many

losing seasons.

Bob notes that prediction can involve careful analysis of current events to make an educated guess about the future. Stock market analysts, political pollsters, social scientists, and CBS *Survivor* fans all seek to predict outcomes. But prophecy often involves events and situations hundreds of years apart or without apparent human connection. Bob explains that if someone were to study the Duke men's basketball team and announce they would win the national championship, and then it happened, that would be successful prediction. But if someone evaluated the Duke *football* team and announced they would win the national championship, that would be prophecy!

Could the 300 prophecies Jesus fulfilled have been fulfilled merely by chance? Peter Stoner, a California mathematician, once calculated the probability of just eight of these 300 prophecies coming true in one person due to chance alone. Using estimates that both he and classes of college students considered reasonable and conservative, Stoner concluded there was one chance in 10^{17} that those eight were fulfilled by fluke.

He says 10^{17} silver dollars would cover the state of Texas two feet deep. Mark one coin with red fingernail polish. Stir the whole batch thoroughly. What chance would a blindfolded person have of picking the marked coin on the first try? One in 10^{17}, the same chance that just eight of the 300 prophecies "just happened" to come true in this man, Jesus.{33}

With all these signs, why wasn't more attention paid to Jesus' birth? No reporters with microphones and cameras waited outside the stable to interview the new mom. (Maybe if she'd had quints?)

Some back then were looking for a conquering king promised by Hebrew prophets and did not anticipate a lowly birth. Others

were perhaps too entangled in their own self-importance or preoccupied with the details of life: working, families, relationships, emotions. Maybe they were a bit like us.

What does all this mean for us this Christmas?

Today's Good News

Jesus' "good news" offers a chance to hook into God's unchanging love, to be forgiven of all wrong and to live forever with Him. He can help you accept yourself, replace anxiety with peace and provide the best friends you've ever had.

If His news is so good, why do people still miss it today? Some are enmeshed in careers or relationships that offer little time for reflection. Chasing dollars blinds some. Family strife can make life a blur: teens experimenting with sex or drugs, a spouse wanting out. Western life itself can be exhausting: media overload, the rush to taxi kids or complete shopping, cellphones, beepers, PTA, soccer practice, e-mail, laundry, Web surfing . . . Help! Maybe you could use some time to reflect.

I suspect you've had hints of God's good news. Maybe you've admired the majesty of the universe and wondered Who was behind it. Perhaps a friend told you their story of faith. Maybe a magazine article got you thinking.

For eighteen years I heard the story of Jesus but did not understand it. The summer before entering university, I wrestled with concern over my own afterlife but gave up because it seemed too complicated. That fall I met some vibrant Christians whose love, joy, and enthusiasm attracted me.

They told me I could not earn eternal life. Rather I needed to receive Christ's free gift of forgiveness accomplished by His death for my sins and His resurrection. They told me all this

would be a “gift of God; not . . . a result of works, so that no one . . . [could] boast” about it.{34} That was good news to me. I accepted His gift of forgiveness and have found Him to be a wonderful friend.

Life hasn’t been perfect. I’ve had my share of domestic strife, job conflicts, and minor health struggles. God never promised perfection, painlessness, or complete prosperity in this life. But He does offer unusual peace, pardon from guilt, ultimate purpose, and the inner power to cope with any struggle. He promises to cause “all things to work together for good” to those who love Him.{35} He is a friend who will never leave.{36}

Might this Christmas season be a good time for you to ask God to forgive you and become your friend? It’s a decision that only you can make for yourself. You can simply talk to Him right now, ask Him to forgive you and become your friend forever. Then contact this station or visit the Web site Probe.org to learn more about a relationship with God.

Maybe there’s some good news for you in the story of Jesus. Do you hear what I hear? Are you listening?

*This article is adapted from Rusty Wright, “Are You Listening? Do You Hear What I Hear?” *Pursuit* VII: 3, 1998, pp.12-15. Copyright © 1998 Rusty Wright. Used By Permission.

Notes

1. Names and some details in certain stories in this article have been altered for privacy while preserving the points of the stories. Details of stories that name me personally have not been changed.

2. Luke 2:10 NLT.

3. Adapted from Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (San Bernardino, Calif: Campus Crusade for Christ, 1972)

147-157 ff.

4. Micah 5:2 NLT.

5. Matthew 2:1 NASB.

6. Isaiah 7:14 NIV.

7. Matthew 1:18, 24, 25 NLT.

8. Genesis 22:18 NLT.

9. Genesis 21:12 NLT.

10. McDowell, op. cit., 154.

11. Numbers 24:17 NLT.

12. Luke 3:23, 34 NASB.

13. Matthew 27:46 NIV.

14. Psalm 22.

15. Psalm 22:7 NIV.

16. Psalm 22:16 NIV.

17. Psalm 22:18 NIV.

18. Matthew 27:39-44, 35; John 20:25.

19. Malachi 3:1; Isaiah 40:3; Matthew 3:1,2.

20. Zechariah 9:9; John 12:15; Matthew 21:1-9.

21. Zechariah 11:12; Matthew 26:15, 27:3.

22. Zechariah 12:10; John 19:34, 37.

23. Isaiah 53:12; Matthew 27:38.

24. Isaiah 53:5; Zechariah 13:6; Matthew 27:26.

25. Psalm 34:20; John 19:33, 36.

26. Psalm 16:10; Acts 2:31-32.

27. See McDowell, op. cit., 185-273.

28. John 14:27.

29. Colossians 1:14.

30. Matthew 28: 18-20.

31. Galatians 5:22-23.

32. Bob Prall, *The Master Plot of the Bible* (Houston: Emmaus Books Trust, 1997) 56; Bob Prall, *As You Are Going… Make Disciples* (Houston: Emmaus Books Trust, 2001) 108-109.

33. Peter W. Stoner, *Science Speaks* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1969) 99-112.

34. Ephesians 2:8-9 NASB.

35. Romans 8:28 NASB.

36. Hebrews 13:5.

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2012: Doomsday All Over Again

Progress or Regress

It is the end of the world again. The world was predicted to end at least eight times in the past 30 years, from the Jupiter Effect in 1982 to what became a common punch line, “88

reasons why the rapture will happen in 1988." Then there was the granddaddy of all false apocalyptic prophecies: the millennium bug of 2000, when it was widely held that all computers would fail at the turn of the millennium. Let's not forget the two failed predictions of the end in 2011. Now the world faces yet another prediction of the end with the Mayan calendar prophecy of 2012. In an age of super–science, computers, space travel and accelerating progress, why are people fascinated with the end of the world?

We have all heard the phrase "What goes up must come down." This captures the popular attitude towards progress and regress. Americans believe strongly in human perfectibility and the inevitability of technological progress. This idea states that as technology moves society from its primitive state to an advanced condition it will eventually improve, bringing a better tomorrow. The world is getting better and better. Faith in progress provides the engine for all the accelerating technological changes from space exploration, media, computers, to science and medicine. Historian Robert Nisbet noted the essential role of progress in our belief system when he said that progress does not represent one aspect of modern life, but in fact provides the keystone idea and context for the entire modern worldview, including democracy, equality, social justice and, of course, science and technology.{1} The modern world does not exist without the belief in progress. Technological improvement makes no sense without the larger *telos,* or purpose of history, guiding it. Simply put, all of this innovation leads to a utopian future.

So we are left with the question, If America is so progressive why is it so obsessed with the end of the world or *apocalypticism*, a belief that is not progressive, but regressive? This view of history does not move toward a utopian society of universal peace, ease and convenience, but rather toward calamity. Progress and regress share the same view of history. Any belief in progress necessarily has a

regressive interpretation. They each look at the same circumstances and data and draw complementary conclusions. One sees the dawn of a great society, the other sees the end of the world. They represent complementary ideas in the same way life and death complement each other. What lives eventually dies, so what progresses will also necessarily regress.

All people intuitively know that they will die one day; so then society, the collective "person," knows it too must one day die. If progress takes place we know that its opposite, regress, will also happen. Regressive thought states that the progress we take for granted potentially has a downside and in fact will result in something catastrophic. Our society will one day come to an end. It cannot live forever any more than an individual can live forever in a mortal body. We know that what goes up must come down. The current obsession over the end of the world in movies, such as *2012*, *Melancholia* and *Contagion* or wildly popular novels such as the *Left Behind* series, the predictions of popular preachers or the Mayan prophecy all cater to our regressive and pessimistic side. This is not as bad as it first sounds. Death creates the foundation of all religion, philosophy and culture as attempts to provide answers for our questions and solace in times of doubt and need. The reality of death causes people to look for the meaning of life. Christians need to harness the regressive side of culture because it warns of imminent danger and offers the opportunity to introduce people to Jesus Christ. Regressive thinking, like the knowledge of our own death, makes us all aware of our need for God and the Savior. Believers must take advantage of this primal consciousness of the end to tell people about what the Bible says concerning the end of the world and the return of Christ. But in order to do this successfully we must first establish guidelines on how to identify false prophecy.

What the Bible Says

Today people are searching for the meaning of life in the wrong places, such as the prophecies of Nostradamus, astrology and, again, the Mayan prophecy of 2012. It is a sign of the end times when there are many false prophets talking about the end of the world (Matthew 24:11). The false prophet shows that people are aware that the end is near.

There are two rules in Scripture that will help believers identify false prophets, which should be followed without exception. First, prophecy *must never set a date regarding when the world will end*. Jesus spoke clearly about the signs of His return and the end of the world when He said, "But of the day and the hour no one knows" (Matthew 24:36). Anyone who comes to you with a firm date as to when the world will end such as December 21, 2012 should be avoided. Cultists continually violate this cardinal rule. For example, the Jehovah's Witnesses have predicted the end of the world eight times between 1914 and 1975. Popular radio preacher Harold Camping predicted the end in 1994 and twice in 2011. The speculation surrounding the year 2000 was much like it is today over 2012. Scientific evidence was proffered predicting that all computers would fail at the turn of the last millennium. This warning was taken very seriously by most people who made preparations for the potential disaster, demonstrating the pervasive sentiment of impending of doom.

However, many Bible-believing Christians also fall prey to the error of date–setting, even if this practice is often veiled in vague language and logic. For example, when prophecy experts identify leading political figures as the Antichrist, such as Hitler, Mussolini or Saddam Hussein, they engage in false prophecy. This approach will invariably get us into trouble because it starts the clock ticking. If Saddam Hussein were the Antichrist, then logically Christ should have returned before the end of his life, since the Antichrist is

the precursor to the coming of Christ (Rev. 6:2; 2 Thess. 2:3). However, we know that did not happen. In this way, identification of the Antichrist with any leading figure becomes false prophecy.

How much better it would have been to say Hussein was *like* the Antichrist or prefigured the Antichrist, rather than identify him as the Antichrist. This simple switch in focus spares us the humiliation of false prophecy, but retains all the power of moral denunciation that apocalyptic thinking offers.

This leads to the second rule of indentifying false prophecy: *all prophecy must have a moral imperative*. This means people should not engage in speculation and prognostication for the fun of it. A biblical approach to prophecy gives a warning about future judgment and a chance to repent: "Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; for the time is near" (Rev. 1:3; see also 2 Thess. 2:1, 5-10). Prophecy engages in denouncing moral outrage, which is why it couches things in the strongest possible language. To say that the world is coming to an end or that someone is the Antichrist gets a lot of attention, but requires a moral cause to justify its claims.

If the prophecy gives a date and it lacks the moral imperative, then the prophecy reveals itself to be false and sensationalistic. The Mayan 2012 prophecy fails on both counts. Although it causes us to contemplate the end, it sets a date and offers no reason for why the world should end. It is simply doomsday all over again!

Notes

1. Robert Nisbet*, History of the Idea of Progress* (New York: Basic Books, 1980), 9, 171.

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See Also:

- 2012: Is the Sky Really Falling?

“Couldn’t Jesus’ Disciples Have Just Fabricated Fulfilled Prophecy Claims?”

First of all I’d like to thank you for helping me so much. You have really cleared up a lot of questions I’ve had about my faith in Christ and have given me some great answers. I have another question for you that I have been struggling with. Couldn’t the disciples have made it look like Jesus fulfilled all those prophecies, and simply fabricated them?

This may seem possible in some instances, but in many others it becomes very difficult to believe. For example, consider those prophecies which were fulfilled during the last week of Jesus’ life (i.e. from the Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem through His death by crucifixion). Quite frankly, these events were observed by too many people for the disciples to have fabricated them. Not only did Jesus’ loyal followers witness these events, but so did unbelieving Jews and Romans (the very people responsible for executing Jesus). These events are too well-established historically for anyone to seriously suggest that the disciples fabricated them. What the skeptic will typically do, therefore, is simply deny that such Old Testament texts are truly prophetic. They’ll argue that the disciples misinterpreted these texts when they applied them to

Jesus. It would be unusual to seriously argue that the disciples made up stories about how Jesus fulfilled these prophecies. In this sense, the debate really tends to be over how these Old Testament passages should be interpreted, and whether such texts can be fairly applied to Jesus' life and ministry. Although this is a technical and complicated debate, I'm convinced that these texts do accurately prophesy certain things about the birth, life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Hope this helps.

Michael Gleghorn, Probe Ministries

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"Was Isaiah Written by Two Authors?"

I was told in an Old Testament class that Isaiah was written by two authors. Is this true and if it is does that change the validity of the prophecies in the book?

Also, I have always believed that the gospels were found in different places but were in harmony. Is this true or what were the origins of the gospels?

I am a Christian but have been beating myself up trying to find answers to all of these questions I have.

Thanks for writing Probe Ministries. It is a very common view among moderate to liberal biblical scholars that Isaiah had two authors. Indeed, some even believe that there were three (or more) authors of this book. A disbelief in the validity of

predictive prophecy may well be one of the reasons for adopting this view. However, I personally am persuaded that this view is incorrect. One conservative scholar makes the following points:

1. There is predictive prophecy in Isaiah 1-39 (often attributed to the "first" Isaiah who lived prior to the Babylonian Captivity). Thus, one does not escape predictive prophecy simply by asserting that chapters 40-66 were written later in history by another author. For instance, Isaiah 7:16, 8:4 and others are prophecies which were fulfilled shortly after they were given, whereas 9:1-2 is a prophecy about the coming of Messiah (fulfilled hundreds of years after it was given). Such examples could be multiplied.

2. Although there are some differences in the literary style of chapters 1-39 and 40-66, this does not at all mean that the entire book could not have been written by one person. After all, if such standards were applied to the works of Shakespeare or Milton, we would have to deny that they wrote much of what is attributed to them. Clearly, the same author can make use of diverse literary forms.

3. There are also similarities between both sections of Isaiah. For instance, compare 11:6-9 (allegedly by first Isaiah) with 65:25 (allegedly by second Isaiah). Other passages could be mentioned. Such passages argue as persuasively for a single author as any differences might argue for two authors.

4. Most importantly (in my view) is the New Testament use of Isaiah. First, quotations from chapters 40-66 (allegedly from "second" Isaiah) are simply attributed to Isaiah (see Matthew 3:3 and Acts 8:28-33 for just two examples). Second, in John 12:37-41, there are quotations from Isaiah 53:1 and 6:10, and both are attributed to the same Isaiah who saw the glory of the Lord (John 12:41).

Thus, I think there are good reasons for believing that there was only one author of the book of Isaiah.

Concerning the Gospels, I will certainly admit that there are some difficulties in harmonizing them on all points. However, I do think it's possible to harmonize them in large part. Also, it's important to remember that sometimes problems are resolved with the discovery of new data from archaeology, history and the like. This has happened many times in the past and will likely happen more in the future.

I take the traditional view on the origins of the Gospels. Namely, that Matthew and John were written by the apostles of those names, that Mark was written with eyewitness testimony supplied by the Apostle Peter, and that Luke was written by the physician, who thoroughly researched the subject before writing (see Luke 1:1-4). All of the Gospels were written in the first century, probably between the dates of the mid-50's to early 60's for Mark and the 90's for John.

Hope this information helps put your mind at ease a bit.

Shalom,

Michael Gleghorn
Probe Ministries

"Why Did Jesus Seem to Want

Parables To Obscure His Message?”

In Matt 13:10 the disciples ask Jesus why he spoke to the people in parables. It seemed that His answer was Him not wanting them to understand and in doing so being saved. If God desires for everyone to be saved and gave His most valuable treasure (His Son), why did He not reveal His Word to all so that they would come and be healed and saved?

Great question! God does indeed want all men to be saved (1 Tim. 2:4; 2 Pet. 3:9). In Matt. 13:10-17 Jesus is referring to God’s judgment on willful unbelief. The religious leaders had just accused Jesus of casting out demons by the power of Beelzebub, the ruler of the demons (Matt. 12:24). People were willfully rejecting God’s revelation in the person, teachings, and deeds of Jesus. Notice that Jesus says that in them Isaiah’s prophecy is fulfilled (Matt. 13:14). Notice, further, what this prophecy says in Matt. 13:15. They have willfully “closed their eyes” lest they should see, understand, repent and be forgiven.

Great question! God does indeed want all men to be saved (1 Tim. 2:4; 2 Pet. 3:9). In Matt. 13:10-17 Jesus is referring to God’s judgment on willful unbelief. The religious leaders had just accused Jesus of casting out demons by the power of Beelzebub, the ruler of the demons (Matt. 12:24). People were willfully rejecting God’s revelation in the person, teachings, and deeds of Jesus. Notice that Jesus says that in them Isaiah’s prophecy is fulfilled (Matt. 13:14). Notice, further, what this prophecy says in Matt. 13:15. They have willfully “closed their eyes” lest they should see, understand, repent and be forgiven.

Hope this helps. Shalom in Christ, Michael Gleghorn

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The Christmas Story: Does It Still Matter?

Christmas often means time with family, hectic shopping, parties, cards and gifts. But what about the first Christmas? Why is the original story—the baby in a manger, shepherds, wise men, angels—important, if at all? The answer may surprise you.

What does Christmas mean to you? Times with family and friends? Perhaps carols, cards, television specials. Maybe hectic shopping, parties, and eating too much.

All these and more are part of North American Christmas. But what about the first Christmas? Why is the original story—the baby in a manger, shepherds, wise men, angels—important, if at all?

May I invite you to consider eight reasons why the original Christmas story matters, even to you? You may not agree with all of them, but perhaps they will stimulate your thinking and maybe even kindle some feelings that resonate with that famous story.

First, the Christmas story is important because it is. . .

A Story that Has *Endured*

For two millennia, people have told of the child in a Bethlehem manger; of angels who announced his birth to

shepherds; of learned men who traveled a great distance to view him.{1}

That a story persists for many years does not prove its truthfulness. Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny and the tooth fairy survive in the popular imagination. But a twenty-century tenure at least merits our consideration. What deep human longings does the Christmas story portray? Why has it connected so profoundly with millions of people? Is the story factual? Curiosity prompts further investigation.

Second, the Christmas story is also . . .

A Story of *Hope* and *Survival*

Jesus' society knew great pain and oppression. Rome ruled. Corrupt tax collectors burdened the people. Some religious leaders even sanctioned physical beating of Jewish citizens participating in compulsory religious duties.{2}

Joseph and his pregnant wife Mary traveled a long distance to Bethlehem to register for a census but could not obtain proper lodging. Mary bore her baby and laid him in a manger, a feeding trough for animals. Eventually, King Herod sought to kill the baby. Warned of impending risk, Joseph and Mary fled to Egypt, then returned home after Herod's death.

Imagine how Mary felt. Traveling while pregnant would be challenging. Fleeing to another nation lest some king slay your son would not be pleasant. Yet she, Joseph, and Jesus survived the ordeal.

In the midst of social and cultural challenges, the Christmas story offers hope and encouragement toward survival, hope of new life linked to something—someone—greater than oneself. One of Jesus' followers said Jesus' "name . . . [would] be the hope of all the world."{3}

So, the Christmas story is important because it has endured

and because it speaks of hope and survival.

Reason number three: the Christmas story is . . .

A Story of *Peace* and *Goodwill*

Christmas carolers sing of “peace on earth.” Greeting cards extol peace, families desire it, and the news reminds us of its fleeting nature.

I encountered ten-year-old Matt from Nebraska in a southern California restaurant men’s room one afternoon. Alone and forlorn looking, he stood outside the lone stall.

“Could I ask a favor?” inquired the sandy haired youth. “The door to this stall has no lock. Would you watch and be sure that no one comes in on me?” “Sure,” I replied, happy to guard his privacy. Matt noted, “In a lot of nice restaurants the stall doors don’t have locks.” “I know,” I agreed. “You’d think they would.”

After a pause, his high-pitched voice said, “You know what I wish? I wish there could be peace in all the earth and no more arguments or fighting so no one would have to die except by heart attacks.” “That would be great,” I agreed. “How do you think that could happen?” Matt didn’t know.

“It seems that the Prince of Peace could help,” I suggested. “Do you know who that is?” He didn’t. “Well, at Christmas, we talk a lot about Jesus as the Prince of Peace,” I explained.

“Oh, I see,” conceded Matt. “I don’t know about those things because I don’t go to church. Do you know what it’s like to be the only boy in your town who doesn’t go to church? I do.”

“Well, I’m a church member,” I replied, “but really the most important thing is knowing Jesus Christ as your personal friend. When I was eighteen, some friends explained to me that He died and rose again for me and that I could begin a

relationship with Him. It made a big difference and gave me a real peace inside. He can also bring peace between people."

By now, Matt was out washing his hands as his father stuck his head in the door to hurry him along. I gave him a small booklet that explained more. "Thanks," smiled Matt as he walked out to join his family for lunch.

Psychologist Daniel Goleman in his bestselling book *Emotional Intelligence* tells of boarding a New York City bus to find a driver whose friendly greeting and positive disposition spread contagious warmth among the initially cold and indifferent passengers. Goleman envisioned a "virus of good feeling" spreading through the city from this "urban peacemaker" whose good will had softened hearts.{4}

The Christmas angel announced to some shepherds, "'Don't be afraid! . . . I bring you good news of great joy for everyone! The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born tonight in Bethlehem, the city of David!"{5} A crowd of angels then appeared praising God and proclaiming peace among people of good will.{6}

The Christmas story brings a message of peace that can soothe anxious hearts and calm interpersonal strife.

Reason number four: the Christmas story is . . .

A Story of *Family*

Christmas is a time for family gatherings. This interaction can bring great joy or great stress. Estrangement or ill will from past conflicts can explode.

Joseph and Mary had their share of family challenges. Consider their circumstances. The historical accounts indicate that Joseph's fiancée became pregnant though she was a virgin. Mary believed an angel told her she was pregnant by God. Now, how

would you feel if your fiancé/fiancée exhibited apparent evidence of sexual activity with someone else during your engagement? Suppose your intended said that God had sanctioned the whole thing. Would your trust and self-esteem take a nosedive? Would you cancel the wedding?

Joseph, described as "a just man, decided to break the engagement quietly, so as not to disgrace . . . [Mary] publicly."{7} But an angel appeared to him in a dream, explaining that the child was conceived in her by God, and told him to "name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."{8} Joseph followed instructions and cared for his family. His continuing commitment to Mary and Jesus played a significant part in the boy's birth and early childhood. With God's help, the family overcame major obstacles. And so can your family.

Fifth, the story is Christmas is also . . .

A story of *Humility*

When kings, presidents, and other rulers appear in public, great pomp often ensues. From a biblical perspective, God came first not as a ruling king but as a servant, a baby born in humble circumstances. His becoming human helps humans identify with Him.

Imagine that you and your child are walking in a field and encounter an ant pile with hundreds of ants scurrying about. In the distance, you see a construction bulldozer approaching. Suppose your child asks how to warn the ants of impending danger. You discuss various possibilities: shouting, holding up signs, etc. But the best solution would be if somehow your child could become an ant and warn them personally. Some ants might not believe the danger. But some might believe and take steps to ensure their safety.

Paul, an early follower of Jesus, wrote of the humility Jesus

displayed by becoming human:

> *Though he was God, he did not demand and cling to his rights as God. He made himself nothing; he took the humble position of a slave and appeared in human form. And in human form he obediently humbled himself even further by dying a criminal's death on a cross. Because of this, God raised him up to the heights of heaven.{9}*

The Christmas story speaks of family and humility. But is it true?{10}

Reason number six why the Christmas story matters: it is . . .

A Story that Was *Foretold*

Jesus' followers noted numerous clues to his identity, prophecies written many years before His birth.{11}

The Hebrew writer Micah told around 700 BC of deliverance through a coming Messiah or "Anointed One" from Bethlehem.{12} We know that ". . . Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea. . . ."{13}

Isaiah, writing around 700 BC, foretold that the Messiah would be born of a virgin. He wrote, "The Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel."{14} The name "Immanuel" means "God is with us." Biblical accounts claim Jesus' mother was a virgin when she bore Him.{15}

Additional prophecies concern the Messiah's lineage, betrayal, suffering, execution, and resurrection. Peter Stoner, a California mathematician, once calculated the probability of just eight of the 300 prophecies Jesus fulfilled coming true in one person due to chance alone. Using estimates that both he and classes of college students considered reasonable and

conservative, Stoner concluded there was one chance in 10^{17} that those eight were fulfilled by fluke.

He says 10^{17} silver dollars would cover the state of Texas two feet deep. Mark one coin with red fingernail polish. Stir the whole batch thoroughly. What chance would a blindfolded person have of picking the marked coin on the first try? One in 10^{17}, the same chance that just eight of the 300 prophecies "just happened" to come true in this man, Jesus.{16}

In a similar vein, consider reason number seven why the original Christmas story matters. It is . . .

A Story that Has *Substantial Support*

Can we trust the biblical accounts of the Christmas story? Three important points:

• *Eyewitness Testimony*. The Gospels—presentations of Jesus' life—claim to be, or bear evidence of containing, eyewitness accounts. In a courtroom, eyewitness testimony is among the most reliable evidence.

• *Early Date*. Dr. William F. Albright, one of the world's leading archaeologists, dated every book of the New Testament (NT) before about AD 80.{17} There is no known record of NT factual authenticity ever being successfully challenged by a contemporary.

• *Manuscript Evidence*. Over 24,000 early manuscript copies of portions of the NT exist today. Concerning manuscript attestation, Sir Frederic Kenyon, director and principle librarian of the British Museum, concluded, "Both the authenticity and the general integrity of the books of the New Testament may be regarded as finally established."{18}

The Christmas story is notable for its enduring messages of hope, peace, goodwill, family and humility. It was foretold by

prophets and has substantial manuscript support. But there is another reason for considering the story of Jesus' birth, perhaps the most important.

Reason number eight: the Christmas story is . . .

A Story of *Love*

Jesus' followers taught that His conception and birth were part of a divine plan to bring us genuine peace, inner freedom, and self-respect. They believed the biblical God wants us to enjoy friendship with Him, and meaning and purpose. Alas, our own self-centeredness separates us from Him. Left to our own, we would spend both time and eternity in this spiritually unplugged state.

Jesus came to help plug us into God. Mary's baby was born to die, paying the penalty for our self-centeredness, which the biblical documents call "sin." If I had a traffic fine I could not pay, you could offer to pay it for me. When the adult Jesus died on the cross, He carried the penalty due all our sins then rose from the dead to give new life.

Jesus explained, "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life."{19} God can become your friend if you believe in Him, that is, if you trust Him to forgive you. He will never let you down.

Perhaps you are becoming aware of the importance of the Christmas story in your own life. Might you like to receive Jesus' free gift of forgiveness and place your faith in Him? You can celebrate this Christmas knowing that you are a member of His family. Perhaps you'd like to talk to Him right now. You might want to tell Him something like this:

> *Jesus Christ, thanks for loving me, for dying for my sins and rising again. Please apply your death as the means of my*

forgiveness. I accept your pardon. Come and live in me and help me to become your close friend.

If you made that decision to place your trust in Jesus, He has entered your life, forgiven you and given you eternal life. I encourage you to tell another of His followers about your decision and ask them to help you grow in faith. Call this radio station or visit the Web site probe.org to learn more. Read the Bible to discover more about God. Begin with the Gospel of John, the fourth book in the New Testament, which is one of the easier ones to understand. Tell God what is on your heart, and tell others about the discovery you've made so they can know Him too.

Christmas is meant to celebrate peace and joy. Amidst the busyness of shopping, parties, presents, and fun, remember that the Prince of Peace came to spread peace and joy to all who believe in Him.

Notes

1. Details of the Christmas story are in Luke 1-2 and Matthew 1:18-2:23.
2. Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973 printing of the 1883 original), i:372.
3. Matthew 12:21 NLT.
4. Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence* (New York: Bantam Books, 1997), ix-x.
5. Luke 2:10-11 NLT.
6. Luke 2:13-14 NASB.
7. Matthew 1:19 NLT.
8. Matthew 1:21 NLT.
9. Philippians 2:6-9 NLT.
10. For more on evidence for Jesus, see www.WhoIsJesus-Really.com and www.probe.org.
11. For a summary of prophecies Jesus fulfilled, see Josh

McDowell, *Evidence that Demands a Verdict* (San Bernardino, CA: Here's Life Publishers, 1979), 141-177.
12. Micah 5:2.
13. Matthew 2:1 NASB.
14. Isaiah 7:14 NIV.
15. Matthew 1:18, 22-25; Luke 1:27, 34.
16. Peter W. Stoner, *Science Speaks* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1969), 99-112.
17. McDowell, op. cit., 62-63.
18. Frederic G. Kenyon, *The Bible and Archaeology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1940), 288; in McDowell, op. cit., 41. McDowell develops these points in pp. 39-41 ff.
19. John 3:16 NLT.

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"Where Are the Old Testament Prophecies of Jesus' Resurrection?"

I was reading Cruci-fiction and Resuscitation: The Greatest Hoax in the History of Humanity? to learn more about the resurrection of Jesus. When I went to the two Old Testament references he gave (Psalm 34:20, "He keeps all his bones, Not one of them is broken," and Zechariah 12:10, "…they will look on Me whom they have pierced…") as evidence of the prophecy of resurrection, I discovered that these were not prophetic at all but simply words and phrases that were taken out of

context. Can you provide me with any Old Testament writing that does speak directly of the resurrection of the messiah?

John 19:36-37

> “For these things came to pass to fulfill the Scripture, “NOT A BONE OF HIM SHALL BE BROKEN.” And again another Scripture says, “THEY SHALL LOOK ON HIM WHOM THEY PIERCED.”

may cite both of these OT passages. However, the one in v. 36 may actually be citing Exodus 12:46–

> “It is to be eaten in a single house; you are not to bring forth any of the flesh outside of the house, nor are you to break any bone of it.”

or Numbers 9:12–

> “They shall leave none of it until morning, nor break a bone of it; according to all the statute of the Passover they shall observe it.”

Thus, it is not clear whether John viewed Psalm 34:20 as having Messianic implications. And certainly it does not refer to Jesus’ resurrection. (But then, we would note, the author never indicated these verses refer to the resurrection. The article is about the crucifixion as well, which these verses do prophesy.)

The passage in Zechariah 12:10 is Messianic and would at least be consistent with the resurrection of Christ (as it probably refers to His Second Coming). Isaiah 53:10-12 would also seem to be consistent with Jesus’ resurrection:

> But the LORD was pleased
> To crush Him, putting Him to grief;
> If He would render Himself as a guilt offering,
> He will see His offspring, He will prolong His days,
> And the good pleasure of the LORD will prosper in His hand.
> As a result of the anguish of His soul,

He will see it and be satisfied;
By His knowledge the Righteous One, My Servant, will justify the many,
As He will bear their iniquities.
Therefore, I will allot Him a portion with the great,
And He will divide the booty with the strong;
Because He poured out Himself to death,
And was numbered with the transgressors;
Yet He Himself bore the sin of many,
And interceded for the transgressors.

However, in neither of these passages is Jesus' resurrection specifically predicted.

The only OT texts which specifically teach the doctrine of resurrection are Isaiah 26:19-21;

Your dead will live; Their corpses will rise.
You who lie in the dust, awake and shout for joy,
For your dew is as the dew of the dawn,
And the earth will give birth to the departed spirits.
Come, my people, enter into your rooms
And close your doors behind you;
Hide for a little while
Until indignation runs its course.
For behold, the LORD is about to come out from His place
To punish the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity;
And the earth will reveal her bloodshed
And will no longer cover her slain.

Ezekiel 37:12-14;

"Therefore prophesy and say to them,
'Thus says the Lord GOD,
"Behold, I will open your graves and cause you to come up out of your graves, My people;
and I will bring you into the land of Israel.
Then you will know that I am the LORD, when I have opened

> your graves and
> caused you to come up out of your graves, My people.
> I will put My Spirit within you and you will come to life,
> and I will place you on your own land.
> Then you will know that I, the LORD, have spoken and done it,” declares the LORD.'”

and Daniel 12:1-3:

> “Now at that time Michael, the great prince who stands guard over the sons of your people, will arise.
> And there will be a time of distress such as never occurred since there was a nation until that time;
> and at that time your people, everyone who is found written in the book, will be rescued.
> Many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake, these to everlasting life,
> but the others to disgrace and everlasting contempt.
> Those who have insight will shine brightly like the brightness of the expanse of heaven,
> and those who lead the many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.

Job 19:25-27 is another possibility:

> “As for me, I know that my Redeemer lives,
> And at the last He will take His stand on the earth.
> Even after my skin is destroyed, Yet from my flesh I shall see God;
> Whom I myself shall behold,
> And whom my eyes will see and not another.
> My heart faints within me!

None of these texts are specifically Messianic. I do not think there are any specific predictions of Jesus’ resurrection in the OT. This, I think, is partly why Jesus’ disciples had such a difficult time understanding His own predictions of His resurrection. They did not have a category for a dying and

rising Messiah (i.e. raised to glory, never to die again) within world history. They only knew of a general resurrection at the end of time.

Shalom,

Michael Gleghorn
Probe Ministries

Addendum: April 7, 2021 by Sue Bohlin

I would respectfully suggest that we can also turn to the powerful words of Peter in Acts 2:24-32, where He unfolds the realization that David had prophesied about the Lord's resurrection in Psalm 16—

"But God raised him up, having released him from the pains of death because it was not possible for him to be held in its power. For David says about him,

> 'I saw the Lord always in front of me,
> for he is at my right hand so that I will not be shaken.
>
> Therefore my heart was glad and my tongue rejoiced;
> my body also will live in hope,
>
> because you will not leave my soul in Hades,
> nor permit your Holy One to experience decay.
>
> You have made known to me the paths of life;
> you will make me full of joy with your presence.'

"Brothers, I can speak confidently to you about our forefather David, that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. So then, because he was a prophet and knew that God had sworn to him with an oath to seat one of his descendants on his throne, David by foreseeing this spoke about the resurrection of the Christ, that he was neither abandoned to Hades, nor did his body experience decay. This Jesus God raised up, and we are all witnesses of it."

Was Jesus Really Born of a Virgin?

Aren't Miracles Impossible?

Of the four canonical gospels, there are two, Matthew and Luke, that provide details about the birth of Jesus. The accounts may reflect the unique perspectives of both Joseph (in Matthew's gospel) and Mary (in Luke's), for there are many differences between the two.{1} However, of the things they share in common, one cannot be missed. They both declare that Jesus was miraculously conceived through the supernatural intervention of the Holy Spirit in the womb of a young virgin named Mary.{2} Today, some scholars regard the doctrine of Jesus' virgin birth as simply a legendary development of the early church. The story is said to be myth—not history.{3} But if we ask why they think this, we may notice something very interesting. For the virgin birth is usually not rejected on grounds of insufficient historical evidence. Rather, it is more often rejected on the presupposition that miracles are simply impossible.{4} This is quite revealing. For if such scholars really believe that miracles are impossible, then no amount of evidence can convince them that one has actually occurred. Their minds are made up before they examine the evidence. In theory, they view miracle claims as guilty until proven innocent. In actual practice, however, they never reach a verdict of "Not Guilty"!

The belief that miracles are impossible often arises from a naturalistic worldview. Strict naturalism completely rejects any notion of the supernatural.{5} All that exists are atoms and the void.{6} If naturalists are right, it follows that

miracles are indeed impossible. While strange things that we do not fully understand may sometimes occur, there must, in principle, be a naturalistic explanation for every event in the universe.

But are such naturalists right? Since my aim in this article is to explore the historicity of Jesus' virgin birth, I will not attempt now to refute naturalism. Instead, I will simply point out that if a personal Creator God exists (and there is good evidence to believe that One does), then miracles are at least possible. For clearly, such a God might choose to intervene in His creation to bring about an effect for which there was no prior natural cause. And that is at least one way of describing a miracle.

Thus, if a personal Creator God exists, miracles are possible. And if miracles are possible, then Jesus' virginal conception and birth are possible. And if the virgin birth is possible, then the only way we can determine if it actually occurred is by carefully examining the evidence both for and against it. Next we will continue our inquiry by looking at an ancient prophecy that some think actually foretold Christ's virgin birth!

Didn't Matthew Misread Isaiah?

Matthew's gospel tells us that Jesus was conceived through the supernatural agency of the Holy Spirit while Mary was still a virgin.{7} He then goes further, however, by declaring that this miraculous event fulfilled an Old Testament prophecy in the book of Isaiah. He writes:

> *Now all this took place that what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet might be fulfilled, saying, "Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and shall bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel," which…. means, "God with us."{8}*

Some scholars are unimpressed with Matthew's interpretation of Isaiah. John Dominic Crossan unequivocally states, "The prophecy in Isaiah says nothing whatsoever about a virginal conception."{9} Did Matthew misread Isaiah?

Let's acknowledge that the original context of Isaiah's prophecy may not be exclusively about the virginal conception of Jesus. The year is 734 B.C. and King Ahaz of Judah is terrified to learn that Aram and Israel have formed an alliance against him. Isaiah is sent to reassure Ahaz that God is in control and that the aims of the alliance will not succeed. Ahaz is told to request a sign from the Lord, a means of confirming the truth of Isaiah's message. But he refuses!{10} Annoyed at the king's stubbornness, Isaiah declares that the Lord will give a sign anyway: an *almah* (a maiden of marriageable age) will conceive a son and call his name Immanuel. He will eat curds and honey upon reaching an age of moral discernment. But before this happens, the land of the two dreaded kings will be forsaken.{11} Should this prophecy be understood to refer exclusively to Jesus' virginal conception? If so, how does it relate to the promise that the Aram-Israel alliance would soon be broken and their lands forsaken (a promise fulfilled within twelve years time)?{12}

It's quite possible that Isaiah's prophecy had a *dual fulfillment*:{13} initially, in Isaiah's day; and ultimately, at the birth of Jesus. In this view the *almah*, or young maiden of Isaiah's prophecy, is a type of the virgin Mary, who later conceived Jesus through the miraculous intervention of the Holy Spirit.{14} So although a young woman in Isaiah's day bore a child named Immanuel, Jesus is later recognized by Matthew to also be Immanuel, "God with us" in a new and unprecedented way. Thus, Matthew didn't misread Isaiah. And if this is so, we must continue to consider this prophecy in weighing the evidence for Jesus' virgin birth.

But even if we've correctly explained Matthew's use of Isaiah's prophecy, we must still consider the alleged

contradictions in the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke. We will address this issue in the next section.

Don't Matthew and Luke Contradict Each Other?

{15} Some scholars see the infancy narratives in Matthew and Luke as contradictory. If so, their historical reliability is in doubt, along with their accounts of Jesus' virgin birth. But are these narratives really contradictory? Let's take a closer look.

First, some think Matthew implies that Mary and Joseph resided permanently in Bethlehem before Jesus' birth, whereas Luke says they lived in Nazareth and only came to Bethlehem for the census.{16} But Matthew never actually tells us the couple's residence before Jesus' birth. He simply says that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, just like Luke.{17}

But if Mary and Joseph resided in Nazareth prior to Jesus' birth, then why, after their flight into Egypt, does Matthew seem to suggest that they intended to return to Judea rather than their home in Nazareth?{18} It's helpful to recall that Jesus was "the promised king of David's line."{19} Might not his parents, then, have wished to raise Him in His ancestral home?{20} This is actually quite probable. But regardless of their original intention, let's not forget that Matthew goes on to write that Joseph, being warned in a dream not to settle in Judea, did take his family back to Nazareth after all.{21}

Finally, some think Luke's narrative leaves no room for Matthew's account about the visit of the magi and sojourn in Egypt. These events could only have occurred after Jesus' presentation in the Temple, forty days after His birth.{22} But Luke 2:39, which concludes this presentation, says that when Jesus' parents "had performed everything according to the Law of the Lord, they returned to . . . Nazareth." This raises a question. Does Luke's statement prohibit an initial return

to Bethlehem, thus casting doubt on Matthew's account of the magi and flight into Egypt?

It's important to notice the emphasis in Luke 2:39. It's not so much on when Mary and Joseph returned to Nazareth, but rather that they did not return until after they had fulfilled the requirements of the Law.{23} Strictly speaking, Luke 2:39 does not disallow the events recorded by Matthew. Luke may not have known of the visit of the magi and flight into Egypt, or he may have chosen to omit this information. Either way, however, "the silence of one narrative regarding events recorded in another is quite a different thing from actual contradiction."{24} Thus, the virgin birth cannot be dismissed on the grounds that the infancy narratives are contradictory—they're not.

But aren't we forgetting the most obvious hypothesis of all? Is the story of Jesus' virgin birth simply a myth, comparable to other such stories from the ancient world? We'll examine this question in the next section.

Wasn't the Virgin Birth Story Derived from Pagan Myths?

Not long after Matthew and Luke finished writing their gospels, some scholars began contending that the story of Jesus' virgin birth was derived from pagan myths. Unfortunately, such ideas continue to haunt the Church even today. John Dominic Crossan cites parallels between the deification of Octavius by the Roman Senate and that of Jesus by the early church.{25} In each case, says Crossan, the decision to deify their leader was closely connected with the invention of a divine birth story. The official biography of Octavius claimed the god Apollo in the form of a snake impregnated his mother.{26} Jesus' biographers claimed the Holy Spirit in the womb of the virgin Mary conceived Him. In Crossan's view, neither story is historically true: "The

divine origins of Jesus are…just as…mythological as those of Octavius."{27} The stories simply help explain why these men received divine honors.

Is Crossan's hypothesis plausible? One can certainly find scholars who embrace such ideas. But a careful comparison of the biblical accounts of Jesus' birth with the many miraculous birth stories in pagan literature reveals several important differences.

First, the accounts of Jesus' virgin birth show none "of the standard literary marks of the myth genre."{28} Matthew and Luke are written as history—not mythology. They mention places, people, and events that can be verified through normal methods of historical and archaeological inquiry. The beginning of Luke's gospel "reads very much like prefaces to other generally trusted historical and biographical works of antiquity."{29} Thus, there is a clear difference in genre between the gospels and pagan myths.

Another difference can be seen in the religious atmosphere of these stories. The pagan myths are polytheistic; the gospels, monotheistic. The miraculous birth stories in pagan literature usually focus on a god's lust for some mortal woman.{30} Since this lust is typically gratified through sexual intercourse, the resulting conception and birth are hardly virginal. We are thus far removed from the description of Jesus' virginal conception in the gospels. There we find no hint that God's love for Mary in any way parallels the lust of Apollo for the mother of Octavius.

These are just two of many differences between the gospel accounts of Jesus' birth and the miraculous birth stories in pagan literature. But even these differences make the theory of pagan derivation unlikely. Remember, this theory requires us to believe that strict moral monotheists, who claimed to be writing history, borrowed some of the crudest elements from polytheistic myths to tell the story of Jesus' birth! Frankly,

it's incredible. But could a theory of Jewish derivation still work? We'll conclude with this question.

Wasn't the Virgin Birth Story Derived from Jewish Thought?

Some scholars have speculated that the story of Jesus' virgin birth may have been derived from an imaginative Jewish interpretation of the Old Testament.{31} The story is not historical; it is a literary fiction of early Jewish Christians. It may have resulted from reflection on Isaiah 7:14, which says in part, "Behold, a virgin will be with child." What could be more natural than this verse becoming the source of inspiration for a legendary tale about the virgin birth of the Messiah?{32}

But would this really have been natural? There's actually no clear evidence that pre-Christian Judaism understood Isaiah 7:14 as a prophecy of the Messiah at all, much less his virginal conception.{33} Indeed, many contend that the Hebrew text of Isaiah says nothing whatever about a virginal conception and birth.{34} But if that is so, it would seem quite unlikely for early Jewish Christians to have read the verse in such a way!

Others believe the translation of Isaiah from Hebrew to Greek, known as the Septuagint, may have provided the initial impulse for such a reading. The Greek text of Isaiah 7:14 translates the Hebrew term *almah*, meaning "a young woman of marriageable age," with the Greek term *parthenos*, meaning "virgin". Could this translation have led some Jewish Christians to conclude that Isaiah was prophesying the virgin birth of the Messiah? And if so, might they have invented the story of Jesus' virgin birth as the alleged "fulfillment" of Isaiah's prediction?

While one can claim that they might have done so, there's no evidence that they actually did. But if not, what could account for early Christianity's understanding of Isaiah 7:14

as a prophecy of the Messiah's virgin birth? Well, the historical reality of Jesus' virgin birth could have done so! After all, it's one thing to think that early Jewish Christians, without any precedent in Jewish thought, would invent the story of Jesus' virgin birth from an imaginative interpretation of Isaiah's prophecy. But it's another thing entirely to think that by beginning with a historically reliable account of Jesus' virgin birth, they eventually concluded that Isaiah had indeed prophesied such an event.{35}

Only the latter hypothesis is supported by evidence. Particularly important in this regard are the gospels of Matthew and Luke. These sources have been shown to be quite historically reliable. Their accounts of Jesus' birth, though apparently written independently of one another, are free of contradiction. Indeed, apart from an unproven bias against the supernatural, there is little reason to doubt the accuracy of their reports. Thus, there do appear to be adequate grounds for believing that Jesus really was born of a virgin!

Notes

1. Such differences do not, of course, imply contradictions. See the third section for more information.

2. See Matt. 1:18-25 and Luke 1:26-35.

3. For instance, John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: Harper, 1994), writes, "I understand the virginal conception of Jesus to be a confessional statement about Jesus' status and not a biological statement about Mary's body. It is later faith in Jesus as an adult retrojected mythologically onto Jesus as an infant. . ." (23). And again a little later, "Jesus . . . was born . . . to Joseph and Mary." (26)

4. For example, in Paul Copan, ed., *Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up? A debate between William Lane Craig and John Dominic*

Crossan (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1998), 61, Dr. Craig questions Dr. Crossan about his anti-supernaturalistic presuppositions and whether they do not rule out the possibility of miracles a priori. Dr. Crossan admits that, insofar as miracles are concerned, "[I]t's a theological presupposition of mine that God does not operate that way."

5. Ibid. In fact, although it is difficult to pin him down this appears to be Dr. Crossan's position. At one point in the debate, Dr. Craig asks Dr. Crossan, "What about the statement that God exists? Is that a statement of faith or fact?" Dr. Crossan responds, "It's a statement of faith for all those who make it" (49). But suppose no human beings existed to make such statements of faith. In order to clarify Dr. Crossan's response, Dr. Craig later asks, "Was there a being who was the Creator and Sustainer of the universe during that period of time when no human beings existed?" Dr. Crossan's answer is quite revealing: "Well, I would probably prefer to say no because what you're doing is trying to put yourself in the position of God and ask…'How is God apart from faith?' I don't know if you can do that. You can do it, I suppose, but I don't know if it really has any point" (emphasis mine, 51). This answer appears to commit Dr. Crossan to an atheistic (and thus strictly naturalistic) worldview.

6. So said the famous Greek atomist philosopher, Democritus of Abdera.

7. See Matt. 1:20-25.

8. Matt. 1:22-23.

9. Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography,* 17. He goes on to say, "Clearly, somebody went seeking in the Old Testament for a text that could be interpreted as prophesying a virginal conception, even if such was never its original meaning"(18).

10. See Isaiah 7:1-12.

11. See Isaiah 7:13-16.

12. Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *The Ryrie Study Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1978). Ryrie comments, “Within twelve years after this prophecy, Damascus was captured by Assyria (732) and Israel had fallen (722).” (1024)

13. Although some writers object to the notion of a “dual fulfillment” of prophecy, there appear to be other examples of this phenomenon in Scripture. For instance, in Joel 2:28-32 we find a promise of a future outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The prophecy is linked with various cosmic disturbances that will immediately precede the Day of the Lord. Later, in connection with the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2, Peter declares, “This is what was spoken of through the prophet Joel” (v. 16). He proceeds to quote almost the entire passage of Joel 2:28-32. However, it seems that only the first part of the prophecy, concerning the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, was actually fulfilled in Peter’s day. What’s more, the book of Revelation seems to indicate that the cosmic disturbances mentioned by Joel await a yet future fulfillment (see Rev. 6:12). While scholars have offered various solutions to account for Peter’s use of Joel in Acts 2, it seems best to understand Joel’s prophecy as having some sort of “dual fulfillment”: an initial fulfillment on the day of Pentecost; an ultimate fulfillment before the second coming of Christ. The “dual fulfillment” view has the advantage of preserving the original integrity of the prophet’s message, while at the same time recognizing that some prophecies may be Divinely intended to include more than one fulfillment throughout salvation history. In light of this very real possibility, we should humbly acknowledge that Matthew’s use of Isaiah and Peter’s use of Joel confront us with complex interpretive issues. It is partly for this reason that very capable scholars reach different conclusions about the meaning of these passages. After careful consideration I was inclined toward the “dual fulfillment” position; however, I recognize

that others will want to adopt some other perspective.

14. Ryrie, *The Ryrie Study Bible*, 1024.

15. In this section I have relied heavily on the analysis given in J. Gresham Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1971), 192-97.

16. I have chosen to examine some of the more difficult "contradictions." But it's important to point out that some of the alleged difficulties are quite easily dealt with. For instance, Luke records that shepherds visited the baby Jesus in response to an angelic announcement (Luke 2:8-20). Matthew, however, tells not of shepherds but of magi, who responded not to an angelic announcement, but to an astronomical observation (Matt. 2:1-12). But surely there's no contradiction here. After all, it's entirely possible that both the shepherds and the magi visited Jesus! Doubtless the accounts are selective and have not recorded every detail, but this does not mean they are contradictory.

17. Matt. 2:1; Luke 2:1-7.

18. Matt. 2:19-23.

19. Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, 193.

20. Ibid.

21. Matt. 2:22-23.

22. Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, 196, explains: "The visit of the magi could hardly have taken place during this forty-day interval; for it would have been impossible to take the child into the Temple when the wrath of the king was so aroused…Evidently, therefore, the flight into Egypt took place immediately after the magi had come; no visit to the Temple could have intervened. If, therefore, the two narratives are to be harmonized, we must suppose that when the presentation in the Temple had been completed, Joseph and Mary returned

with the child to Bethlehem, received there the visit of the magi, and then fled into Egypt."

23. Ibid., 196-97.

24. Ibid., 197.

25. Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, 1-5, 26-28.

26. Peter Jennings, interview with John Dominic Crossan, "The Search for Jesus," ABC Special, June 26, 2000. More general information about this ABC special program can be found at the following URL: http://more.abcnews.go.com/onair/abcnewsspecials/pjr000626_jesus_promo.html. A conservative, evangelical response to Peter Jennings' ABC special was done by John Ankerberg, "A Response to ABC's The Search for Jesus: Part 1: Questions About His Birth," The John Ankerberg Show (videotape copy), 2001. More general information can be found at John Ankerberg's Web site at: www.ankerberg.com.

27. Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, 26-27.

28. Norman L. Geisler, "Virgin Birth of Christ," in *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1999), 763.

29. Craig Blomberg, quoted in Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 39-40.

30. Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, 338.

31. This might be referred to as midrash, or midrash pesher, which "is an imaginative interpretation or expansion based on some OT text." B. Witherington III, "Birth of Jesus," in Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels, eds. Joel B. Green and Scot McKnight (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 60.

32. Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, 287.

33. Witherington, “Birth of Jesus,” 64. See also Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, 297.

34. Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, 288. See also, John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, 17.

35. Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, 286-87.

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