

In my previous post I started to explain why, based on the testimony of Paul, it appears that most Jews (the vast majority) rejected the Christian claim that Jesus was the messiah.

I have to say, that among my Christian students today (most of them from the South, most of them from conservative Christian backgrounds), this continues to be a real puzzle.

“But there were **prophecies of Jesus** being the messiah,” they argue. “Hundreds of Old Testament passages, such as Isaiah 53, describe him to a tee.”

They genuinely can't figure it out.

What About Old Testament Messianic Prophecies?

In their view, the Old Testament makes a number of predictions about the messiah:

- he would be [born in Bethlehem](#)
- his mother would be a virgin
- he would be a miracle worker
- he would be killed for the sins of others
- he would be raised from the dead

These are all things that happened to Jesus! How much more obvious could it be? Why in the world don't those Jews see it? Are they simply hard-headed and rebellious against God? Can't they *read*? Are they stupid???

What is very hard to get my students to see (in most cases I'm, frankly, completely unsuccessful) is that the authors of the New Testament who portrayed Jesus as the messiah are the ones who quoted the Old Testament in order to prove it, and that they were influenced by the Old Testament in what they decided to say about Jesus, and that their views of Jesus affected how they read the Old Testament.

The reality is that the so-called “messianic prophecies” that are said to point to Jesus never taken to be messianic prophecies by Jews prior to the Christians who saw Jesus as the messiah. The Old Testament in fact never says that the messiah will be born of a virgin, that he will be executed by his enemies, and that he will be raised from the dead.

Messianic Prophecies in Isaiah?

My students often don't believe me when I say this, and they point to passages like Isaiah 7:14 (virgin birth) and Isaiah 53 (execution and resurrection). Then I urge them to read the passages carefully and find where there is any reference in them to a messiah. That's one of the problems (not the only one).

These passages [are not talking about the messiah](#). The messiah is never mentioned in them. Anyone who thinks they *are* talking about the messiah, has to import the messiah into the passages, because he simply isn't there.

I should stress that no one prior to Christianity took these passages to refer to a future messiah.

Then why are they read (by Christians) as if referring to the messiah? What happened is this: ancient Christians (within a couple of decades of Jesus' death) who believed that Jesus *was* the messiah necessarily believed that Jesus fulfilled Scripture. They, therefore, began to read passages of the Old Testament as predictions of Jesus. And so the interpretation of these passages was changed so that they were now seen as foretelling the birth, life, and death of Jesus.

Once those passages are read that way, it is very hard indeed to read them the way they had been read before. When Christians read Isaiah 53, they simply can't *help* but read it as a prediction of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. But for those who read the passage just for what it has to say, it does not appear to be about the messiah. (You'll note that the term "messiah" never occurs in it.)

Are These Prophecies Really Messianic?

So that is one problem with Christians using the Old Testament to "prove" that Jesus is the messiah. They are appealing to passages that do not appear to be about the messiah. The other is the flip side of the coin. Christians who think that Jesus fulfilled predictions of the Old Testament base their views, in no small measure, on what the Gospels say about Jesus' life: He was born in Bethlehem. His mother was a virgin. He healed many people. He was rejected by his own people. He was silent at his trial. And so on - there are lots of these "facts" from Jesus' life, it is thought, that fulfilled Scripture. But how do we know that these are facts from Jesus' life?

The only way we know is (or think we know it) is because authors of the New Testament Gospels claim that these are the facts. But are they? How do we know that [Jesus was actually born in Bethlehem?](#) That his mother was actually a virgin? That he was actually silent at his trial? And so forth and so on? We only know because the Gospels indicate so. But the authors of the Gospels were themselves influenced in their telling of Jesus' story by the passages of Scripture that they took to be messianic predictions, and they told their stories in the light of those passages.

Take Jesus' birth in Bethlehem. A couple of times on the blog I've talked about how problematic it is to think that this is a historical datum. It's true that both Matthew and Luke say that Jesus was born in that small village. But Mark and John do not assume that this is true, but rather that he came from Galilee, from the village of Nazareth. Moreover, Matthew and Luke *get* Jesus born in Bethlehem in radically different and contradictory ways, so that for both of them he is born there even though he comes from Nazareth. Why don't they have a consistent account of the matter?

It is almost certainly because they both want to be able to claim that his birth was in Bethlehem, even though both of them know for a fact he did not come from Bethlehem, but from Nazareth. Then [why do Matthew and Luke want to argue \(in different ways\) that he was born in Bethlehem?](#) It is because in their view — based on the Old Testament prophet Micah 5:2 — that's where the messiah had to come from. And so for them, Jesus *had* to come from there. They aren't recording a historical datum from Jesus' life; they are writing accounts that are influenced by the Old Testament precisely to show that Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament.

You can go through virtually all the alleged messianic prophecies that point to Jesus and show the same things: either the "prophecies" were not actually

predictions of the future messiah (and were never taken that way before Christians came along) or the facts of Jesus' life that are said to have fulfilled these predictions are not actually facts of Jesus' life.

One fact about Jesus' life is certain: he was crucified by the Romans. And that was THE single biggest problem ancient Jews had with Christian claims that Jesus was the messiah. [There was not a Jew on the planet](#) who thought the messiah was going to be crushed by his enemies — humiliated, tortured, and executed. That was the *opposite* of what the messiah would do. To call Jesus the messiah made no sense — i.e., it was nonsense - virtually by definition. And that was the major reason most Jews rejected the Christian claims about Jesus.



[Another Problem with Calling Jesus the Messiah](#)
[Readers' Mailbag on Revelation: November 6, 2015](#)