

QUESTIONS SKEPTICS ASK ABOUT MESSIANIC PROPHECY

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Were Old Testament predictions fulfilled in the life of Jesus?

If so, why, when we read these prophecies in their original setting, do they often seem more obscure than we might have expected?

Is it possible that skeptics of biblical prophecy are right? Could there be validity to their claim that Christians read Jesus back into the Old Testament? Or is there a legitimate way of showing that He really is there?

I hope that by the time you have read this booklet you will realize that messianic prophecy is not easy to understand, but it is legitimately fulfilled in Jesus Christ—contrary to the arguments of skeptics.

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THE CLAIMS OF CHRISTIANS QUESTIONED

Few issues are more foundational to the Christian faith than the belief that Jesus is the Messiah predicted by Old Testament Jewish prophets. Yet many of the prophecies that are said to predict Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, when read in their Old Testament context, are not as clear as we might expect. In fact, it's easy to see why unbelievers are often skeptical. Why aren't the prophecies more obvious? And why in some cases does the New Testament claim a fulfillment where no prediction is even in view? Before answering these questions, let's look at claims made by Christians, and the kind of questions thoughtful skeptics ask.

CHRISTIAN CLAIMS

In *Evidence That Demands A Verdict*, Christian apologist Josh McDowell states, "The Old Testament contains over 300 references to the Messiah that were fulfilled in Jesus." He believes this "establishes the fact of God, authenticates the deity of Jesus, and [proves] the inspiration of the Bible." He lists 61 specific messianic prophecies and shows how they were fulfilled hundreds of years after they were spoken. Then he quotes from Peter Stoner's book *Science Speaks*, which says that according to scientifically accepted laws of probability, the odds against just eight of the prophecies being fulfilled are one chance in 10^{17} (pp.150-175).

Are McDowell's facts and logic sound? Those who already believe in Jesus will probably say his facts are unarguable. They know, for

example, that Luke 24 describes two occasions when the resurrected Christ “opened the minds” of His followers to understand that Moses, the Prophets, and Psalms had spoken of His death, resurrection, and salvation He would provide through them (Lk. 24:25-27, 44-49). Believers in Jesus are convinced that He was

Many of the prophecies that are said to be fulfilled by Jesus are not as clear as we might expect.

telling the truth when He said that the Old Testament was speaking about Him (Jn. 5:39).

These claims, however, do not greatly impress skeptics. Many Jewish

people, for instance, believe that the prophets foresaw a different kind of Messiah. They see prophets pointing to a coming Deliverer who would rescue Israel from her enemies and establish Jerusalem as the capital of a world government (Isa. 2:1-3). Since Jesus did not do this, they wonder how He could be the Messiah.

Yet Christians believe that among the prophecies of a coming world leader are predictions with another view of Messiah.

- He will be despised and rejected (Isa. 53:3).
- He will die for our sin (Isa. 53:6).
- He will be “cut off” before the destruction of Jerusalem and her temple (Dan. 9:24-27).
- He will live after dying (Isa. 53:10).
- He will justify many (Isa. 53:11).
- He will be a light to the Gentiles (Isa. 49:6).

Christians believe that these prophecies present the Messiah as suffering, dying, and rising from death to provide salvation from sin's penalty before restoring Israel and ruling the earth from Jerusalem. Is this claim supported by facts? Skeptical people have many questions.

THE SKEPTICS' QUESTIONS

Many skeptics doubt that Jesus fulfilled even one prophecy. They argue that Christians either quote Old Testament passages out of context, mindlessly misinterpret them, or even dishonestly change them to fit their purposes. Here are some of the questions skeptics ask and the problems they raise:

Does Micah 5:2 really say that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem? Matthew 2:1-6 says that a group of Jewish teachers of the law

told Herod that according to Micah 5:2 the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. "That can't be true," say skeptics. "No Hebrew scholar would have taken Micah 5:2 as a prophecy of Messiah's birthplace. Micah declares only that Messiah's ancestral origin will be Bethlehem, the birthplace of King David" (1 Sam. 17:58).

Does Isaiah 53 describe the sufferings of the Messiah or the sufferings of the Jewish people? Isaiah says, "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. 53:6). A common Jewish response to this verse is that the innocent sufferer here is not Jesus but the nation of Israel. They say that God Himself identifies Israel as this servant in the context when He declared, "You are My servant, Israel, in whom

I will display My splendor” (Isa. 49:3).

Some skeptics accuse Christian translators of even mistranslating key verses in Isaiah to make them fit the New Testament portrayal of Jesus. As an example of deliberate deceit they cite Isaiah 53:8, pointing out that all versions produced by non-Jewish scholars use the singular pronoun in the expression, “For the transgression of My people *He* was stricken,” even though the pronoun is plural in the Hebrew text. Their contention is that the last clause in the verse should read, “*they* were stricken.” They insist, therefore, that Isaiah has the “people of the Holocaust” in view, not Jesus.

Did the New Testament writers misquote, mistranslate, and misapply Psalm 22? The writers of the New Testament

quote and allude to Psalm 22 again and again as being fulfilled in the suffering and death of Jesus Christ (Mt. 27:35,39,43,46; Lk. 23:34; Jn. 19:23-24,28,34,37; Heb. 2:12). But skeptics point out that nothing in the original context would lead a reader to see this psalm as a predictive prophecy. They suggest that Psalm 22 is nothing more than King David’s poetic portrayal of the pain and anguish he experienced as a fugitive from either Saul or Absalom.

Unbelieving scholars also argue that the words “they have pierced My hands and My feet” (v.16) are misleading because the correct reading in most Hebrew manuscripts and in the Masoretic text is actually “like a lion my hands and my feet.”

Was Matthew dishonest in his use of various Old Testament passages

to prophetically support certain particulars of Jesus' early life?

After telling the story of Jesus' return to Israel from Egypt (Mt. 2:13-15), Matthew wrote, "So was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: 'Out of Egypt I called My Son.'" But when we turn to the Old Testament quote from Hosea 11:1, we look in vain for any indication that the original text was anything more than a historical description of the nation of Israel.

Skeptics point out that Matthew also declared that the slaughter of the infants in Bethlehem (2:16-18) fulfilled Jeremiah 31:15, another passage that does not make a specific reference to the Messiah. Matthew even said that it was a fulfillment of prophecy (2:23) for Jesus and His parents to live in the town of Nazareth. Yet,

there's no such prophecy in the Old Testament.

So, were the writers of the New Testament guilty of altering or misrepresenting the Old Testament text to create an illusion of fulfillment? These are

Did the New Testament writers try to create an illusion of fulfilled prophecy by painting Jesus into the Jewish Scriptures?

serious questions deserving of honest answers. If the founders and leaders of the Christian faith lacked moral and intellectual integrity, their teachings are suspect and have no spiritual authority.

I'm convinced, however,

that the New Testament writers were honest. I believe that the link between Jesus and the prophets of Israel is authentic, and that there are many reasons to believe that He can be found in the pages of the Old Testament. I also believe, however, that many of the questions skeptics raise deserve to be taken seriously, and that all of us need a clear understanding of how the New Testament writers saw Jesus in the prophecies of the Old Testament.

WHAT IT TAKES TO SEE JESUS IN PROPHECY

Before taking a look at the specific texts we've just identified, let's consider some of the assumptions that Christians need to make to see Jesus in the Old Testament.

If Jesus is in the Old Testament, the prophecies of His

suffering and glory are like a shuffled deck of cards. Prophecies of His suffering are intermingled with prophecies of His kingdom and glory. Nowhere do the prophets clearly explain two comings of Messiah—a first coming to die for the penalty of sin and a later return to deliver the earth from sin's consequences. Instead, themes of suffering and glory are interwoven throughout the prophetic Scriptures.

If Jesus is in the Old Testament, His presence is like viewing a distant mountain range.

The prophecies of Jesus' suffering and glory are like viewing mountains on the horizon. From a distance, it's impossible to see the valleys and gaps that separate peaks and ranges. Only when travelers get into the mountains and have a

peak or two behind them do they get a sense of the space between peaks that was impossible to see from a distance. Thus it is only in retrospect that anyone can see how the Messiah first came to save His people from the penalty of sin, and that He will return to fulfill the kingdom prophecies.

If Jesus is in the Old Testament, He is there like the author of a novel. On the surface, the creator of a good story may not appear to be writing about himself. Yet students of literature know that authors often show up in their own work and in some way reflect their own experience in what they write. Sometimes those who know the author are able to find and describe this relationship. Sometimes it takes the author himself to show how a chapter or image emerged from his own experiences or relationships.

From a New Testament point of view, the Messiah expresses the Spirit of the Author of the Old Testament. In the unity of the Godhead, Messiah is one with the God behind the page and with the Spirit guiding the pen of Moses, Jeremiah, and Isaiah. It was this conviction that gave the apostle John reason to speak of Jesus as the eternal Word made flesh through His birth in Bethlehem (Jn. 1:1-2,14).

If Jesus is in the Old Testament, He is there like a man in a house of mirrors.

From a Jewish perspective, Messiah would be a deliverer greater than Moses, a priest greater than Aaron, a king greater than David, a prophet greater than Elijah, and a servant more faithful than Israel.

Once Jesus' followers concluded that the carpenter from Nazareth was this

Messiah, they believed they had a basis for seeing Jesus reflected everywhere in the Old Testament. Once they became witnesses of His resurrection, they believed they had a basis for seeing Him as the embodiment of the spirit of the law (Mt. 5:17; Lk. 24:44). They saw Him as the One who gave meaning to the sacrificial ritual, the One who provided a salvation from sin that extended without distinction to Jew or Gentile, male or female, rich or poor, and as the One through whom Israel would fulfill her calling.

If Jesus is in the Old Testament, He is there like shadows on a field. The New Testament says that the patterns of Old Testament religion are like shadows on the landscape of history (Col. 2:17). They reflect the form and image of the coming Messiah, but in and of themselves they

have no real substance.

So the patterns of the Jewish house of worship, the sacrificial system, and the festival cycle of Israel are seen by Christians as anticipating a Messiah who would not only break the yoke of Gentile domination but would also offer Himself as a sacrifice for sin (1 Cor. 5:7).

If Jesus is in the Old Testament, He is there like a piece of an unsolved puzzle.

As noted earlier, Christians believe that messianic allusions were intermingled in passages designed to instruct, correct, comfort, and challenge. The New Testament says that God prompted His prophets to say some things that would be understood only by later generations. As a result, those who believe in Jesus embrace ideas that were only mysteries to people of an earlier era.

THE QUESTIONS OF THE SKEPTICS WEIGHED

We are now ready to take a closer look at the questions raised by skeptics, considering them in the light of the perspectives we've just described.

THE BETHLEHEM PREDICTION OF MICAH 5

In his gospel, Matthew wrote:

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born King of the Jews? We saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him." When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.

When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: 'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of My people Israel'" (Mt. 2:1-6).

Skeptics have suggested that Matthew contrived the events of Bethlehem to make it look like a fulfillment of Micah's prediction that Messiah would come out of Bethlehem. Those who use this argument implicitly acknowledge what other skeptics deny; namely, that the expectation of a Bethlehem birth existed among the Jews of Matthew's time.

**The Prediction:
Messiah would come
“out of” Bethlehem.**

All agree that Micah 5:1-4 predicts that Jerusalem would be invaded by enemy forces (v.1), that Israel would be temporarily abandoned by God (v.3), and that someday Messiah would restore Israel, establishing a kingdom of universal peace and justice (vv.3-4). Micah declared that this Deliverer would come “out of” Bethlehem.

*Is it possible that
Micah was only
saying that Messiah
would have an
ancestral link to
Bethlehem?*

Christians ask, “Isn’t this an obvious, undeniable prediction that Messiah

would be born in Bethlehem? “No,” say the skeptics. “Micah was only predicting that Messiah would be a descendant of David, the Bethlehemite. He could have this *ancestral* link to Bethlehem without actually being born there.”

Have followers of Jesus made too much of Micah’s prophecy? Could a son of David lay claim to the Kingdom if it turns out that He was actually born in Hebron, or Bethel, or Tel Aviv?

**The Moral-Spiritual Lesson:
Lowly Bethlehem would
be favored over proud
Jerusalem.** While Micah 5:2 does not make it absolutely clear that the coming Deliverer would be born in Bethlehem, preceding verses set the stage for that interpretation. With descriptive irony the prophet referred to Jerusalem as a “city of

troops” as he called on her to marshal her forces. Yet, in his next breath he predicted that the Babylonians would “strike Israel’s ruler on the cheek with a rod,” a prophecy of the extreme humiliation to which Zedekiah, Israel’s last king of the Davidic dynasty, would be subjected by enemy soldiers. Second Kings 25:1-7 says that his captors executed his sons before his eyes, blinded him, and took him to Babylon.

From Micah’s point of view, the descendants of David who were born in proud, self-reliant Jerusalem had sinned by relying on military power and strategy rather than on Jehovah. Therefore, according to Micah, the Deliverer would come from lowly Bethlehem, not from proud Jerusalem. While this is not a precise statement that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, it can be

inferred from the context. As the son of David, Messiah would have an ancestral link to both Jerusalem and Bethlehem. This relationship to both cities suggests that Micah must have had something else in view.

A Historical Confirmation: *The New Testament record is confirmed by history.* It remains for the record of the New Testament to put the last pieces into the puzzle. For those who accept the Gospels as true, Micah’s prophecy doesn’t have to stand all by itself. It can be interpreted in the light of the shepherds’ report about an angelic announcement, the sign of a star in the sky, the visit from the Magi, and the slaughter of the Bethlehem babies. Those first-century people who came to believe in Jesus as their Savior from sin and conqueror of death had no difficulty viewing Micah

5:1-4 as a prediction of His Bethlehem birth. It became for them one of many Old Testament prophecies amazingly fulfilled by Jesus.

First-century doubters could have checked out a story as concrete and specific as Jesus' birth by going to Bethlehem and either confirming or refuting it.

But again the skeptics ask, "How do we know that Matthew didn't just make up the Bethlehem connection to make it look like Jesus fulfilled Micah's prediction?" Several factors weigh against this fabrication theory. First, it is now widely recognized that all of the Gospel writers

wrote within the lifetime of Jesus' contemporaries. So any controversial claims could be checked out.

"But," someone asks, "who would remember such an insignificant event?" A better question might be, "If the account of the events surrounding Jesus' birth were true, who could forget?" The Gospel writers went on to tell how Herod the King heard about the birth of Messiah and ordered the death of all the male babies of Bethlehem. What contemporary Bethlehem family would not have heard about Herod's terrible massacre of innocents and the circumstances that prompted it? (Mt. 2:16-18). On the other hand, if no one of the first century had heard about the massacre, the "Bethlehem connection" could easily have been exposed as a baseless rumor.

THE SUFFERING SERVANT OF ISAIAH 52-53

Of all the passages thought by Christians to reflect Jesus in the Old Testament, Isaiah 52:13-53:12 is the one most intensely held by Christians and questioned by skeptics. The fourth in a series of “Servant Songs,” it opens with a brief summary of the Servant’s exaltation after a time during which His “appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man and His form marred beyond human likeness” (52:14).

It depicts Him as unpretentious and sorrowful: “He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces He was despised, and we esteemed Him not” (53:3).

Yet His rejection and suffering had a divine and beneficial purpose: “Surely

He took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered Him stricken by God, smitten by Him, and afflicted. But 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” (53:4-6).

As noted above, Christians see Jesus as this Servant: His humble birth and way of life (vv.1-2), His rejection (v.3), His substitutionary death (vv.4-6), His unretaliating attitude when abused (v.7), His wrongful execution as a criminal (vv.8-9), and His eventual vindication and everlasting reward (vv.10-12). Many non-Christian and Jewish skeptics, however, reason that the

suffering servant portrayed here is Israel. First let's look at the case for the position of the skeptics, including their objections to the idea that the servant is Jesus Christ. Then we will present the evidence for the Christian position.

The Skeptics' View That The Servant Is Israel. Skeptics point out that in his "Servant Songs," the prophet Isaiah identifies the servant as "Israel" or "Jacob" at least six times: 41:8-9; 44:1-2,21; 45:4; 48:20; and 49:3. When asked how the nation who was seen by God as so unfaithful that she deserved to be defeated by pagan Gentile powers could be Isaiah's morally perfect servant, most skeptics reply that Isaiah is speaking of a *righteous remnant*, those within the nation who suffer unjustly at the hands of the wicked Gentile nations.

Sensitive Christians can

understand why many Jews take this position. They are painfully aware of the fact that Jewish people have endured terrible injustices, sometimes by those who proclaim themselves to be

Even Christian theologians see a time when godly Jews will be the prime targets of intense persecution because of their witness.

followers of Jesus. Moreover, many Christian Bible students believe that the prophetic Scriptures portray a future time when the Jews who accept their Messiah will be subjected to the most intense persecution in all history under the regime of a coming world ruler.

These skeptics, some of whom have great reverence for the Old Testament Scriptures, claim that Christians see Jesus in the “servant” section of Isaiah partly through the benefit of hindsight and partly because Christian scholars have tampered with the Hebrew text. They say that by a combination of wishful thinking and dishonesty we have changed the powerful political Messiah of Jewish expectation into a suffering Servant who dies as a sacrifice for the sins of others.

In addition, they raise the following four specific objections to the Christian viewpoint: (1) No clear statement in the Jewish Scriptures can be interpreted to support the idea of a rejected, suffering, personal Messiah. (2) The servant in Isaiah, properly understood, is a community of godly Jews, not an individual.

(3) The concept of a Deliverer who suffers and dies voluntarily as a sacrifice for the sins of others is a concoction of Christian

Skeptics say that by wishful thinking and dishonesty, Christians have changed the powerful political Messiah into a suffering Servant.

theologians. (4) Christian translators are dishonest when they render Isaiah 53:8, “For the transgression of My people *He* was stricken,” because the pronoun they translate as “He” is plural, so it should be translated “they.”

These objections to the Christian viewpoint are raised by serious, thoughtful

people and deserve careful consideration.

The Christians' View That The Servant Is Jesus Christ.

The possibility of another servant in Isaiah's "Servant Songs" is not ruled out by the fact that Israel functioned as God's servant in the past, nor by the existence of prophecies about a godly remnant in the last days. Note, for example, that in Isaiah 45:1, Cyrus, King of Persia, is called God's "anointed" (the Hebrew word used to denote the Messiah in other passages) and chosen to show all the world that "There is none besides Me. I am the Lord, and there is no other" (Isa. 45:6). In time, Cyrus was used by God to conquer the Babylonian captors of Israel and to issue a decree allowing Jewish exiles to return from captivity.

It is apparent, therefore, that Isaiah has intermingled in his prophecies three

anointed servants: (1) Israel, the servant who has failed, (2) a righteous last-days remnant of the nation, and (3) a pagan king. Could there be another servant woven into these prophecies? Christians say yes, and point to Jesus. They are convinced that He, and He alone, fits the graphic description of Isaiah 53:7-12.

He was oppressed and afflicted, yet He did not open His mouth; He was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so He did not open His mouth. By oppression and judgment He was taken away. And who can speak of His descendants? For He was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people He was stricken. He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in His death, though He had done no

violence, nor was any deceit in His mouth. Yet it was the Lord's will to crush Him and cause Him to suffer, and though the Lord makes His life a guilt offering, He will see His offspring and prolong His days, and the will of the Lord will prosper in His hand. After the suffering of His soul, He will see the light of life and be satisfied; by His knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and He will bear their iniquities. Therefore I will give Him a portion among the great, and He will divide the spoils with the strong, because He poured out His life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For He bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

Let us now consider the skeptics' four specific objections (listed on p.16) to

the Christian belief that Jesus is that suffering Servant.

(1) What about the claim that no clear Old Testament passage portrays a rejected, suffering, personal

Messiah? In response, we present two passages which do just that: Zechariah 12:10 and Daniel 9:26.

I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication. They will look on Me, the One they have pierced, and they will mourn for Him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for Him as one grieves for a firstborn son (Zech. 12:10).

In the last days, a repentant Israel will grieve and mourn over the Savior they rejected and "pierced."

The prophet Daniel spoke of a specific time when the Messiah would appear and be "cut off,"

declaring plainly that this would occur before the Roman destruction of Jerusalem and its temple.

After the sixty-two “sevens,” the Anointed One will be cut off and will have nothing. The people of the ruler who will come will destroy the city and the sanctuary. The end will come like a flood: War will continue until the end, and desolations have been decreed (Dan. 9:26).

(2) What about the claim that the servant in Isaiah is a community, not an individual? To answer, one needs only to note the intensely personal nature of the Servant passages:

Here is My Servant, whom I uphold, My Chosen One in whom I delight; I will put My Spirit on Him and He will bring justice to the nations (Isa. 42:1). The Lord says—He who formed Me in the womb to

be His servant to bring Jacob back to Him and gather Israel to Himself, . . . He says: “It is too small a thing for you to be My servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make You a light for the Gentiles, that You may bring My salvation to the ends of the earth.” This is what the Lord says . . . to Him who was despised and abhorred by the nation, . . . “Kings will see You and rise up, princes will see and bow down, because of the Lord, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen You” (Isa. 49:5-7).

These words point to an individual who is distinct from even the godly remnant (here referred to as “those of Israel I have kept”). Moreover, no Old Testament prophecy declares that this godly remnant will be

“despised and abhorred by the nation.”

(3) What about the skeptics’ denial that the servant is portrayed as voluntarily suffering and dying as a sacrifice? The Servant clearly declared the voluntary nature of His suffering:

The Sovereign Lord has opened My ears, and I have not been rebellious; I have not drawn back. I offered My back to those who beat Me, My cheeks to those who pulled out My beard; I did not hide My face from mocking and spitting (50:5-6).

The Servant’s suffering is also seen in 53:7, where it says that “He did not open His mouth.”

The Servant’s death as a sacrifice comes through clearly in Isaiah 53:5, “He was pierced *for* our transgressions, He was crushed *for* our iniquities.” But skeptics say the

rendering should be “because of” our transgressions and iniquities instead of “for” them. This allows them to interpret these words as a portrayal of a redeemed remnant suffering because of the sins of the Gentile nations.

The redemptive significance of a sin offering is well-established in the Old Testament.

While the laws of grammar allow for either “for” or “because of,” the context shows that “for” is more accurate. The innocent Servant obviously suffers in behalf of the guilty and benefits them. This comes through even in a Jewish translation of verse 5, “The chastisement of our welfare was upon him, and with his

wounds we were healed.”

It can be argued that it is through persecuted Jewish witnesses that multitudes of Gentiles will in the last days be brought to their senses. But this group cannot be the Servant of Isaiah 53:10, of whom the prophet declares, “The Lord makes His life a guilt offering.” The Hebrew expression Isaiah uses links this Servant’s offering directly to the sacrificial system established by Moses. This Servant, then, must be Jesus Christ.

(4) What about the charge that Christian translators were dishonest in their rendering of Isaiah 53:8? As noted earlier, some skeptics call attention to Isaiah 53:8, which in Christian translations reads, “For the transgression of My people He was stricken,” even though the third person pronoun is plural. They render it, “For the

transgression of my people a plague befell them [the Jewish remnant].”

The pronoun is plural, but the accusation of dishonesty is unjustified. The last two Hebrew words in this sentence are in the form of a grammatical ellipsis, a construction in which a word or words necessary for a complete statement are omitted. This makes it necessary for the reader to determine its exact meaning from the context.

J. A. Alexander of Princeton Seminary, considered by many to be one of the world’s outstanding linguists, rendered the latter part of 53:8 this way: “For the transgression of My people, (as) a curse for them” (*Commentary On The Prophecies Of Isaiah*, Zondervan, p.299). This translation of the clause fits the context and gives the plural form to the pronoun.

Therefore, the traditional “for the transgression of My people He was stricken” accurately and honestly expresses the truth that the Messiah was made a curse (was stricken) for the sins of God’s people.

Who is speaking these words about the suffering Servant?

Beginning in the 1800s, most Jewish scholars rejected the idea that Isaiah 52:13–53:12 referred to the Messiah and began applying it to a remnant in Israel. Since then, they have been saying that these words will be spoken by Gentiles, who in the last days will stand corrected and brokenhearted before the suffering nation that has borne their hatred and sins. They say that this entire passage is a last-days confession of a Gentile world, admitting that its proud and mindless anti-semitism has been the cause of Israel’s pain.

It is difficult to see this chapter, especially its closing words, as describing a last-days glorification of Israel. What we find instead is a description of a humble Deliverer and Sin-bearer who, after being made a “guilt offering” (vv.4-8,10), sees the result of His atoning work and is satisfied.

J. A. Alexander gives us a literal translation of verses 10-11: “He shall see (His) seed, He shall prolong (His) days), and the pleasure of Jehovah in His hand shall prosper. From the labor of His soul He shall see, He shall be satisfied; by His knowledge shall My servant, (as) a righteous one, give righteousness to many, and their iniquities He shall bear.”

The expression “by His knowledge My righteous servant will justify many” (v.11) means that by knowledge of Him many will be justified. The Servant here

is not portrayed as a teacher but as a Savior in His priestly ministry, saving people by bearing their iniquities, not by imparting knowledge to them. The benefits of His atoning work will be received by those who come to know Him. Their salvation will crown His work with success:

Therefore I will give Him a portion among the great, and He will divide the spoils with the strong, because He poured out His life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For He bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors (v.12).

Commenting on this verse, J. A. Alexander writes, “This denotes intercession, not in the restricted sense of prayer for others, but of the wider one of meritorious and prevailing intervention, which is ascribed to Christ in the New Testament, not as a work already finished,

like that of atonement, but as one still going on (Rom. 8:34; Heb. 9:24; 1 Jn. 2:1)” (p.307).

One result to see Israel as the suffering Servant is that the language of Isaiah 53 describes a glory that even a righteous remnant can't claim.

When we read Isaiah 52:13–53:12 in its entirety and take it in its simple, unforced, and obvious meaning, the evidence shows that the speaker is not the Gentile nations but the redeemed community. The passage also reveals a suffering Servant who bears a striking resemblance to Jesus as He endured suffering on the cross.

THE SUFFERER OF PSALM 22

My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me? . . . Dogs have surrounded Me; a band of evil men has encircled Me, they have pierced My hands and My feet. I can count all My bones; people stare and gloat over Me. They divide My garments among them and cast lots for My clothing (Ps. 22:1,16-18).

Psalm 22 begins as an anguished prayer (vv.1-21) and ends as a hymn of praise (vv.22-31). Written by David, possibly in connection with the rebellion led by his son Absalom, it is beautifully poetic, rich in word pictures, and balanced in experience. Beginning in agony, it ends with a wonderful expression of God's goodness to those who fear Him.

The point of contention arises when Christians relate elements of David's suffering

in Psalm 22 to the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus. New Testament writers connect this psalm with Jesus' crucifixion at least 12 times (Mt. 27:35,39,43,46; Mk. 15:24,29,34; Lk. 23:34; Jn. 19:23-24,28,34,37; Heb. 2:12). They see the gambling

Psalm 22 shows how a person after God's own heart can experience feelings of abandonment, insight, and renewed hope.

for Jesus' clothing, the shaking of heads in ridicule, the expression of His thirst, and His cry of abandonment as foreshadowed in Psalm 22.

These New Testament references to Psalm 22 anger

those who reject the idea that Jesus fulfilled Old Testament prophecy in any way. They use this passage as a prime example of how dishonest followers of Jesus attempt to paint Jesus back into the Old Testament Scriptures. As evidence, they highlight the words “they have pierced My hands and My feet” (Ps. 22:16) and they point out that the Hebrew word Christians have translated “pierced” in verse 16 really means “like a lion.” Because Christian translators rendered the same word “like a lion” in Isaiah 38:13, critics charge translators with deceit.

The fact is that Christian translators are not alone in translating Psalm 22:16 as they do. Some Hebrew manuscripts and the Septuagint (the Greek version of the Old Testament produced by Alexandrian Jews in 250 BC) support the reading “they have pierced

my hands and my feet.” The Jewish scholar Aquila, who produced a Greek version of the Old Testament about AD 120 to correct the mistakes in the Septuagint, rendered Psalm 22:16, “they disfigured my hands and my feet” (*Bible Encyclopedia And Dictionary*, A. R. Fausset, Zondervan, p.525).

Skeptics claim that Christians twist the text to paint Jesus back into Psalm 22.

Therefore, while the Masoretic text, compiled by 10th-century Jewish scholars, reads, “like a lion,” it is not at all certain that this is the correct reading. The Hebrew word for “like a lion” and the one for “pierced” or “disfigured” differ only in the length of the last line in the last letter.

The scribes who made handwritten copies of the Hebrew manuscripts were very careful, but apparently some of them copied the last line of this word differently than others did.

Maybe the translators were wrong. Maybe not. We don't know. No one does. But to charge them with deliberate mistranslation is to say far more than what is known.

To charge translators with deliberate mistranslation is to say far more than what is known.

Christians believe that the suffering of David at the hands of his enemies foreshadowed the suffering of Jesus. But we can't be sure exactly what happened

to David. Did men at some point gamble for his clothing? (Ps. 22:18; Mt. 27:35). Did bystanders shake their heads in ridicule? (Ps. 22:7; Mk. 15:29). Did David experience intolerable thirst? (Ps. 22:15; Jn. 19:28). Possibly, but probably not. No known interpreters, Jewish or Christian, make that claim. All see the psalm as poetic, with much hyperbole and figurative language. But the details correspond strikingly with those of the crucifixion. It is therefore possible that David in his suffering was lifted by the Spirit beyond his own experience to mysteriously taste and describe in a limited way the suffering of the King he served.

It remains for honest seekers to decide whether the Gospel writers contrived this whole scenario or reported the facts as they remembered them.

THE INFANCY EVENTS OF MATTHEW 2

In his gospel, Matthew described several incidents in the early life of Jesus that he claimed fulfilled certain Old Testament prophecies. As noted earlier, skeptics have a field day with Matthew 2 because they can make it appear that Matthew took two Old Testament passages out of context and simply made up the third one.

Let's examine each of Matthew's quotations in the light of the whole Old Testament as well as in their immediate context to determine whether or not they are valid.

“Out of Egypt I called My Son” (Mt. 2:15).

When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. “Get up,” he said, “take the Child and His

mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the Child to kill Him.” So he got up, took the Child and His mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: “Out of Egypt I called My Son” (Mt. 2:13-15).

The problem comes when we check out Matthew's Old Testament source. A casual reading of Hosea 11:1 indicates that the prophet was speaking about the nation of Israel. From an Old Testament perspective, it doesn't seem that there are any messianic overtones in the text. So what gave Matthew the right to claim that Jesus' return from Egypt fulfilled what Hosea said?

The problem looks different in hindsight. Matthew knew Jesus to

be the Messiah. He knew Him to be all that man was created to be. He saw Him as the perfect sacrifice, giving substance to the shadow of priestly ritual. He saw Him as the conqueror of death. He saw the parallels between Israel and Jesus. Both are spoken of as a son of God, a chosen servant, and a light to the Gentiles. Both are given roles of prophet, priest, and king.

Yet Matthew was also aware of the differences between Israel and her long-awaited Son. As a nation, Israel had failed repeatedly in her calling to be a holy people and a channel of blessing to the nations. Because of her longing for spiritual self-rule, Israel had fallen to the oppression of Roman rule. Matthew was well-acquainted with the hope-filled messages of the prophets who portrayed a day when Israel as a nation would be converted and

restored to fulfill her destiny under the rule of a king from the family of David (Isa. 9:6-7; 11:1-16; Jer. 23:1-8; Ezek. 36-48). When Matthew wrote his gospel, he believed that these promises would be fulfilled through Jesus Christ. He saw the carpenter

***The New Testament
claims that Jesus
fulfilled the law,
the rituals, the
festival cycle,
and the history
of Israel.***

and rabbi from Nazareth as the individual who did all that the nation failed to do, making provision for her restoration.

Jesus is therefore the ideal "Israel," who experienced in principle some of Israel's experiences in coming out of Egypt, being tested

in the wilderness, and then showing the power of God to a watching world.

It is significant, from a New Testament point of view, that while Israel was described to Pharaoh as God's "firstborn son" (Ex. 4:22) and "My son" in Hosea 11:1, Jesus was declared to be God's "one and only Son" (Jn. 3:16). Matthew therefore saw Jesus as the perfect Son who would accomplish all that Israel, the imperfect son, had failed to achieve. Because of this, Matthew could apply passages to Jesus, which in their context seemed to relate only to Israel.

"Rachel weeping for her children" (Mt. 2:18).

When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under,

in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled:

"A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more" (Mt. 2:16-18; cp. Jer. 31:15).

Here again Matthew quoted a passage which in its original form seemed to give no hint of messianic prediction. In Jeremiah 31, the prophet spoke of Ramah, a town 5 miles north of Jerusalem through which Israelites would pass on their way to exile to Babylon. Ramah was also the burial place of Rachel, the mother of Joseph (representing the 10 tribes) and Benjamin (representing Judah). Jeremiah figuratively portrayed Rachel weeping bitterly as the exiles tramped

past her tomb on their way to a strange land. But she is told to cease her weeping because there is hope: Both the 10-tribe kingdom of Ephraim (vv.18-22) and Judah (vv.23-30) would repent and be restored. They would live under a new covenant that would be written in their minds and hearts as a converted and forgiven people who would never again become disobedient (vv.31-40).

Matthew saw a parallel between Rachel's tears and the mothers of Bethlehem crying for their lost children. In both there was reason for tears. Yet, in both cases the grief of a few would be followed by the joy of many.

The exile would produce a new and transformed Israel. The heartbreaking death of Bethlehem's infant boys was likewise part of a battle between Messiah and Satan. Herod could order the death of infants, but within a

few weeks he himself died. Jesus, on the other hand, had "the power of an indestructible life" (Heb. 7:16) and would in time give life to countless numbers who believed on Him.

“He shall be called a Nazarene” (Mt. 2:23).

He went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets: “He will be called a Nazarene” (Mt. 2:23).

The controversy with this passage is that a prediction about Messiah being called a Nazarene cannot be found in the Old Testament. This is not a problem, however, if Matthew was referring to non-biblical prophets whose prophecies have not survived. On the other hand, some Christian scholars have suggested that Matthew was playing on the similarity of the Hebrew word *nezer* (translated

“Branch” or “shoot” in Isa. 11:1 and Jer. 23:5) with the Greek *nazoraios*, here translated “Nazarene.”

Nazareth was a despised city. Note Nathaniel’s response to Philip’s statement that in Jesus of Nazareth they had found the Messiah: “Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?” (Jn. 1:46). It is possible, therefore, that Matthew was thinking of the prophecies of Isaiah and Jeremiah when he made this reference to the prophets. The lowly Shoot (a Branch of the royal line hacked down to a mere stump) grew up in Nazareth, in a place guaranteed to win Him scorn.

A second possibility is that by using the plural term “prophets” and the grammatical construction of an indirect quotation, Matthew was only saying that by living in Nazareth, Jesus was fulfilling the many

Old Testament prophecies that He would be despised and rejected (see Ps. 22:6-8,13; 69:8,20-21; Isa. 11:1; 49:7; 53:2-3,8; Dan. 9:26).

A skeptic cannot easily dismiss the claims of New Testament writers who saw foreshadowings of Jesus in the Old Testament.

We don’t have all the answers. There are many more questions that could be asked about the relationship between the Old and New Testaments. But I hope that what has been presented in this booklet has convinced you that a skeptic cannot easily dismiss the claims of New Testament writers who saw foreshadowings of Jesus in the Old Testament.

THE HEART OF THE MATTER

I know a retired physician who, while remaining a religious skeptic throughout his career, respects people of faith. Some of us who are praying for his conversion were encouraged recently when he said he has set aside his interest in medicine to seek answers to life's ultimate questions. On the basis of Scriptures like Matthew 7:7 and John 7:17, I believe that if he wants to know God and do His will, his mind will be opened, and like C. S. Lewis and other honestly seeking skeptics, he will find answers.

The Lord loves honest skeptics. He extends to them the invitation, "Come now, let us reason together Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow" (Isa. 1:18). He has provided this

complete forgiveness through Jesus Christ and longs to give it to you.

"If anyone chooses to do God's will, he will find out whether My teaching comes from God or whether I speak on My own."
Jesus (Jn. 7:17)

What remains is your response to His invitation. If you are uncertain, ask God to reveal Himself to you and to show you the truth about Jesus. He will open your eyes to see that Jesus is the Messiah who died for your sin and rose from the dead. I urge you to do your part by accepting Him as your Savior and making Him your Lord and Master.

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