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Is Jesus the Jewish Messiah?

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When Jesus was born, wise men from the East traveled to Israel to find and worship the newborn King of the Jews, following a bright star in the sky. They believed this brilliant star was a sign of the birth of a great king, who had been promised by ancient Hebrew prophets.

Author Ray Stedman reveals that the long-awaited hope for the Jewish Messiah is a resounding theme throughout the Old Testament (The Hebrew Scriptures also known as the *Tanakh*).

From the very beginning of the Old Testament, there is a sense of hope and expectation, like the sound of approaching footsteps: Someone is coming!... That hope increases...as prophet after prophet declares yet another tantalizing hint: Someone is coming!¹

Christians and Messianic Jews (Jewish followers of Jesus) are convinced that while on earth, Jesus of Nazareth fulfilled hundreds of these ancient messianic prophecies in detail.² However, most religious Jews are still waiting for their Messiah.

In his book, *A Rabbi Looks at Jesus of Nazareth*³, Jonathan Bernis attempts to unravel the mystery of the Messiah by taking a deeper look at Jesus (Yeshua) and his claims. As a Jew, Bernis thought Jesus was just a great moral teacher who started a new religion. After being challenged to look at Jesus in light of ancient Hebrew prophecies, he began his search.

Five profound questions intrigued Bernis:

1. Did Jesus truly fulfill the prophetic “fingerprint” of the Messiah?
2. Why did the Jewish leaders reject Jesus as their Messiah?
3. What was the Messiah’s Mysterious Identity?
4. Was Jesus the “suffering servant” of Isaiah 53?
5. Did Jesus’ rise from the dead?

Did Jesus Fulfill the Prophetic “Fingerprint” of the Messiah?

When he read the New Testament, Bernis discovered that the original followers of Jesus were all Jews who saw him as the fulfillment of their scriptures. In fact, many of their writings in the gospels connect the ancient Hebrew prophecies to Jesus’ alleged fulfillment. So, Bernis read both the Old Testament messianic prophecies as well as the claims in the New Testament of how they were fulfilled by the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth.

Bernis notes that the prophetic clues provide a “fingerprint” for the Messiah’s identity. He wondered if they would fit together like pieces of a puzzle to reveal Jesus as the Christ (Greek for Messiah). Or would they expose him as a fraud?

He also wanted to see if recently found mysteries from over 980 Dead Sea Scrolls would shed light on the Messiah’s identity. Hidden in caves for 1,900 years, these ancient scrolls were finally telling their story about the identity of the true Messiah. He wondered what clues they would reveal.

As he read the Scriptures, Bernis was shocked to see how ancient prophets had indeed provided a “fingerprint” from which the Messiah could be identified. A few examples are,

- He would be from the lineage of David⁴
- He would be born in Bethlehem⁵
- He would be rejected by his own people⁶
- He would be betrayed by a friend⁷
- He would be sold for 30 pieces of silver⁸
- He would be pierced in his hands and feet⁹
- He would be buried in a rich man’s tomb¹⁰
- He would be raised from the dead¹¹

Bernis then discovered that Jesus was from the line of David¹², was born in Bethlehem¹³, was rejected by the Jewish leaders¹⁴, was betrayed for 30 pieces of silver¹⁵, was nailed to a cross and then buried in a rich man’s tomb¹⁶. And, his followers proclaimed that he rose from the dead.¹⁷

Wondering if Jesus' fulfillment might have been coincidental, Bernis read that the odds of Jesus fulfilling these eight prophecies would be one in 100 quadrillion. Professor of Mathematics Peter Stoner illustrates how improbable that would be:

First, blanket every inch of an area the size of Texas (268,000 square miles) with silver dollars two feet high.

Second, put a special mark on one dollar and bury it among the trillions of other silver dollars throughout the State of Texas.

Then blindfold someone and ask them to travel throughout Texas and pick up that marked dollar on *one try*.

It would have been more difficult for Jesus to have fulfilled eight prophecies than to pick up that one marked dollar. Yet, Jesus fulfilled far more— over forty-eight prophetic details written in roughly 300 Old Testament Scriptures.¹⁸ According to mathematicians, that's statistically impossible.¹⁹

Why Did Jewish Leaders Reject Jesus?

Since Jesus fulfilled so many of these prophecies, Bernis wondered why Israel's religious leaders wouldn't have been able to recognize him as the Messiah.

However, as he read the Gospel accounts, he realized that Jesus fulfilled messianic prophecies in ways that no one was expecting. Israel was looking for another Moses who would deliver them from the oppression of Rome.

Yet, instead of conquering Rome, Jesus captured the hearts of people with his love and message of forgiveness. Instead of promoting himself, he brought glory to God by his words and deeds of compassion. Instead of wielding power, he exemplified humility and servitude. Instead of teaching legalistic rules about outward appearance, Jesus offered us a relationship with God by transforming hearts.

Jesus spoke of himself as a savior rather than a military conqueror, stating that he must suffer and die for our sins. He told his follower Zacchaeus,

"I came to seek and save those who are lost."²⁰

What Was Messiah’s Mysterious Identity?

Jesus also made claims that infuriated many of the Scribes and Pharisees such as claiming his eternal existence by telling them he had pre-existed the Jewish patriarch, Abraham who had lived two thousand years earlier.²¹

Several hundred years before Jesus was born, Isaiah wrote of the Messiah’s divine nature. He said, “For unto us a child is born,” whose identity would be “Mighty God,” “Everlasting Father,” “Prince of Peace.”²² Mysteriously, the prophet reveals that God would take on human form.

Although Jesus always pointed to his Father as God, he also called himself God’s only Son, claiming oneness with his Father.²³ And when Philip asked Jesus to show him the Father, Jesus replied, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and yet you still don’t know who I am? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father!”²⁴

Bernis was stunned to discover that the prophet Zechariah actually wrote of the day when the Jewish people would recognize Jesus as the Messiah they had rejected, a day when they will enter a time of repentance. In Zechariah 12:10 we read, “They will look on me whom they have pierced and mourn for him as for an only son. They will grieve bitterly for him as for a firstborn son who has died.”²⁵

Imagine the scene! Zechariah prophesies that Israel will be nearly destroyed by its enemies. Then the Lord himself will descend in majestic power and glory, overthrowing Israel’s enemies. But when the rescued people of Israel see the wounds he had previously suffered—written hundreds of years before Jesus—they will suddenly weep bitterly.

Why would these surviving Israelis be so distraught at such a time of victory? Could it be that their bitter anguish comes from the realization that their forefathers had rejected him two thousand years earlier and continued to reject him for almost 2000 years? Or could it be that their hearts had been unwilling to consider Jesus’ claims?

Was Jesus the Suffering Servant Depicted in Isaiah 53?

Just how strong is the case for Jesus being the long-promised Messiah?

The most comprehensive description of the Messiah is in Isaiah 53 where the prophet foretells the Messiah suffering and dying for our sins. Here are just a few portions of that messianic prophecy:

He took our suffering on him....the Lord has put on him the punishment for all the evil we have done....but he didn't say a word. He was like a lamb being led to be killed....He was put to death....He had done nothing wrong....He willingly gave his life....he carried away the sins of many...and asked forgiveness for those who sinned.²⁶

So, how do Jewish rabbis today deal with the obvious parallels between Isaiah 53 and their fulfillment by Jesus of Nazareth?

Unbelievably, most Jewish people are unaware of Isaiah's 53rd chapter because the synagogue readings of the weekly Haftarah purposely omit it, skipping from chapter 52 to 54.²⁷ Most rabbis today believe Isaiah 53 refers to the suffering servant as the nation of Israel, rather than the Messiah.²⁸

Bernis was shocked to learn Isaiah 53 was always viewed as messianic until a thousand years after Christ. The 2nd century Rabbi Jonathan ben Uzziel viewed Isaiah's prophecy as messianic. So too did The Babylonian Talmud, The Midrash Ruth Rabbah, the Zohar, and even the great Rabbi Maimonides, who wrote, "I believe with perfect faith in the coming of the Messiah; and, though he tarry, I will wait daily for his coming."²⁹

That view was prevalent among Jewish sages until the 11th century when Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaqi (known by the acronym Rashi) began teaching that the suffering servant was the nation of Israel, not the Messiah.³⁰

However, a careful reading of Isaiah 53 reveals that the prophecy of the suffering servant is speaking of a person, not the nation of Israel itself.

Since the oldest copies of Isaiah were from the Masoretic Text, dated around AD 1000, skeptics suggested the prophecies might have been changed later by Christians to make it appear Jesus had fulfilled them.

However, in 1947, ancient Hebrew scrolls carbon dated around 200 years before Christ were discovered near the Dead Sea. Hidden for 1,900 years was a copy of Isaiah, virtually identical to the Book of Isaiah in our Bibles today. It's clear that

Jesus' fulfillment of Isaiah's 53rd chapter occurred hundreds of years after the prophecy was written and couldn't have been contrived.³¹

Isaiah clearly reveals the Messiah would give his life for our sins. And, when John the Baptist first saw Jesus, he prophetically said of him, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."³²

Is there Evidence for Jesus' Resurrection?

Bernis needed to know one more vital thing to be convinced that Jesus is the true Messiah. He asks, "Did Yeshua rise from the dead? For all of us, and most especially for Jews, the answer to this question makes all the difference."³³

He read the Old Testament prophecy where David refers to the Messiah as "Your holy one who would not undergo decay for You will not abandon my soul to Sheol; Nor will You allow Your Holy One to undergo decay."³⁴

After examining the compelling evidence for Jesus' resurrection, he became convinced that it was an actual historical event. (See page 53, "Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?") What other explanation could there be for Jesus' followers to willingly risk their lives proclaiming the risen Jesus as the true Messiah?

Conclusion

After searching both the Old and New Testaments, Bernis finally became convinced that Jesus Christ fulfilled over 300 messianic prophecies written hundreds of years before his birth. He concluded that the odds for Jesus being the prophesied Messiah overwhelmingly pointed to him as the fulfillment.

Finally, Bernis became a Messianic Jew, accepting Jesus Christ as the Messiah of Israel, as well as his own personal Savior and Lord. He concludes,

Embracing Yeshua is the most Jewish thing I have ever done. In fact, it is the most important thing I have ever done. The same God who changed my life...still has the power to change lives today. His love is transforming the lives of Jew and Gentile alike, all over the world.

God created you with a divine destiny to fulfill, and the only way to come into that destiny is to say yes to God and surrender yourself completely to Him.³⁵

Endnotes