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THE PATH OF THE PROPHETS: **Was Jesus the Messiah?**

What evidence is there that Jesus is who he really claimed to be? How do we know he wasn't some kind of imposter? Let's take a look at some renowned imposters and see if that title fits Jesus, or whether there is evidence to support his claims.

Ferdinand Waldo Demara, Jr. was called, the great imposter. Demara held phony identities of psychologist, university lecturer, college department head, school teacher, and prison warden. He even performed surgeries, as a bogus doctor.

Some argue that Frank Abagnale was an even greater imposter. Between the ages of 16 and 21, Abagnale was one of the world's most successful con artists. He cashed \$2.5 million in fraudulent checks in all 50 states and 26 foreign countries. He also successfully passed himself off as an airline pilot, an attorney, a college professor, and a pediatrician before being apprehended by the French police.

If this story sounds familiar to you, it's probably because you watched the 2002 movie *Catch Me If You Can*, in which Abagnale was played by Leonardo DiCaprio (who passed himself off as an actor in *Titanic*).

What would it take to top Abagnale's performance as a con man? Well, if Jesus Christ wasn't the Messiah he claimed to be, there would be no contest. We're not talking about conning thousands, as in the case of Abagnale. If Jesus Christ was an imposter, his con job deluded billions of people and changed the course of 2,000 years of history.

So, could Jesus have been a fake Messiah, fooling even the most noteworthy religious scholars? Is it possible he was groomed by his parents or undisclosed mentors to become the long-promised king that Israel had been looking for? In fact, if Jesus was an imposter, he would not be the first person in the history of Israel to have lied about being the Messiah. Through the centuries prior to Christ's birth, and afterward as well, many self-proclaimed messiahs arose, only to be shown to be cons or lunatics.

Ancient Hebrew prophecies had clearly predicted the reign of a future king who would bring peace to Israel and be their Savior. A sense of expectancy filled the land and captivated Jewish hopes and aspirations. In such an atmosphere as Israel's, could not someone less qualified have been pressed into, or conformed himself to fit, the mold of Messiah? The answer to that question hangs on the Old Testament prophecies pointing to the Messiah.

God's Mouth Pieces

According to the Scriptures, the God of the Hebrews spoke to his people through prophets, men and women who were especially attuned to God and who may or may not have been a part of the religious establishment. Some of the prophets' messages were for the present; others, for the future. Either way, their role was to proclaim God's declarations and disclosures to the people.

In general, being a prophet ranked up there with working at a meatpacking plant among the world's most hazardous occupations. Even when they were telling the truth, prophets might be killed or thrown into prison by people who didn't like what they were saying. (Some kings hated hearing bad news.) According to historical accounts, the prophet Isaiah was sawn in half.

So consider a prophet's dilemma: death if he was proved wrong and the possibility of death if he was right. No true prophet wanted to offend God, and just as few wanted to be sawn in half. Thus most prophets waited until they were absolutely convinced that God had spoken, or else they kept their mouths shut. Kings began to shudder at their words. A true prophet's messages were never wrong.

Now here's a question: how would the accuracy of these biblical prophets match up with today's psychics?

Prophets Vs Psychics?

To consider whether modern psychics' accuracy approaches that of biblical prophets, let's take Jean Dixon as a case study. This American psychic seemed to have a special ability to foretell events. But upon analysis her reputation seems unwarranted.

For instance, Dixon had a vision that on February 5, 1962, a child was born in the Middle East who would transform the world by the year 2000. This special man would create a one-world religion and bring lasting world peace. She saw a cross growing above this man until it covered the whole earth. According to Dixon, this child would be a descendant of the ancient Egyptian Queen Nefertiti.¹ Where is this guy? Have you seen him? And how about that lasting world peace-it's nice, huh?

In fact, an exhaustive search of her prediction yields two indisputable facts. Her rate of accuracy is equivalent to those guessing the future, and her most publicized fulfillments were prophecies so intentionally vague as any number of events could have been hailed as fulfillments. Even the widely publicized prophecies of Nostradamus have frequently been proved wrong in spite of his vague oracles, which are difficult to disprove.² For example, here is one of the predictions of Nostradamus:

“Takes the Goddess of the Moon, for his Day & Movement: A frantic wanderer and witness of Gods Law, in awakening the worlds great regions to God's will (Ones Will).”³

This is said to be about the death of Princess Diana. (You were probably thinking Margaret Thatcher.) Prophecies like this are as nebulous as seeing images in clouds. Yet some insist this is evidence of a Nostradamus prophecy fulfilled. Highly suspect, but difficult to disprove.

And this is generally the track record of psychics. When “*The People's Almanac*” researched the predictions of 25 top psychics, 92 percent of the predictions had proved wrong. The other 8 percent were questionable and could be explained by chance or general knowledge of circumstances.⁴ In other experiments with the world's foremost psychics, their rate of accuracy has been shown to hover around 11 percent, which might not be a bad average except for the fact that people making random guesses about the future score at the same percentile. This doesn't disprove all future telling, but it certainly explains why psychics aren't winning the lottery.

The difference between psychics and prophets seems to be more one of kind than one of degree. Prophets made specific declarations about future events in relation to God's unfurling plan-and did it with unwavering accuracy. Psychics are more mercenary, providing vague sketches of the future to a market willing to pay for their services. They offer sensational information, but with a flawed track record.

Religious Prophecy In Perspective

Prophecy can be rather mystical, metaphysical, and-for lack of a better word-creepy. It conjures up images of séances and other worlds. In Star Wars there is the foretelling of one who would bring balance to the Force. The Lord of the Rings movies weave their imaginary themes around scenes of prophetic utterances. But such is the world of imagination.

Regarding the real world, it has been said that if a person knew just one minute of the future he could rule the world. Think about it. One minute of knowing every hand dealt at the Trump Casino. You'd become the richest person in the world and Donald would become a postal worker.

But in the world of religion, prophecy serves an important function. It becomes one sure way to know if someone is speaking from God or if he is not, for only an omniscient God could exhaustively know the future. And on this point the prophecy in the Old Testament stands as unique, for most of the renowned holy books from other religions are devoid of predictive prophecy. For example, while the *Book of Mormon* and the *Hindu Veda* claim divine inspiration, there is really no means to corroborate their claims; you're simply left with "Yeah, that sounds like something God might say."

Bible scholar Wilbur Smith compared the prophecies of the Bible with other historical books, stating that the Bible "is the only volume ever produced by man, or a group of men, in which is to be found a large body of prophecies relating to individual nations, to Israel, to all the peoples of the earth, to certain cities, and to the coming one who was to be the Messiah."⁵ Thus the Bible lays out its claim for inspiration in such a way that it can be either substantiated or disproved.

And if you put this degree of accuracy into everyday perspective, you can see how astounding it is. For example, it would have been miraculous if in 1910 you had predicted that a man named George Bush would win the 2000 election. But imagine if you had included some of these details in your prediction:

- The candidate with the most total votes would lose the election.
- All major TV networks would announce the winner and then reverse themselves.
- One state (Florida) would swing the election.
- The U.S. Supreme Court would ultimately determine the winner.

Had such occurred, there would be churches named after you and dashboard statuettes bearing your likeness. But you didn't, so there aren't. As difficult (or impossible) as it would have been in 1910 to have accurately predicted this precise sequence of events, the odds are incredibly more difficult for Jesus, or any one person, to have fulfilled all the Hebrew prophecies for the Messiah. Contained within the Old Testament, written hundreds of years before the birth of Jesus, are 61 specific prophecies and nearly 300 references about the Messiah.⁶

According to the Hebrew requirement that a prophecy must have a 100 percent rate of accuracy, the true Messiah of Israel must fulfill them all or else he is not the Messiah. So the question that either vindicates Jesus or makes him culpable for the world's greatest hoax is, did he fit and fulfill these Old Testament prophecies?

What Are The Odds?

Let's look at two of the specific prophecies about the Messiah in the Old Testament.

“You, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, are only a small village in Judah. Yet a ruler of Israel will come from you, one whose origins are from the distant past.” (Micah 5:2, NLT)

“The Lord himself will choose [a] sign. Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel-‘God is with us.’” (Isaiah 7:14, NLT)

Now, before considering the other 59 prophecies, you have to stop and ask yourself how many people in the category of potential Messiah throughout history were born of a virgin in the town of Bethlehem. “Well, let's see, there's my neighbor George, but ...no, never mind; he was born in Brooklyn.” In the case of 61 detailed prophecies being fulfilled by one person, we are talking about virtually impossible odds.

When forensic scientists discover a DNA profile match, the odds of having the wrong person is frequently less than one in several billion (something for deviants to keep in mind). It would seem we are in the same neighborhood of odds, and numbers of zeros, in considering a single individual fulfilling these prophecies.

Professor of mathematics Peter Stoner gave 600 students a math probability problem that would determine the odds for one person fulfilling eight specific prophecies. (This is not the same as flipping a coin eight times in a row and getting heads each time.) First the students calculated the odds of one person fulfilling all the conditions of one specific prophecy, such as being betrayed by a friend for 30 pieces of silver. Then the students did their best to estimate the odds for all of the eight prophecies combined.

The students calculated that the odds against one person fulfilling all eight prophecies are astronomical—one in ten to the 21st power (10^{21}). To illustrate that number, Stoner gave the following example: “First, blanket the entire Earth land mass with silver dollars 120 feet high. Second, specially mark one of those dollars and randomly bury it. Third, ask a person to travel the Earth and select the marked dollar, while blindfolded, from the trillions of other dollars.”⁷

People can do some pretty squishy things with numbers (especially with a last name like that), so it's important to note that Stoner's work was reviewed by the American Scientific Association, which stated, “The mathematical analysis...is based upon principles of probability which are thoroughly sound, and Professor Stoner has applied these principles in a proper and convincing way.”⁸

With that as an introduction, let's add six more predictions to the two we've already considered, giving us a total of Professor Stoner's eight:

Prophecy: The Messiah would be from the lineage of King David.
Jeremiah 23:5
600 B.C.

Prophecy: The Messiah would be betrayed for 30 pieces of silver.
Zechariah 11:13
487 B.C.

Prophecy: The Messiah would have his hands and feet pierced.
Psalm 22:16
1000 B.C.

Prophecy: People would cast lots for the Messiah's clothing.
Psalm 22:18
1000 B.C.

Prophecy: The Messiah would appear riding on a donkey.
Zechariah 9:9
500 B.C.

Prophecy: A messenger would be sent to herald the Messiah.
Malachi 3:1
500 B.C.

Fulfillment: "Jesus ...the son of David..."
Luke 3:23, 31
4 B.C.

Fulfillment: "They gave him thirty pieces of silver."
Matthew 26:15
30 A.D.

Fulfillment: "They came to a place called The Skull. All three were crucified there- Jesus on the center cross, and the two criminals on either side."
Luke 23:33
30 A.D.

Fulfillment: "The soldiers...took his robe, but it was seamless, woven in one piece from the top. So they said, 'Let's not tear it but throw dice to see who gets it.'"
John 19:23-24
30 A.D.

Fulfillment: "They brought the animals to him and threw their garments over the colt, and he sat on it."
Matthew 21:7
30 A.D.

Fulfillment: John told them, "I baptize with water, but right here in the crowd is someone you do not know."
John 1:26
27 A.D.

The eight prophecies we've reviewed about the Messiah were written by men from different times and places between about 500 and 1,000 years before Jesus was born. Thus there was no opportunity for collusion among them. Notice too, the specificity. This is not the genre of a Nostradamus prediction-"When the moon turns green, the lima bean will lie cloaked by the roadside."

Out Of His Control

Imagine winning a Powerball lottery with merely one ticket among tens of millions sold. Now imagine winning a hundred of these lotteries in a row. What would people think? Right, "It was rigged!"

And over the years a similar claim has been made by skeptics about Jesus' fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. They have granted that Jesus fulfilled messianic prophecies but have accused him of living his life in such a way as to intentionally fulfill them. A reasonable objection, but not as plausible as it might seem.

Consider the nature of just four of the messianic prophecies:

- His lineage would come from David (Jeremiah 23:5).
- His birth would occur in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2).
- He would migrate to Egypt (Hosea 11:1).
- He would live in Nazareth (Isaiah 11:1).⁹

lived. And they are virtually identical to the texts of the Bible we were already using.

As a result, even scholars who deny Jesus as the Messiah accept these manuscripts of the Old Testament as having predated his birth and therefore concede that the prophecies about the Messiah contained within them have not been altered in order to conform to Jesus.

If these predictions were fulfilled so accurately through the life of Jesus, it seems logical to wonder why everyone in Israel would not have been able to see it. But as his crucifixion attests, not everyone did see it. As the apostle John said of Jesus, “Even in his own land and among his own people, he was not accepted.” (John 1:11, NLT). Why?

Considering the embattled history of Israel, it is not difficult to read into the definition of Messiah the idea of a political freedom fighter. It is understandable how a first-century Jewish person might think, How could the Messiah have come and Israel still be oppressed under Roman occupation?

While Jesus fulfilled the messianic prophecies, he did so in ways that no one was expecting. He sought a moral and spiritual revolution, not a political one, accomplishing his objectives through self-sacrifice and humble service, healing and teaching. Meanwhile, Israel was looking for another Moses or Joshua who would lead them in a conquest to recover their lost kingdom.

Of course, many Jews of Jesus’ day did recognize him as the Messiah—the entire foundation of the Christian church being Jewish. The majority, however, did not. And it’s not so hard to comprehend why.

To better understand the first-century Jews’ misunderstanding, consider this messianic prophecy written 700 years before the birth of Jesus by the prophet Isaiah. Was it referring to Jesus?

“All of us have strayed away like sheep. We have left God’s paths to follow our own. Yet the Lord laid on him the guilt and sins of us all.”

“He was oppressed and treated harshly, yet he never said a word. He was led as a lamb to the slaughter. And as a sheep is silent before the shearers, he did not open his mouth. From prison and trial they led him away to his death. But who among the people realized that he was dying for their sins—that he was suffering their punishment? He had done no wrong, and he never deceived anyone. But he was buried like a criminal; he was put in a rich man’s grave.”

“But it was the Lord’s good plan to crush him and fill him with grief. Yet when his life is made an offering for sin, he will have a multitude of children, many heirs. ...And because of what he has experienced, my righteous servant will make it possible for many to be counted righteous, for he will bear all their sins.” (Portions of Isaiah 53:6-11, NLT)

As Jesus hung on the cross, some understandably may have been thinking, ‘How could this be the Messiah?’ At the same time, others may have been wondering, ‘Who else but Jesus could Isaiah be talking about?’

Impossible Imposter

So, what are we to make of Jesus having fulfilled so many prophecies written hundreds of years prior to his birth? Leonardo DiCaprio ... I mean, Frank Abagnale might be a good imposter, but even he got caught by the time he was old enough to drink a beer legally.

Jesus doesn't look anything like a more competent Frank Abagnale. He's in a different category altogether. No imposter could ever beat such odds as those presented by Hebrew prophecy.

And what does that mean? Two conclusions emerge: First, only a transcendent Being could orchestrate such events. And second, it makes all of Jesus' other claims credible and worthy of serious consideration.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus made the claim, "I am the way, the truth and the life." Overwhelming evidence seems to indicate that the signature on that check is not a forgery.

Did Jesus Really Rise From The Dead?

The greatest question of our time is "Who is the real Jesus Christ?" Was he just an exceptional man, or was he God in the flesh, as Paul, John, and his other disciples believed?

The eyewitnesses to Jesus Christ actually spoke and acted like they believed he physically rose from the dead after his crucifixion. If they were wrong then Christianity has been founded upon a lie. But if they were right, such a miracle would substantiate all Jesus said about God, himself, and us.

But must we take the resurrection of Jesus Christ by faith alone, or is there solid historical evidence? Several skeptics began investigations into the historical record to prove the resurrection account false. What did they discover?

Endnotes

1. Terence Hines, *Pseudoscience and the Paranormal* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 2003), 193.
2. Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (San Bernardino, CA: Here's Life Publishers, 1999), 194.
3. Prediction 3, Quatrain 2, 28.
4. McDowell, *Ibid.*
5. Quoted in McDowell, 12-13.
6. McDowell, 164-193.
7. Peter W. Stoner, *Science Speaks* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1958), 97-110.
8. Stoner, 5.
9. The Hebrew word *netzer*, appearing in Isaiah 11:1, is believed by many to refer to Nazareth, Jesus' hometown.
10. Lee Strobel, *The Case for Faith*.

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