

HAS PROPHECY BEEN FULFILLED?

A prophet was someone who spoke a message from God. Prophets were not fortune tellers or mediums who were able to see the future. Whatever message a prophet was given was called a prophecy. Prophecies did not necessarily entail predicting some future event.

Moses is the first writing prophet mentioned in Scripture, and the one who established the criteria for being accepted as a prophet. During his experience at the burning bush God commissioned Moses to act and speak on his behalf. Moses was told the future of Israel and was to tell these things to the nation of Israel. But Moses was not convinced they would believe him. God then gave him two signs or miracles for him to perform to demonstrate his authority to speak for God. In addition to these and many other miracles, the liberation of Israel by Egypt was accomplished during Moses' lifetime, fulfilling his prophecy and authenticating his position as one who spoke the words of God.

With Moses as a prototype, the prophets that succeeded him also spoke the words of God and were authenticated by miracles—often predictive prophecy that came true during the prophet's lifetime. Deuteronomy 18:17-22 gives a criteria for distinguishing between authentic and false prophets and how God's people are to respond both to each.

Then the Lord said to me, 'They have spoken well. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. I will put My words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him. I will hold accountable whoever does not listen to My words that he speaks in My name. But the prophet who dares to speak in My name a message I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods—that prophet must die.' You may say to yourself, 'How can we recognize a message the Lord has not spoken?' When a prophet speaks in the Lord's name, and the message does not come true or is not fulfilled, that is a message the Lord has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously. Do not be afraid of him.

Prophets were never wrong. And the penalty for a prophet's false testimony was death. Also, the words of the prophet were to be obeyed as God's own words.

There are many occasions in the Bible, however, where prophecy foretold future events. These prophecies are given so far ahead of their fulfillment that they cannot have possibly been intended to authenticate a prophet during his lifetime, though they all must come true if they are indeed from a true prophet. God uses these prophecies to reveal Himself as a faithful God who keeps his promises and in whom we can place our trust and is sovereign over all history.

In prophecy we see God designing and ordering history using seemingly unconnected acts of people distanced by time. Picture a pond with a sandy bottom and flat rocks on the shore but no rocks in the water. Now picture a boy who discovers the lake and skips a few rocks. A century later another boy also skips some rocks across the pond. Another century goes by and another boy skips more rocks on the pond. Imagine then climbing a tall tree by the pond and discovering

that there was a detailed portrait on the bottom of the pond made from the stones. This is what prophecy is like.

Given the advantage of hindsight and the advances of archaeology, we should be able to take a look at some of the predictive prophecies and test the accuracy of their fulfillment—if they were fulfilled at all. We'll look at a couple of fulfilled prophecies.

THE CITY OF TYRE

Ezekiel 26:3-14, 21

3 I will raise up many nations against you, just as the sea raises its waves.

4 They will destroy the walls of Tyre and demolish her towers. I will scrape the soil from her and turn her into a bare rock.

5 She will become a place in the sea to spread nets, for I have spoken She will become plunder for the nations,

6 and her villages on the mainland will be slaughtered by the sword .

7 I am about to bring King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, king of kings, against Tyre from the north with horses, chariots, cavalry, and a vast company of troops.

8 He will slaughter your villages on the mainland with the sword. He will set up siege works against you, and will build a ramp and raise a wall of shields against you.

9 He will direct the blows of his battering rams against your walls and tear down your towers with his iron tools.

10 His horses will be so numerous that their dust will cover you. When he enters your gates as an army entering a breached city, your walls will shake from the noise of cavalry, wagons, and chariots.

11 He will trample all your streets with the hooves of his horses. He will slaughter your people with the sword, and your mighty pillars will fall to the ground.

12 They will take your wealth as spoil and plunder your merchandise. They will also demolish your walls and tear down your beautiful homes. Then they will throw your stones, timber, and soil into the water.

13 I will put an end to the noise of your songs, and the sound of your lyres will no longer be heard.

14 I will turn you into a bare rock, and you will be a place to spread nets. You will never be rebuilt, for I, the Lord, have spoken. This is the declaration of the Lord God.

...

21 I will make you an object of horror, and you will no longer exist. You will be sought but will never be found again."...

Ezekiel began his prophetic ministry in 593 BC and continued until at least 571 BC. Obviously, the future tense of the prophecy indicates the events described had not happened yet. Skeptics will argue that Ezekiel or some later editor of his material could have simply written past events as future events for his own glorification or some other reason. However, although some of the prophecies came true during his lifetime, many did not.

Tyre in the time of Ezekiel existed in two parts, one on the coast of the mainland in what is modern day Lebanon, and the other on an island about half a mile from shore. In 585 BC Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, laid siege to the city that lasted until 572 when Tyre finally fell. After 13 years the soldiers entered the city to find most of its treasure and wealth missing. It seems it had been smuggled out to the island city. The fall of mainland Tyre fulfilled the

prophecies of verses 7, 8, 9, and 11, and parts of 4 and 12.

In 332 BC, Alexander the Great attacked the island city of Tyre. He decided to take the city by linking the island to the mainland since the water was only 20 feet deep. Using the debris of the old city still lying where it fell, he built a causeway 200 feet wide that led to the island. This fulfilled the prophecies of verses 4 and 12. The clearing away of this debris created a flat place that fishermen still use today to dry their nets. This fulfilled the first part of the prophecy of verses 5 and 14. Following Alexander's conquest of Tyre, it fell to Antigonus c. 314 BC. In AD 1291, Muslims took control of the island. This succession of invaders fulfills the prophecy in verse 3.

Though today there is a tiny fishing village on the spot of ancient Tyre, the great city has never been rebuilt, fulfilling the prophecy of the second half of verse 14. Tyre, as a city of prominence and wealth was destroyed.

Thus, the prophecies of Ezekiel concerning Tyre have all been fulfilled. Mathematician and astronomer Peter Stoner calculated the odds of all these prophecies being fulfilled as 1 in 75,000,000. To be fair, some of these events, such as Nebuchadnezzar's attack of Tyre, could be reasonably guessed by Ezekiel, and some are fairly vague. However, the Old Testament canon reached its final form 100 years or so before Alexander's conquests making it highly unlikely any editing after the fact was done to make Ezekiel more accurate. If there were changes, we would expect to find variants in the texts, some with the accurate prophecies and some without. But that is just not the case.

ALEXANDER THE GREAT

Another example concerning Alexander the Great is Daniel 11:2-4.

2...“Three more kings will arise in Persia, and the fourth will be far richer than the others. By the power he gains through his riches, he will stir up everyone against the kingdom of Greece.

3 Then a warrior king will arise; he will rule a vast realm and do whatever he wants.

4 But as soon as he is established, his kingdom will be broken up and divided to the four winds of heaven, but not to his descendants; it will not be the same kingdom that he ruled, because his kingdom will be uprooted and will go to others besides them.

Daniel wrote his prophecy in Persia toward the end of the sixth century BC, almost 200 years before the birth of Alexander the Great in 356. Alexander ascended the throne at the age of twenty and immediately embarked on a campaign of vengeance to conquer Persia and, eventually, most of the rest of the Mediterranean world, creating a vast empire. This fulfilled verse 3 of the prophecy. After Alexander's sudden death in 323 BC, his empire was divided among his generals, not his heirs. Generals Ptolemy, Seleucus, Lysimachus, Cassander and Antigonids wrangled and conspired against one another until ultimately solidifying into four different kingdoms. This fulfilled verse four of Daniel's prophecy.

Like the prophecy of Tyre, this prophecy could not have been written back into Daniel after the events because the canon of the Hebrew Bible had closed over 100 years before the death of Alexander, and by this time the text had been firmly established. There are no alternate versions of Daniel that have a different chapter 11.

One of the interesting features of these and other biblical prophecies is that the prophets may not have had a clear picture of what they were foretelling or predicting. How these prophecies came to pass, the time between the stages, and even the order of the stages are not necessarily known by the prophets themselves. The pictures of future things to the prophets were often without a sense of the proper relationship between the different elements involved. These things can only be seen in hindsight.

The authenticating nature of prophecy is even more powerful in the context of the Messianic prophecies. We see frequently in the New Testament how people asked if Jesus was the Messiah but not what a Messiah was in the first place. No education was needed about what the Messiah was because there were so many prophecies about a Messiah in the Hebrew Bible who would come to rescue Israel. Certainly there were a number of misconceptions about what the Messiah would look like in terms of function and role, but a Messiah was expected nonetheless.

The importance of these prophecies is hard to underestimate. If these prophecies have been fulfilled, then we find confirmation for the claim of the Bible that it is the word of God. We also find confirmation of a personal, involved, benevolent, all-powerful God who has chosen to reveal Himself in a particular way. Lastly, we find the person that these predictions were written about, the person whom God has sent to bring about salvation, the person through whom God has chosen to reveal Himself in the most clear and unambiguous way. If such a person has fulfilled the prophecies then we must listen to Him and take His teaching seriously.

But how many Messianic prophecies are we talking about? Three or four, like our earlier examples? Surely the odds are that more than one person that has ever lived could fulfill three or four prophecies or even double or triple that many prophecies. Fortunately, the Old Testament prevents such an argument. By some counts there are 300 to 400 Messianic prophecies in the Old Testament. Other scholars believe that this number is a bit high. They certainly see that number of allusions to the Messiah, but count the major prophecies as less than 100. Josh McDowell has made an excellent study of the major prophecies and numbers them at 61. He rightly characterizes these prophecies as credentials that anyone claiming to be the Messiah had to have.

McDowell's list contains a group of prophecies concerning the genealogy of the Messiah. If we consider only these genealogical prophecies, we begin to see just how narrow the list of candidates for the Messiah actually is. The Messiah will be of the seed of Abraham, the son of Isaac, the son of Jacob, of the tribe of Judah, in the family line of Jesse, of the house of David. These prophecies use a male pronoun when referring to the Messiah's gender. This excludes half of everyone who has ever lived from the pool of candidates. Abraham had two sons, one of whom was Isaac. Thus, half the men who have ever lived who are descended from Abraham are excluded from the pool. Isaac also had two sons, one of whom was Jacob. This eliminates half the male descendants of Isaac from the pool. Jacob had twelve sons, one of whom was Judah, which eliminates eleven out of every twelve of his male descendants from the pool. Judah had five sons, which eliminates four out of five of all his male descendants. Jesse fathered eight sons, one of whom was David. This eliminates seven out of eight male descendants of Jesse from the pool. Lastly, David had three sons, eliminating two out of three male descendants of David. This leaves an incredible small pool of candidates. Not just anyone could make that claim and be taken seriously.

But the prophecies provide other credentials that must be met by the Messiah. In his book

Science Speaks, Peter Stoner then calculated the odds of fulfilling forty-eight prophecies. Using conservative estimates for the odds of individual prophecies, such as the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, the chances that any one man would fulfill all forty-eight is 1 in 10157. To get an idea for just how big this number is, the number of atoms in the known universe is estimated to be about 1080. As incredibly large as this number is, it must be remembered that there are at least 61 major Messianic prophecies. If the odds of 48 prophecies being fulfilled are statistically close to zero, how much greater are odds the 61 prophecies? The improbability is overwhelming.

There are, of course, some prophecies that can be fulfilled intentionally, like entering Jerusalem on a donkey. But most of the prophecies cannot be discounted in such a way. The Messiah could not contrive His place of birth, time of birth, descendants, the actions of others (such as His betrayer), or manner of death. Also, the intentional fulfillment of some of the prophecies, as mentioned above, would be a declaration that that person fulfilled all of the prophecies—a claim that could be investigated. It must also be understood that these prophecies were not added into the text later to fit the life of Jesus. Remember that Jewish interpreters used the exact same text that these prophecies came from. They never argued against the Christians by saying the prophecies were inserted. Rather, they argued against the interpretation and fulfillment of the prophecies.

DANIEL'S SEVENTY WEEKS

One of the most well known and astounding prophecies regarding the Messiah is found in Daniel. This passage, Daniel 9:24-27, often referred to as “Daniel’s Seventy Weeks,” gives a very narrow window of time during which the Messiah would appear.

Seventy weeks are decreed
about your people and your holy city
to bring the rebellion to an end,
to put a stop to sin,
to wipe away injustice,
to bring in everlasting righteousness,
to seal up vision and prophecy,
and to anoint the most holy place.
Know and understand this:
From the issuing of the decree
to restore and rebuild Jerusalem
until Messiah the Prince
will be seven weeks and 62 weeks
It will be rebuilt with a plaza and a moat,
but in difficult times.
After those 62 weeks
the Messiah will be cut off
and will have nothing.
The people of the coming prince
will destroy the city and the sanctuary.
The end will come with a flood,
and until the end there will be war;
desolations are decreed.
He will make a firm covenant
with many for one week,

but in the middle of the week
he will put a stop to sacrifice and offering.
And the abomination of desolation
will be on a wing of the temple
until the decreed destruction
is poured out on the desolator.

To understand the timetable given it must be noted that the word translated “week” is the Hebrew word for seven as it refers to a duration of time, a “period of sevens.” Throughout the Tanakh it has been used to mean a period of seven days or years. In this case, it is believed to refer to weeks of years: 70 weeks = 490 years.

The window of time given for the Messiah to appear within closes with the destruction of Jerusalem. At the time Daniel wrote this, c. 530 BC, Jerusalem lay in ruins already. His prophecy said that the city will be rebuilt before it is destroyed. It also said that the decree that ordered Jerusalem’s restoration is the beginning of the seventy weeks. After sixty-nine weeks of years pass, the Messiah will appear. This is when the window opens. And the window shut in AD 70 with the destruction of Jerusalem. No one appearing in history outside this window could be the promised Messiah. The question now becomes, “When did the window open?” Do we know of a decree that ordered the rebuilding of Jerusalem and, if so, when was the decree issued? If we did know of such a decree, then we would know the start of the seventy weeks, and the end sixty-ninth week marking the opening of the Messiah’s window.

There are two decrees mentioned in Scripture that are very strong candidates for being the start date for the seventy weeks. One is the decree of Artaxerxes in Ezra 7:11-16. Beginning with the year of the decree, 457 BC, and going forward 483 years (69 weeks of years) we arrive at AD 27. According to Luke 3:1, John the Baptist began his ministry in the fifteenth year of the rule of Tiberius. Although Tiberius ascended the throne in AD 14, he began a co-regency in AD 12 making his fifteenth year of rule AD 26. Thus, the Messiah appeared in AD 27. This fits the life of Jesus quite well and puts his crucifixion in AD 30.

The other option is the decree of Artaxerxes in Nehemiah 2:1-8. The decree is dated in the month of Nisan during the twentieth year of the reign of Artaxerxes. Artaxerxes ascended the throne in 465 BC giving us a 444 BC start date for the year. Traditionally, if the day of the month was not mentioned in a writing, ancient Hebrews intended the first day of the month to be understood as the day in question. Thus, the start date for the seventy weeks would be Nisan 1, 444 BC which is the equivalent of March 4, 444 BC on our calendar. Advocates of this start date also point out that a year in the time of the prophecy contained 360 years. To understand weeks of years correctly we must convert the sixty-nine weeks, 483 years, to days: $483 \times 360 = 173,880$ days. Beginning at March 4, 444 BC and counting forward 173,880 days on the current calendar and account for leap years we arrive at Sunday, March 29, AD 33. This would be Palm Sunday, the day Jesus presented Himself to Israel as Messiah, making April 3, AD 33 the date of the crucifixion.

Again, this astonishing prophecy could not have been added into the scripture to make it fit the life of Jesus because the Hebrew Bible was reverently preserved by Jews and Christians alike. The text itself has never been an issue, only its interpretation.

Conclusion

Predictive prophecy is very important because it is a miracle that is testable. We have only to see if such events have come to pass to verify or reject a prophet. As we have seen, there are prophecies that have indeed come true and can be demonstrated. These prophecies have an extremely small probability of being fulfilled by chance. Also, these prophecies could not have been written into the text at a later date. Thus, having shown authentic credentials as ones who speak the very words of God, we have good reason to treat the messages of the Biblical prophets as authoritative.

More than that, we find a large number of prophecies pertaining to the identity of one man, the Messiah. The evidence indicates that the Messiah did appear as prophesied and fulfilled further prophecies written about him. This man was Jesus of Nazareth.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

***Apologetics Study Bible* Articles:**

Christ: The fulfillment of Prophecy By D. James Kennedy, xxviii

Doug Powell, *The Holman QuickSource Guide to Christian Apologetics*

Chapter 10, What About Prophecy?

Josh McDowell, *Evidence that Demands a Verdict, vol. I* (San Bernadino: Here's Life, 1972, 1992)

Peter Stoner, *Science Speaks*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1958, 1969).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Does the evidence for fulfilled prophecy give you greater confidence in the Bible or are they just interesting oddities that don't effect your faith much?
2. Can you think of any other fulfilled prophecies? Can you name some that have yet to be fulfilled?
3. Is the evidence for Jesus being the expected messiah convincing?
4. Other people around the time of Jesus claimed to be the messiah. What makes Jesus' claim any better than theirs?
5. How do you think you would have reacted to someone like Ezekiel or Daniel if you had heard them make such seemingly wild predictions? Would they have been hard to accept, would you have taken them at their word, or would you have asked for some kind of verification?