

WERE THE OLD TESTAMENT PROPHECIES SOMEHOW ALTERED SO THAT JESUS APPEARS TO BE THE MESSIAH?

By Mark Paynter THD

What we have looked in the previous pages is merely a sample of the Messianic prophecies. Christians claim that these prophecies foretell the coming of Jesus as Messiah. Since as we have seen Jesus fits the description of the Messiah exactly one has to ask the question could the New Testament writers somehow have altered the Old Testament so that Jesus appears to be the Messiah. The answer to this question, as we shall see, is a resounding “No:” Our negative response to this question is based on the fact that

- The ministry of the Old Testament prophets ended 400 years before the birth of Christ.
- In about 167 B.C the Jewish canon (The Tanakh) was established, so at the time of Jesus there was wide spread agreement as to which books were to be included in the official canon recognised by Jewish authorities. The word “Tanakh” is an acronym based on the Hebrew names of the three divisions: the Law (Torah), the Prophets (Neviim), and the Writings (Ketuvim).¹
- In 1947 The Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered, this collection of scroll contains over nine hundred manuscripts of various books of the Tanakh.

“These ancient texts, hidden in pots in cliff-top caves by a monastic religious community, confirm the reliability of the Old Testament text. They provide significant portions of Old Testament books—even entire books—that were copied and studied by the Essenes. These manuscripts date from as early as the third century B.C. and so give the earliest window so far found into the texts of the Old Testament books and their predictive prophecies. The Qumran texts have become an important witness for the divine origin of the Bible²

Josh McDowell observes

“The Dead Sea Scrolls provide clear evidence of the complete faithfulness of the Old Testament text to the originals in spite of transmission through long centuries.³ The Dead Scrolls “have been compared to the modern copies and have been found to agree,

¹Corduan W chapter “The Bible alone is the Word of God “ in Geisler, N. L., & Hoffman, P. K. (2001) *Why I am a Christian: Leading thinkers explain why they believe*. Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Books page 185

²Geisler, N. L. (1999) *Baker encyclopedia of Christian apologetics* Baker reference library (Page 187) Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Books.

³McDowell, J. (1997, c1991). *Josh McDowell's handbook on apologetics* (electronic ed.). Nashville: Thomas Nelson. Chapter 2 The making of the Old Testament

virtually letter-for letter (Most of the differences are in the spelling of names). The point, is the Dead Sea scrolls essentially “froze in time” the prophecies about Jesus – long before He was born”⁴

- Another important evidence of the age of the Old Testament writings is the Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures that 70 scholars translated from original Hebrew texts about 200 years before Christ. Muncaster provides the following illustration of how the Septuagint is able to help us translate the Hebrew Text.

“Much is often made of the word for “virgin” in Isaiah 7: 14. “The Lord himself will give you a sign: “The virgin will be with Child and will give birth to a son”). Some have contended that the Hebrew translated “virgin” - *almah* – simply means “young women”. This indeed is one of the possible meanings of the Hebrew. However, in the Septuagint the word clearly indicates the Jewish scholarly opinion before the time of Jesus. The Greek word is *parthenos* (also used in Matthew 1: 23) which very specifically means “virgin”.

Seventy esteemed scholars understood what the ancient Hebrew meant, and translated this meaning into Greek. Naturally they would have no incentive to invent prophecy about Jesus more than 200 years before He was born. Hence when key words are in question, the Septuagint often clarifies the precise meanings of the ancient Hebrew far better than the critics of today.”⁵

- In addition to the Dead Sea scrolls and the Septuagint the Tanakh was translated into several other different ancient texts in different languages.

Altogether these ancient translations provide a substantial body of evidence that confirm that the prophecies in the Old Testament concerning the Messiah were clearly recognised and understood centuries before Jesus was born. Because by the time of Jesus the Old Testament had been completed and recognised as sacred the New Testament writers rather than fraudulently altering the Old Testament apologetically appealed to the Old Testament prophecies to establish Jesus’ identity after his death and resurrection. (Acts 3:18, Acts 10:43, Acts 17:2-3, 1 Peter 2:5-6).

Geisler points out that

“Even the most liberal critics admit that the prophetic books were completed at least four hundred years before Christ and the Book of Daniel by about 165 B.C. Though there is good evidence to date most of these books much earlier (some of the Psalms and earlier prophets were in the eighth and ninth centuries B.C.), it would make little difference. It is humanly impossible to make clear, repeated,

⁴ Muncaster page 167

⁵ Muncaster page 168

and accurate predictions two hundred years in the future. But God knows all things and can predict the future with no difficulty. So even using the late date for the Old Testament given by critics, the fulfillment of these prophecies in a theistic universe is miraculous and points to a divine confirmation of Jesus as the Messiah.

Some have suggested that there is a natural explanation for what only seem to be supernatural predictions here. One explanation is that the prophecies were accidentally fulfilled in Jesus. In other words, he happened to be in the right place at the right time. But what are we to say about the prophecies involving miracles? He just happened to make the blind man see? He just happened to be resurrected from the dead? These hardly seem like chance events. If there is a God who is in control of the universe, as we have said, then chance is ruled out. Furthermore, it is unlikely that all these events would have converged in the life of one man. Mathematicians have calculated the probability of 16 predictions being fulfilled in one man at 1 in 10^{45} . If we go to forty-eight predictions, the probability is 1 in 10^{157} . It is almost impossible for us to conceive of a number that big.”⁶

Muncaster based his own probability estimate on 30 messianic prophecies and calculated a probability of 1 in 10^{110} that the prophecies fulfilled in one man. On the basis of this degree of probability Muncaster was led to the conclusion that “Jesus was the Messiah, as planned by the supernatural God and predicted in the Bible.”⁷ In reaching this conclusion we can also conclude that the Islamic claim that the Old Testament contains errors in its prophecy can be rejected. Furthermore unlike the followers of Judaism we can conclude that Jesus is the Messiah and has come in fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy.⁸

The process that ensured that the right books were in the Bible is referred to as the canonisation of Scripture.

“The word “canon” comes from the Greek *Kanon*. It means, in the first place, a reed or rod, then a measuring rod, hence a rule or standard. In the second place, it means an authoritative decision of a church council, and in the third place, as applied to the Bible, it means those books which have been measured, found satisfactory and approved as inspired of God.”⁹

⁶Geisler, N. L., & Saleeb A. (2002). *Answering Islam: The crescent in light of the cross* (2nd ed.) (Page 256). Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books. For mathematical evidence Geisler and Saleeb cite “Peter W. Stoner, *Science Speaks* (Wheaton: Van Kampen Press, 1952), 108.

⁷ Muncaster page 190

⁸

⁹ Thiessen page 59

Norman Geisler observes, “Canonicity is determined by God. It is not the antiquity, authenticity, or religious community that makes a book canonical or authoritative. A book is valuable because it is canonical, and not canonical because it is or was considered valuable. Its authority is *established* by God and merely *discovered* by God’s people.”¹⁰ Hence when we talk about the process of canonisation what we are talking about is how did God’s people discover or recognise which Books to include in the canon of Scripture and which books were to be excluded. In other words which books bore testimony that they were the result of divine inspiration, if the Book did not mere the marks of divine inspiration it was to be excluded from the Canon.

Moses completed the Torah (the first five books of the Bible) about 1450 B.C. The Torah was immediately generally accepted at the time of completion as being the Word of God. Muncaster attributes this to the fact that “the Hebrews at the time had observed firsthand the miracles and presence of God and the relationship of Moses to God.”¹¹ However the formal recognition of the Torah did not occur until much later, until the time of the first exile in about 500 B.C. Thiessen has argued that the canonisation of the Old Testament was “completed by Ezra and the members of the Synagogue in the fifth century before Christ.”¹² Thiessen sees evidence in the titles that are used for Ezra (Neh.8: 1; 12:36; Ezra 7:6 and 11) that he was the one who organised the sacred books of the Old Testament. In support of Thiessen Josephus (the first century A.D. Jewish historian) indicated that the canon was completed in the reign of Artaxerxes, a period corresponding to the lifetime of Ezra.

By the time of Christ, the Jewish people had essentially accepted the entire Old Testament as being the Word of God by for at least two centuries.

When it comes to the canonisation of the New Testament, the New Testament seems to have been settled as the canon by “the Damasine Council of Rome (382) and the third council of Carthage (397)”¹³ and in the east almost a century later. It is essential to remember that the councils that formally recognised the New Testament canon did not determine what should be included in the canon but “only affirmed what was clearly already the consensus of the churches, which had fixed the canon with three centuries of usage throughout the Roman Empire”¹⁴ Thus the canonisation of the New Testament was not an organised process but rather a general recognition that certain books had the genuine character of inspired writings. “The church recognized, acknowledged, received, and submitted to the canon of Scripture. The term the church used in Council was *recipimus*, “We receive.”¹⁵” This reception seems to have focused upon five primary considerations. 1) Was the book written by an apostle or a close associate of an apostle? 2) Was the book suitable for public reading? 3) Was the book universally received by the

¹⁰Geisler, N. L. (1999) *Baker encyclopedia of Christian apologetics* Baker reference library (Page 80) Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Books.

¹¹ Muncaster page 234

¹² Thiessen page 60

¹³ Thiessen page 60

¹⁴P Patterson; article “The Bible a Book of Destiny “ in *Believers Study Bible*, electronic ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997, c1995).

¹⁵R. C. Sproul, *Essential Truths of the Christian Faith* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House, 1996, c1992). Section Revelation; The Canon of Scripture

wider Christian community? 4) Was the book of sufficient spiritual character? 5) Did the book give evidence to it having been inspired by the Holy Spirit?