

The Person the Prophets Predicted

By David Feddes

Christianity isn't the only religion around, the Bible isn't the only book around, and Jesus isn't the only religious leader to attract a following. So why be a Christian when you could be a Hindu or Muslim or Buddhist or something else instead? Why believe the Bible as the ultimate book when Muslims have the Koran, Hindus have the Bhagavad-Gita, and various others have their own book they consider sacred? Why trust Jesus as the supreme link between God and humanity, when so many people look to Muhammad or Confucius or Gautama the Buddha or someone else?

With many varieties of religion around, it may seem impossible to decide which is right. It's tempting just to say, "You believe whatever you want to believe, and I'll believe whatever I want to believe—and let's not say any more about it." That might help us to avoid arguing and conflict, but it won't bring us any closer to the truth. If we want our belief to be more than wishful thinking, then we can't just believe whatever we want to believe. We need to believe what's true.

I'll be blunt: If Christianity isn't true, then I don't want to be a Christian. If the Bible isn't God's Word, then I don't want to believe that it is. If Jesus isn't God come to us as a human, then I don't want to trust him or follow him.

On the other hand, if Christianity is true, then I'm not the only one who should be a Christian. You should be a Christian too. If the Bible is God's Word, then I'm not the only one who should believe it. You should believe it too. If Jesus is God with us and the Savior of the world, then I'm not the only one who should follow him. You should follow him too.

First, though, we need to settle the question whether there's anything that sets the Bible apart from other books and anything that sets Jesus apart from other religious leaders. Christians believe that the Bible is the Word of God written, totally reliable and without error in what it reveals. But *why* believe the Bible instead of another sacred book? Christians believe that Jesus is the Son of God and the Savior of all who trust him. But *why* believe in Jesus instead of some other religious leader?

Prophecies That Match a Person

There are a number of ways to approach this. We could explore archeology and manuscripts and various kinds of evidence that show the accuracy of the Bible. We could examine a number of historical and logical arguments which show that it's rational to believe in Jesus Christ. But instead of trying to make a case for the Bible, and then making a separate case for Jesus, what I'd like to do here is focus on how Jesus and the Bible confirm each other. How do we know Jesus is the way? Because the Bible says so. And why should we believe what the Bible says? Because Jesus confirms it.

That may sound unhelpful and unconvincing at first. Isn't that just arguing in a circle? You might think, "The Bible and Jesus match up? Big deal! Of course the Christian holy book fits the founder of Christianity. The holy book of every religion records the ideas of its founder, so of course the man and the message match up. But what if the man and the book which matches him are both wrong?"

In the case of the Bible and Jesus, though, we're not just talking about a holy book that was written by a religious leader or by his followers as a record of what he taught. You see, the Bible isn't just one book; it's a collection of 66 books. 27 of these books—those in the part

called the New Testament—were written after Jesus walked this earth and recorded what he taught and what he did. But the other 39 books in the Bible—those in the part called the Old Testament—were written *before* Jesus came. These 39 books, written centuries before Jesus, often spoke of events that still lay in the future. And the amazing thing is this: those predictions came true, and they came true in the life of one particular person: Jesus!

Almost anybody can write a book, and almost any book can record things that have already happened and words that have already been spoken. But what about a book that pointed to certain events centuries before they happened? I think you'd agree that such a book would be amazing. I think you'd also agree that any one person whose life fulfilled all sorts of ancient predictions—made in a number of different writings from a number of different writers over a number of different centuries—would be an amazing person indeed. Well, Jesus is just such a person, and the Bible is just such a book.

Predictions About Birth and Ministry

The books of the Old Testament contain many predictions about the birth of a future ruler and rescuer whom God would send to overcome evil and give people new life. These were not just vague predictions. Some details were quite specific. For example, the prophet Micah said that this ruler would be born in Bethlehem (5:2). The prophet Hosea said that God's Son would be called out of Egypt (11:1). The prophet Isaiah said that a virgin would become pregnant and give birth to a son (7:14), and Isaiah also said that a great light would shine in the region of Galilee after the special child was born (9:1-2).

Now, it's a stunning prediction to say a virgin will give birth, and it sounds like an outright contradiction for different prophets to predict a child being born in Bethlehem, coming out of Egypt, and shining in Galilee. Bethlehem and Galilee are at opposite ends of the land of Israel, and Egypt is another country altogether. How could prophecies referring to Bethlehem, Egypt, and Galilee all be fulfilled in the same child? Sounds impossible, doesn't it?

Well, centuries later, a young woman from Nazareth in Galilee became pregnant without being with a man. This woman, Mary, was betrothed to Joseph. At first Joseph could not believe that Mary's pregnancy was a miracle, but an angel convinced him. The couple lived in Nazareth, so it seemed obvious that their baby would be born there, not in Bethlehem, far to the south. But then the Roman emperor called for a census and required people to register in the towns of their ancestry. Joseph and Mary had to go to Bethlehem, because Joseph's family line went back to King David, and Bethlehem was the city of David. While they were in Bethlehem for the census, Mary went into labor, and the baby Jesus was born in Bethlehem, just as the prophet Micah predicted.

King Herod, the vicious ruler in that region, heard that a special baby had been born, and Herod felt threatened. He ordered all the babies in Bethlehem killed. Before the order could be carried out, however, an angel warned Joseph what Herod was planning. Joseph and Mary fled to Egypt with baby Jesus. Awhile later, King Herod died, and Jesus came up out of Egypt with Joseph and Mary, just as the prophet Hosea had predicted.

After leaving Egypt, the family went back to Israel, to the town of Nazareth in Galilee, where they originally came from. There Jesus grew up and began his ministry, bringing God's light to the region of Galilee, just as the prophet Isaiah predicted. Amazing! The seemingly contradictory prophecies all came true in the Christ child: he was conceived of a virgin, born in Bethlehem, came out of Egypt, and was God's light in Galilee.

Through the prophet Isaiah, writing 700 years before Jesus' birth, God not only predicted that a baby would be born of a virgin and would be God with us (7:14), but the prophet also predicted that at the Messiah's coming, the eyes of the blind would be opened, the ears of the deaf would hear, and the lame would leap for joy (35:5). Even the most skeptical people who knew Jesus couldn't deny that he enabled blind people to see and deaf people to hear. Nobody could deny that Jesus made paralyzed people walk and leap and praise God. Even Jesus' worst enemies had to admit that he was doing amazing things. These miracles weren't just marvels to astonish people; they were signs that Jesus was the person the prophets predicted.

When Jesus' friend John the Baptizer was in prison, he sent a message to Jesus, asking, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?"

Jesus' answer was simple. He replied, "The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor" (Matthew 11:3-5). These things showed that yes, Jesus was the promised Messiah, and no, the people shouldn't look elsewhere, because Jesus was doing the miracles which the Old Testament had predicted. Many of the common people, recalling those predictions and seeing Jesus in action, believed in him. They said, "When the Messiah comes, will he do more miraculous signs than this man?" (John 7:31).

Predictions of Jesus' Final Week

So far we've sampled prophecies that were fulfilled in Jesus' birth and ministry. Now let's zoom in on the week Jesus died to see even more detailed predictions.

It was the week of the great feast of the Passover, a time when great crowds of people were gathering in Jerusalem. "They heard that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. They took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting, 'Hosannah! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the king of Israel!'" Jesus found a young donkey and sat upon it" (John 12:12-14). He rode into Jerusalem on that donkey, surrounded by the cheering crowd.

This had been predicted long ago in the Old Testament. 800 years earlier, Psalm 118 had said, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord... With branches in hand, join in the festal procession" (Psalm 118:26-27). More than 500 years earlier, the prophet Zechariah had written, "Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey" (Zechariah 9:9). When Jesus climbed onto the young donkey and rode into Jerusalem, acclaimed by crowds with palm branches, it showed that he was the person the prophets predicted.

But these prophecies mentioned more than just a donkey ride or palm branches. Zechariah had gone on to say, "Because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will free your prisoners from the waterless pit" (9:11). The king on the donkey was going to bring freedom based on blood. He would be gentle, so he wasn't going to be shedding the blood of others. But if it wasn't going to be their blood, whose blood would it be? His own! According to Zechariah, the king on a donkey would somehow rescue others through his own blood.

Likewise, Psalm 118 spoke not only of praise and palms, but went on to say, "The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes" (Psalm 118:22-23). As Jesus rode into Jerusalem, he knew what this ancient prophecy meant (see Matthew 21:42). He knew that "the builders," the main religious leaders, would reject him and kill him, and he also knew that the Lord would raise him up again and give him the highest position in all the world.

Before going to his death, however, Jesus did some other things that fulfilled Old Testament prophecy. After riding into Jerusalem, Jesus went to the temple. The temple was supposed to have a court of the Gentiles, where people from any nation who wanted to worship the God of Israel could do so. But the religious leaders hated foreigners, and they were greedy for money, so they turned the court of the Gentiles into a currency exchange and a market for selling animals for the temple sacrifices. When Jesus saw this, he stormed into the temple, made a whip, and cleared out all the salesmen and money-grubbers.

450 years earlier, the prophet Malachi had written, “Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple... But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner’s fire or a launderer’s soap” (Malachi 3:1-2). When the Lord Jesus came to his temple and cleaned it up, he was fulfilling that prophecy.

As he was driving out the money grubbers, Jesus said, “‘My house will be called a house of prayer,’ but you are making it a ‘den of robbers’” (Matthew 21:13). More than 700 years earlier, God had said through Isaiah, “my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations.” When Jesus cleared the merchants from the court of the Gentiles, he showed that he is the one who clears the way for true prayer and opens the way for people of every nation and race to have full access to God—just as Isaiah had prophesied.

When Jesus said the religious leaders had made his temple “a den of robbers,” he was quoting the prophet Jeremiah (7:11). This prophet from six centuries earlier had spoken of “a den of robbers” in a prophecy about the temple. People in Jeremiah’s day were treating the temple like a good luck charm that would keep them safe no matter what they did or how they related to God. But through Jeremiah God said that since they had made God’s temple a den of robbers, the temple wouldn’t do them any good. God would destroy his temple and punish the nation. Shortly after Jeremiah’s prophecy, the soldiers of Babylon came and reduced the temple to rubble.

Later, though, the temple was rebuilt, and by Jesus’ day, it was again corrupt. So Jesus quoted from Jeremiah and called the temple a den of robbers. Jesus also took Jeremiah’s prophecy of destruction and applied it once again. Jesus declared that the temple would soon be reduced to rubble (Matthew 24:2). And less than forty years later, Jesus’ words came true. Read your history books. It happened. Roman armies under Titus destroyed the temple, and to this day, it has never been rebuilt.

After Jesus cleaned out the temple, his enemies decided it was time to get rid of him. In the process, many more Old Testament predictions came true. The religious leaders paid Judas, a member of Jesus’ inner circle, to betray him. This fulfilled Psalm 41:9, written a thousand years earlier, which said, “Even my close friend, whom I trusted, he who shared my bread, has lifted up his heel against me.” When Jesus was arrested, his disciples all ran away, just as Jesus had said they would, and just as the prophet Zechariah had predicted long ago, “Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered” (13:7).

Jesus was dragged away, given a phony trial, and convicted. His enemies beat him, mocked him, and spit on him. Isaiah had foreseen this long before when he wrote, “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 (50:6).

Predictions of Death and Resurrection

The manner of Jesus’ torture and death revealed him as the one the prophets predicted. Long ago Psalm 22 had said, “They have pierced my hands and my feet... They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing.” A thousand years later soldiers pounded

spikes through Jesus' hands and feet and gambled to see which of them would get his clothing. Psalm 22 says, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" A thousand years later Jesus cried those very words as he hung on the cross. Psalm 22 speaks of mockery and of people sneering, "He trusts in the Lord; let the Lord rescue him." A thousand years later Jesus' enemies said: "Let him come down now from the cross and we will believe in him. *He trusts in God. Let God rescue him* now if he wants him, for he said, 'I am the Son of God'" (Matthew 27:43). Psalm 22 said, "My tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth." A thousand years later the dying Jesus cried, "I am thirsty" (John 19:28). Psalm 69 said, "They gave me vinegar for my thirst." A thousand years later someone offered Jesus wine vinegar to drink.

When Jesus died, the treatment of his body fulfilled a number of ancient prophecies. It was the day before the Sabbath, and the people in charge wanted to make sure Jesus and the two men crucified with him were dead before sundown. So the soldiers broke the legs of two men with Jesus. With broken legs, they wouldn't be able to hold up their weight and would soon die from not being able to get air in their lungs. The soldiers intended to break Jesus' legs too, but when they found he was already dead, they left his legs alone and simply pierced Jesus' side with a spear to make sure. Centuries earlier the Old Testament had said, "Not one of his bones will be broken" (Exodus 12:46, Psalm 34:20), and another scripture had said, "They will look on the one they have pierced" (Zechariah 12:10). Then a rich man named Joseph of Arimathea laid Jesus' body to rest in a tomb Joseph himself had purchased for his own burial, fulfilling when Isaiah had said long ago, "He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death" (53:9).

Even the timing of all this showed that Jesus was the person the prophets predicted. Remember, Jesus died during Passover week. Back in the time of Moses, the angel of death killed the firstborn of Egypt and rescued the Israelites from slavery. Each Israelite household was passed over and spared if the blood of a lamb was smeared on the doorpost of the home. The lamb died instead of the firstborn son, and its blood saved God's people from death (see Exodus 11-12). Each year Passover marked that event.

Jesus ended up dying right at the time when Passover week was reaching its climax. Jesus is the ultimate Passover, the final sacrifice. Fourteen centuries earlier the slaughtered Passover lamb and the great liberation from Egypt had been the foreshadowing. The slaughtering of Jesus, the Lamb of God, and the great liberation from sin and Satan that his death brought about—this was the fulfillment. The timing of the Passover and the crucifixion matched perfectly, again linking the ancient scriptures with the person of Jesus.

How could so many prophecies turn out to be so accurate? And how could one person be the fulfillment of all those things which were written so many years earlier? The answer is simply that these predictions in the Old Testament were promises from God, and that this Jesus is the One God sent to save us. How else could the person and the predictions match so precisely?

Old Testament predictions didn't stop at the death of the Messiah. Psalm 16 said, "You will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay." Psalm 22 said that after being forsaken by God and pierced by men, the afflicted one would live and rejoice and bring far-off nations to the Lord. Isaiah 53 says, "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." Sure enough, Jesus didn't stay in the grave, and his body didn't decay. He rose from the dead, saw the light of life, and has brought joy and salvation and eternal life to people from many nations ever since.

Reason to Believe

So if you ask, “Why be a Christian and not something else? Why believe the Bible and not some other book? Why trust Jesus and not some other person?” the answer is that there is no other book like the Bible, and there is no other person like Jesus. The Bible is God speaking in written form, and Jesus is God living among us in human form.

Before you believe in some other book that claims to be from God, be sure to ask whether that book accurately predicted things long in advance of when they happened. Before you believe in some other religious leader, be sure to ask how many prophecies he fulfills, and ask whether he ever died and was buried and then walked out of the tomb alive. No book but the Bible reveals God’s promises even before they come true. No person but Jesus fulfills all those promises. No religious leader is holy and loving enough to die for the sins of his people, and no religious leader is mighty enough to conquer death and Satan.

This is what the New Testament calls “the gospel God promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures regarding his Son” (Romans 1:2-3). This is why someone who met Jesus exclaimed, “We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote” (John 1:45). This is why Jesus himself said, “Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms” (Luke 24:44). There may still be a lot you don’t know about the Bible and a lot you don’t understand about Jesus, but when you see the amazing way the Bible and Jesus fit one another perfectly, you at least know what book you can believe as God’s Word and what person you can trust as God’s Son.

Don’t let the variety of sacred books and religious leaders confuse you or keep you from making up your mind. Other books may contain valuable insights, but the Bible holds an altogether higher authority. Other leaders may have their good points, but Jesus is altogether superior. Believe the Bible, and study it more and more. Trust Jesus, and get to know him better and better. Thank him for dying in your place and for rising again to conquer death on your behalf. Welcome his Holy Spirit to live in you. Then true predictions won’t be just an amazing set of facts that convince your mind. Jesus will be the living Lord who grips your heart.