

Christ in the Old Testament

Israel's true Messiah

THE Lord Jesus Christ is the central character of the New Testament scriptures. The opening words of the first gospel account, by Matthew, can be applied to the whole of the New Testament: "The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ" (Matthew 1:1). The four gospels are followed by the account of the preaching of Christ's apostles, and by the letters they wrote to believers in him throughout the Roman world in the first century AD.

But information about Jesus Christ is not confined to the New Testament. His coming was anticipated by men and women who lived before the New Testament books were written: "The people were in expectation, and all reasoned in their hearts about John, whether he was the Christ or not" (Luke 3:15).

A divine watermark

This simple statement conceals a miracle. Yes, a miracle: something altogether beyond human achievement. And the miracle is this: there is throughout the Old Testament, on every page, a divine watermark revealing in advance the nature of Israel's coming Messiah. The Old Testament might appear to be just God's message to the Jewish people and an account of their history. But it is much more than this. There is something which is part of the very texture of the Old Testament and which cannot be removed without destroying the book as a whole. Simply stated, it is the fact that we have the life history of Jesus written centuries before he was born. In other words, you can read all about Jesus in the Old Testament.

It must be a matter of regret that all this information about Christ, revealed by the inspiration of God to His servants the prophets right from the dawn of human history, is so neglected. For Jesus himself, these scriptures explained the reason for his birth, the work he was to accomplish, and the glory in store for him, and for all who come to God through him. Our understanding of Christ will be diminished if we do not take account of the information presented about him in the Old Testament scriptures.

Messiah

The word *Messiah* is part of everyday speech. Nowadays, it is used about men who have a powerful personality and a message to go with it. But the impact usually dies when they die and pass off the scene. Such usage is a mere distortion, a poor copy, of what the word means. It is a Hebrew word taken right out of the Old Testament. Messiah means "anointed" which in Greek is *kristos*, our English word, Christ. In the Old Testament, Messiah was not an historical person. The word stood for the Promised One, the Coming King, the one "whose right it is" (see Ezekiel 21:25-27).

Messiah was the Great Deliverer for whom faithful Jews waited and longed. They and some of their neighbours talked about "when Messiah comes". One of the earliest disciples, after he had met Jesus, told a friend, "We have found the Messiah", and the gospel writer who recorded the incident added a word of explanation, "(which is translated, the Christ)" (John 1:41). They were exciting times. Faithful Jews had long hoped that they would glimpse Messiah's time. They were constantly on the watch, yearning for the day of his appearing.

Messiah was the kernel of all Jewish hopes, the very essence of the great promises made by God as set down in the Old Testament. Jesus was that Messiah.

The evidence

The Old Testament described Jesus before he was born. No one but God could have foretold in such detail so many different kinds of things about Jesus. The Jews themselves had identified many of these scriptures as foretelling Messiah. They were not brought to light until after Jesus came. They were plain for all to see. Some of them are so astonishing that we may feel they can only have been written after the events they speak about. Yet the evidence that they were written centuries before is altogether beyond doubt. Let us say it clearly: the birth, life, mission, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ of Nazareth were detailed in the old Jewish scriptures, the Old Testament, known and read in Jewish synagogues at home and abroad, and faithfully preserved right down to our own times.

The Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in 1947 and scholars are now agreed that some of them pre-dated the birth of Jesus by over 200 years. One scroll contains an almost complete Book of the prophet Isaiah which contains exactly the same prophecies as are known to us from our English Bible. The same is true of the Greek translations of the Old Testament: they too were made two or three centuries before Christ and are known to us by various manuscripts now in museums in different parts of the world. Thus the prophecies were known in Hebrew and Greek long before Jesus came. So, it would simply be flying in the face of incontestable facts to say that these prophecies were inserted after Jesus was born.

In any case, we must remember that the Jewish nation is not Christian, and they would never have allowed their Bible, the Old Testament, to be tampered with by Christian hands. To try to plead, as some have done, that the prophecies were added at a later date is only to admit how good they are! The only Bible available to Jesus was the one we know as the Old Testament. Josephus, the Jewish historian of the first century AD, lists the books in the Jewish Bible in his day and they are exactly the ones we have in our Old Testament. There is no doubt that the Old Testament as we know it predates the time of Jesus.

What Jesus said

Jesus used the prophecies of the Old Testament as powerful evidences when he spoke to the apostles after he had risen from the dead. This is what he said: "These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning me. And he opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures" (Luke 24:44,45). Earlier, in the same chapter, we read: "And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, he expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself" (24:27).

These are important and significant words. Jesus took the apostles back to the three constituent parts of the Old Testament — the books of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms. He said that in those scriptures there were things about himself which were being fulfilled in his own life-story. "In all the Scriptures" is how Jesus summed up the evidence. Describing some of these prophecies, Jesus said: "Moses wrote about me" (John 5:46). Yet Moses lived about fifteen hundred years before Jesus!

After his resurrection, Jesus commanded the apostles to go out as his witnesses to preach the gospel everywhere. As part of their preaching of the gospel, they used as evidence those same Messianic prophecies: the history of Jesus written before it happened! And those same prophecies of the Old Testament were in use in the synagogues throughout the Mediterranean region.

What kind of prophecy?

The Bible is an account of redemption, how God rescues people from sin and from death. The Bible begins with a record of Creation and of how sin and death came into the world in the Garden of Eden. The Bible ends with a description of the culmination of God's glorious plan, still in the future, by saying:

“I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, ‘Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying; and there shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away.’” (Revelation 21:3,4)

Jesus Christ is the bridge between Eden and the promised, glorious End. He is the means whereby God accomplishes His mission of mercy and salvation. The Old Testament prophecies about Jesus are part of that story about God's Grand Plan of Redemption. The prophecies were revelations of how God would work out His saving will. Let us follow the steps in the Grand Plan, revealed long before Jesus was born.

Jesus the man

The Old Testament foretold that Messiah would be a Jew, born in Bethlehem in the royal line of David the king, of the tribe of Judah. These are clear and detailed prophecies. Look at these examples:

“When your days are fulfilled and you rest with your fathers, I will set up your seed after you, who will come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever.” (2 Samuel 7:12,13)

“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth to me the One to be ruler in Israel, whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting.” (Micah 5:2)

These are promises of an illustrious son of David who would be born in Bethlehem. Solomon was the immediate successor-son of David, but he was not born in Bethlehem. He certainly built a temple for God, but his throne was not established for ever. Moreover, Micah's prophecy, about Messiah being born in Bethlehem, was written some two or three hundred years after the death of David. Messiah had still not come. About seven hundred years later Jesus was born in the little town of Bethlehem a few miles from Jerusalem in the land of Judah.

Jesus, son of God

The prophecies said Jesus was not only to be the son of David; he was also to be Son of God. This is variously described in the Old Testament:

“Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel.” (Isaiah 7:14)

“I will be his Father, and he shall be my son;” (1 Chronicles 17:13)

“He shall cry to me, ‘You are my Father, my God, and the rock of my salvation.’ Also I will make him my firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth.” (Psalm 89:26,27)

“I will declare the decree: The Lord has said to me, ‘You are my Son, today I have begotten you.’” (2:7)

Therefore Messiah would be a descendant of David but not of a Jewish father. As the New Testament later tells us, he had a mother who was a virgin, but no human father.

“Now all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying: ‘Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel,’ which is translated, ‘God with us.’” (Matthew 1:22,23)

“Concerning his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh.” (Romans 1:3)

Surprisingly, the very first promise of the virgin birth (Genesis 3:15) calls the promised Deliverer: the seed of the woman, not the seed of the man. It was God, not man, who would provide the Redeemer; nevertheless, he would be born of a woman:

“when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law” (Galatians 4:4)

The forerunner

The public ministry of Jesus was preceded by the witness of John the Baptist who declared himself to be the one who ran ahead to prepare the way for the Messiah by preaching in the wilderness. This too was made plain by the prophets:

“The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.’” (Isaiah 40:3)

“Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me.” (Malachi 3:1)

The message of John Baptist stirred the hearts of thousands of Jews to repentance and preparation. John told them to get ready for Messiah, and when Jesus came to the River Jordan where John was preaching and baptizing, one of John’s disciples said:

“We have found him of whom Moses in the law, and also the prophets, wrote ‘Jesus of Nazareth’” (John 1:45)

The message of Jesus

The wonderful message of the Lord Jesus Christ came as comfort and healing to the minds of the ordinary people, and they said, "He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes" (Matthew 7:29). "They were astonished at his teaching, and people of all kinds, high and low, rich and poor, sick and well, came to him and were comforted by his words of relief, care and salvation. But this was exactly what the Old Testament prophets had foretold of him:

"The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good tidings to the poor; he has sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn" (Isaiah 61:1-2)

"The Lord God has given me the tongue of the learned, that I should know how to speak a word in season to him who is weary. He awakens me morning by morning, he awakens my ear to hear as the learned." (50:4)

No wonder the gospel is called "glad tidings". People who had been locked in dead formalism and made afraid by their teachers and rulers found release and joy and hope – just as the prophets had promised. They caught the meaning of all this, and sick people repeatedly called Jesus, "The son of David", the one promised to David by God. He was their Messiah.

Miracles

The good news Jesus brought was called "the glad tidings of the kingdom of God". He is the One who, at his second coming, will reign as king on David's throne. Meanwhile, his message was the royal law by which his disciples were being prepared for the kingdom. His miracles were not simply ways of drawing attention to his teaching. They were a living proof that he was Son of God as well as son of David, and by doing these things he was bringing them a foretaste of the kingdom age:

"Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are fearful-hearted, 'Be strong, do not fear! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God; he will come and save you.' Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the dumb sing. For waters shall burst forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert." (Isaiah 35:3-6)

Some people understood this: they saw that his words and miracles proved that Jesus was the promised Messiah:

"Then one was brought to him who was demon-possessed, blind and mute; and he healed him, so that the blind and mute man both spoke and saw. And all the multitudes were amazed and said, 'Could this be the Son of David?'" (Matthew 12:22,23)

Jesus the rejected

Despite his wonderful words and compassionate miracles and his evident goodness, at the end of his life on earth Christ was rejected by his own people. The rulers envied and hated him. The common people proved to be unreliable and were easily swayed by the hostility

shown toward Jesus by their elders and religious rulers. This, too, was foretold long before Christ came:

“He is despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we hid, as it were, our faces from him; he was despised, and we did not esteem him.” (Isaiah 53:3)

“Thus says the Lord, the Redeemer of Israel, their Holy One, to him whom man despises, to him whom the nation abhors” (49:7)

“I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who plucked out the beard; I did not hide my face from shame and spitting.” (50:6)

“You know my reproach, my shame, and my dishonour; my adversaries are all before you. Reproach has broken my heart, and I am full of heaviness; I looked for someone to take pity, but there was none; and for comforters, but I found none.” (Psalm 69:19,20)

Jesus the crucified

The climax of the life of Jesus was his death by crucifixion. It is said that in times before Christ it was sometimes the practice to tie or nail certain criminals to a stake or tree after they had been put to death. Crucifixion of living persons appears to have been perfected by the Romans. It was unknown among the Jews in early times. Yet, a thousand years before Jesus was born, his living crucifixion was clearly foretold:

“Dogs have surrounded me; the assembly of the wicked has enclosed me. They pierced my hands and my feet; I can count all my bones. They look and stare at me.” (Psalm 22:16,17)

Even the sharing of his clothes – which the New Testament describes as having been carried out by the soldiers – is clearly described:

“They divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots.” (verse 18)

The mockery, scorn and biting derision of his enemies, and Christ’s uncomplaining submission were prophesied:

“But I am a worm, and no man; a reproach of men, and despised of the people. All those who see me laugh me to scorn; they shoot out the lip, they shake the head” (Psalm 22:6,7)

“He was oppressed and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; he was led as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth.” (Isaiah 53:7)

There are no more poignant words in the Bible than these which were written up to a thousand years before the event they describe. Their complete fulfilment in Christ is evidence that he was Messiah and that prophecies were the word of God. They could not be the word of anyone else.

Jesus the redeemer

The suffering and shame of Christ were full of redemptive purpose. He suffered for our forgiveness and salvation. The Old Testament words could not be clearer:

“Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon him, and by his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way; and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.” (Isaiah 53:4-6)

These things were not amazing coincidences or chance happenings; they were part of the Great Plan of God, of which Christ is right at the centre.

Christ is risen

Of course, it might be said of some of the evidence so far outlined, that Jesus simply set about to act out the sayings of the Old Testament and thereby claim to be Messiah. In other words, it could be alleged that Jesus engineered his life to make it seem like the fulfilment of prophecy. To argue in this way is a policy of desperation. Not only has it a very hollow ring, but it does not explain the miracles Christ performed. More than that, such a theory does not account for his rejection and crucifixion which at the very least would then require the connivance of those who rejected him and the cooperation of the soldiers who crucified him.

This is a most unlikely possibility. In any case, such an argument collapses completely in the light of his resurrection from the dead. This wonderful miracle was entirely out of his hands and, moreover, was not expected by his disciples.

His resurrection is the final miracle which crowned everything that had gone before and came to them as a joyful surprise. Yet it too had been foretold in the Old Testament:

“Therefore I will look to the Lord; I will wait for the God of my salvation; my God will hear me. Do not rejoice over me, my enemy; when I fall, I will arise; when I sit in darkness, the Lord will be a light to me.” (Micah 7:7,8)

“For you will not leave my soul in Sheol, nor will you allow your Holy One to see corruption. You will show me the path of life; in your presence is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures for evermore.” (Psalm 16:10,11)

The words “soul” and “Sheol” are the usual Hebrew words for “a person” and “the grave”. Not only was Messiah to be raised from the dead, his body would not be contaminated by corruption during the time he was in the grave!

This evidence from the Psalms forms the cornerstone of the preaching of the apostles. It could not apply to anyone other than the Lord Jesus Christ. Speaking of the words from Psalm 16, as quoted above, the apostle Peter on the Day of Pentecost said:

“Men and brethren, let me speak freely to you of the patriarch David, that he is both dead and buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. Therefore, being a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that of the fruit of his body, according to the flesh, he would raise up the Christ to sit on his throne, he, foreseeing this, spoke concerning the resurrection

of the Christ, that his soul was not left in Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption. This Jesus God has raised up, of which we are all witnesses.ö (Acts 2:29-32)

õHades õ is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew word õSheolö, both of which mean ãthe graveø Jesus was not left in the grave, for God raised His Son from the dead.

The ascension

After forty days or so, the risen Christ ascended to heaven. Yes, you may have guessed it: this too was made known long ago in the Old Testament. How could so wonderful an event be foretold? It was so unusual. Yet, this is what the scripture said:

õYou will show me the path of life; in your presence is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures for evermore.ö (Psalm 16:11)

õThe Lord said to my Lord, ãSit at my right hand, till I make your enemies your footstoolö (110:1)

This was the crowning glory of the evidence. It completes the Old Testament trail that led to Jesus of Nazareth. It both sealed the certainty that Jesus is the Son of God and it proves the Old Testament scripture to be the totally reliable word of God. Jesus has ascended to heaven and is seated at Godø right hand. That is the final evidence that Christ is the Messiah.

Yet there is more!

There is one further piece to the story: an intriguing and altogether fitting burst of promise and light. It has been part of the Christian faith from the start. Jesus Christ is coming back to earth to reign as King. This too is to be found in the Old Testament:

We have already read the prediction that Jesus would be his Fatherø right hand man in heaven: õThe Lord said to my Lord, ãSit at my right hand, till I make your enemies your footstoolö, but notice what comes next:

õThe Lord shall send the rod of your strength out of Zion. Rule in the midst of your enemies!ö (Psalm 110:2)

No wonder that Psalm 110:1 is the most quoted verse of the whole Old Testament to appear in the New! Read how this verse was applied by the apostle Peter when speaking about Jesus:

õí Whom heaven must receive until the times of restoration of all things, which God has spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began.ö (Acts 3:21)

The Jesus who ascended to heaven is the Christ who is coming to reign on earth as King of kings and Lord of lords. He who wore the crown of thorns will wear the crown of glory. He will reign as King over all the earth. This is beyond doubt. Those promises will be fulfilled as surely as the prophecies about his first coming were fulfilled to the letter.

What difference does it make?

In the light of these things, where do we stand? We are at the crossroads, the point of decision. We can either accept the testimony we have read as convincing, and find it to be a solid and sound foundation for our faith. Or we may choose to turn away from the facts, without being able to refute them, to lead our own lives away from Christ. The second course of action is exactly what most of the Jews who were contemporary with Jesus decided to do. And they were disastrously wrong. Jesus warned them that their rejection of him would bring an end to their existing nationhood in the land of Palestine, and foretold that the city of Jerusalem would be sacked and their temple destroyed.

To them this was incredible and quite unthinkable. Yet, it happened. The Romans besieged the city and finally over-ran it in AD 70. The havoc and carnage were terrible. Despite the Roman general's command that the Jewish Temple should not be violated, his soldiers set it ablaze and left it in ruins.

God's words are always fulfilled. The gospel has now reached all parts of the earth. Christ has become a light to the Gentiles, as the Old Testament declared would be the case. It is for us in Gentile lands to answer the question of Pilate, the Roman governor, and to meet its challenge: "What then shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?" He is the promised Saviour of mankind, and the coming King. There is no hope for any of us or for the world without him. Wise men from a Gentile country came to Jesus when he was born. Wise men and women have come to him ever since. Will you be one of them?

Prophecy fulfilled in our day

The Old Testament is still being fulfilled. One of the greatest wonders of the twentieth century was the return of the Jews to the land from which they were scattered, over nineteen hundred years before. And the Bible said that they would return, just as they did!

"Hear the word of the Lord, O nations, and declare it in the isles afar off, and say, 'He who scattered Israel will gather him, and keep him as a shepherd does his flock'" (Jeremiah 31:10)

"For behold, the days are coming," says the Lord, "that I will bring back from captivity my people Israel and Judah," says the Lord. "And I will cause them to return to the land that I gave to their fathers, and they shall possess it" (30:3)

Those prophecies are as clear and unambiguous as those about Christ. We all are witnesses to their truth. Everyone knows about the Jews as a nation in their own land. The Bible foretold it and God has fulfilled it. Therefore, it is absolutely certain that Christ will come back to be King on earth. Look at what the Old Testament has promised:

"For unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government will be upon his shoulder. And his name will be called Wonderful, Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David and over his kingdom, to order it and establish it with judgment and justice from that time forward, even for ever. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this." (Isaiah 9:6,7)

Finally ...

Will you be ready for the King when he comes? Wise men and women will. The Master comes to reign on earth. He will give eternal life to all who have believed these good things and have been baptized, and are waiting faithfully for him:

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. And he will set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on his right hand, ‘Come, you blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.’ (Matthew 25:31-34)

Surely, this is worth believing. And it is true!

By Harry Tennant

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