

Before the Foundation of the World

Discovering Jesus' Divinity in the
Old Testament



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Before the Foundation of the World



Discovering Jesus' Divinity in the Old Testament

Ancient Jewish prophecies of the coming Messiah inspired hope in Israel through many dark and difficult times. These Old Testament prophecies were also intended to help God's people identify their Savior. While the church was being established, these prophecies played an important role in helping people find and hold onto faith in Jesus.

When persecution broke out in the early church, it would have been easy for early believers to question their faith in this new Messiah. But one thing that kept them going was the conviction that only Jesus could have fulfilled the prophecies found throughout the Hebrew Scriptures.

In fact, this is one way that Jesus Himself responded to the doubts of people around Him. After John the Baptist was arrested, he started having some questions about Jesus' ministry. For instance, Jesus and His disciples didn't fast like John's followers. So John sent his disciples to ask, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?"

Jesus' response was, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor" (*Matthew 11:4–5, New International Version**).

This was Jesus telling John to look at His ministry through the lens of the prophets. His words touched on ministries the prophets foretold. The coming Messiah would take on our suffering (*Isaiah 53:4*). The blind would receive sight (*Isaiah 29:18, 35:5*), and the lame would be healed (*Isaiah 35:6*). As Isaiah promised, the dead would be raised (*Isaiah 26:18–19*) and good news would be preached to the poor (*Isaiah 61:1*).

Jesus wanted to strengthen John's faith by reminding him of the prophets' words and to point out that He was fulfilling those promises. And when we struggle with our own faith today, it's helpful to look at all the prophecies that Jesus fulfilled. The New Testament writers saw it as an essential truth that Jesus was who He claimed to be.

*All Scripture is taken from the New International Version

ONE

Is Jesus' divinity truth or legend?



Authentic Christian theology doesn't just see Jesus as a good teacher, but it worships Jesus as God incarnate. One thing that critics of Jesus like to suggest is that Jesus' divinity is a legend that sprang up over time. They claim that Jesus never proclaimed to be God, the New Testament didn't see Him as God, and the early church didn't worship Him as God.

But we know that people worshiped Jesus from the outset. Polycarp was a bishop in the early church who was believed to be a disciple of John the apostle (affirmed by both Irenaeus and Tertullian). He said this in his own letter to the Philippian church:

“Now may the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the eternal high priest himself, the Son of God Jesus Christ, build you up in faith and truth...and to us with you, and to all those under heaven **who will yet believe in our Lord and God Jesus Christ** and in his Father who raised him from the dead.¹”

Ignatius, a church father and another disciple of John, had plenty to say on the topic.

“Being as you are imitators of God, once you took on new life through **the blood of God** you completed perfectly the task so natural to you.²”

“**For our God, Jesus the Christ**, was conceived by Mary according to God's plan, both from the seed of David and of the Holy Spirit.³”

But the early church didn't break from the New Testament in this regard. The New Testament declares Jesus' divinity throughout. There were very few people closer to Jesus than Peter, and Peter identified Jesus as God:

“Simon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ,
To those who through the righteousness of **our God and Savior Jesus Christ** have received a faith as precious as ours” (*2 Peter 1:1, emphasis added*).

1. Polycarp, Philippians, 12:2

2. Ignatius, Letter to the Ephesians, 1.1

3. Ignatius, Letter to the Ephesians, 18.2

Is Jesus' divinity truth or legend?

Continued

Paul, too, points to Jesus as God:

“while we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of **our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ** (*Titus 2:13, emphasis added*)”.

When Jesus presents Himself raised from the dead to Thomas, the disciple responds in worship. Jesus not only accepts Thomas' worship as God, but He also affirms it.

A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.”

Thomas said to him, “**My Lord and my God!**”

Then Jesus told him, “**Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed**” (*John 20:26–29, emphasis added*).

TWO

Seeing the Messiah as God in the Old Testament



If Jesus is truly God, it only makes sense that God's people would have been tipped off through the prophets. So let's examine some Old Testament passages that reveal the divine nature of the coming Messiah.

Micah and the Ancient of Days

The writer of Hebrews tells us that God has spoken to us through His Son, “whom He appointed heir of all things, and through whom He made the universe” (*Hebrews 1:2*). Paul wrote in his letter to the Colossians that Jesus “is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in Him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together” (*Colossians 1:15–17*).

If the coming Messiah existed before the world was formed, it seems like the Old Testament would point to the pre-existent nature of the coming Messiah. Were there hints that Jesus existed *before* stepping into our world? Yes!

When we think about the prophet Micah, it's usually regarding his revelation about where the Messiah was to be born, but the same prophecy that predicts Jesus' birthplace also makes another startling pronouncement:

“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
 though you are small among the clans of Judah,
 out of you will come for me
 one who will be ruler over Israel,
 whose origins are **from of old,**
from ancient times” (*Micah 5:2, emphasis added*).

Seeing the Messiah as God in the Old Testament

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Some may argue that Micah is talking about the Messiah's lineage going back to King David. But the phrase translated "from of old" is used in Habbakuk 1:12 to describe God's eternal nature: "Lord, are you not *from everlasting?*"

In communicating where Jesus was to be born, the prophet also alerts his readers to the Lord's divine nature. Jesus' earthly life would begin in Bethlehem, but His birth wouldn't be His origin story. He existed ages before stepping into the pages of human history.

Isaiah confirms the Messiah's divinity

As a prophet, Isaiah is one of the Bible's most influential figures. Of the New Testament's 260 chapters, all but 25 quote Isaiah directly or indirectly. And when Jesus kicked off His ministry, He inaugurated it by reading from the scroll of Isaiah in the synagogue.

Isaiah prophesied about the Messiah and His coming kingdom quite often. One of his most popular messianic prophecies includes these words:

For to us a child is born,
 to us a son is given,
 and the government will be on his shoulders.
 And he will be called
 Wonderful Counselor, **Mighty God,**
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Of the greatness of his government and peace
there will be no end.
 He will reign on David's throne
 and over his kingdom,
establishing and upholding it
with justice and righteousness
from that time on and forever.
 The zeal of the Lord Almighty
 will accomplish this (*Isaiah 9:6-7, emphasis added*).

Seeing the Messiah as God in the Old Testament

Continued

Not only does Isaiah call the Messiah mighty God and everlasting Father, but he points to the eternal nature of the Messiah's kingdom that will last forever.

In fact, at one point Isaiah prophesied:

“This is what the Lord says—
 Israel's King and Redeemer, the Lord Almighty:
I am the first and I am the last;
 apart from me there is no God (*Isaiah 44:6, emphasis added*).

And in Revelation, the mantle of first and last (Alpha and Omega) is placed upon the glorified Christ:

“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty” (*Revelation 1:8*).

When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. Then he placed his right hand on me and said: “Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades” (*Revelation 1:17–18*).

The messianic trilogy in Psalms

It's not a surprise that Psalm 22 is considered a prophetic Psalm. Many of its words point directly toward Jesus' sacrifice and experience on the cross.

Dogs surround me,
 a pack of villains encircles me;
they pierce my hands and my feet.
 All my bones are on display;
people stare and gloat over me.
They divide my clothes among them
and cast lots for my garment (*Psalm 22:16–18, emphasis added*).

Seeing the Messiah as God in the Old Testament

Continued

But many scholars believe that Psalms 22, 23, and 24 make up a messianic trilogy of the Shepherd. Psalm 22 speaks to the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for the sheep (*John 10:11*). Jesus quotes this Psalm from the cross when He asks, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me” (*Psalm 24:1, Matthew 27:46*)?

Psalm 23, arguably the most well-known Psalm (if not passage) in the Bible, points at Jesus’ role of protecting His sheep, meeting their daily needs, guiding them, and empathizing with their weakness.

The Psalmist talks about the shepherd leading him beside still waters (Psalm 23:2). While prophesying about Israel’s coming deliverance, Isaiah uses this same imagery:

They will neither hunger nor thirst,
nor will the desert heat or the sun beat down on them.
**He who has compassion on them will guide them
and lead them beside springs of water** (*Isaiah 49:10, emphasis added*).

John also invokes this imagery in the book of Revelation when prophesying about the future of the righteous:

For the Lamb at the center of the throne
will be their shepherd;
‘he will lead them to springs of living water.’
‘And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes’” (*Revelation 7:17*).

Psalm 24 describes Jesus’ future role as King of Kings, fulfilling His promises as the King of glory.

Jesus went out of His way to identify Himself as the good shepherd, which means that He is both a leader and a companion to His sheep. But throughout the Old Testament, the identity of Israel’s chief shepherd belonged to God, which was often contrasted against the poor shepherding of Israel’s leaders.

Seeing the Messiah as God in the Old Testament

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On his deathbed, Jacob communicated that God had been his shepherd all of his life (*Genesis 48:15*). And in one of the most evocative passages about God's power and care, Isaiah says:

See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power,
and he rules with a mighty arm.
See, his reward is with him,
and his recompense accompanies him.
He tends his flock like a shepherd:
He gathers the lambs in his arms
and carries them close to his heart;
he gently leads those that have young (*Isaiah 40:10–11, emphasis added*).

It's not difficult to surmise that by taking on the mantle of "good Shepherd," Jesus was taking upon Himself the identity of the Old Testament's great Shepherd.

The Messiah as Savior

Back in the garden of Eden, God told the deceiving serpent that he would strike the heel of the woman's offspring, but his head would ultimately be crushed (*Genesis 3:15*). This came to pass when Jesus was crucified but, in the process, conquered Satan and death.

The Bible makes it clear that humanity's salvation was worked out long before Jesus was born. In Ephesians, Paul declares that God chose us to be in Christ before the world was created (*Ephesians 1:4*) and Revelation proclaims that Jesus (the Lamb) was slain from the creation of the world (*Revelation 13:8*).

When talking about Jesus as humanity's Savior, it's important to consider how Scripture talks about the role of savior. Isaiah addresses this topic succinctly:

For I am the Lord your God,
the Holy One of Israel, **your Savior** (*Isaiah 43:3, emphasis added*).

Seeing the Messiah as God in the Old Testament

Continued

“You are my witnesses,” declares the Lord,
 “and my servant whom I have chosen,
 so that you may know and believe me
 and understand that I am he.
 Before me no god was formed,
 nor will there be one after me.
 I, even I, am the Lord,
 and **apart from me there is no savior** (*Isaiah 43:10–11, emphasis added*).

Declare what is to be, present it—
 let them take counsel together.
 Who foretold this long ago,
 who declared it from the distant past?
 Was it not I, the Lord?
**And there is no God apart from me,
 a righteous God and a Savior;
 there is none but me** (*Isaiah 45:21, emphasis added*).

The point is clear. There is only one Savior, and it is the Lord. To call Jesus the Savior of humankind is to call Him God. In fact, Jesus’ name literally means “Yahweh is salvation.”

This salvation is Scripture’s central theme. When Jesus appears to the disciples after His resurrection, they’re overcome with amazement and joy. Jesus reminds them, “This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms” (*Luke 24:44*).

It’s obvious from Jesus’ statement that He had tried to explain this all to them in the past, but they didn’t entirely understand. Jesus had just explained all these things to the travelers on the path to Emmaus.

Seeing the Messiah as God in the Old Testament

Continued

He said to them, “How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?” And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, **he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself** (*Luke 24:25–27, emphasis added*).

Scripture makes it clear that there is no savior besides God and that salvation belongs to the Lord alone (*Psalms 3:8*). This would explain why Jesus is the central theme of the Old Testament. If He is the Savior of the world (*John 4:42, Acts 5:31, Philippians 3:20, 2 Timothy 1:10*), He is also God. And this explains why an angel would appear to the shepherds after Christ’s birth to proclaim this good news:

Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; **he is the Messiah, the Lord** (*Luke 2:11, emphasis*).

THREE

Understanding the importance of Jesus' divinity



The Old Testament clearly shows that Jesus existed long before the incarnation. When He walked the earth, He was completely human—but He was fully God. This is a truth that the orthodox Christian faith rests upon.

Because Jesus was a man, He experienced our temptations and empathizes with our weaknesses. He isn't some distant or removed God who doesn't care about our struggles or understand our pain. He is a high priest who sympathizes and shares our joys and sorrows. And He mediates between the Father and us.

But Jesus is also God. He is the world's only Savior. Omnipotent. Sovereign. And Victorious. By turning to Him, our sins are forgiven and we get to share in His life. We can cast our cares upon Him and trust Him to hear and respond to our prayers. And ultimately we will be united with Him in His eternal kingdom.

Jesus tells His followers, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (*Matthew 28:18–20*).

This isn't the suggestion of a profound teacher or sage. It is a command from God Himself to tell the world of His identity and how they can spend eternity with Him.

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