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# *Did Jesus Fulfill Old Testament Prophecies of a Coming Messiah?*

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**C**hristians make the claim that Jesus of Nazareth was the Jewish Messiah as predicted in The Old Testament. The New Testament repeats this assertion in many ways (direct quotes, brief allusions, and identifying older events as foreshadowings of Jesus' life).

This is a bold claim, asserted with great force, and should not be ignored. If it's true, we should reject a common notion that, "Jesus was just a good teacher but nothing more." If these claims are false or the products of over-active imaginations, we should dismiss them (and probably reject the entire Christian message).

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There may be good reasons for skepticism. Without a thorough investigation, it can appear that New Testament writers may have played fast and loose with the Hebrew texts. On the surface, some of their interpreting can appear stretched. But something this important deserves more than a cursory reading.

First, we must reckon with the fact that the same verses that New Testament writers labeled messianic are the same passages that Jewish scholars have identified in the exact same ways. You can find dozens of such references in the rabbinic writings like the Talmud, Mishnah, and Targums, all written long before Jesus was born. (Alfred Edersheim lists 30 pages of such quotes in his *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, Hendrickson Publishers, 1993, pp. 980-1010.)

Second, we must observe that there are two very different kinds of Messianic prophecies. Old Testament scholars, both Jewish and Christian, see as many as 800 verses that point to a Messiah, a unique person who fulfills God's plans and promises. But some describe a reigning messiah who brings in peace and prosperity while others paint pictures of a suffering messiah who atones for sins.

In the former category (as many as 500 out of the 800), we read of a messianic age when:

- "They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore." (Micah 4:3, NIV)
- "The wolf and the lamb will feed together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox." (Isaiah 65:25, NIV)

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- Some of these passages speak of divine judgment, such as, “You [God] will rule them with an iron scepter; you will dash them to pieces like pottery.” (Psalm 2:9, NIV(1984))

In the latter category, we find prophecies like these:

- The very first messianic prophecy in the Garden of Eden after Adam and Eve disobeyed God: “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.” (Gen. 3:15, NIV)
- The most elaborate messianic prophecy: “We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.” (Isaiah 53:6, see all of Isaiah 52:13 - 53:12, NIV(1984))

These make up just a tiny sampling of a remarkably long and complex collection. It would be easy to find a complete list through a simple internet search. However, these two very different descriptions create a confusing puzzle. How could one person do both—reign and suffer?

One proposal that some Jewish interpreters have offered suggests that there would be two Messiahs. They called the reigning king “Messiah, Son of David” and the suffering servant “Messiah, Son of Joseph.” The first was prophesied in places like 2 Samuel 7 and Psalm 89 when King David reigned powerfully. That earthly reign of David’s pointed to an eternal reign of “Messiah Son of David.”

Prophesied in places like Isaiah 53 and Psalm 22, a suffering Messiah would parallel Joseph’s sufferings at the hands of his brothers. (see Genesis 37 - 50). Joseph told his brothers, “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good.” (Gen. 50:20, NIV) On a grander scale, the “Messiah, Son of Joseph” would suffer and God would use it for a much greater good.

While the “two Messiahs” suggestion does solve some of the difficulties raised by the two vastly different kinds of messianic prophecies, it does not take into account that a few messianic prophecies tie the suffering and the reigning to the same person.

For example, Zechariah predicted a time when God Himself, in the person of the Messiah, will come to earth and people “will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son.” (Zechariah 12:10, NIV) He came the first time and was pierced. He returns a second time and reigns (see the rest of the book of Zechariah). Rather than pointing to two Messiahs, the Old Testament envisions one Messiah who comes twice.

Finally, we must take seriously what the New Testament writers claimed. They identify Jesus as the one who fulfills predictions of the first coming (see Matthew 1:22-23; 2:5-6; 2:15; 2:17-18 among many other places) and the one who will fulfill promises of a future return (see Mark 14:62; Matthew 24:29-31). In fact, Jesus Himself claimed that things written in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms were about Him (see Luke 24:44) and that “Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad.” (John 8:56, NIV)

If Jesus was correct—that the prophets spoke about Him, that He arrived when and where and how they said He would, and that He provided payment for sin so people could know God intimately—we should take His word (and the prophets He affirmed) seriously. We might end up echoing the words of the blind man, right before Jesus healed him, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” (Mark 10:47, NIV)

