

Messianic Prophecy in the Old Testament

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After His resurrection, Jesus appeared to his disciples in Jerusalem and said, “[A]ll things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning me. Then opened he their understanding, that they might understand the scriptures” (Luke 24:44-45). Just before this, on the road to Emmaus Jesus joined himself with Cleopas and another disciple who were talking about the Lord’s death and the report of His resurrection. Jesus said to them, “O fools, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken: Ought not Christ to have suffered these things, and to enter into his glory? And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself” (Luke 24:25-27).

Importance of Messianic Prophecy in the Old Testament

Until the New Testament was penned, the only scriptures the early church had were the Old Testament scriptures (Acts 17:2, 11; 18:24-28). Paul said that the Old Testament was also written for our learning (Rom. 15:4) and our admonition, or warning (1 Cor. 10:11). The way the New Testament writers used the Old Testament is very interesting. We see it used in typological ideas (Col. 2:17; Heb. 8:5; 10:1; 1 Pet. 3:20-21); sermons, like Peter’s on Pentecost (Joel 2); and sometimes in highlighting principles or warnings (i.e., 2 Pet. 2:1-2). Messianic prophecies like Genesis 3:15 present some description or fact about the Messiah (“Christ” means “the Anointed One”). Since the focus of the Bible is upon Jesus the Messiah (John 1:41; Matt. 16:16; Acts 2:36), it is important for us to focus our attention upon Messianic prophecy.

Messianic Examples and New Testament Fulfillment

Let us consider a few examples of Old Testament prophecy. In Psalm 16:8-11 David said, “For thou wilt not leave my soul in hell, neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption.” On Pentecost Peter described David by calling him a “prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him, that of the fruit of his loins, according to the flesh, he would raise up Christ to sit on his throne; He seeing this before spake of the resurrection of Christ, that his soul was not left in hell, neither his flesh did see corruption” (Acts 2:30-31).

When God made the covenant with Abraham, He said, “and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed” (Gen. 12:3; 18:18; 22:18). Paul told us that this prophecy was an early announcement of the Gospel. He said, “And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the heathen through faith, preached before the gospel unto Abraham, saying, In thee shall all nations be blessed” (Gal. 3:8). One can see why Paul would call this the “gospel” because, as he explained, “Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ” (Gal. 3:16).

Another exciting example is the portion of Isaiah that the Ethiopian eunuch was reading as he journeyed toward Gaza (Acts 8:32-33). The fuller citation from Isaiah is this:

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth. He was taken from prison and from judgment: and who shall declare his generation? for he was cut off out of the land of the living: for the transgression of my people was he stricken. (Isa. 53:7-8)

Since the eunuch did not know of whom the scripture was speaking, “Philip opened his mouth, and began at the same scripture, and preached unto him Jesus” (Acts 8:35).

The Importance of Being Familiar with Messianic Prophecy

There are at least two reasons why Christians should be familiar with Messianic prophecy.

1. Your faith in Christ depends on it.

Paul taught that faith comes by hearing the Word of God (Rom. 10:17), a context saturated with prophetic quotes from the Old Testament! Did Paul have the Old Testament scriptures in mind when he was talking about preaching the Word of God in Romans 10? “Yes!” and especially those Messianic texts! Our faith in Christ is mostly based in the New Testament, but the early Christians had to listen to the teachings of the Old Testament closely since the New Testament texts were only slowly being composed. Oral teaching and the Old Testament formed the early Bible for the earliest church members.

When Jesus was confronted by Sadducees who did not believe in the resurrection, He asked them, “Do ye not therefore err, because ye know not the scriptures, neither the power of God?” (Mark 12:24). The implication is that the doctrine of the resurrection could be believed if they knew the scriptures—the Old Testament scriptures. To the Pharisees who came tempting Him about the doctrine of divorce, He replied, “Have ye not read, that he which made them at the beginning made them male and female...?” (Matt. 19:4). In both accounts, Jesus references the Old Testament.

2. Your personal evangelism depends on it.

Messianic scriptures are the foundation of Christian faith, showing that Jesus is the one way to salvation. Messianic scriptures show that the Bible is inspired by God and thus an accurate and reliable source upon which to base one’s faith. The Messianic texts build faith in Jesus and in God’s written word, and they provide a tool for personal evangelism to both Jews and Gentiles (Rom. 11). The apostles and early evangelists could use those Messianic scriptures to show that Jesus was the Christ (Acts 9:22; 18:28). So Christians should always be prepared to give a defense of the faith, but to do so with gentleness and respect (1 Pet. 3:15-16).

It is precisely because God intended to send Jesus for the salvation of humanity that the Old Testament is filled with so many significant prophecies about His messianic service. Knowing of this continuity reminds us of the long-term plans that God has developed and unfolded through the centuries; this allows us to see His great wisdom and love simultaneously (see Acts 3:19-26). Let us be committed to learning more about our Lord, especially that which is said of Him in the Old Testament!