

Can prophecy be true?

Most attempts to prophesy the future end in failure.

Those who claim to be prophets are usually charlatans. But the writers of the Old Testament were different. They forecast the future with uncanny accuracy.

The Old Testament is a library of thirty-nine books, which makes up more than three-quarters of the Bible. It was finished over four hundred years before Jesus Christ was born. Yes, there were four clear centuries between the close of the Old Testament and the first events recorded in the New.

Well over twenty authors wrote the Old Testament. Most of them never met each other, and the first of them was separated from the last by a period of one thousand years. In terms of birthplace, family, education and social background, they had very little in common, and it is not surprising that their writings display a great variety of styles, vocabulary and content. What united them all was their common understanding that God had moved them to write.

A special person to come

They were not wrong about this, as even the most casual reader can see. The fact is that all the Old Testament writers had something to say about a special person who was to come. Some of them spoke about him by means of pictures, symbols or broad hints, while others used language of plain prediction. As the centuries passed, the picture they drew became clearer and clearer, for new author's added greater detail to the existing predictions. If you like, the picture started off as a line drawing. The bare outline was then filled in until it became more like a black and white photograph. Then more and more traces of colour were added. By the time the end of the Old Testament was reached, it was as if the picture was about to move. It seemed like it was high time to meet this person whom the authors had spoken about so many hundreds of times.

To change the illustration, each of the Old Testament writers was like someone throwing onto a table a piece (or several pieces) of Identikit. Eventually, so many pieces were on the table that it looked as if there were too many. By using the clearest pieces, it was possible to build up such an accurate picture of the person to come that there would be no trouble recognising him if he were to come into the room. But it was only after his coming that anyone could see where all the other pieces fitted in. So much fine detail had been revealed about him, that those looking at both him and the pieces were flabbergasted — especially when they remembered that all those pieces had been on the table for over four hundred years before he appeared!

Detailed predictions

The Old Testament had spoken of the 'Coming One' as a man who would be the direct descendant of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, from the tribe of Judah and the line of David. Micah correctly identified the place of his birth as Bethlehem, Isaiah declared that he would be born of a virgin, while Daniel even predicted the time of his coming!

The ancient authors foretold the massacre of Bethlehem's infants, the child's escape into Egypt, and that he would eventually settle down and minister in Galilee. Rejected by the Jews, he was nonetheless to ride triumphantly into Jerusalem on an ass, to be betrayed by a friend and sold for thirty pieces of silver. Silent when accused, hated without a cause, he would be cruelly put to death by his enemies.

How amazingly was his death described by those Old Testament writers! Mocked and insulted, his hands and feet pierced, thirsty beyond measure, he was to be offered vinegar to drink. Lots would be cast for his clothing, his blood would flow freely, but not one of his bones (all of which would be dislocated) would be broken. While dying, he would pray for his enemies and be openly identified with wicked people. At last he would be buried in a rich man's tomb. From that grave he would rise victorious and ascend into heaven — because the man to come was, in fact, God!

There has to be an explanation

Everybody who wants to do it can check the dates of the Old Testament books, and can see for themselves that these details (and many others) are really there. It is not hard to assemble all the pieces of Identikit and to see that only one person fits the picture. The fact cannot be contested — the Old Testament speaks about Christ. So how do you account for that?

The early Christian preachers constantly appealed to these Old Testament prophecies to back up the truth of what they were saying, and their opponents could not stand the heat. There was simply no way to account for the phenomenon of fulfilled prophecies, except by admitting that the Book which contained them was supernatural. But the Old Testament writers did not explain it quite like that. They bluntly declared that their messages had been given to them by God, the Creator and Judge of this universe and its inhabitants. He was the ruler of history, and so well able to predict the future.

Some explanations will not do

The fact of fulfilled prophecy still makes some people uncomfortable. In recent years some of them have tried to handle the question openly. They have suggested that Jesus, on discovering that the place and details of his birth and childhood tied up with Old Testament predictions, attempted to fulfil the rest of them. His motive was to carve out a place for himself in the history books. And so it was, for example, that he provoked the Jewish authorities to kill him, and rode on an ass to his certain death in Jerusalem.

To believe this, we would also have to believe that he arranged for his betrayer to receive thirty pieces of silver, and organised for himself a blood-shedding death where no bones were broken. He gave directions for his hands and feet to be pierced, for vinegar to be given to him in his thirst, for thieves to be each side of him, and for a rich person to offer him his tomb! Is there really anyone who honestly believes that this is what happened?

It is time to face the facts

The facts have to be faced: the Old Testament prophecies were given, and they were fulfilled in Jesus Christ. And they can never be fulfilled in anyone else, because the predicted time for these events expired two thousand years ago! There is nobody else who fits the picture.

The Bible is a divine book. The God-Man, Jesus Christ, is the promised Saviour. There is no doubt about it. So nobody who follows him is being misled. We can go through life, and into the grave and eternity, with complete certainty. 'Joy to the world! The Lord is come!' is a good carol to sing at Christmas.

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