

34 Foundations 105 – Messianic Prophecy and Improbable Odds

Fulfilled Prophecy and the Case for a Written-in-Advance Messiah

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I grew up in the church, so I heard about fulfilled prophecy my whole life.

For a long time, that was enough. People smarter than me believed it, so it must be true. I didn't feel a need to check.

Then I got older, and I learned something uncomfortable. Lots of smart people believe false things.

If I actually wanted to know what was true, I couldn't keep borrowing someone else's confidence. I had to go pursue it myself.

So I started reading the Bible more thoroughly. I started reading men like C.S. Lewis, Josh McDowell, and Lee Strobel – not because they were smart, but because they'd actually done the work. Real research. Real soul-searching. Men willing to ask hard questions instead of assuming the answer.

What I found wasn't vague at all.

It was specific. Uncomfortably specific. So much so that many modern scholars have attempted to proclaim the actual books were written after the fact instead of centuries before the man it describes ever took a breath.

The Prophecies Themselves

The Old Testament doesn't offer one or two predictions about a coming Messiah. Depending on how you count them, scholars have identified over 300 distinct prophecies about him scattered across the Hebrew Scriptures – his birthplace, his ancestry, the manner of his death, even details about how his executioners would behave.

Written by different authors. Across different centuries. Compiled long before Jesus was born.

We know this isn't a case of prophecies quietly edited in after the fact, either (as some scholars would suggest). The Dead Sea Scrolls, discovered at Qumran starting in 1946, include a complete copy of Isaiah dated to over a century before Christ's birth. This is powerful evidence the prophecies were already sitting there, unchanged, before the man they describe ever arrived.

Peter Stoner and the Silver Dollars

In the 1950s, a mathematics professor named Peter Stoner decided to test something with his students.

Stoner chaired the math and astronomy departments at Pasadena City College. He wasn't a theologian trying to prove a point. He was a scientist running a probability exercise.

He picked eight of the clearest Messianic prophecies – the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, a messenger would prepare his way, he'd enter Jerusalem on a donkey, he'd be betrayed by a friend, his hands and feet would be pierced, and so on. Then he had his students estimate, as conservatively as possible, the odds of any one person accidentally fulfilling all eight.

Over 600 students across twelve classes worked through the numbers with him.

The result: one chance in 10 to the 17th power. That's a one followed by seventeen zeros. One hundred quadrillion.

Stoner illustrated it this way. Take that many silver dollars and cover the entire state of Texas. Not an inch deep. Two feet deep, wall to wall. Mark one single coin with a black X, mix the pile thoroughly, then blindfold a man and set him loose anywhere in the state.

The odds he picks up that one marked coin on his first try are the same as one man accidentally fulfilling those eight prophecies.

His work was reviewed by the American Scientific Affiliation and found to be mathematically sound. Stoner didn't stop at eight, either.

When he ran the same exercise for 48 of the prophecies, the odds dropped to a number so large it stops meaning anything to the human brain. It's not just improbable at that point. It's functionally impossible by accident.

Josh McDowell cites this same research in *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, and it's worth considering what it actually claims. Not that Jesus was a good man who happened to match some vague expectations. That one specific person, born in one specific place, matched a written record so precisely that random chance stops being a reasonable explanation. Think about what that actually means.

Daniel and the Timing

It gets even more fascinating. It's not just what the Messiah would do. Scripture also gives us a timeline for when.

The prophet Daniel, writing during the Babylonian exile roughly 500 years before Christ, recorded a specific countdown in Daniel 9:24 through 27. From the decree to rebuild Jerusalem, Daniel says, there would be sixty-nine "weeks" – understood by many scholars as weeks of years, sixty-nine sets of seven – until the Messiah appeared publicly to Israel.

Scholars have spent over a century working through the calendar math on this one, comparing the ancient Persian decree in Nehemiah 2 against Jewish and Babylonian calendars. They don't all land on the exact same calendar date – the ancient calendars themselves leave a little room for disagreement.

But here's what nearly all of them agree on. The countdown, started from that ancient decree, lands within the narrow window of Jesus's public ministry – specifically pointing toward the triumphal entry, the day the crowds laid down palm branches and called him the Son of David.

Faithful scholars land within a year or two of each other, not centuries apart. Some have given a very specific date and believe the math lines up perfectly, and based on my understanding of Daniel and the prophecy foretold, I have no reason to doubt that. The Creator God who stands outside the confines of our time knows the end from the beginning.

Whatever view you land on, it is still extraordinary. A prophet, five hundred years early, gave a specific starting point and a specific length of time, and it lands on the general season when Jesus of Nazareth was publicly presented as the Messiah.

One final point. If you've read the gospel accounts, you know that King Herod understood the coming Messiah would be born in Bethlehem around this particular time.

Herod didn't come to that conclusion on his own. When the magi arrived from the east asking where the newborn king of the Jews had been born, Herod called together the chief priests and scribes and asked them directly (Matthew 2:4). They quoted him Micah 5:2 without hesitation. Bethlehem. Then Herod pressed the magi further, asking exactly when the star had first appeared, so he could pin down the timing as precisely as the location (Matthew 2:7).

Did Herod actually believe the prophecy? Well, he believed it enough to order the deaths of every boy two years old and under in and around Bethlehem, hoping to protect his own throne by wiping out a rival he took seriously enough to kill for (Matthew 2:16).

That's not a minor detail. The religious scholars of Herod's own court knew exactly where to look and roughly when to expect it. **The timing wasn't a surprise dreamed up after the fact by Jesus's followers. It was common enough knowledge that a paranoid, murderous king could act on it in real time.**

Whatever your view on the exact math, the bigger point stands. Nobody else in history has ever had a five-hundred-year-old prophetic timeline point at them and land anywhere close.

“The Myth That Became Fact”

C.S. Lewis spent years of his own life resisting Christianity partly because he loved mythology, and the story of a dying and rising god felt, to him, like something he'd read a hundred times before in other cultures.

What changed his mind wasn't abandoning that instinct. It was realizing where it pointed.

In his essay “Myth Became Fact,” collected in *God in the Dock*, Lewis argued that the old myths of a dying god – Balder, Osiris, and others – had always floated somewhere in legend,

nobody knows when or where. Christianity was different. It took that same ancient longing and planted it in an actual date, an actual place, under an actual Roman governor whose name we can verify with an inscription found at Caesarea.

Lewis wrote that by becoming fact, the myth “does not cease to be myth: that is the miracle.”

In other words, the ache people had always felt for a story like this wasn't foolish. It was pointing somewhere real, and prophecy is a big part of how we know it landed on somewhere real, instead of just another legend nobody could ever check.

The Skeptic Who Went Looking

Lee Strobel spends an entire chapter of *The Case for Christ* on exactly this question, and he doesn't ask a pastor. He goes and finds a man named Louis Lapides.

Lapides was raised Jewish in New Jersey. He had almost no exposure to Christianity growing up, and what little he'd absorbed wasn't friendly. After serving in Vietnam, he came home depressed, spent time exploring other religions, and eventually ended up in a conversation with some Christians on a sidewalk in California.

Instead of taking their word for it, Lapides did something very Berean. He went and read the Old Testament prophecies himself, in their original context, to see whether they actually pointed where the Christians claimed they did.

What he found convinced him. Isaiah 53, written more than 700 years before Jesus, describes a suffering servant pierced for the sins of others. Daniel 9 gave a timeline. Micah gave a birthplace. One by one, the details lined up with a precision he hadn't expected, and Lapides became a believer.

When Strobel pressed him on the obvious question – if this is so clear, why don't more Jewish people believe it – Lapides didn't dodge it. He said most people, on any side of the question, simply never take the time to research the prophecies for themselves. They trust whoever they already agree with and stop there.

There's a name for that. Confirmation bias. Already holding a belief, and only ever looking for information that agrees with it.

It's something all of us are guilty of, myself included. And it's the opposite of being a Berean. A Berean goes and checks, even when the answer might not be the one they were hoping for. Confirmation bias keeps you inside a system you built yourself, walls up, never testing whether what's inside is actually true – exactly the kind of thing I write about in my book about living in a castle... you think it's freedom but it's actually the walls that hold you hostage.

A fortress like that feels safe. It keeps out anything that might challenge what you've already decided to believe. But a wall built to keep out uncomfortable evidence is still a wall, and it holds you hostage just as surely as any other kind.

Strobel's challenge to skeptics was simple. Don't take his word for it. Don't take anyone else's word for it either. Go read the actual texts – do the research yourself.

That's the same challenge I want to leave you with.

The Leaders Who Had the Evidence and Missed It

Think back to that scene with Herod for a second.

The chief priests and scribes didn't have to search for the Bethlehem prophecy. They knew it instantly, off the top of their heads, the moment Herod asked. These weren't uneducated men. They had access to every Messianic prophecy in existence. They had spent their lives studying this text.

And yet, when the actual Messiah was born a few miles away, not one of them went to look.

Herod took the prophecy seriously enough to commit murder over it. The very men who quoted it for him didn't take it seriously enough to walk to Bethlehem themselves.

This is worth thinking about, because it isn't a knowledge problem. It was never a knowledge problem. They had the information.

What they lacked was the will to let that information disrupt what they'd already built their lives around.

They weren't reading Scripture to find out what it said. They were reading it to confirm what they already believed.

Why This Matters for You

This is why I keep coming back to the same word throughout this whole series. Berean.

In Acts 17, the Bereans didn't take Paul's word for it just because he sounded confident and knew his Scripture well. They went home and checked it against the text themselves, every single time.

Lapides did the same thing centuries later, from the opposite direction, and it changed his life.

I want you to do that too.

Everything I've written in this Foundations series – the manuscripts, the canon, the Gnostics, the archaeology, and now this – I want you checking it. Not taking my word for it because I sound confident. Looking at the sources. Reading the primary texts. Running the numbers yourself if you're the kind of mind that needs to see the math firsthand.

If I've gotten something wrong, or overstated a case, I want to know. That's not weakness in the argument. That's the whole point of building a faith that can survive being looked at closely.

Prophecy fulfilled at this scale isn't a coincidence you're required to explain away. It's an invitation to look closer.

Whether you land where I've landed or you're still working through it, I'd rather you get there by checking for yourself than by trusting me or anyone else blindly.

For Further Study

Peter Stoner's full calculations, including his work on both 8 and 48 prophecies, are laid out in *Science Speaks*, and the complete text is available for free at sciencespeaks.dstoner.net.

Josh McDowell's *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* cites Stoner's research directly and expands on the broader case for fulfilled prophecy as historical evidence.

C.S. Lewis's essay "Myth Became Fact" is collected in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, and is worth reading in full for anyone wrestling with how myth and history relate in the Christian story.

Lee Strobel's *The Case for Christ*, chapter 10, "The Fingerprint Evidence," contains the complete interview with Louis Lapidus referenced above, including his own detailed walkthrough of the Messianic prophecies that convinced him.

For the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Great Isaiah Scroll specifically, the Israel Museum's Digital Dead Sea Scrolls project (deadseascrolls.org.il) allows anyone to view high-resolution images of the actual scroll online.

Look at the actual sources. Follow the citations. Be a Berean.

If you're struggling:

- Christian Faith-Based Resources: <https://mentalhealthhotline.org/christian-faith-resources/> or call 1-866-903-3787 (24/7)
- The Hope Line: <http://thehopeline.com/> Chat with trained professionals for free 24/7.
- Crisis Text Line: Text HOME to 741741
- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 988 (call or text)

You matter. Whatever doubts you're wrestling with right now – you don't have to sort them out alone. Please stay.

William James Meyer is the author of "Do You Live In A Castle? Breaking Free From The Walls That Hold You Hostage." He writes from a Christian perspective as a fellow traveler and Berean trying to examine the Scriptures daily and share what he finds.

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