

Prophecies about the Coming Messiah

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One of the most impressive sections of prophecy in the Old Testament is found in the book of Isaiah, chapters 40 through 56. It is often called the AServant@ section because of its many references to a figure whom God calls Amy servant@ or the like. This Servant is frequently identified with the nation Israel (Isa 41:8; 44:1, 21; 45:4; 48:20; and 49:3), but elsewhere he is just as clearly distinguished from Israel (Isa 42:6; 49:5-6, 7, 8; 50:5; 53:8, not to mention numerous characteristics that do not fit the nation as a whole). Probably the best explanation for this peculiarity is that suggested by MacRae: from the viewpoint of responsibility, Israel as a whole was called by God to do a particular work, but as regards accomplishment of the work, it will be done by an individual Israelite.¹

It has sometimes been suggested that the Servant is a personification of Israel B particularly its righteous remnant or an ideal Israel. But the lack of any contextual hints of personification, together with very specific details, rather argue that a particular individual is in view.²

Besides scattered references to the Servant throughout Isaiah 40-56, there are several extended passages in which his character and labors are detailed. These are Isa 42:1-7; 49:1-12; 50:4-11; and 52:13-53:12. Numerous features in these passages point to the Servant being Jesus as he is described for us historically and theologically in the New Testament. But to counter claims that the New Testament was explicitly written to fit these predictions, we here look at one of them which happened long after New Testament times and which the New Testament writers could not have engineered.

In Isa 42:6-7 we are told:

*(6) I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles,
(7) to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison, and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.*

The Servant is to be a light to the Gentiles.

This theme is picked up and developed further in Isaiah 49, where in verses 5-7 we hear:

(5) And now the LORD says B he who formed me in the womb to be his servant, to bring

1. Allan A. MacRae, *The Gospel of Isaiah* (Chicago: Moody, 1977; reprint, Hatfield, PA: IBRI, 1992), pp. 61-62.

2. Frederick A. Aston, AThe Work of the Messiah,@ in *The Evidence of Prophecy*, ed. Robert C. Newman (Hatfield, PA: IBRI, 1998), pp. 121-124.

back Jacob to him and gather Israel to himself, for I am honored in the eyes of the LORD and my God has been my strength B (6) he says: AlI is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept, I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.@ (7) This is what the LORD says B the Redeemer and Holy One of Israel B to him who was despised and abhorred by the nation, to the servant of rulers: AKings will see you and rise up, princes will see and bow down, because of the LORD, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you.@

Here the Servant=s being a light to the Gentiles is explained as Abring[ing] my salvation to the ends of the earth,@ suggesting that the phrases in Isa 42:7 about opening blind eyes and freeing captives are either eschatological (referring to events at the end of the age) or are spiritual (rescuing people from spiritual blindness and from captivity to sin). But in any case the Servant=s work is to have a powerful effect. Though Adespised and abhorred by the nation,@ even rulers of the Gentiles will bow down to him.

Has there ever been any Israelite that fits these words? Not even Albert Einstein, though he has received widespread honor for his scientific discoveries and has been the most respected Jew of recent centuries.

But what about Jesus? He is the only Jewish person B and one who claimed to be the Messiah at that B who has started a world religion of Gentiles. Before the first century AD, only the Jews and a few Greek philosophers were believers in one God. Only a small percentage of the world=s population were even aware of the Hebrew Scriptures. Most worshiped a whole committee of gods, who set rather poor examples for their followers. The resulting level of morality was understandably quite low. But today those who believe in one God include not only the Jews (14.2 million), but also the predominantly Gentile Christians (1.4 billion). We could also include the Muslims (723 million), as the rise of Islam was at least an indirect result of Christianity. Thus about one-half the world=s population now claims allegiance to the God of Abraham, most of these as a result of the work of Jesus.³

Even neglecting Islam and most Jews, about one-third of the world=s people accept Jesus as the Messiah. They are found on every continent and in nearly every country: both in the more developed nations (790 million) and less developed (643 million); in the Western nations (547 million), the Third World (532 million) and even in Communist countries (254 million).⁴ Truly Jesus of Nazareth has become a light to the Gentiles as news of him has spread throughout the world.

3. Statistics from David B. Barrett, *World Christian Encyclopedia* (New York: Oxford, 1982), pp. 4, 6.

4. *Ibid.*

Another striking prophecy points to the time of the coming of the Messiah. This is the prophecy of Daniel's seventy weeks⁴ found in Daniel chapter 9.

According to the narrative at that point, the prophet Daniel has recently come to understand from the Scriptures that the desolation of Jerusalem would last seventy years.⁴ Apparently Daniel realizes that the time must be about up, so he begins to pray to God, confessing his sins and those of his people, asking God to restore the city for the sake of his Name. While he is praying, the angel Gabriel is sent to him with the following message (Dan 9:24-27):

(24) Seventy >sevens= are decreed for your people and your holy city to finish transgression, to put an end to sin, to atone for wickedness, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy and to anoint the most holy. (25) Know and understand this: From the issuing of the decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until the Anointed One, the ruler, comes, there will be seven >sevens,= and sixty-two >sevens.= It will be rebuilt with streets and a trench, but in times of trouble. (26) After the sixty-two >sevens,= the Anointed One will be cut off and have nothing. The people of the ruler who will come will destroy the city and the sanctuary. The end will come like a flood: War will continue until the end, and desolations have been decreed. (27) He will confirm a covenant with many for one >seven.= In the middle of the >seven= he will put an end to sacrifice and offering. And on a wing [of the temple] he will set up an abomination that causes desolation, until the end that is decreed is poured out on him.

There has been considerable dispute over the meaning of this passage, especially since the rise of theological liberalism in which it is claimed that the book of Daniel was written in the Maccabean period (c165 BC) instead of the sixth century BC in which the narrative is set. Three items in particular will concern us here: (1) Is the passage speaking of one Anointed One or two? (2) What is the unit of time measurement used here? (3) What is the starting point for the time-span here pictured?

Modern translations fall into two classes regarding how to construe the syntax of verses 25 and 26. The King James Version and a number of more conservative translations⁵ agree with the quotation above, in which it appears that the prophecy expects one Anointed One (or Messiah) to come and be cut off at the end of 7 + 62 >sevens.= The Revised Standard Version and a number of more liberal translations⁶ instead read the text as saying there will be two Anointed Ones, one coming at the end of seven >sevens,= the other after a further sixty-two >sevens=:

5. Including the NIV, NASB, Living Bible, Berkeley Version, Amplified Bible, and the Jerusalem Bible.

6. Including the Jewish Publication Society's version, the NEB, the Smith-Goodspeed and Moffatt translations, and the New American Bible.

(25) *Know therefore and understand that from the going forth of the word to restore and build Jerusalem to the coming of an anointed one, a prince, there shall be seven weeks. Then for sixty-two weeks, it shall be built again with squares and moat, but in a troubled time. (26) And after the sixty-two weeks, an anointed one shall be cut off, and shall have nothing....*

This latter translation follows the old Masoretic punctuation of the Hebrew Bible, where a division in the sense is made between the seven weeks and the sixty-two weeks.⁷ It does explain the peculiar combination of 7 and 62 instead of their sum 69.

In spite of these facts, the Masoretic punctuation may not date back before the ninth or tenth century AD,⁸ and the parallelism of the passage favors the former translation. In the Hebrew, the phrase rendered *Restore and rebuild* consists of the same pair of verbs as are translated *built again* later in the verse. Likewise the word *Messiah/Anointed One* is repeated. This parallelism may be sketched as follows:

From the going forth of the word to *build again* Jerusalem
To *Messiah* the Prince shall be 7 weeks and 62 weeks.
Plaza and moat shall be *built again*...
And after 62 weeks *Messiah* shall be cut off...

This parallelism suggests that the passage is structured as a *summary* statement of two lines in which two events and two time-periods are mentioned, followed by several lines in which the details of each event are spelled out in turn. Thus we should expect one Messiah or anointed one, whose cutting off occurs after 69 weeks from the starting point. Perhaps the first seven weeks, if one may hazard a guess, involve the rebuilding of the city.⁹

The usual procedure in interpreting this passage is to assume that the prophecy intends by the word *>seven=* or *>week=* a period of seven years, and then to proceed to make the calculation using *units of years*. With the most likely starting point (the one we shall suggest below), this has the anointed one cut off about 39 AD. As a result, most conservatives have opted for an earlier starting point or suggested that the years are actually *>prophetic years=* of only 360 days. None of this is necessary.

7. See, for example, K. Elliger and W. Rudolph, *Biblica Hebraica Stuttgartensia* editio minor (Stuttgart: Deutsche Biblegesellschaft, 1984), p. 1404.

8. Ernst Wurtwein, *The Text of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1957), p. 19.

9. As suggested in the Berkeley Version. The Smith-Goodspeed and the New English Bible imply such an interpretation by translating verse 25b: *A for sixty-two weeks it shall stay rebuilt / remain restored,* but these translations of the verb *shub* find no warrant in the lexicons and merely show the problem of adopting the Masoretic punctuation.

The unit of measurement used here in Daniel is the >week= or >seven,= not the year. The context, and possibly the unusual plural used for this word here, suggests that the author intends us to understand the seven-year sabbatical land-use cycle rather than the seven-day week.¹⁰ The biblical commands regarding this sabbatical cycle are given in Exodus 23:10-11 and Leviticus 25:3-7, 18-22. The Exodus passage reads: AFor six years you are to sow your fields and harvest your crops, but during the seventh year let the land lie unplowed and unused.@

It is interesting that our context in Daniel 9 seems to point to this usage as well. Daniel has been concerned about the desolation of Jerusalem and the fact that the Israelites are scattered from their land. He has just learned Afrom books@ that this desolation will last seventy years. The prophecy of Jeremiah supplies the time-element for this scattering and desolation (Jer 25:11-12; 29:10), but it appears that Lev 26:32-35 supplies the rationale: If Israel did not keep the sabbatical-year regulation, God would expel them from the land until the land could Aenjoy its sabbaths.@¹¹

Various suggestions have been made for the starting point of these seventy >sevens=: (1) God=s word at the fall of Jerusalem (586 BC; Jer 25:11-12; 29:10); (2) Cyrus= word in allowing the captives to return to Jerusalem (537 BC; 2 Chron 36:23; Ezra 1:2); (3) Artaxerxes= commission to Ezra (458 BC; Ezra 4:11-12, 23); (4) Artaxerxes= commission to Nehemiah (445 BC; Neh 2:1-6).¹² Of these four, only the last actually issued in the rebuilding of the city wall. In thus making Jerusalem fortified again, it became in ancient parlance once more a city and no longer a village. We thus follow this fourth alternative, and Neh 2:1 dates Artaxerxes= sending Nehemiah to Jerusalem to the twentieth year of Artaxerxes 1, namely 445 BC.¹³ So this is our starting point.

Now we must make the calculation forward from 445 BC. But unlike many others, we shall use the *actual sabbatical cycles* as units of measurement rather than just adding 7 x 69 years to the starting point, since this follows the actual usage in Daniel. Recent work by Ben Zion

10. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver and C. A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1966): 988-989; Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* 5 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 1994-2000), 4:1383-1384.

11. The author of 2 Chron 36:21 explicitly applies this reasoning to explain the length of the Babylonian captivity.

12. See J. Barton Payne, *Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), pp. 383-386.

13. Jack Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), section 336.

Wacholder has reviewed all the ancient data for the location of the sabbatical cycles in antiquity, and he finds the modern cycle in error by one year.¹⁴ We will use Wacholder=s numbers rather than the traditional cycles, but this will turn out to make no difference in our result.

The calculation is very simple. Our starting point, 445 BC, falls in the seven-year cycle 449-442 BC, of which the last year, from September 443 to September 442, is the seventh or sabbatical year. Using the usual Jewish inclusive method of counting, 449-442 is the first >seven= of Daniel=s prophecy. The second is 442-435 BC, and so on, down to the transition from BC to AD, where we need to remember that 1 BC is immediately followed by AD 1, with no zero in between. The 69th cycle following Artaxerxes= commission is AD 28-35, just the time that Jesus of Nazareth was Acut off@ in Palestine while claiming to be God=s Messiah!

| BC | | | AD | | |
|----------------------------|---------|---------|---------------------------|-------|-------|
| 449-442 | 442-435 | 435-428 | 14-21 | 21-28 | 28-35 |
| 1st | 2nd | 3rd | 67th | 68th | 69th |
| ^ 445 - Artaxerxes= decree | | | Jesus= crucifixion - 30 + | | |

Some may be concerned that Daniel says *After* the sixty-two >sevens= Messiah will be cut off,@ whereas by our calculation the crucifixion occurs *on* the 62nd >seven= (the 69th, counting the first 7). But this, too, is a conventional Jewish idiom, in which *After*@ means *After* the beginning of.@ Notice that Jesus= resurrection is alternatively spoken of as occurring *After* three days@ (Matt 27:63; Mark 8:31) and also *on* the third day@ (Matt 20:19; Mark 9:31).

If instead we follow the traditional scheme for the location of the sabbatical cycles instead of Wacholder=s, the 69th cycle only shifts by one year, to AD 27-34, which still fits equally well. Likewise an error by a year or two on either end B for Artaxerxes= 20th year or the date of the crucifixion B would not change the result. The prediction fits Jesus even allowing for the largest possible uncertainties in chronology!

How unusual are these predictions? We here attempt some estimation of probabilities.

The ALight to the Nations@ prophecy, in the course of over 2000 years since it was made, has been fulfilled in a rather spectacular manner. The largest religion in the world today was

14. Ben Zion Wacholder, *The Calendar of Sabbatical Cycles During the Second Temple and the Early Rabbinic Period*,@ *Hebrew Union College Annual* 44 (1973):153-196. A complete table from 519 BC to AD 441 is given on pp. 185-196.

founded by a Jew, who has turned multitudes of pagan Gentiles into worshipers of the God of Abraham. How do we calculate the probability of something like this happening? We may, I think, assume that the founder of the world's largest religion must belong to some people group. Then what fraction of the world's population, at the time the prediction was made, or the time it was fulfilled, were Jews? The current fraction of Jews in the world is .3%. In spite of the holocaust, the fraction of Jews living today is probably higher than in antiquity, since the Jews have participated in the huge population expansion of first world countries and many ethnic groups have not. But we will stick with .3%. Thus there is antecedently about 1 chance in 300 that this prophecy will come true.

What fraction of famous Jews would be Adespised and abhorred by the nation@ (Isa 49:7)? Not a very large fraction normally. Like any ethnic group, Jews tend to take pride in those who have done well in the larger society. Of course, Jesus is viewed as a religious innovator, and the fraction of Jewish religious innovators who are abhorred by the Jews is doubtless closer to one than in non-religious cases. But are Spinoza and Einstein abhorred by the nation? Anyway the prophecy doesn't say he will be a religious innovator, and one of the standard *objections* against the Messiahship of Jesus is his rejection by the Jews! I think there is something unusual going on here, and I incline to give this one chance in ten. Total probability on Alight to the nations,@ 1 in 3000.

How about Daniel's seventy weeks prophecy? What is the chance that the prophet will accidently hit Jesus at a distance of hundreds of years? The size of his Agunsight@ is seven years. The size of the prophetic span given is 490 years. One chance in 70. But there is no antecedent reason why the prophet need limit himself to 490 years in the sweep of his prophecy. If we took instead the length of Jewish history up to the time of fulfilment, that would be about 1500 years (from Moses) or 2000 years (from Abraham), one chance in 200 or 1 in 300. If we took the length of Jewish history to date, about 1 in 500 to 1 in 600. Let's try 1 in 200.

Compare this with the liberal alternative that says some pseudo-Daniel was Apredicting@ the Maccabean persecution after the fact using one of the starting points mentioned above. Taking the target to be 170 BC and the seventy weeks to be 490 years, the starting point would be 660 BC, which misses the four alternative starting points listed on page 5 as follows: (1) by 70 years, (2) by 120, (3) by 190, and (4) by 215 years! This is one of the reasons that convinced me that critical B Humean B biblical scholarship is bankrupt.

There are other impressive Messianic prophecies. The prediction of the suffering servant in Isaiah 53 (actually 52:13-53:12) comes to mind. See the detailed discussions in Aston and MacRae.¹⁵ Aston finds the following features in this passage. (1) The suffering servant is

15. Frederick A. Aston, AThe Work of the Messiah,@ in *The Evidence of Prophecy*, ed. Robert C. Newman (Hatfield, PA: Interdisciplinary Biblical Research Institute, 1988), pp 119-127; Allan A. MacRae, *The Gospel of Isaiah* (Chicago: Moody, 1977; reprint Hatfield, PA: Interdisciplinary Biblical Research Institute, 1992), pp 129-150.

portrayed in detailed features as a real person. (2) He is an innocent sufferer. (3) He is a voluntary sufferer. (4) He is an obedient, humble and silent sufferer. (5) His suffering springs from love for sinners, including his executioners, who act in ignorance. (6) His suffering is foreordained by God in love, and fulfills the divine intention and purpose. (7) His suffering is vicarious or substitutionary. (8) His suffering is redemptive and spiritual in nature. (9) His suffering ends in death. (10) His death gives way to resurrection. (11) His atoning work leads the straying people to confession and repentance. (12) His redemptive work inaugurates a victorious life of kingly glory. Obviously, many of these features refer to phenomena which cannot be directly seen in human history. But what is clear is that they are central to the New Testament portrayal of Jesus, the one Messianic claimant who has founded a world religion of Gentiles and who was cut off in just the period designated by Daniel! What are the chances that all these things could plausibly be applied to an individual who also shows up at the right time and does the right things? Can you specify even one other candidate in the first century AD? Or in any century? Surely the probability for this is far smaller than 1 in a thousand.

Then there is the suffering person depicted in Psalm 22, whose cry to God for help is reported by two of the Gospel writers to have been shouted by Jesus from the cross. This person (1) feels abandoned by God but (2) trusts him completely. (3) He is despised and mocked by the people who surround him. (4) They have pierced his hands and feet, (5) cast lots for his clothing, (6) and subjected him to some situation in which he is weak, terribly thirsty, and his bones are out of joint. (7) Although he is Alaid in the dust of death,@ God somehow rescues him. (8) The effects of these events will go down through the future generations and to the ends of the earth, (9) so that all the families of the nations will turn to the Lord and bow down to him. Though some of these features are regularly dismissed from being real fulfillments by assuming that the Gospel writers ransacked this passage for details to use in describing Jesus= death, it remains a fact that this passage strikingly fits death by crucifixion, an experience that Jesus certainly endured. What fraction of people since this Psalm was written have died by a death consistent with these details? One in a thousand? One in a million?

So, to summarize the probabilities:

| | |
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| Light to the nations (Isaiah 42 & 49): | 1 in 3000 |
| Seventy weeks prophecy (Daniel 9): | 1 in 200 |
| Suffering servant (Isaiah 53): | 1 in 1000 |
| Abandoned by God (Psalm 22): | 1 in 1000 |

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|------------------------|--|
| Cumulative probability | 1 in 600,000,000,000 1 in 600 trillion! |
|------------------------|--|

I have no fear of entrusting my destiny to Jesus and his claims!