

PROPHECY ALIVE AND WELL ¹

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Wouldn't it be great if you could predict the future accurately? Imagine what power, what influence you could wield if you really could see tomorrow as though it happened yesterday. You could predict every bull and every bear stalking the stock market and know when to buy and sell shares. You could make a fortune.

This ability to accurately see into the future would come in very handy for choosing your ideal life partner, too ... 'Don't touch that man with a 20 foot barge pole, he'll turn out no good!' Or, "That lady might look the goods, but she will never deliver." And before you flew on that aeroplane, or took that train ride, you would know whether it was going arrive safely. Yes, I dare say, a lot of the mistakes we have made in life would have been avoided and our lives a lot happier and a lot richer, if we could see accurately into our future.

But if you really could foretell the future, word would get out that you were a prophet, connected to supernatural sources, and it would not take long till you would be sought out by presidents and leaders, and people from all over the globe would constantly be beating a path to your door for advice on all sorts of decisions facing them and the nations. Hmm. Come to think of it, perhaps being able to predict the future might not be such a good idea after all!

Of course there are some who want us to think they can foretell the future. But I wonder why those fortune tellers sit in little tents in the market places trying to make a buck on the side? Do you think they can *really* tell your future?

Fortunately, or unfortunately, the ability to accurately predict the future is not in man's province. Jesus stated the truth when he said, "You know not what the morrow may bring forth." In truth, we can't even predict what the next hour is going to bring. But if the ability to predict the future is not in man's province, there is One Person Who is in the business of foretelling and forthtelling the future. This Person stakes His reputation, His character, on His ability to --- without fail --- foretell the future with 100% accuracy 100% of the time. The ability to predict the future belongs to one God only and to one book only; the God of the Bible.

"I, the LORD, your Redeemer, and the one who formed you from the womb, I, the LORD am the Maker of all things, stretching out the heavens by Myself, and spreading out the earth all alone, causing the omens of boasters to fail, making fools out of diviners, causing wise men to draw back, and turning their knowledge into foolishness" (Isaiah 44:24-25).

"Remember this and be assured ... For I am God, and there is none other; I am God, and there is none like Me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things which have not been done, saying, 'My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure ... truly I have spoken and I will bring it to pass. I have planned it, surely I will do it'" (Isaiah 46:9-10).

One of the interesting things you find in the Bible is how the LORD God challenges the gods of the nations that surround Israel,

"Announce to us what is coming, Declare the things that are going to come afterward, that we may know that you are gods" (Is. 41:22-23).

You so-called gods of Persia, of Assyria, and Egypt, you so called deities of Greece, or wherever there is anyone who thinks himself a god, come on, stand up and show the things that are going to come to pass. Announce the future! Declare the things that will be! This is the test to see if you really are a god or not. The God of the prophets of Israel declares,

¹ This is the second in the series *The Bible: Sad Hoax or Solid Hope?* Delivered on Sunday 4th September, 2016 at the Church of Christ, (Life & Advent) Hamilton, New Zealand. Again I ask the reader to remember the style is hortatory, rather than primarily academic.

“I am Yahweh, that is My Name, I will not give My glory to another, nor My praise to idols, Behold ... I declare new things; before they spring forth I proclaim them to you” (Is.42:8-9).

Good friends, it is not by accident that the Scriptures are called, “the word of prophecy” (2 Pet. 1:21). No other religious book or writing makes prophecy the test as to whether it comes from the Living God or not. You don’t find prophecy in the Koran. You don’t find prophecy in the Sanskrit. You don’t find prophecy in the Bhagavadgita. You don’t find prophecy in Buddhism, in Zoroastrianism, in Shintoism. You find it alone in the God of Israel and His spokespersons, the holy prophets and apostles.

Moses told the fledgling nation that Yahweh God would raise up prophets to speak in His Name. But what was the test to see if any prophet really had been commissioned by God or was just blowing hot air out of his mouth?

“When a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the thing does not come about or come true, that is the thing which the LORD has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; you shall not be afraid of him” (Deut. 18:22).

Now of course, many have claimed to speak for God. There have been countless would-be prophets. There are any number of false prophets who have spoken “presumptuously”. To this very day there are many religious organisations with millions of followers who still follow the failed teachings of false prophets with failed predictions.

2 PETER 1:15-21

This is a remarkable and thought-provoking few verses. It’s one of those little passages that always seems to yield something new, no matter how many times I study it. Peter is an old man and knows he is about to die (it is traditionally believed he was crucified upside down at his own request for he felt unworthy to die as his Lord had). So he says his purpose in writing his epistle is to remind his readers of the importance of remaining faithful to the apostles’ teaching, v.15

“And I will also be diligent that at any time after my departure you may be able to call these things to mind.”

He emphasises the authority of the apostles by contrasting their teaching with those who peddle “cleverly devised tales” (v. 16). One of the groups who are following “cleverly devised tales” can be none other than those who prefer the Jewish Mishnaic legends, that is, Jewish stories and legends of the *Talmud*. The rabbis had made the fables of the *Talmud* their *modus operandi* for Biblical interpretation. But Peter says he and the apostles do not follow that rabbinic method when it comes to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

No. Peter says his authority is not second-hand hearsay, but first-hand, up close and personal experience of “the power and coming of the Lord Jesus”. “We were eyewitnesses of the majesty” of the Lord Jesus when we saw his “power and coming” (v.16). And Peter has one specific incident in his own first-hand experience with Jesus that he is highlighting. He refers to the time when Jesus was transfigured on the Mount of Transfiguration (probably Mount Hermon which is the highest mountain of all in the Holy Land).

Peter says, we were on that Mountain when Jesus’ face shone brighter than the sun, and when his clothes glistened dazzling white. There we heard the voice of “God the Father” saying, “This is My beloved Son with whom I am well pleased” (v.17). Yes, we saw “the honour and glory” that God gave to His Son.

Now, the Greek word Peter uses for “eyewitness” is a noun used only here in the NT. But it was a common word used, in First Century society. An eyewitness was someone who was initiated into the pagan mystery religions. Peter says, On that Mount of Transfiguration, we were initiated. You ask, initiated into what?

When Peter says he saw and was initiated into “the power and the coming of the Lord Jesus”, he uses the classic Greek word of the NT for the Second Coming of Jesus; the *Parousia*. It was a word commonly used throughout the Roman Empire by its citizens. When an emperor personally came to visit a provincial city in his empire, it was called his *parousia*, that is, the royal and personal arrival of the emperor himself.

But when the NT writers used the word they specifically applied it to when Jesus promised to come back to set up the Kingdom of God on earth. As you will understand, it had enormous political ramifications. It was a word supercharged with political overtones. For when Peter says he saw “the power and glory” of King Jesus’ *parousia*, he was being counter-revolutionary to the Imperial cult of Rome.

So, Peter says, “In that Mount we saw an advance screening of the glory of Jesus when he comes back to earth. Peter was initiated there and then into the glory of God’s coming world-wide kingdom. It’s like when a blockbuster movie is soon to hit the cinemas. The producers release a “trailer”. You get a couple of snippets, a passing glimpse of the action that’s soon to hit the big screen. That’s what Peter is describing. He had a *preview* of the coming glorious kingdom of Jesus the Messiah when he saw that vision on the Mount.

Now, having said all of that, Peter goes on to say something, that if it were possible, is even more startling,

“And we have also a more sure word of prophecy, to which you do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star arises in your hearts” (v.19)

Here Peter refers to the Old Testament as “the word of prophecy”. Now the Greek here allows for two possible interpretations. And these two possible meanings are reflected in our English translations.

1. “WE HAVE THE WORD OF PROPHECY MADE MORE SURE”?

One possibility is: Does Peter mean that because of the vision of Jesus’ future *parousia* they saw on that Mount of Transfiguration, the apostles are better qualified than before concerning their gospel message? In other words, Peter could be saying, the Scriptures have been fulfilled. Our eyewitness testimony confirms what the prophets wrote in the Scriptures. There are now two powerful sources of authority for you believers. The combined testimony of OT prophecy and the eyewitness testimony of the apostles of Jesus means “we have the word of prophecy made more sure.”

2. “WE HAVE THE MORE SURE WORD OF PROPHECY”?

Or, the second possibility is: Does Peter mean that in spite of the wonderfully certified eyewitness testimony of the apostles of Christ, the word of prophecy in the OT is even surer confirmation of God’s truth than their experience on the mountain? In other words, Peter might be saying that the OT is more reliable than even our apostolic experience. Which is to say, the words of Scripture are a more valid source of authority than anybody’s vision or experience, even if it be the experience of an apostle of Christ... “We have a more sure word of prophecy” than even eyewitness testimony from apostles.

If this is the meaning, then it is an astounding claim. It is as if Peter says, “OK. You don’t have to listen to me, even though I am a certified apostle and eyewitness of Jesus’ power. Even though the Lord Jesus gave the keys of the kingdom to me, and I was there on the Mountain, and my testimony is accredited, there is an higher and more certain authority; the prophetic Scriptures.” Wow!

Personally, I prefer option 1, i.e. the testimony of the apostles confirms the OT prophecies. Prophets and apostles supply a double barreled blast confirming the prophetic predictions now fulfilled in Christ! Either way, Peter is telling us that as believers in the coming Kingdom of God, we must hang on to the Scriptures right up until the appearing of Jesus at the end of this evil age. God’s prophetic word is like a “lamp shining in a dark place”. “You do well to take heed” to the prophetic Scriptures. There is a Day coming, (which Peter saw in preview), when the full light and power of our Lord Jesus will be on full and real display to the world.

And Peter goes on to add even more reason why we are on solid ground to continue believing the Scriptures,

“But knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation; for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God” (v.20-21).

Here Peter explains the source of the prophetic words of the Bible. He says, the prophetic word is not “of one’s own private interpretation”.

The way we use the word “interpretation” today misleads what Peter is stating. The issue is not how we interpret the Scripture --- though it goes without saying that we need to be very skeptical of anybody who claims to have a private revelation or interpretation purporting to come from God! No, the issue rather is the source of Scripture. Negatively stated, the prophetic Scriptures do not originate from men’s “private disclosure”. As we saw last week, the Bible did not originate out of men’s cleverness or ingenuity. Positively stated, the prophetic Scriptures originated with God.

Yes, men were “moved” (literally, “borne along”) by God’s Holy Spirit when they put pen to parchment. The word “borne along” is the same Greek word used of a ship that is blown along by the wind. The prophets who wrote Scripture were blown along by the breath of God. The men who wrote the Bible were impelled, compelled by the creative urge of the Spirit of God. The end result of this Divine energy is that the prophets penned exactly what God breathed out through them. “All Scripture is God breathed.”

OBJECTION: TEXTUAL CORRUPTION.

Oh, but you hear the objection, we don’t have the original autographs that the prophets and apostles penned. We have copies of copies, of copies, of copies. The scribes made either deliberate or accidental copying errors. How can we ever know what the original pen-men who were “borne along” by the Holy Spirit of God wrote. Surely the Bible is full of corruptions and mistakes?

Now I don’t have time to set out for you all the reasons why we can be absolutely sure that when we hold in the Hebrew and Greek texts today we hold a miraculously preserved record of the originals. So let me distill a massive subject right down to simple and hopefully helpful illustration as to why we can be confident we hold in our hands 99.5% of what the original penmen wrote. ²

Suppose a schoolteacher writes a letter to the President of the United States inviting him to come to her little school and meet her class of 8 year olds. To her great joy she receives a personal reply. It is a treasure which she must share with her pupils. “Boys and girls” she joyfully announces, “I hold in my hand a personally handwritten letter from the President. Get your pens and books out and I will dictate it for you so you can have the President’s words too.” And so she dictates the letter to them. They are in the early days of their schooling, and spelling and accuracy is not yet one of their strong points.

In his copy of the letter Johnny misspells a few words. Mary has left out a couple of punctuation marks such as a question mark, or an exclamation mark, and even direct quotation marks. Billy has written one or two words twice, and Peter has omitted a word now and then. Jane couldn’t keep up and so missed a whole sentence. Some of the better students got most of it right, but even they are not without errors. Nevertheless, despite all these flaws about 30 copies of the President’s letter have been made.

Unfortunately, that night the teacher did not realise she had folded the original letter from the President’s pen into some other papers destined for the fire . To her great sorrow it is gone. She does not have the original letter which came directly from the President’s pen; she must be content with those dictated copies her children have made. She gathers them all up, and compares and contrasts all the written evidence, and writes out the original letter from all her variant sources.

But will anyone deny that she has the words of the President? Does she not have his message, in just the same words in which he wrote to her? True enough, there are some mistakes in many, if not most of the letters, but the teacher may engage in the science of textual criticism and correct them. She can correct the misspelled words. She can fill in the missing words omitted by carelessness, because the majority of the other students put them in. A superfluous word not found in nearly all the letters can be happily omitted as not original. Without any serious difficulty, the teacher may indeed restore the original, word for word. Her copy from all those copies is the words of the President.

Yes, it should be clear that errors are bound to appear in almost anything that is copied. Did you know that an English Bible came off the press that had changed Psalm 119:161 from “Princes have persecuted me” to “Printers

² Edward J. Young in *Thy Word is Truth*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1957, p 57 uses this illustration, which I have adapted for purposes of better oratory.

have persecuted me”? Needless to say, that whole edition was destroyed and you won’t find it anywhere now. And then there was “The Wicked Bible” which omitted the word “not” from the Seventh Commandment. Needless to say, you won’t buy a copy of “The Wicked Bible” that said, “Thou shalt commit adultery”!

But these days with computer technology the science of textual reconstruction (called textual criticism) is so exact that experts in the field are confident we have 99.5% accurately transmitted to us from the original pens of the prophets and apostles.

There is no greater authority in the field of the science of textual criticism than Sir Frederic Kenyon who wrote at the end of his life after extensive discoveries and research,

“... we have in our hands, in substantial integrity, the veritable Word of God.”³

And the prince of NT scholars, F. F. Bruce wrote,

“There is no body of ancient literature in the world that enjoys such a wealth of good textual attestation as the New Testament.”⁴

And in the few discrepancies that remain and await further discovery, not one major Christian doctrine is in dispute. But let’s move on. We can do this with great assurance, as you can see. We could talk about dozens of amazing prophecies that have historically come to pass just as the prophetic Scriptures foretold, but I want to pick just one that has not been given much attention.

THE GALILEAN WHO WOULD RULE THE WORLD

Almost casually the Gospel writers mention that Jesus began his ministry in Galilee. Mark writes,

“And it came about in those days that Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee, and was baptized by John in the Jordan” (Mk 1:9).

“And after John had been taken into custody, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God” (Mk 1:14).

John Dixon, PhD. Macquarie University, Sydney and Honorary fellow of the Department of Ancient History, says no serious historian today doubts this historical record ... Jesus was a Galilean.⁵ So you ask, what’s the significance of that? Well, the prophet Isaiah wrote 750 years before Christ that “a great light” would shine out of Galilee. From Galilee one was going to come who would be the Prince of Peace whose ancestor was King David, and who would rule the world. The prophet had foretold that the the Lord of the world would hail from Galilee.

This is just staggering. Galilee was a nice little fertile area, and picturesque. But politically speaking, Galilee was a backwater. In Australia we would say Galilee was on the other side of the Black Stump.⁶ Even in Jesus’ own day, Galilee was considered insignificant. Those who lived in Jerusalem considered Galilee a place where the uneducated lived. Worse still, from Israel’s point of view, Galilee was inhabited with lots of Gentiles, lots of foreigners, non-Jews.

So, to have faith that the Lord of the world would hail from Galilee, must have seemed like an ill-founded promise. But all the sources agree that Jesus began his ministry in Galilee around the year AD 28. Matthew’s Gospel records this prophetic significance,

³ Kenyon, F. G. *The Story of the Bible*, (1936), p144.

⁴ Bruce, F.F. MA., *The Books and the Parchments: Some Chapters on the Transmission of the Bible*. Pickering & Inglis, London. 1953. p170.

⁵ Dixon, John. *A Doubter’s Guide To The Bible: Inside History’s Bestseller For Believers and Skeptics*. Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2014. p159

⁶ In Aussie speak, the Black Stump means the otherside of nowhere in the remote bush.

“Now when he heard that John had been taken into custody, he withdrew into Galilee; and leaving Nazareth, he came and settled near Capernaum, which is by the sea, in the region of Zebulun and Naphtala. This was to fulfill what was spoken through Isaiah the prophet, saying, ‘The Land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, by the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles --- The people who were sitting in darkness saw a great light, and to those who were sitting in the land and shadow of death, upon them a light dawned’” (Matt. 4:12-16).

In Matthew’s own day, to write that the crucified Jesus from Galilee was the Lord of the world, must have surely seemed pure fantasy and ridiculous. There was no observable evidence, that the Galilean of the Christian faith was the universal Lord that Isaiah had prophesied. When you looked at the political landscape the message that Jesus of Galilee truly ruled the world and that his kingship would know no bounds, being universal, was laughable.

Certainly, after Rome had pulverised Jerusalem and dispersed the Jews to the four corners of the earth in 70 AD there was nothing in the first Christians’ painful experience to prove that Jesus of Galilee was on the way to conquering the heart of Rome, yet alone capturing the nations of world. But they believed the word of the prophets.

And here’s the truth. That impossible dream has come true (even though it still awaits its ultimate fulfillment). The Galilean has captured the world. He has irrevocably changed the world in which you and I live. Jesus is worshipped this very day by more people in more countries than any other person.

Late in 2013 Cambridge University Press released *Who’s Bigger? --- Where Historical Figures Really Rank*, by Professors Steven Skiena and Charles Ward.⁷ The book aims to adjudicate on the debate over history’s most influential people. It is no Christian book. It’s a serious monograph tracking the historical, cultural, and ongoing international significance of thousands of people from Aristotle to Einstein and beyond, putting them through a mathematical model designed to reduce the subjective element in the authors’ judgment, and then ranking the historical figures.

Guess who came out on top? Guess who rules the roost? Guess who is Lord of the heap? Jesus of Nazareth! The Galilean rules the world. How could this have been stage-managed? A prophecy around 750 years BC says the Lord of the world would come out of lowly, backwater Galilee. His life, death, resurrection convinced his followers that he is Lord. Two thousands years later he is the most revered and influential name in history. What are the odds that a man from Galilee would become the Lord of the world exactly as the prophet foretold centuries before his birth?

THE ODDS

There are approximately 330 specific prophecies in the OT predicting the coming of the Messiah. They were written no less than a minimum of 450 years before Jesus was born (Malachi was the last prophetic book included in the OT canon of Scripture). But the skeptic says, “Oh, it’s quite possible that Jesus fulfilled these prophecies by sheer coincidence. Eventually, somebody was bound to come along and tick all the boxes. Out of the billions of people ever born on the planet, somebody, somewhere, somehow, eventually would fit.” It’s a mathematical possibility. So perhaps Jesus of Nazareth just chanced to be the one of many throughout history to accidentally fit the prophetic fingerprint. And couldn’t he have deliberately done certain things to make sure that a few general predictions were fulfilled anyway?

Well, a certain mathematician, Peter W. Stoner calculated the mathematical probabilities for Jesus. You will find them in his book, *Science Speaks*. Stoner said that if you took just eight OT predictions that Jesus had absolutely no control over whatsoever, and somehow they were fulfilled in Jesus, the statistical odds are mind boggling.

If you took for example, any 8 prophecies over which Jesus had no control whatsoever (and there are many messianic predictions that Jesus had no control over), Peter Stoner calculated the mathematical probability would be one chance in one hundred million billion ... 1 in 10¹⁷, or 10 to the 17th power. ... 1 chance with 17 zeros after it!

⁷ John Dixon, Op. Cit. pp 160

That number is millions of times greater than the total number of people who have ever walked this planet! To put that number into a pictorial illustration, Stoner calculated that if you took one hundred million billion silver dollars, and poured them into Texas, the largest state in America would be covered with coins to a depth of two feet.⁸ Now, if you painted one of those silver dollars tossed it into that mass of coins, and had a blindfolded man wander the whole state and bend down to pick up that one painted coin, his odds would of picking up that coin would be one chance in a hundred million billion! And that's the same odds that anybody in history would have of fulfilling just 8 messianic prophecies from the OT.

Stoner went on to compute the probability of fulfilling 48 messianic prophecies, which was one chance in a trillion, trillion!⁹ That is, 1 in 10^{157} , or 10 to the 157th power ... 1 chance with 157 zeros after it! Of course, our minds are unable to comprehend this truly staggering number. It's more than the number of atoms in our universe, and in fact, more than the number of atoms in a trillion, trillion, trillion billion universes the size of our universe.

But Jesus fulfilled not just 8 specific prophecies, not just 48 prophecies, but at least 330, with so many of them that he had no power to control or interfere with. The odds of Jesus being the Messiah, the Son of God, are virtually one chance in infinity!

OBJECTION: Now, in case you think these figures are fabricated and exaggerated, let me read to you the foreword to Stoner's book by H. Harold Hartzler, of the American Scientific Affiliation;

"The manuscript for *Science Speaks* has been carefully reviewed by a committee of the American Scientific Affiliation members and by the Executive Council of the same group and has been found, in general, to be dependable and accurate in regard to the scientific material presented. The mathematical analysis included is based upon principles of probability which are thoroughly sound and Professor Stoner has applied these principles in a proper and convincing way."¹⁰

In other words, Stoner's mathematical calculations are peer-reviewed by the scientific community! Is it any wonder that the God of the Bible through his prophets confidently issues the challenge: Come on you so-called gods. You deities of Egypt. You gods of Babylon. You idols of Persia. Come on you gods of Greece and the Roman pantheon. Come on you so-called prophets and seers of the pagans,

"Announce to us what is coming, Declare the things that are going to come afterward, that we may know that you are gods" (Is. 41:22-23)

It simply takes more credulity to believe the prophetic Scriptures are an accident than that they are God-breathed. Well may we put our confidence in the "more sure word of prophecy" (or if you prefer, "the word of prophecy made more sure"). The Bible is the only book in this world that puts its reputation on the line with fulfilled prophecy. Truly there is no god, but the God of Israel, the God of the prophets and the apostles of Christ.

What a priceless treasure you and I hold in our hands, when we have a Bible. The only book in the world that is God-breathed, of supernatural origin. The only book in the world full of remarkable prophecies. Let us be sure to "pay heed" to this "word of prophecy made more sure", for it is "a lamp shining in a dark and gloomy place."

⁸ I am thankful to Samuel Bennett of the Mardon Road Church of Christ (Life & Advent) in Hamilton, New Zealand for computing for my audience that the State of Texas has a surface land area twice that of all of the North and South Islands of New Zealand. This means that the depth of the coins if tipped into New Zealand would rise to 4 feet, or well over a metre!

⁹ Stoner, Peter, W. *Science Speaks*, Moody Press, Chicago, 1969, p 109

¹⁰ As quoted in Josh McDowell's *The New Evidence That Demands A Verdict*, Authentic Media, 2015, p193