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CURVED HORIZON
A Fundamentalist Revisits
Christian Messianic Prophecies

Chuck Bryant

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INTRODUCTION

We sometimes equate Biblical *prophecy* with a prediction of actions or events. The term more broadly refers to any teaching, proclamation, or speaking out on behalf of another. Prediction usually comes along as something of a sideline.

But the common preoccupation with prediction endures. Perhaps understandably so: If someone should have a perceptual flash forward across time, consistently envisioning details of realities which currently exist in what most of us can only abstractly invoke as **THE FUTURE**, we certainly might believe that this person had some high-level connections. And if so, the message would rightly merit our attention. So while I'll sometimes use "prophecy" and "prediction" interchangeably, here I focus on the predictive role.

However you define it, prophecy has an integral role in Biblical theology. Fulfilled prophecy served as a litmus paper of reliability:

You may say to yourselves, "How can we know when a message has not been spoken by the Lord?" If what a prophet proclaims in the name of the Lord does not take place or come true, that is a message the Lord has not spoken. *Deuteronomy 18:21, 22*

This concept took on particular significance for the Hebrews. They'd gone on the skids for centuries; their salad days had wilted. *And this we get for being the chosen people*, they grumbled. Scripture mingled with folklore to create hopes for a dynamic leader who'd restore the nation to supremacy. Some who came to believe in Jesus as God's messiah (*χριστος*, anglicized "Christ") saw in him a "fulfillment" of several Old Testament (OT) prophecies given centuries earlier. Several New Testament (NT) passages claim outright that these texts in fact came true as they supernaturally predicted details of Jesus' life. Justin Martyr used this argument as he sought to convert Trypho, the Jewish philosopher.

Today many Christians consider this belief an objective, ostensibly scientific proof of traditional Christianity. Throughout my adolescence and college I read several books and listened attentively to preachers quoting verses from all over the OT, linking them to equally scattered passages from the gospels, with a smattering in other parts of the NT. During those years I, as a fundamentalist or conservative, believed and even taught this concept.

Over the years I've had to re-think it. Why? Ironically, because *I believed the fundamentalist premise* that the Bible comprised an infallibly objective record of history and biography, a sacred documentary. So I took scriptural details **literally**. I studied my Bible diligently, paid careful attention to what it said, and memorized many passages. Between junior high and finishing my first year of college I'd read the entire OT three times, and the NT four times, with extensive specific textual or topical studies beyond. That study alerted me to several inconsistencies and peculiarities, but I didn't worry much about them.

Then one day during my sophomore or junior year in college, I compared these two records:

There they offered Jesus wine to drink, mixed with gall; but after tasting it, he refused to drink it. *Mt. 27:34*

Later, knowing that all was now completed, and so that the scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, "I am thirsty." A jar of wine vinegar was there, so they soaked a sponge in it, put the sponge on a stalk of the hyssop plant, and lifted it to Jesus' lips. *Jn. 19:28-30*

Some commentaries presented these as "fulfilled prophecy" based on *Psa. 69:21*:

They put gall in my food and gave me vinegar for my thirst.

Cool, I thought at first. The psalmist does foresee Jesus here. But then I kept reading:

May the table set before them become a snare; may it become retribution and a trap. May their eyes be darkened so they cannot see, and their backs be bent forever. Pour out your fierce wrath

on them; let your fierce anger overtake them. May their place be deserted; let there be no one to dwell in their tents. For they persecute those you wound and talk about those you hurt. Charge them with crime upon crime; do not let them share in your salvation. May they be blotted out of the book of life and not be listed with the righteous. *Psa. 69:22-28*

If verse 21 means Jesus, then in these **very next verses** that same voice—speaking for Jesus—demands Yahweh’s holy terror on his persecutors. Trap ‘em, blind ‘em, bend their backs, dump your anger on ‘em, leave ‘em homeless, lock ‘em up in prison, liquid paper ‘em from the book of life. Psalm 69:21-28 reflects the essence of one who said, “Father, *forgive them*—they don’t know what they’re doing”?

Hmmmmmm.

I realized: *this can’t be right.*

At that particular point I had to acknowledge at least this one “fulfillment” as, well, flawed—at best. But I didn’t decide glibly, “These all are bunk,” and then set out to nuke ‘em. Quite the contrary: I simply continued comparing the texts. The more I studied, the more the concept crumbled. Some of the incongruities I found as flagrant as this one; others suffered more subtle damage. But I found that the context of almost every presumed messianic prophecy creates serious logical and intellectual problems—but only to whatever extent one tries to apply those isolated sound bites to Jesus *literally*.

Even worse, as I’d read several of the standard “Christian evidence” books,¹ I found them often citing such “proofs” without honestly confronting the glaring textual problems. I found that blindness inexplicable—and appalling.

Let’s check out the data. Let’s see what happens when we look into the context, underneath the surface, beyond the headlines. I believe that studying these things leads to some significant implications. I can respect the intentions of those who want to honor the what they believe as the Word of God; it was as a fundamentalist – conservative myself that I conducted this study. If conservative Christians want to share spiritual truth meaningfully with a secular world, I believe their premises need more careful objective consideration. I offer the present study as my contribution to that process.

¹ Josh McDowell’s *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, Frank Morrison’s *Who Moved the Stone?*, Peter Stoner’s *Science Speaks*, Bernard Ramm’s *Protestant Christian Evidences*, Batsell Barrett Baxter’s *I Believe Because*, John Clayton’s *Does God Exist?* series, and others.

Let's start with an informal survey. Pick one of these four views as *closest to your view* on messianic predictions. (Despite their imperfections, one should fit reasonably well enough.)

- 1. Details in Jesus' life provided precise, literal fulfillment for every prediction.
- 2. Jesus substantially fulfilled the predictions, though not necessarily in every detail.
- 3. Some events in Jesus' life resemble or echo some OT quotes, but mainly as literary links.
- 4. Events in Jesus' life that we attribute to OT foresight represent either coincidence or contrivance, or they operate on a different hermeneutic mode altogether.

To illustrate, let's say that on any given Monday, I predict: "Later this week, a woman will come to Miami from Brazil, and she'll give an honorary award to Miami's Mayor."

I'll use the terms *Fundamentalist*, *Conservative*, *Liberal*, and *Progressive* to distinguish levels of expectations for fulfillment.² What would each of these four positions require to consider my prophecy fulfilled?

Fundamentalist (Choice #1 in the survey)

The fundamentalist position assumes full, verbal inspiration: God's holy spirit dictated every single word of the original writings, therefore we must take scripture literally. Since fundamentalism operates on this absolutely and comprehensively literalist premise, its criteria for fulfillment must require not only perfect accuracy in citing the OT source, but also consistency of all details and conditions of the prophecy, and indisputably flawless interpretation of the original context as well. If not, any verse may mean anything at all—and hence nothing at all.³

Given our illustration, this mode would count it satisfactory if, say, on Thursday a young lady arrives on a jet from Rio de Janeiro, bringing a plaque of appreciation, which she takes to City Hall and presents to the mayor. Any number of details could render the fulfillment false, such as: if a man came from Brazil and presented the plaque; if a woman from Brazil brought a business proposal; if a woman from Brazil arrived on the following Sunday; if she brought along a monkey, who gave the mayor a big messy kiss (forget the prophecy; I'd rather see this one).

Conservative (Choice #2 in the survey)

Many conservatives assume verbal inspiration, but we'll use the term that some affirm to include a slightly more flexible outlook: God *shaped* the Bible through each writer, whose personality, education, personal struggles or biases, linguistic mannerisms, attention to or neglect of detail, and intended audience might create a unique spin. In my experience most self-professed conservatives insist that Biblical interpretation should nonetheless stick clearly to the source's subject matter and obvious point.

Conservatives could count my prediction fulfilled for a slightly broader range of details: for example, if a 17-year old girl brings the plaque; if she brings a bouquet of exotic flowers; if she boards the jet in Argentina, but it has a layover in Brazil; if she gives the award (of whatever sort) to the mayor's secretary.

Conservatives wouldn't consider the prophecy fulfilled woman came from Quebec, or if a young child brought the award.

Most *evangelicals*, by believing that Jesus is literally the unique virgin-born divine son of God, would also tend to self-define as either fundamental or conservative. For this study, it doesn't matter which.

Liberal (Choice #3 in the survey)

Individuals passionate for spiritual things felt what they probably believed to be God's presence and influence as they wrote their messages. Occasionally they cited OT passages or fragments verbatim; often they paraphrased, changing details, sometimes intermingling data from utterly unrelated sources.

When an author compared the OT passages and the NT event, these isolated passages seemed to make sense in a deeper, more *spiritual* way (typically as contrasted with a Zionist mindset). So when NT authors mentioned fulfilled prophecy, they meant something like, "What Jesus did here *reminds me* of a passage I recall from one of the prophets. Think about it like this..."

² See elaboration in the Appendix, "Four Models of Christian Belief."

³ For fundamentalists to affirm the New Testament texts as having any practical authority whatsoever after the first few decades of Christianity, they must also affirm that the Holy Spirit likewise fully guided all translators of the scriptures, now including some 2100 full or partial translations worldwide.

Liberals may gladly find meaning in any corroboration of teachings, such as if a visiting South American dignitary offered some formal honor to a representative of the City of Miami. But they don't worry much about checking off prophecies as literally fulfilled.

I've known Christians who would consider themselves "liberal" and who do gladly share their faith, even encouraging others to explore Christianity, but they generally do not fit the "evangelical" mode.

Progressive (Choice #4 in the survey)

I'll use the term *progressive* to represent those who hold a more pragmatic view: centuries of oral tradition morphed all sorts of details in Hebrew lore, eroding some, enhancing others, fabricating more than a few. Lore evolved into sacred legend and tradition. The advent of writing standardized the tales somewhat, though they continued shifting until under Babylonian captivity (after 586 BCE⁴) the scribal traditions emerged to provide stricter quality control. Even with more reliable duplication, blending sources spawned awkward clashes between, and sometimes within, today's Hebrew Bible (which most Christians call the Old Testament).

The gospels drew on a common database of stories and sayings circulating among Jesus' early followers. Print versions evolved and gradually settled. Some new data meshed well with the more-established versions, but some didn't—hence the NT's internal flaws. These show up as particularly vivid, and much more complex, when we compare the Hebrew Bible with the New Testament.

Thus progressives don't try to force any such "fulfillments." They focus on the larger meaning of the scriptures, the core lessons, and valid contemporary application of broader spiritual values.

To describe what support each prediction actually provides for its fulfillment of the traditional Christian message, I'll use these labels (the legal terms serve only to illustrate):

- Positive** This establishes a *specific, definite relationship* between prediction and fulfillment, not likely to find fulfillment in anyone other than Jesus, with no contradictions or discrepancies of any sort, clearly reflecting the source text's intent. This *could not serve* merely as a literary tool. Think of this as **compelling direct evidence**.
- Neutral** Direct or close quote/application that we *could find valid*. It creates no obvious contradictions. Yet it fails to establish any *specific, definite relationship* between prediction and fulfillment. The link could apply equally to other persons or circumstances; a writer could even cite it merely as a literary tool. Think of this as **circumstantial evidence**.
- Negative** *Significant inconsistency* or *outright contradiction* between prediction and fulfillment. It may happen due to misquoting, distorting, and/or ignoring the original prediction's obvious contextual meaning. Consider it **perjury**. (It may still provide an interesting literary device.)
- Excluded** Internal NT citations (no specific OT sources), or others so generic that we could tag on *any* prediction — similar to a newspaper horoscope. These are utterly meaningless for any tests of fulfillment. Ultimately they say nothing more than "this shows a fulfilled prediction because I say it does." Though I don't include them in the tabulation, I discuss a few of these because (1) some still provide insight on the philosophy and dynamics undergirding so many alleged fulfillments, and (2) many traditional Christian apologists do often cite them as "proof" of fulfillments.

This pair of passages help distinguish legitimate "prophetic" references from the tabloid style of "predictions." The first one occurs outside the gospels, and as I've never even found it used as a main example for any sort of fulfillment, its neutrality makes it a good starting point.

⁴ BCE for "before common era," and CE for "common era" (instead of BC and AD).

Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the Lord, and Satan standing at his right side to accuse him. The Lord said to Satan, "The Lord rebuke you, Satan! The Lord, who has chosen Jerusalem, rebuke you!..." *Zechariah 3:1, 2*

But even the archangel Michael, when he was disputing with the devil about the body of Moses, did not dare to bring a slanderous accusation against him, but said, "The Lord rebuke you!"
Jude 9

Jude cites an apocryphal (and evidently mythological) anecdote including a powerful invective—"The Lord rebuke you!"—which also happens to occur in Zechariah. Does this signify any miraculous fulfillment or other divine connection between the two passages? Not at all. Jude no more *fulfills* Zechariah's writing than I would *fulfill* Lincoln's Gettysburg Address by stating, on my 87th birthday, "Fourscore and seven years ago, I was born in Andalusia, Alabama."

Second, let's consider a gospel reference that moves closer to the issue, but stays within reason:

I am a stranger to my brothers, an alien to my own mother's sons; for zeal for your house consumes me, and the insults of those who insult you fall upon me. *Psa. 69:8*

[after Jesus clears the temple] His disciples remembered that it is written: "Zeal for your house will consume me." *Jn. 2:17*

John doesn't present this as fulfilled prediction. The disciples perceive a resemblance in the ancient text and the current event. End of story. Nothing mystical. No angels we have heard on high, no psychic hotline, no mysteriously bent spoons, my hand never leaves my wrist. Had the NT authors and editors (and today's literalists) left things at this level of "fulfillment," we'd have no trouble.

We create credibility gaps only when we stretch such passages like taffy and claim, "This took place to *fulfill* Psalm 69:8, where the writer foresees Jesus." Unfortunately, this reflects the gist of what happens in most so-called "fulfilled prophecies" built on the premise of a verbally-inspired Bible.

We'll evaluate these prophecies mainly to consider the implications FOR LITERALISTS, whether they identify themselves as fundamentalists, evangelicals, or conservatives. So, *as their premise demands*, we'll evaluate the data based on how well every detail fits precisely, as a record of history and biography.

I believe you'll find that this approach creates many amazing claims.

TECHNICAL NOTES

1. Generally I've sequenced the data in their traditional NT order of appearance. Occasionally I'll combine closely related passages. With direct parallels or evidently linked events, I usually quote one source and cite others only for additional significant detail. In a few cases I've added some context and related passages to clarify the grounds for my conclusions.
2. I'll focus mainly on those passages that specifically *claim* to fulfill OT citations, or at least contain a direct quote or record a significant event (since many apologists often cite these as *de facto* cases of fulfilled prophecy). If the writer doesn't explicitly invoke the fulfillment claim, I've tracked down most of the likely sources. In some cases, they make a bit of a stretch, and this tells us something very important.
3. Some OT passages I include for comparison. Generally they include a phrase or topic similar to the topic. We sometimes confabulate different scriptures, even mingling them with secular aphorisms (e.g., many people say, "Spare the rod, spoil the child," thinking they quote scripture; they actually cite Samuel Butler's 1664

poem, which *resembles* a mish-mash of several Proverbs [13:24; 22:15; 23:13, 14]). Some Biblical writers probably had passages in the back of their mind like this when they attributed certain events to “prophecy” or “scripture” in general.

4. As an example of cross-referencing, “cf. 16(d)” refers to “fulfillment” #16 (as numbered in the table’s left-hand column), comment (d) in the right-hand column.

5. Generally, verse numbers indicated (x) in the comments refer to OT citations; NT references I specify more fully.

6. Seven common themes I cross-reference in boldface in the comments block:

70 CE: 16(e), 18(d)

Forgiveness/Vengeance: 4(d), 16(d), 19(b), 25(b), 26(b), 31(c), 32(a), 37(c), 38

Peace/justice in this world: 4(c), 11(e), 15(b)

Protection/Rescue: 19(c), 20(a), 26(a), 36(a)

Sinful/Guilty Jesus: 2, 29, 31(b), 32(b)

Zechariah: 18(a), 37(a)

Zionist nationalism or spiritual church?: 4(d), 13(a), 18(c), 22, 25(a)

7. I welcome well-researched objective data (e.g., linguistic analysis, textual comparisons, historic records or notes) that clearly indicate other conclusions. Even during the course of this study I’ve found information, or recognized other logical processes, that forced me to scrap some of my own initial assessments.

8. Why these 40+ examples? Is this comprehensive?

“Counts [of messianic prophecies] range from 100 [2] to 191 [3] to “nearly 300” [4] and to even 456 passages of Scripture labeled Messianic according to ancient Jewish writings.[5] These are found all through the Old Testament from Genesis through Malachi, however the most significant ones are found in Psalms and Isaiah.”⁵

[2] John F. Walvoord in *The Prophecy Knowledge Handbook* (1990) identifies 98 locations in the OT where one or more Messianic prophecies can be found.

[3] Barton Payne lists 191 prophecies in *Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy*, (1973), pp. 665-670.

[4] Josh McDowell in *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (1999), p. 164.

[5] Alfred Edersheim: *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (1896, 2003 edition), volume 2, p. 710.

Given the results from the major examples, I doubt that continuing the study into 98, 191, nearly 300, or 456 evidently less well-known “prophecies” would begin to change anything.

⁵ <http://www.windmillministries.org/frames/CH20A.htm>, March 16, 2010.

THE PROPHECIES

At this point, see the pdf "Curved Horizon Prophecies," printed separately. It appears in landscape format, and I haven't made time to learn how to combine formats in a single document.

THE SUFFERING SERVANT

Modern Christian apologists revere Isaiah 53 chapter as a stronghold of messianic prophecy. Thus it deserves special attention.

We've seen **many** other OT passages matter-of-factly and indisputably invoked as source material. With that backdrop for contrast, note that the NT writers almost totally ignore Isaiah 53. I've found the NT writers legitimately and specifically citing only *two* verses herein (v. 4 in #8, v. 1 in #26). Maybe I've simply missed others. I'll welcome correction—but until then, I find this at least very, *very* odd.

In the absence of overtly claimed fulfillments, my NIV apparatus suggests some NT passages that, while arbitrary, do have at least *some* textual overlap with the Isaiah texts. Essentially they recycle Isaiah as rhetoric, consistent with the larger "teaching" aspect of prophecy. But even the most eloquent or passionate preaching doesn't qualify as fulfilled *prediction*. In much the same manner as later writers apparently fabricate Mk. 15:28 to reflect Isa. 53:12 (#24), these paraphrases and circumstantial links stand suspect as contrived support. I offer some comments simply for comparison and reflection.

I have yet to find a convincing case for Isaiah 53 establishing literally fulfilled prophecies, especially after completing this study. If you have definitive objective data, please fill me in. Meanwhile, read on.

Addressing Isaiah 53 alone right now, I find the evidence (or absence thereof) compelling.

Consider this analogy from the constellations. Every starry “image” consists of merely an interpretation, a superimposition of mythology and utterly subjective perception. We recognize these stellar “outlines” only by traditions of various cultures over millennia, and formally today in the west by specifications of the 1930 commission of the International Astronomical Union. We know that the actual stars exist spatially separated in three dimensions by hundreds and thousands of light years—distances utterly inconceivable to ancient observers, as ten-dimensional mathematics remain impenetrable to all but a few persons today.

Suppose the constellations in fact did appear in only two dimensions on a planar sky as they seem when viewed by the unaided eyes and unknowing minds of past civilizations. The patterns would still exist only in our imaginations. Others have shown us where to connect the dots; we *create* a perception of the archer and chariot and bear, and so on, only because we’ve learned to do so. Attributing complex patterns to unrelated flaming solar masses billions of miles apart requires quite a vivid penchant for fantasy, blended with generous doses of superstition.

Similarly I propose: “we have heard that it was said” that Isaiah 53 *looks like* Jesus. “Well, sure, of course it predicts the birth and the life and the betrayal and the trial and the crucifixion and the burial and the resurrection.” No matter how eloquent the story may seem, and no matter how precious a place it may have in one’s theology, as an analogy I present it thus:

ORION : IMAGINARY REPRESENTATION OF LITERAL HUNTER
ISAIAH 53 : IMAGINARY REPRESENTATION OF LITERAL PREDICTION

We see what they’ve told us to see. It doesn’t literally, objectively, empirically exist.

Some suggest that although the individual verses don’t match up, Isaiah 53 *taken as a whole* foreshadows Jesus. Sort of a gestalt theology: the whole prophecy is greater than the sum of the verses.

Given this tactic, any thinking person may well ask: Why *should* we suddenly shift gears here? The fulfilled-prophecy premise operates consistently on an isolated verse-by-verse basis; it constantly rips sound bites out of their context and forces dogma onto them. I recognize a powerful reason for invoking this defense: to protect the tenuous dogma of messianic prophecy.

Then what *does* Isaiah 53 mean? In the larger context of Isaiah, and all the prophets, and Israel’s national history overall, it means an oppressed, weary people wanted some powerful leader, a deliverer, to make everything right and make sure they could have and keep their own real estate. I find that a very concrete, practical, and understandable desire.

Further, why do some rally so fervently around this chapter as if it had so much more significance than all the *other* OT prophets? Why don’t they show *equal* concern with what the thirtysomething OTHER prophecies actually “mean”? Not only do those clearly *not* indicate Jesus, but in failing to do so their contrivances show themselves at least terribly weak, or even utterly absurd.

Do we simply sweep them under the rug? Do we simply mumble, “Well, you have to accept it on faith”? We can justify neither of these by any objective standard.

Surprise: we find the cumulative effect of the preposterous claims, and gross failure, of virtually **all** other so-called messianic prophecies basically indicts the entire literalist CONCEPT of fulfillment. This renders the general messianic view of Isaiah 53 likewise suspect.

Let’s get back to the larger study, tabulate the evaluations, and discuss what we’ve read.

SUMMARY OF EVALUATIONS

	NT	OT	NEG	NEU	POS
1. Genealogy: Judah	Mt. 1:2; He. 9:15	Jer. 31:31-34	x		
2. Genealogy: David	Mt. 1:6; He. 1:3-5	2 Sam. 7:12-16	x		
3. Immanuel	Mt. 1:21-23	Isa. 7:14, 17ff.	x		
4. Born in Bethlehem	Mt. 2:6	Micah 5:2	x		
5. Out of Egypt	Mt. 2:14, 15	Hos. 11:1	x		
6. Rachel weeping	Mt. 2:18	Jer. 31:15	x		
7. Nazarene	Mt. 2:23	Judg. 13:5	x		
8. Voice calling in the desert	Mt. 3:3	Isa. 40:3-5	x		
9. A light has dawned	Mt. 4:13-16	Isa. 9:1, 2	x		
10. Infirmities and diseases	Mt. 8:17	Isa. 53:4	x		
11. My chosen servant	Mt. 12:18-21	Isa. 42:1-4	x		
12. Three days, three nights	Mt. 12:40	Jon. 1:17	x		
13. Hear, not understand	Mt. 13:13-15	Isa. 6:9, 10	x	x	
14. Speak in parables	Mt. 13:35	Psa. 78:2	x	x	
15. Riding on a donkey / colt	Mt. 21:4, 5	Zech. 9:9	x	x	
16a. 30 silver coins	Mt. 26:14-15; 27:9-10	Jer. 32:6-9ff.	x		
16b. 30 silver coins	Mt. 26:14-15; 27:9-10	Zech. 11:12, 13	x		
17. General	Mt. 26: 24, 54, 56	No specific ref.	E x c l u d e d		
18. Strike the shepherd	Mt. 26:31	Zech. 13:7	x		
19. Gall and wine	Mt. 27:34; Jn. 19:28	Psa. 69:21	x		
20. Divided garments	Mt. 27:35	Psa. 22:18	x	x	
21. He trusts in God	Mt. 27:39-41	Psa. 22:6-8	x	x	
22. Darkness over the land	Mt. 27:45	Amos 8:9	x		
23. Eloi, eloi	Mt. 27:46	Psa. 22:1	x	x	
24. Counted with the lawless	Mk. 15:28	Isa. 53:12	E x c l u d e d		
25. Spirit of Lord upon me	Lk. 4:17-21	Isa. 61:1, 2	x		
26. Into your hands I commit	Lk. 23:46	Psa. 31:5	x		
27. General	Lk. 24:44	No specific ref.	E x c l u d e d		
28. General	Lk. 24: 25-27	No specific ref.	E x c l u d e d		
29. Zeal for your house	Jn. 2:17	Psa. 69:8	x		
30. Who's believed message?	Jn. 12:38	Isa. 53:1		x	
31. Shares bread / lifted heel	Jn. 13:18	Psa. 41:9	x		
32. Hated me without reason	Jn. 15:25	Psa. 35, 69, 109?	x		
33. Lost none—but one (?)	Jn. 17:12, 18:9	Jn. 6:39, 70	E x c l u d e d		
34. General	Jn. 18:32	No specific ref.	E x c l u d e d		
35. I am thirsty	Jn. 19:28	Psa. 22:15	x	x	
36. No broken bones	Jn. 19:36	Psa. 34:20	x		
37. They will look on one...	Jn. 19:37	Zech. 12:10	x		
38. Judas	Ac. 1:16, 20	Psa. 69:25, 109:8	x		
39. Not abandon me to grave	Ac. 2:24-31	Psa. 16:1-11		x	
40. General	Ac. 3:18	No specific ref.	E x c l u d e d		
41. You are my son	Ac. 13:32-33	Psa. 2:1-12	x		

	NEG	NEU	POS
Totals	33	9	0

Whereas I do believe this limited study of these scriptures on their own at face value does provide adequate support for my conclusions, I freely acknowledge that some more complex points require much more scholarly justification than I can provide here. Absent that input, I fully concede that certain points may in this context seem unjustified or extreme (as they did to me when I first began recognizing them). I refer concerned readers willing to do the work to the Suggested Readings at the end.

I personally know many Biblical literalists, including friends from many years back. Most of them I admire for their genuine compassion, devotion, and sincerity. I truly respect their zeal. But this fervent effort to defend the dogma of fulfilled prediction must confront these issues.

If nothing else, I find even these limited arguments *far* more credible and realistic than any position that tries to take these Biblical “predictions” literally.

Well, fasten your seat belt. Here we go.

DISCUSSION

1. BASIC PRINCIPLES

**You may say to yourselves,
“How can we know when a message has not been spoken by the Lord?”
If what a prophet proclaims in the name of the Lord
does not take place or come true,
that is a message the Lord has not spoken.
*Deuteronomy 18:21, 22***

Two little verses. I set them atop my own former literalist dogma of messianic prophecies, and they weigh enough to break its spine. Justin Martyr, for all his good intentions, gave us a bogus argument.

The alleged prophecies do *not* “take place or come true” as their authors claim. We’ve just read **many** awkward inconsistencies and blatant contradictions between the original citations and later Christianity’s claimed fulfillments. Yet fundamentalists and conservatives, despite the litany of errors, continue citing these OT sound bites as if they provided some sort of scriptural Astrological Charts for Jesus. How can any thinking person study all this and *still deny* the problems that this concept creates for any literalist theology?

Ironic. Perhaps a separate study of prophecy or hidden truths in the Hebrew Bible⁶ may support some premise of divine inspiration for Jewish faith and culture, but if its prophecies taken literally prove anything at all, they clearly *exclude* Jesus of Nazareth as having any unique place in God’s divine plan.

As I took this one notion literally, my own fundamentalist and conservative stances created an unstable, awkward array of self-defeating arguments. Now I must ask: how does this intellectual abyss portray faith to anyone else who analyzes it carefully? I fear that upholding this dogma casts doubts on any traditional view of Jesus, and on any possible merits in mainstream Christianity. No matter how popular this “proof” goes over with most evangelicals, it besmirches any intellectual credibility or social relevance they may otherwise have and undermines the significant social-cultural values they uphold. It

⁶ Including modern “scientific” Torah Codes such as Michael Drosnin’s volumes on *The Bible Code* (two so far from Touchstone, 1997, and Viking, 2002) and Gregg Braden’s claim of a link between Hebrew numerology and human DNA (*The God Code*, Hay House Press, 2004).

leaves believers in a light comparable to the notion that believers should persecute and murder unbelievers, or even other believers, on supposedly “biblical” grounds.

Through probing my own fundamentalist premises, I began realizing that this claim of messianic prophecy typifies many grave flaws undergirding the standard theology of much mainstream Christianity. But the status of this *faux* evidence has much greater impact than most challenges to conservatism. This carries substantial, foundation-level implications for Jesus’ identity and the essence of his ministry. It calls for a clearer view of how people saw him during his life and in the decades after he died. Further, the outcome of this study tells us something about the nature of scripture in general, and especially the NT.

One metaphor just won’t do, so let’s mix a few: the fundamentalist/conservative modes of interpreting prophecy lurk as mine fields of dogma, covered in a quicksand of inconsistency, on a San Andreas fault of hermeneutics. So watch your step.

Key point: *If God literally* inspired every single *a, an,* and *the*, then every single *a, an,* and *the* **must** match up. This subset of “messianic prophecies” constitutes only one most visible compilation of failures to do so. The presence of *any* error, of *any* sort, forms a blood clot near the heart of the whole concept of **literal** inspiration and divinely-protected transmission. Every modern Bible contains a host of discrepancies and disputed passages. Most of them we may dismiss as trivial, but several entail large blocks of text, sometimes very popular passages.⁷ The *content* of the errors or textual variants never proves crucial; even eliminating most of these verses wouldn’t cause any major theological upheaval. It doesn’t leave us with a Jefferson Bible.

Suppose you know you have a balance of \$1,000.00 in your savings account. Your statement arrives indicating \$998.37. Can you call this document “flawless”? Certainly not. (And the Bible’s errors go *far* beyond the analogy of a few cents.) Nor can we truly consider the Bible a completely flawless product of an infallible, omniscient, omnipotent Divine Accountant. Both documents we may otherwise find very useful in many ways. But no intelligent, rational person can justify calling either one *perfect*. Somebody—author, transcriber, editor, publisher, copyist, plagiarizer—goofed. Given literalists’ claims for Biblical inerrancy and total historic accuracy, this point demands our scrutiny.

“Oh, come on. You take this stuff too seriously. You take this interpretive stance as if it were absolute. We allow a certain amount of literary drapery, of talking around the central issue, of setting the stage for the essential prophecy. You demand that we justify every little thing. You push it to absurdity.”

I agree that this falls into absurdity—but not because of my interpretation. I’m simply addressing fundamentalists, literalists, and many conservatives on their own terms. My friend Chuck Lee commented on these problems by observing that the western church heritage has tended to say, “We’ve got to try to make everything fit; we have to defend every single detail.” And I ask: whom does this reality indict? What faction demands such anal-retentive precision? Whose flawed philosophical stance requires zero tolerance for error? This indicts only those *literalists* who, sincerity and devotion notwithstanding, declare that our modern Bible *IS* THE infallible Word of God. I’ve simply demonstrated the necessary outcome of taking fundamentalist and conservative premises *on their own terms*, to *their logical conclusion*.

Corollary: Reject the fundamentalist/conservative premises and we find the absurdities resolved.

A diligent study of the scriptures shows the literalist premise of a verbally-inspired messianism stands hopelessly shot through with incongruities, contradictions, and outlandish claims. This becomes evident to anyone who reads the OT and NT thoroughly enough and then objectively, independent of dogma, compares the sources. (You did *read* the scriptures, right?) In my experience literalists usually respond to any such rational concerns not with any coherent reasoning, not with logic and data, but through indignant rhetoric and propaganda, dismissing it as the “foolishness” of “worldly wisdom.”⁸

“OK, verbal inspiration has all the logical validity and intellectual integrity of 1-900-PSYCHIC. But you’ve got to allow some linguistic flexibility, particularly between translations. And sure, paraphrases

⁷ Including evidently later insertions such as Mark 16:9-20 and John 7:59-8:11.

⁸ 1 Corinthians 1:18-31.

inherently lose detail, but they get the idea across. Whether it reads ‘diseases’ or ‘sorrows,’ and ‘islands’ or ‘nations’—so what?”

So: all this indicates much about how the Bible evolved.

Any newspaper carries a certain slant, even if only in which facts it puts on page one and which facts it shoves back toward the classifieds. Likewise, the scriptures provide select images of how the emerging Jesus groups saw themselves and their destiny. Biblical authors, compilers, and editors tinkered with the manuscripts to reflect their interests and biases; the many inconsistencies and contradictions bear witness to the patent fallibility. Our modern gospels stand as Exhibit A of revisionist history, their testimony as flawed as a 1945 U.S. History text portraying all 19th century Caucasian pioneers moving west across the continent as noble, courageous good guys defending themselves from savage, bloodthirsty redskins.

Literalist Christianity (and much of its attendant politics, at least in America) has thus created all sorts of contortions and distortions by forcing its agenda onto the scriptures. But modern America certainly didn’t start this; comparable embellishment and refocusing apparently began with the original texts in the decades after Jesus’ death, though in a different mode.

Let’s address this first from our conventional western mindset. This approach to “fulfilled prophecies” tells you about how the NT writers, or later contributors, *thought*. It shows that they had a *predetermined* vision in mind, that they had a slippery memory, and that they used what we’d call fallible reasoning. (Or at least that their memory and reasoning have far more flexibility than a rigid Aristotelian mode allows—more on this later.) Matthew wanted to present Jesus as the healer, so he quotes Isaiah. But he has to stretch Isaiah’s words to “see” Jesus in them, as we have to stretch our imaginations to “see” Libra and Scorpio and Ursa Major.

If you speak for Almighty Jehovah, *why* would you need a cheat sheet? Why would you need to **exaggerate** the accomplishments or pad the résumé?

DANGER – WILL – ROB-IN-SON! DANGER – WILL – ROB-IN-SON!

It’s a lie. Cooking the books. Massaging the numbers on your tax return. A few bucks here and there, somebody catches it, and a hundred bucks saved from the IRS gets you a few thousand dollars in fines and maybe a year or two in an exclusive gated community with lots of new friends you’ll get to know *really* well.

Fudging those facts and figures we can *not* call good. Not for taxes, not for research, not for scriptures.

This exposes a *structural* flaw in the entire literalist hermeneutic. We’ve found a couple of cracks in the walls of the newly built house you felt almost ready to buy. Don’t sign the contract. If you’ve already signed, don’t rent the moving truck. Call your lawyer soon.

If you find a stress fracture in the building’s load-bearing columns, we need an investigation of the contractor and the construction supervisor. Call your lawyer *now*.

More cracks discovered in the *foundation* indicate **critical** problems. Add investigations at the county level, maybe for criminal negligence. And alert the media.

Read the scriptures. Think carefully on them. Get past the sound-bite mentality. Too often we carelessly trust what we’ve “heard that it was said...,” or we interpret it according to a tradition, or another external constraint of purely cultural origin. So we don’t see the text and context for what they *do* say.

If the Bible truly provides God’s perfect text version 1.0, why didn’t God protect its integrity from these fortysomething fractures? Most of them show visibly crumbling gaps. Many of them indicate damage in load-bearing columns. Since “fulfillment” serves as such a key support of traditional Christian evidences, these flaws indicate that we should immediately evacuate the structure, board up the doors, and post a big CONDEMNED sign at every entrance. Given the collapse of this presumably central support for the traditional concept of Jesus as God’s messiah, we must revisit all its derivative claims and dogmas very, *very* carefully.

Notice that here I assail *not* anything of **faith** and **spirituality**—those are much more complicated issues, requiring a totally different discussion — but only the *falsity* of **dogmas** and **doctrines** and **traditions** that encumber and distort said faith, thus dishonoring God.

Yes, this disturbs me. As a fundamentalist I shaped major decisions in my life to fit these traditions. And I agonized as I came to see more clearly the egregious flaws in my foundation.

Some genuinely spiritual and intelligent people truly have no problem with this dissonance. They earnestly say, “Just drop it. Don’t worry about it. Just trust what really matters, the love of Jesus.” I for one *cannot* in good conscience dismiss what I see, no more than I can deny the earth’s curved horizon. The results of this study for my entire scope of traditional faith have implications as compelling as that global arc did for the men who sailed toward it, into a new hemisphere, a new world unlike anything they’d ever known.

Perhaps as I continue studying, I’ll find yet more data, another frame of reference, that may render this view invalid and outdated. But today, I can no longer affirm that Jesus literally fulfilled these prophecies any more than I can believe that the earth is flat.

Brief digression: this analogy brings up the (no joke) Flat Earth Society.⁹ Its members take literally those scriptures which offer geographic and astronomical declarations of a flat earth. This illustrates, to a particularly frightening degree, my point: take the scriptures at face value and you create all sorts of problems, such as the mythology that evolves from taking these “prophecies” literally as well. Conversely, to the extent that we recognize and respect the Bible as mostly legend and myth and poetry, we remain free to work with its greater spiritual precepts that can still provide us with meaningful lessons.

2. MIDRASH

Much of this conundrum vanishes when we step outside our Aristotelian, European, dichotomous, linear thought processes to revisit our definition of “fulfilled prophecy.” If we accept prophecy as being a function of *Think of it this way* this whole dilemma goes *ffffip*. Outa here. No problem. The lens focuses not on macro for tiny, literal, details, but on wide angle for the panorama. Here we run into a dynamic far more meaningful than the view of “logical flaws” as seen through a western filter. Here we meet the mideastern dynamic of *Midrash*.¹⁰

Midrash arises from the fervent energy of religious devotion. It “searches out” the meaning of scripture via commentary and embellishment. Midrash evolves and expands over time, interpreting, adapting, and enhancing a historically closed story. This acts perfectly—and “logically”—compatibly with ancient cultural norms and traditions. It continues today, to some extent.

How does this apply to the many Jews who followed Jesus, both during his lifetime and thereafter, and the goyim as well?

Remember first that the historic Jesus evidently embodied a bold, exhilarating dynamism. His vision attracted and intrigued the masses. A dozen guys in particular dropped their jobs as brickmasons, CPAs, farmers, and chiropractors to follow him. They joined him for over three years on a populist tour, a spiritual Lollapalooza that grew and grew, until finally it collapsed in tragedy at Calvary.

Despite their grief, Jesus’ followers felt so captivated by his New Not-of-This-World Order that they acted instinctively out of passionate faith to keep the dream alive. Prophecy would help others see Jesus’ greatness, so—as people often did in their culture—they expanded a few coincidences by sticking the label of “fulfillment” onto various events. Many details entered the story-telling; they probably even created a few scenarios here and there to flesh out the story. Classic Midrash.

We in the west may bicker over whether certain events actually happened or not, but such questions didn’t even emerge among Jesus’ followers. Remember, for several years **all** the Jesus people lived as Jews who just happened to honor their own particular leader, probably much like today’s Lubavitchers. In their world they took it for granted that the writings evolved over decades before they settled out as what we now call the gospels. In effect, we may respect the gospels largely as Christian Midrash.

Midrash accommodates the inevitable twists and turns of story-telling and legend-making over time. It allows for the intermingled human errors, simple misunderstandings, and exaggerated hopes shaping the Israelites’ national, cultural, spiritual, and economic hopes for and visions of the messiah. Midrash does not expect literal, linear, historic precision. It does not give answers we can put in the form of a question on Jeopardy. But Western Civilization has superimposed this filter onto the original Jesus

⁹ <http://members.aye.net/~rms/fltearth.html>; <http://www.lhup.edu/~dsimanek/fe-scidi.htm> (7/21/02).

¹⁰ <http://www.kolel.org/tastytreats/mod3.1.html> (7/14/02) provides an excellent overview. John Shelby Spong applies this to Christianity in scholarly and eloquent detail in his book *Resurrection: Myth or Reality?* (Harper San Francisco, 1994).

message. This should help us clarify our focus as we try to determine what to believe about this charismatic Jewish leader they called Y'shua.

This dynamic doesn't mesh well with middle-class American sensibilities. We can't readily envision Jesus' followers doing this; it strikes us as cheating, even outright dishonest. It seems just plain *wrong*. We want black-and-white, clear-cut, simple answers, objective and definitive documentation—and Midrash brings embellishment, decoration, elaboration, even speculation. But I emphasize that Midrash, though imaginative, does *not* cook the books. Jesus and his followers didn't have an Anglo-Saxon, middle-class heritage. Their mideastern mode of story-telling and expanding does NOT fall subject to our middle-class western norms. We expect note-for-note orchestration of all instruments, down to sole *ting* of the triangle; they think in general chord changes, letting gifted soloists add grace notes and trills, improvise cadenzas, even weave new melodic lines. For scripture: pass along the major themes, the general key events, and decorate it as the world turns.

Fast forward a few centuries for another major part of the problem. Over the fourth and fifth centuries CE we see some guys in fine tailored suits, smoking expensive cigars around a mahogany table in a fancy boardroom. Some call them The Church Fathers (I'd say distant Uncles, at best). They live intellectually and spiritually far removed from Jesus and his culture. They demonstrate almost no sense of his heart, his vision, his passion. Over repeated meetings we hear them lobbying to include their favorite writings in what we now call the Bible. Not everyone agrees on the table of contents; we still have dueling canons firing at each other today.¹¹

Given all this: if you focus on the prophet as **predictor**, in the sensationalist tabloid mindset, taking scriptures as history, you'll get all kinds of screwy nonsense. You start a demolition derby of factoids and fables crashing into each other.

But if you focus on the prophet as **messenger**, as one who speaks forth, and—most significantly—one whose message comes to us through the dynamic of Midrash, you'll find much less dissonance and much more substance. The big picture still comes through.

So gaze in awe at the overall canvas. Don't squint at the supermarket tabloid-style predictions.

3. THEOLOGICAL RETROFITTING

Whether we view it through the western forced-choice of right/wrong, true/false, or through the drama of mideastern Midrash, we come to essentially the same conclusion: In the majority of these prophecies and fulfillments, Jesus' devotees have *molded* the Hebrew source passage *to fit* the Greek text Jesus story—or vice-versa—or perhaps both. These dynamics convoluted a very simple record of one man's scant teachings into a full-blown messiah tale. Our modern gospels contain key events enhanced to look more like the OT texts. This whole thing found its first major proponent in Paul, who blended some Hebrew passages into his view of Jesus. Justin Martyr pushed it further, relegating the OT to a preview of "church": creation, Joseph's coat, Moses and the exodus, Joshua's conquest, all the judges and kings, David's kingdom, all the prophets—everything came to pass simply so that we could conduct Sunday services with bread and grape juice to honor an itinerant rabbi martyr.

The basic premise of Biblical historicity we find suspect as in a court trial, when testimony first shows a tiny discrepancy, then another, then a fairly sizable gap. One witness insists that she saw one beggar, but another witness says two (Mt. 20:20ff., Mk. 10:46ff.) One witness says the defendant wore a scarlet jacket, but the second insists he saw the color purple (Mt. 27:28, Mk. 15:17). The second witness says two accomplices tried to cut some sort of deal directly with the leader, but the first claims that a lady did all the talking for them (Mt. 20:20ff., Mk. 10:35ff.). Given a few discrepancies and skewed sources, you have to ask whether these two testimonies can even remain in the record—since everything does have to hold TRUE. But now everything we find at least suspect. If we claim integrity let us re-examine it all, taking nothing for granted.

¹¹ It didn't literally happen at one or two meetings. The lists evolved over time and have continued doing so even up to the last few centuries. But Athanasius' list in 387 CE pretty much laid out the New Testament as most Protestants know it, except for the sequence. (Just as most Christians revere the New Testament, specific sects also consider their leaders' writings equally divine: e.g., Latter Day Saints with Joseph Smith, and Christian Scientists with Mary Baker Eddy. Mainstream Christians who object, "But those obviously are *not* REAL scripture," fail to understand that notable figures in church history dismissed several books in "our" Bible with equal disdain and contempt. Our standards represent nothing divine. Most Christians have trouble breaking through this 21st century myopia.)

The NT writers clearly wanted to paint a picture of Jesus as Israel's prophesied messiah. Given the social and cultural expectations in Jesus' day, the messiah had a pretty massive mission statement—mobilize the militia, liberate Jerusalem, kick the heathen oppressors' butts, establish an eternal throne, create total and perfect justice in this life for not only Israel, but the entire world.

Did Jesus fulfill the prophesied one's duties? This much we can agree on: he comforted; he took up infirmities; he died with no bones broken. Hardly adequate to justify a literalist hermeneutic.

Again, if you disagree, DID you actually **study** the scriptures *in context*? If you believe that those prophecies literally and accurately foresee Jesus, remember that:

- One confuses Jesus with Samson.
- Some confuse Jerusalem's destruction with eternal salvation on Calvary.
- One shows that the Holy Spirit can't even keep Jeremiah and Zechariah distinct.
- Matthew, supposedly writing to a Jewish audience, even equates Jesus with the Baal-loving Hebrew tribes.
- Several portray our Jesus-Meek-and-Gentle as Jesus-Hostile-and-Vengeful, demanding God's horrible wrath on his tormentors.
- Several portray the Jesus we consider blameless and innocent as full of folly, whose heavy **guilt** and **sinfulness** stand fully bared before God.

Messianic "prophecies" speak clearly to—or actually against—the veracity of Biblical literalism.

4. CHEAP FAITH AND REAL FAITH

Read the texts. Think them through. Don't just swallow and regurgitate, as I did, and as too many preachers and priests and ministers today still call you to.

Remember that these flaws have their roots deep in our essentially European, Aristotelian distortion of the ancient Midrash dynamic of Jesus' day. I almost guarantee that this forms the basis of any objections that may disturb you, gnawing at the edges of fundamentalist and conservative theology. You still want to think like a 21st Century American, not a First Century Semite.

When you try to see Jesus through the literalist filter, all these prophecies go unfulfilled—or at best implicated as only a few coincidental similarities, many retrofitted. How do you dismiss that incongruity? You can't. At best you can try to sneak back around to a *nonliteralist* escape hatch from which you can say, "Oh, just take it on faith, don't over-intellectualize it."

Jesus never resorted to such flimsy cop-outs. This weak, arbitrary, contrived, *unbiblical* god-of-the-gaps mentality **opposes** the dynamism and vigor of authentic faith. A genuinely perfect Deity would never call you to ignore reality and integrity. Careful, critical thinking may destabilize, discredit or even ultimately destroy any number of dogmas, creeds, traditions, legends, myths, superstitions—but these we may rightly dismiss as maps of a flat earth. As they crumble and fly away in the wind, we gain a greater understanding of genuine truth with fewer distractions, more flexibility, more freedom to get on with loving God and neighbor, living more meaningfully in the real world.

Meanwhile, the "write it off to faith" plea reflects a flat-earth mentality. It backfires, forcing the believer to file the Jesus story on the fiction shelf, since you acknowledge that when you put it under the microscope, the Bible can *not* literally ring true—

no matter which way you go, the fundamentalist and conservative premises crack under the weight of, ironically, two verses from Deuteronomy about "fulfillment"—

it becomes a game to see how far you can sustain the concept of the Biblical Jesus as if he acted in a documentary for The History Channel—

and if you espouse literalist, left-brain, Aristotelian, European religion (what most of us know as "church"), the implications prove lethal to your Creeds.

Nothing deserves our veneration simply because it demands it—or, more commonly, because others expect you to venerate their religious bias and sectarian agenda. Any cause making any absolute *claims* on your very **life**—as mainstream Christians claim the NT does—had better have all the intellectual and practical power to justify its claims. If we find it less than absolute, we should likewise adjust our expectations and applications.

Let's recognize the realities and work from there in the real world. Let's stop complicating spiritual things by pumping them full of artificial additives like hollow predictions. Let's stop trying to cram ancient Midrash circles into modern syllogistic squares.

The implications destroy much of the traditions I grew up with, what I accepted and trusted and internalized and propagated. But with the horizon in plain view, I had to discard that outlook.

I do believe that reconciling these things starts in learning and accepting greater truths, which at this point seems to blend two dynamics:

(a) in general, “fulfilled prophecy” means *much*, *MUCH less* than how fundamentalist and conservative Christians have cast it, and

(b) in particular, Jesus may have lived as a gifted, compelling, and tragic visionary—but he didn’t fulfill any messianic dream.

Remember that the most brutal assault on this traditional Christian dogma comes *not* from any “godless secular humanism,” “heathen Darwinism,” or “rampant liberalism,” but from this vestige of dusty orthodoxy, which spawns this futile invention of “messianic prophecies.”

5. READY FOR A LITTLE WHIPLASH?

Although I candidly acknowledge the Bible as historically not fully reliable, grossly contaminated by irrational religious fervor, and a product of its culture with all its biases and distortions, I believe we can still honor Jesus as a catalyst of world history. Even if

- Jesus didn’t actually have all the encounters recorded in what we call the gospels, and if
- he didn’t say everything added by people over several centuries after his death, and if
- he didn’t do all the acts that his followers attributed to him, and if
- he didn’t rise from the dead after he was crucified—and even if
- the absolutist and apocalyptic writings attributed or simply linked to him came in later as the product of his culture’s primitive cravings for legend and myth—

still with all these realities, still without the supernaturalism and superstition, we can recognize him symbolically as *μονογενής*, “only begotten” in a way that surpasses our language and literature. We can still see him as a sage whose passion and insight and authority compares to that of Abraham, Moses, Muhammad, and Buddha.

So we call Jesus some sort of a secular-humanist-divine-spiritualist messiah? Is that it?

Fundamentalists and most conservatives find this intense cognitive dissonance not only incomprehensible, but reprehensible. It brutalizes any finite, materialistic, dichotomous view of theology. When you’ve grown up thinking in black and white, you may find it awfully hard to see the wide range of grays, much less the RedOrangeYellowGreenBlueIndigoViolet and all hues in-between and all their shades and tints—and you may not even bother trying to *imagine* gamma rays, x-rays, ultraviolet, infrared, and radio waves—all the energies beyond our everyday perception that encompass *so MUCH more* of reality. The fact that we can’t *see* them with our eyes doesn’t mean they don’t exist.

Likewise for larger and more accurate spiritual perspectives. If you’ve cherished the traditional predictions as precious to your faith—as I did—and if setting aside their literalism unsettles you—as it did me—I can offer this: jettisoning the fallacy of messianic prophecy does not inherently negate any central teachings or miracles attributed to him. These things all have to be evaluated separately.

This does call us to *restructure* the message. And it does eventually require a substantial re-working of what you probably call “inspiration” of the Biblical texts. It generates a different mode of interpreting and applying scripture, a fundamental shift in how you perceive spirituality. It’ll likely bring up many other related issues that require more perplexing study. If you go more deeply into these things, you’ll find a heck of a lot about the traditional Bible that just doesn’t make sense — but only to whatever extent you take it literally, as history.

We do have different levels of tolerance for ambiguity, and different levels of receptivity to new information. And these visions **do** remove the old fabricated certainties of life, the world, the universe. New awareness requires finding a new balance in what may initially feel like an unstable, unpredictable cosmos. But once you finally reach the point of realizing, *hey, this looks like REALITY*, you don’t so desperately **need** the conventional premises of artificial gravity.

Making this mental transformation resembles undergoing removal of a huge cancerous tumor, little bits at a time, without anesthesia. You can’t excise it all at once. It takes time. Repeated surgeries. And for many others like me it may cause great pain.

But it tells us the greater Truths.

6. CURVED HORIZON: THE REAL WORLD

Sometime about 270 BCE Aristarchus of Samos estimated the sizes of the earth, the sun, and the moon. He concluded that the sun stood at the center of this stage. **Heliocentrism** rules, he said. Unfortunately MedievalTV buried his story late in the six o'clock news, after something about traffic backed up due to a chariot overturning on the Appian Expressway. So no one paid him any attention. Even the otherwise brilliant astronomers following him, such as Hipparchus and Ptolemy, toed the party line for **geocentrism**—Earth at the center. Not until Copernicus assembled his data convincingly, jazzed it up on PowerPoint, and published the full version of *On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres* in 1543 did heliocentrism get a shot at its rightful honor. Eventually Kepler, Galileo, and others seconded the motion, set up the website, and stated spreadin' the news. Their superior intellect and courage demanded that Rome's obsolete, neurotic theology get with the program and join the real universe. Only with fear and loathing did medieval popes slowly concede some ground to Enlightenment and Truth.¹²

We face similar dynamics even today. Given the best knowledge of a few centuries ago, literalist or near-literalist readings of scripture offered a normative and plausible outlook. But a literalist interpretation simply does not remain valid today. We rightly compare it to ancient maps depicting man-eating sea monsters at the edge of a flat earth.

We have ever-growing access to a grander view of the spiritual world, as vivid as NASA's gorgeous photos of our spheroid third rock. Accepting and adapting to this emerging reality says nothing ignoble about our parents and grandparents; most of them built their religion based on *what they knew*. But *we* have opportunities based on data comparable to that which sent Columbus sailing toward the unknowns of a curved horizon, seeking a land that even he didn't know with certainty he could reach. He left flatlanders behind on the pier, ridiculing his foolhardiness, condemning his arrogance. No doubt, many of them secretly envied him. Silently they berated themselves for clinging to the predictability of dry land. But there they paced on the pier, mired in their cowardice.

Then, journals and discoveries of the new world came back to Queen Isabella; today, discoveries and insights about the Biblical documents, and the mideastern culture which spawned them, have slowly found their way to those who have ears to hear. Some insights—such as these comparisons—have always awaited careful readers and open minds. Some knowledge has become available only recently in some intriguing finds of other early Christian writings. For example, since 1945 the Nag Hammadi texts¹³ have

¹² Fast forward 359 years after pious tyrants coerced Galileo to recant: Pope John Paul II exonerated Galileo in 1998, tacitly admitting that the Basilica Boys had screwed up. The Roman church still faces many tremendous challenges in both scientific and social realities, but John Paul made some valid progress. Whether that progress will survive under Benedict remains to be seen.

¹³ Some 52 mostly Gnostic texts discovered in the Nile River valley. Relatively better-known items include the Secret Book of James, Secret Book of John, Book of Thomas, and Gospel of Thomas. Few Christians other than clergy and scholars have any significant knowledge of these and many other documents that could also have ended up in what we call the Bible.

The documents contain little or nothing particularly vital; many of them consist of pulp as shallow as your local bookstore's New Age section (a third of the Secret Book of John includes little more than a list of names and notions). The significance lies in how these documents *could* have shaped the evolution of Christianity. Imagine that a few forceful Gnostics with Bill-Gates-level influence had hung around long enough and managed to snag a couple of voting seats on the Canon Councils. If our Bible had included even only a couple of these texts, modern Christianity would probably have quite different a face—at the very least, we would have a few additional denominations with their own particular quirks, and some of them could have changed the game.

(For example, witness the current growth among Latter Day Saints, who in effect give two entire full-length **books** the same veneration that other Christians reserve for the Bible. No other Christian sect will likely ever respect Joseph Smith's writings, but this demonstrates how factions do honor different sources, with tremendously different implications. Comparable dynamics occurred as our conventional Bible took its modern form.)

Some insights relate not so much to how certain documents entered the eventual canon, but how some—such as these—did *not* get enough votes (perhaps some of the Canon Councils met in Palm Beach County). Most traditional Christians have major trouble breaking through the mindset of seeing the existing 66-book-Bible (plus the Apocrypha for Catholics) as a divinely-assembled leather-bound package with maps and concordance. Most modern Christians think the Bible *had to* turn out as it has. But it didn't.

Canonization, though a diligent and studious process in some respects, ultimately reflected the politics and myths at its core. Especially after Constantine, the committee punching the ballots showed more concern for maintaining power over their theological enterprise than they cared about genuinely honoring Jesus and freely sharing his grace. Our bibles reflect the dominant views of the leaders over these centuries, much as early elections in the United States reflected the views of white male landowners. We have no rational nor scriptural basis for arguing that any God in any way influenced their choices.

sparked insight on the dynamics of how the Biblical documents emerged and evolved from the needs and interests of seekers; many such findings go largely unknown and scarcely appreciated outside academia. But some of that knowledge has trickled down.¹⁴

Any significant exposure to these dynamics threatens many Christians today as violently as the NASA photos would have threatened Columbus' detractors. They'd have said, "Those 'photos'? All fakes. Clever paintings, like those of Elvis on velvet. You'll never reach India by this delusion of 'circumnavigation.' You evil heretic, you arrogant blasphemer, you are deceived and a deceiver."

Some data we've suppressed or ignored for almost two millennia; some we've discovered and dusted off only in recent decades. The question remains: What will you do with the data before your eyes?

- At one extreme, religionists will always perpetuate their dogma of the sun revolving around their flat earth. These Jesuit professors of Padua refuse Galileo's invitation to look through the telescope and see the moons of Jupiter for themselves. Why? Because they don't want to risk seeing anything that may challenge their traditions and creeds.
- At the other extreme, disciples—seekers with fire in their hearts—will let *nothing* interfere with their quest for Truth. Not churchism, not creed, not tradition, not ritual, not family, not heritage, not catechism, not social norms, not nation. No *nada*.
- And across the middle of the bell curve, most believers do to varying degrees indulge in various brand-name credos. Ultimately, even nondenominational community churches maintain their own custom blends of dogma, implicitly reflecting orthodoxy's contamination.

I believe that most church people have basically sincere, if not well-informed, faith. They enjoy their preferred traditions and their religious opinions but most don't obsess over them. Some implicitly understand how constricting and stifling their church buildings can prove (literally and symbolically), but they don't yet want to burn them down (literally or symbolically). Some of them do see that something about this whole concept echoes something more real, but they just can't feel quite sure yet. They need time to let things sink in.

Many of these believers at least have an open mind, like the Rabbi at the wedding in *Fiddler on the Roof*. When someone asked whether the men and women might dance together—contrary to the tradition—the Rabbi shrugged and said, "It is NOT *forbidden*—" and it was *everybody dance now!*

I maintain that the *durable* gospel truths still speak meaningfully to this world, and they always will, despite the corruptions and abuses perpetrated by the dominant "Christian" institutions over two millennia. In order to communicate the legitimate, valuable elements of the Jesus story *most meaningfully and effectively* in coming generations, we must accept and adapt to the perpetual flow of new data. Modern Christianity must move past its spiritual geocentrism; believers must renounce the medieval flat-earth view of the Bible as a literal, objective record of history.

This does not compromise any iota of truth; it *strips away* the FALSEHOOD and TRIVIALITY of religious customs and traditions. It lets dead dogmas and myths crumble and fade away. Thus it lets greater, more genuine truths shine more freely.

These conclusions don't work for everybody. The flavor takes getting used to. Think of it as spiritual *café cubano*. It comes across just too intense for some whose palates require plain decaf (churchianity).

Yet I believe that everyone—even literalists—*can* come around to recognizing these things.

Whether that's likely, I don't really know, but I can hope.

OK, maybe I hallucinate. Maybe I took too many Pollyanna pills today. Admittedly, much of this thinking may seem like a play-pretty for upscale clergy and academics. Not a whole lot of the *Just As I Am* crowd will likely discuss any of these things over turkey and dressing at Morrison's after Sunday morning services.

¹⁴ Many everyday believers today have trouble absorbing some concepts that seem difficult only because of some of historic Churchianity's more arrogant clergy and self-glorifying prelates. For too many centuries clerics suppressed the very prospect of individual knowledge and study of scripture. Unlike Jesus, who trusted individual listeners with truth, these clerical poseurs taught that believers *couldn't* understand God on their own. These spiritually bankrupt theologizers insisted that only they should have "authority" to interpret and teach. Of *course* the clergy didn't want believers reading and thinking on their own. Knowledge and reflection gives power, and Rome knew what could happen (and did) as more and more people did read the texts for themselves: Truth broke free.

7. TAKING A FIRST LOOK

If these things unsettle your particular blend of religion, then evidently you do understand the issues. Keep exploring and you very well may find what you need to reconcile these things honestly. Let's respect spirituality as

a process, not a product;
a dynamic, not a doctrine;
a living, not a liturgy.

The *essence* of discipleship entails constant change—from a superficially-stable former life to the flow of spiritual transformation. This life has its anchor not in the customs or traditions of conventional religion, but in the unchanging essence of God. We cannot confine that infinite, divine nature to our agendas, our hopes, our neuroses, our expectations. Whether Jesus “fulfilled” any prophecies or not, he challenged our myopia and evoked a plate-tectonic shift in the way much of the world understands and experiences life. He encourages us to open our eyes to all of life and behold life's wonder.

Meanwhile, acknowledging the hindrances that mainstream churchism creates, we still find changes emerging on our horizons. Anyone whose faith genuinely centers on an infinite God need not fear any valid challenge to our plastic play-pretty of religion. Conversely, anyone whose faith sits lazily in a human quagmire of creed and custom *must* fear such changes. Paranoid Paduan Professors *must* decry intelligent reflection. They *must* oppose any threat to the status quo and the traditions of their ancestors. They *must* censure and shun all who gaze through Galileo's accursed lenses at the moon, the planets, the stars, with all that those tell us about the truths of our place in this cosmos.

I remember the shock I, as a fundamentalist/conservative felt as I saw my Ptolemaic world collapsing and a Copernican universe arising from its ruins. I remember my bewilderment as it continued expanding into apparently endless space-time at one extreme while revealing quantum mysteries at the other. I understand how these things threaten lovers of tradition. I too grew up on a churchism of fear; I felt the anxiety as I confronted the dogmas and customs of my own sectarian agenda; I know how others may feel when the evidence shoves their beliefs over the edge of credibility. The consequent pain and apprehension often accompany a journey toward a greater truth.

True faith calls us to break away from the comforts of cozy churchism. It fosters reverence for something ineffable. Jesus calls us to explore, to grow, to set out into the bracing cold winds on a stormy Galilean Sea. He assures seekers that they won't sink, even as he tells them to rip off their constrictive life vests of liturgy, dress codes, and sectarianism. Transcending the limits of time and history, Jesus says: let's go out on the boat, away from the shore. Head toward the horizon. Sail for the deep waters. Out there we can simply gaze into the galaxies and in awed silence contemplate the splendor of grace, spiritual freedom, our real nature.

I affirm that tremendous doubt and devout faith can in fact operate back-to-back as complementary sides of the same coin, yin and yang. Serious questions and anxieties about these things do not have to stop you from setting sail toward the horizon. Reluctance, even initial resistance, does not contradict true faith. What does contradict the essence of genuine faith? Staunchly defending status quo, heritage, and the established order, even when it defies plain reason, when it ignores the earth's curvature. Such Biblical idolatry coats believers with a dust that chokes both mind and spirit. I genuinely respect literalists and conservatives whom I know for their genuine devotion, but their ideology requires them to hide from and deny too much truth about the Bible and about themselves. Thus literalism suppresses too many truths truly spiritual. *Got my nice pretty church and the traditions I like so much—why bother with truth and reality? Got my Christmas tree lights and votive candles—why gawk at the stars? Shoot, that ocean breeze on the shore's cold—*

If this describes you—if these realities annoy you, and you *refuse* to investigate them BECAUSE they threaten your cherished Traditions—if you *refuse* to investigate boldly and duly confront your religion's doctrines and dogmas, then Jack Nicholson's line from *A Few Good Men* applies:

“You can't HANDLE the truth!”

Defending the Faith of your Fathers does NOT *honor* God. Remember the fuss over Serrano's *Piss Christ* in 1989? That reflects how silly our dogmas look to an infinite, supernal God.

8. NO TURNING BACK

If you truly strive for intellectual integrity as much as you do spiritual integrity, you *cannot* turn your back on these things once you've caught a glimpse of them. Once you see the earth as an oblate spheroid rather than a plane, and you understand that it revolves around a star at the center of our quaint little solar system, which counts for only a speck in the Milky Way galaxy, which at best we consider only one puny village in an unfathomably large and unspeakably ancient universe, you can no longer with any intellectual integrity mythologize humanity at some physical or spiritual center of this ineffably glorious cosmos. The universe doesn't need us. The cosmos doesn't adore us. It simply hosts us.

Fine. Beautiful, even. Our presence here still strikes me as no less splendid.

Many of us, ego-obsessed western capitalists who may honestly aim to honor an egoless mideastern communalist rabbi, can't tolerate this. Fearful, we cringe from the loss of individual self. Like an infant, many of us can't imagine a world and a cosmos which doesn't center around our existence.

Pursuing this vision, you realize that sailing out toward the unknown does not render you holier, more spiritual, or in any way superior to anyone else. Such labels and comparisons reflect only the same crass materialism which fosters and perpetuates churchism. Pursuing the vision simply means that you now find yourself in a place more suitable to seek the stars. You find yourself free. You *need* nothing else. You **need** no Book of Common Prayer, no invitation song, no eucharist, no Creeds, no stained glass, no baptismal initiation, no 95 theses, no rosary, no prayer partners, no preacher or priest or imam or rabbi or pope, no streets of gold, no incense, no confirmation, no gospel meetings, no icons, no patron saints. You certainly may choose to use any or all of these to whatever extent they subjectively appeal to your aesthetics, as they resonate with your emotional background. But you do so while seeing through them. Paul called them all dung. Excrement. Use the vernacular and you get the idea.¹⁵

By any translation, we *don't* need to center any faith on those things.

If you'd like to study this further, I recommend focusing on the basics related to the problems with prophecy (and scripture at large). Assimilating the fuller range of implications will come somewhat more easily as you assimilate these key dynamics:

- Most New Testament writers grew up in, or at least understood, a rich, complex Hebrew culture.
- When composing their documents, they sometimes recalled scriptures from that background.
- They usually isolated those sound bites from their context.
- Often they, or later sources, combined them with other unrelated passages or even folklore.
- They blended these elements with some anecdotes of the still-evolving Jesus stories to create their own Midrashim.
- Followers eventually came to accept these hybrid documents as what we call the gospel accounts.
- Similar dynamics occurred with the documents we now call Acts, various letters, and Revelation.
- Over time, the increasingly institutional church attributed to some writings a patina of historicity.

I'll echo Fox Mulder and assert my conviction that *the truth is out there*. But the truth will never sit as FAR-out as this dogma of "fulfilled prophecies" tries to take it. Let's drop the illusions and get the big picture. The real essence, the deeper truth, stays pretty close to the heart. The kingdom sits right near us, even inside us.¹⁶

Whatever the kingdom honors, whatever genuine faith encompasses, whatever inspiration entails, it doesn't need our fabrications. Any "faith" that relies on shallow, synthetic dogmas worships only a shallow, synthetic god. A transcendent almighty spirit wouldn't need to peddle itself through sleight-of-hand card tricks, prophecy-bending hoaxes, and blue-light discounts on logic that indicate belief in a flat earth.

Set sail for the curved horizon.

¹⁵ Phil. 3:4b-8.

¹⁶ Lk. 10:9.

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