



From Atheist to Theist (Part 27)

Investigating Prophecies
and Ancient Texts

By

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In [our last report](#) we looked at how Old Testament prophecies and New Testament fulfillment supported the Christian claim that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah that God promised to Israel.

As I looked at the evidence through the worldview lens of atheism, I believed several things about Jesus of Nazareth –

1. Jesus was a myth/legend invented by early Christians who wanted to have their own religion for personal power and prestige
2. The New Testament was not credible as an historical document .. it could not be trusted or verified
3. Even if someone named Jesus did live in Israel during the 1st century AD and had a following, anyone could have made up stories about His life to match Old Testament prophecies

So, with all of that in mind – we'll look at some of the prophecies I found difficult to dismiss 'if' Jesus was not a myth/legend and really did exist.

Investigating Messiah

The easy thing for an atheist to do is dismiss the claims of Christianity. The hard thing is to investigate those claims with an open mind. That was my challenge as an atheist – to look at the evidence without putting it through my atheist lens.

How do you do that? Through some objective investigative process that can research evidence logically and reasonably. I used the process that I had been taught in college and experienced in the laboratory of real-life journalism to look at the various evidences that Christian scholars presented to me.

I discovered that some Christians claimed the Bible contains about 400 Messianic prophecies. Some said less than 400. Many of the prophecies were restated one or more times in the Old Testament, so the number of different prophecies was even smaller.

I viewed Messianic prophecies as falling into two basic categories –

1. Prophecies that could be manipulated by a human being
2. Prophecies that could not be manipulated by a human being

Here are some that fell into the first group –

1. Claim to be the Messiah
2. Claim to fulfill Old Testament prophecies
3. Person crying out in the wilderness, “Prepare the way of the Lord;
Make His paths straight”
4. Display character qualities of the Messiah (went about doing good, faithful, meek and lowly, not deceitful, teaching, preaching righteousness, taught in parables, confounded wise people, a leader of men, minister to poor, etc.)

5. Use magic, slight of hand, misdirection or helpers in group of people to give the appearance that a miracle had occurred
6. Royal greeting by followers in Jerusalem while Jesus of Nazareth sat on a donkey
7. Appearance at the Second Temple
8. Hold final supper to replicate OT prophecy
9. Silent before accusers (hard to do, but possible for a man to do that)
10. Buried in rich man's tomb (might have set that up with someone in advance)

Here are some that fell into the second group –

1. Where Messiah would be born (Bethlehem)
2. To whom He would be born (virgin)
3. Being firstborn into a poor family
4. Born into a family with Messianic lineage (line of David)
5. What Messiah's parents would name him (Yeshua-Joshua-Jesus)
6. Parents fleeing to Egypt while child is a toddler
7. Working miracles that were really miracles (e.g. water to wine, sight to the blind, healing sick, raising dead, walking on water, stopping storms, etc.)
8. Where Messiah would die (outside Jerusalem city gates)
9. The method of death (e.g. national rulers counseled together to arrest and kill, false accusations, betrayed by a friend for 30 pieces of silver, arrest, friends fled, hated without cause, trial, scourging, violent death/crucifixion/ lifted up, not a bone broken, side pierced, hands feet pierced, crucified with transgressors/thieves, humiliated/

ridiculed/rejected publicly, garments divided by lot, given vinegar for thirst)

10. Death of betrayer

11. Darkness at time of death (during the daytime)

12. Buried in rich man's tomb (seems unlikely that a rich member of the ruling Sanhedrin would have agreed to be part of a plot to fool people into thinking Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah)

13. The supernatural resurrection of Messiah (body would not see corruption/decay)

14. The supernatural ascension from earth to Heaven to sit at the right hand of God (exalted publicly)

15. Name remembered in all generations

I didn't believe in anything supernatural when I was an atheist, so I did not believe miracles were possible. However, for the sake of conducting an honest, objective investigation I made note of what witnesses said they saw and heard firsthand even if I did not believe them. Though I noted it just to be fair, eyewitness testimony became powerful evidence later as I concluded the investigation.

If anyone could fulfill the prophecies listed in my second group, that would be something to seriously consider because a human being could not make those things happen.

So, how did I interpret the lists? I didn't – at least not for awhile. Interpretation follows observing and asking questions for interpretation. To try to interpret evidence before following a proven investigative process is to set oneself up for failure.

Investigating Gospel Texts

The four narratives of the life of Jesus of Nazareth (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) were the basis for Christian claims that Jesus fulfilled Messianic prophecies. So, the next step for my investigation was to look at the credibility of those texts.

The study of ancient texts is known as *paleography* (from the Greek – ‘old writing’). That was not my educational or occupational background, so I learned as much I could to understand about verifying the texts of the New Testament.

Keep in mind that I am sharing what information was available for research in the early part of 1971. More about New Testament texts has been learned since that time, but I will only refer to the information available during my investigation 55 years ago.

The process included learning about how texts were written at different time periods in history. Paper, as we know it today, did not exist in the ancient world. Most ancient texts were written on [papyrus](#), which was made from the papyrus plant. While very popular in the ancient world, papyrus writing had a limited lifespan unless kept in very dry storage or they were copied.

Other writing materials of the ancient world included clay tablets, stone, bone, wood, leather, metals, potsherds, and parchments (vellum). Papyrus was used in ancient Egypt and adopted by the Greeks and was a popular writing surface during the 1st century AD.

The inks used on papyrus in ancient times included burning organic materials like oil or wood and pulverizing the ash (charcoal) before mixing with water. Brushes made from reeds were often used to apply the material mix on the papyrus.

Knowing how ancient texts were written helped with dating the manuscript along with why they were copied. Another copying purpose was to share an important text with other people (like multiple churches) so that the information was spread widely.

The texts of the New Testament were written primarily in Koine Greek, so that became an important focus just as understanding Hebrew and Aramaic were for texts of the Old Testament. Christians believed that Jesus of Nazareth lived, died and rose from the grave in the early part of the 1st century AD, so I was interested to see how close to that time the New Testament texts had been written.

It was my understanding as an atheist that the authors of the New Testament wrote at least one to two hundred years after the time Jesus was supposed to have lived in Israel. That would rule out eyewitnesses being the real authors. Even though some of the texts were supposedly written by disciples of Jesus, that couldn't be true if the texts were written one or more centuries after the supposed events occurred. The textual information, I believed, was based on myth and legend with no way of verifying that it was true.

Everyone who might have known what really happened would have died long before people started writing texts that eventually became part of the New Testament.

I also thought that the pool of available ancient textual evidence was very shallow. So, you might imagine my surprise when I learned that the ‘pool’ of evidence was much deeper than I could have ever imagined.

Thousands – not dozens, not scores, not even hundreds – thousands of ancient manuscripts and fragments of New Testament writings in Koine Greek had been found, some of them dating from early-to-mid second century AD.

That’s impressive, but still not convincing. Anything written in the second century would still be too late for people alive and following Jesus in the early part of the first century to write anything in the second century.

The only problem with that was the discovery of Christian writings prior to the dating of earliest New Testament texts that quoted from those texts.

What? How can someone quote from something that hasn’t been written yet?

I discovered that there were three important areas to look at when testing the New Testament texts –

1. Greek manuscripts
2. Translations into other languages
3. Quotes from early Christian writers

Clement of Rome wrote a letter to Christians in Corinth. The letter is dated toward the end of the first century AD. Clement quoted or referred to almost half of New Testament texts (13 out of 27) in his letter to the Corinthians. Clement, who became the bishop of Rome, was believed to have known both the apostles Paul and Peter.

Ignatius of Antioch wrote in the early part of the 2nd century AD and would have been a contemporary of Clement of Rome. Ignatius, believed to have been a disciple of the Apostle John, quoted from several New Testament texts (8 out of 27). Ignatius wrote many letters during his ministry, including one to fellow bishop Polycarp of Smyrna.

Polycarp of Smyrna also wrote in the early part of the 2nd century AD and would have been a contemporary of Ignatius and Clement (though younger than both). Polycarp is also believed to have been a disciple of the Apostle John, and he quoted from many New Testament texts (17 out of 27).

Papias of Hierapolis was also a contemporary of Clement, Ignatius and Polycarp. He is believed to have been a disciple of the Apostle John and may have known others who said they saw Jesus Christ. Papias wrote *Exposition of the Sayings of the Lord* in five books, but most of that material has been lost. Irenaeus of Lyons, a disciple of Polycarp and 2nd century bishop, and early Church historian Eusebius of Caesarea (early 4th century bishop), quoted from Papias' books in their writings. They wrote that Papias included notes about who wrote the Gospels of Matthew and Mark and said that Mark interpreted for the Apostle Peter.

The number of Greek manuscripts which contained all or part of the New Testament was about five thousand when I was investigating in 1971. Some of the most interesting papyri were in museum collections. I found that important because the papyri could be viewed and tested. One of the collections was in the Beatty Museum in Dublin, Ireland.

The **Chester Beatty New Testament** papyri, made public in 1931, was important to textual study because it predated other texts by at least a hundred years. The manuscripts included the earliest surviving codex that contained all four Gospels and the Book of Acts in one book. It also contained the earliest copy of the collection of Paul's epistles and the Book of Revelation. The discovery had opened up the investigation into New Testament texts all the way back to the end of the 2nd century AD.

Another important collection is the **Bodmer New Testament** papyri. Though smaller in number than the Beatty collection, the Bodmer Papyri were significant in dating some of the New Testament texts to the 2nd century AD.

The **Bodmer Papyri** were found near Dishna, Egypt, in 1952. The manuscripts were taken from Egypt to Switzerland and purchased by Martin Bodmer. The papyri, made public in 1954, are currently housed in the Bibliotheca Bodmeriana near Geneva.

I also found the *St. John's Fragment* at **Rylands Library** interesting. It is a small piece of papyrus (**P52**) from John's Gospel dated to the early part of the 2nd century AD.

Investigating anything in the early 1970s AD would eventually take you to books, films, slides, photo albums, and microfilm. The Internet didn't exist yet, so libraries were a great place to go during an investigation.

Here are some of the papyri of New Testament texts from various collections:

[P32](#) – Pauline

[P46](#) – Pauline

[P52](#) – Gospels

[P66](#) – Gospels

[P77](#) – Gospels

[P90](#) – Gospels

[P98](#) – Revelation

[P103](#) – Gospels

[P104](#) – Gospels

[GA189](#) – Acts and General Epistles

Next Time

In the next part of my report I will look at 2nd century translations of the Greek New Testament texts into other languages to see how they might support the credibility of the New Testament.