

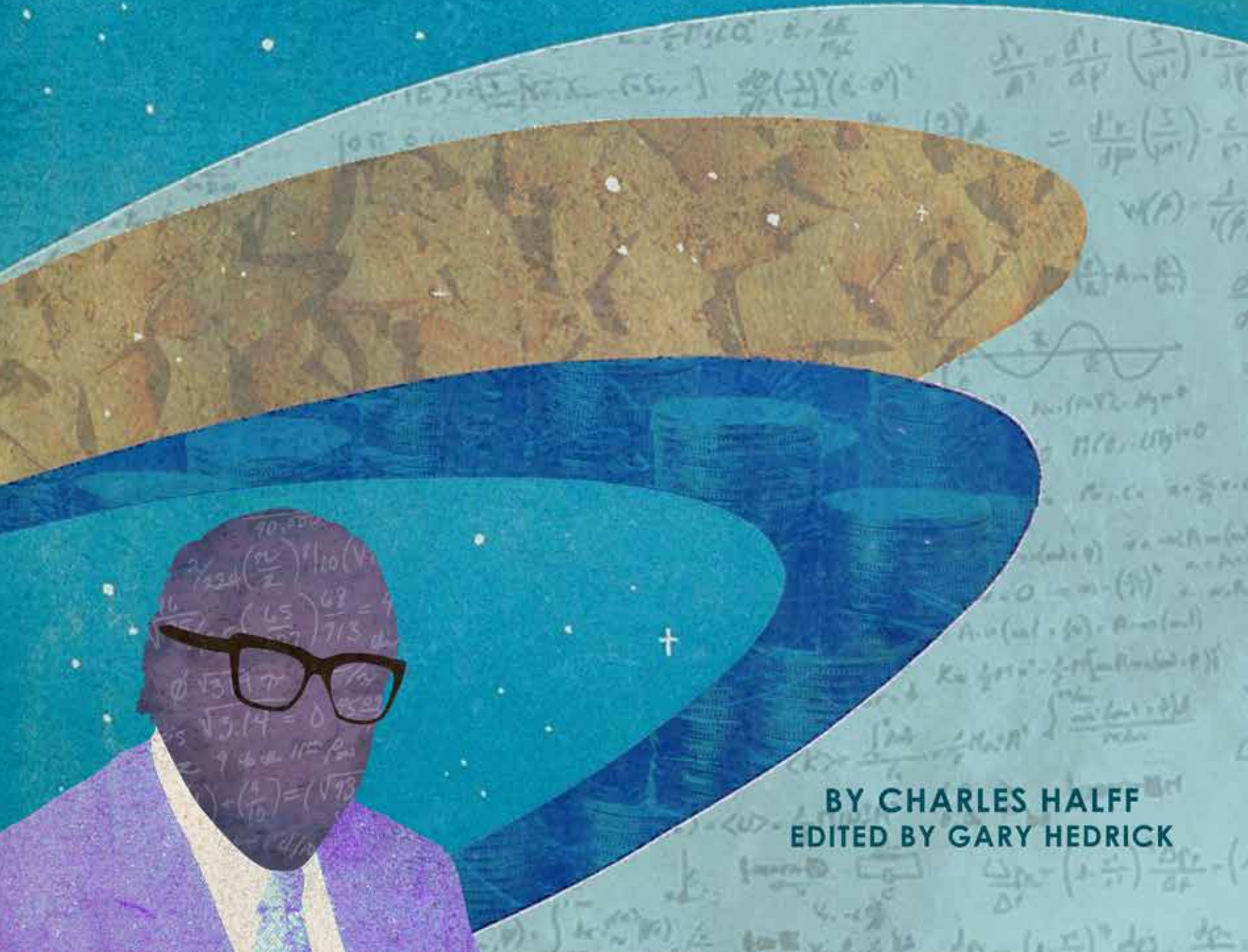


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# Messianic Perspectives®

*God has not forgotten the Jewish people, and neither have we.*

## WHAT ARE THE CHANCES? MESSIANIC PROPHECY ON TRIAL



BY CHARLES HALFF  
EDITED BY GARY HEDRICK

In the 1950s, Peter Stoner was a mathematician and scientist who brought Messianic prophecy into his classroom at Pasadena City College in Southern California.<sup>1</sup> As a staunch believer, one of the professor's interests was the mathematical probability that the Bible's prophecies about Messiah could have been fulfilled randomly, just by chance, without any divine direction or intervention.

The professor's instincts told him that the chances were astronomically *against* such a random fulfillment, apart from it being a work of God. But he knew that for many people—especially unbelievers—a mere hunch wouldn't be enough. They would want hard evidence—mathematical proof. So, he set out to provide them with that evidence.

Professor Stoner tasked six hundred college students, spread across twelve classes he was teaching on "Christian Evidences," with analyzing eight of the Bible's more than three hundred Messianic prophecies.<sup>2</sup> The assignment was to determine the likelihood that these eight Messianic prophecies may have been randomly fulfilled, apart from any divine direction or intervention.

The potential impact of Stoner's (and his students') investigation was clear. They were firing a warning shot across the bow of the liberal–deconstructionist ship of state. The doubters would be forced to sit up and take notice. The professor was challenging their view that there is nothing extraordinary or supernatural about the Messianic "prophecies" and the fulfillments claimed by Christians.

The assignment was straightforward. Dr. Stoner's students would follow a specific procedure as follows:

1. Examine eight carefully defined Messianic prophecies from the Hebrew Bible.
2. Apply standard principles of statistical probability.
3. Arrive at probability estimates that would then be reviewed for accuracy by Stoner's faculty colleagues in mathematics and science.

Only after this classroom work was completed—and vetted by other faculty members—did Professor Stoner collate the material and publish the first edition of *Science Speaks: An Evaluation of Certain Christian Evidences* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1958).

<sup>1</sup> Peter W. Stoner (1888–1980) earned his PhD from the University of Colorado. He was Chairman of the Departments of Mathematics and Astronomy at Pasadena City College, California, until 1953; Chairman of the science division, Westmont College, 1953–1957; Professor Emeritus of Science, Westmont College; and Professor Emeritus of Mathematics and Astronomy, Pasadena City College. Stoner was also a co-founder of the American Scientific Affiliation (asa.org).

<sup>2</sup> Many liberal or minimalist scholars restrict the category of "Messianic" texts to approximately forty to sixty core passages, none of which they regard as divinely inspired in any predictive sense. In our study, however, we adopt the broader estimate of roughly three hundred to three hundred fifty passages traditionally identified by evangelical interpreters as Messianic. We maintain that these texts are divinely inspired and that, taken together, they more accurately reflect the cumulative, typological, multilayered, and thematic dimensions of Messianic expectation in the Bible.

## PROPHETIC "FAILURE"?

Some critics have questioned the validity of Messianic prophecy because of the alleged failure of certain *general prophecies* in the Bible—predictions of future events that they insist never came to pass. Examples of these supposed "failures" include the Bible's warnings that Tyre, Babylon, and Assyria (Nineveh) would be destroyed and never rebuilt.<sup>3</sup> The naysayers point out that people are living on those sites even to this day—therefore, the writing prophets must have been mistaken.

These critics argue that if the Bible's general prophecies are in error, or mistakenly construed, its prophecies about the Messiah are probably also wrong.

However, the real lapse here has nothing to do with the pronouncements of the prophets themselves; rather, it lies in the critics' failure to read the supposed "failed" prophecies within a Messianic and Second Temple interpretive framework.<sup>4</sup> For Second Temple Jews, prophetic statements such as "never rebuilt" (לֹא תִבְנֶה עוֹד; לֹא תִבְנֶה עוֹד) or "no longer a people" (לֹא עַם; לֹא עַם) were well-established Hebrew idioms—that is, figures of speech—signaling an irreversible loss of covenantal status, political power, and historical significance. They did not require a literal erasure of a people's existence or a permanent and total abandonment of their territory.



<sup>3</sup> Ezekiel 26:4, 14 is a pronouncement of doom on ancient Tyre, a prominent Phoenician city on the Mediterranean coast in present-day Lebanon. Isaiah 13:19–22 and Jeremiah 51:26 describe God's judgment on the Neo-Babylonian Empire, which fell to Persia in 539 BC. Zephaniah 2:13–15 foretells the "destruction" and "desolation" of the Neo-Assyrian Empire in 612–609 BC.

<sup>4</sup> There have been two temples in Jerusalem so far. The first was Solomon's Temple, built by David's son and completed around 960 BC. It was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BC. Next was the Second Temple, whose construction was begun by Zerubbabel and the returning exiles after the Babylonian Captivity (late sixth century BC). This temple was later massively renovated and expanded by King Herod the Great, beginning around 20–19 BC, and was essentially completed by about 10 BC, though finish work continued for decades. This temple was destroyed by the Romans in AD 70. A third temple will be erected during the coming Tribulation Period. The fourth and final temple—one that will never be destroyed—will be the future Millennial Temple, described in Ezekiel 40–48.

## Messianic Perspectives®

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## PROPHECY AND PROBABILITY

Now we get down to the nitty-gritty—and it's this: The intense antagonism directed at biblical prophecy—and at Messianic prophecy in particular—is no accident. On the contrary, it's a strategy that is coldly calculated by agnostics and revisionists. The reason is that genuine predictive prophecy—whether Messianic or otherwise—poses a direct challenge to the critics' anti-supernatural worldview.

If the skeptics and deconstructionists allow the ancient prophecies to stand unchallenged, those predictions provide compelling evidence for the accuracy and authority of Scripture—precisely the ideas the skeptics wish to discredit.

Fulfilling even a single prophecy by chance—such as the one where Micah foretells that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem (5:2/1)<sup>7</sup>—would be difficult enough by itself. After all, the number of babies born in a small village like first-century Bethlehem was minuscule when set against the world's population. However, add to that the fact that a person's birthplace cannot be engineered or manipulated—because a baby in the womb obviously has no control over where he is born—and the improbability of random, accidental fulfillment becomes even more striking.

Moreover, Micah 5:2/1 is just one prophecy. What about a whole collection of prophecies, like we see annotated throughout the New Testament? It became abundantly clear to me that fulfilling multiple prophecies merely by happenstance would have been a virtual impossibility. But this was still just an assumption on my part since I was certainly no expert on the laws of probability.

It wasn't until the early 1950s that a qualified mathematician took the time to crunch the numbers and compute the probability of the Messianic prophecies being randomly fulfilled by one person. The scientist's name was Peter W. Stoner (1888–1980), and his book was *Science Speaks*, co-written in later editions with Robert C. Newman (PhD in astrophysics from Cornell University).<sup>8</sup>

In addition to Tyre, Babylon, and Assyria, another case in point is the ancient Canaanites. They were a group of loosely associated Northwest Semitic clans (including Amorites, Hittites, Jebusites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Girgashites) who inhabited the land of Canaan prior to the arrival of the Israelites in the early 1400s BC. Due to their entrenched moral and religious corruption, and their lack of any inclination toward repentance, the Canaanites came under irreversible divine censure and judgment (Deut. 7:1–5).

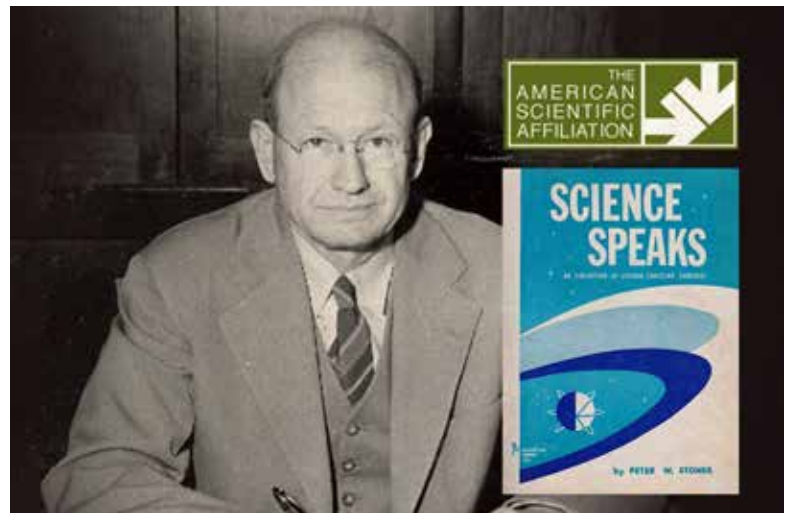
Nonetheless, some individual Canaanites continued to exist afterward, even though they no longer functioned as a recognized “people” or possessed their own land within Israel's theological worldview.

Scripture makes it clear, then, that figures of speech such as “never rebuilt” or “no longer a people” did not imply that a nation or clan literally ceased to exist when it came under divine judgment. Jerusalem is another example. The Holy City experienced severe judgment and desolation, while Edom—rejoicing over Jerusalem's fall—was condemned as an “everlasting desolation” (Ezek. 35:12–15).

Once again, though, that desolation wasn't unending or irreversible. Ancient Israelites readily recognized such language as idiomatic (that is, figurative), denoting judgment beyond human reversal unless God explicitly promised restoration.

In Jerusalem's case, God had indeed promised eventual restoration (Deut. 30:1–5). No such promise, however, was extended to imperial powers such as Tyre, Babylon, or Assyria. On the contrary, each was regarded as having come under irreversible judgment—suffering permanent cancellation of its former role as a political and historical force—even though their former territories continued to be inhabited by others who came and went afterward. So, the Tyrians, Babylonians, and Assyrians were never “wiped off the map” in a literal sense. Ancient Jewish readers understood this.

This is why the supposed “failures” of biblical prophecy evaporate under the scrutiny of careful literary, historical, and theological analysis. This fascinated Dr. Stoner—so, he forged ahead with his inquiry into the relationship between Bible prophecy and mathematical probability.



Dr. Peter Stoner, professor of mathematics and co-founder of the American Scientific Affiliation (ASA)

sciencespeaks.net

<sup>5</sup> In Romans 11, the Apostle Paul distinguishes between people groups that have been permanently “cut off” from covenantal privilege (v. 22) and others that, though “pruned,” remain capable of being “grafted (back) in” (v. 23). Note that this applies, contextually, to nations and has no bearing on individual salvation.

<sup>6</sup> The Bible attests the continued presence of Canaanite populations in passages such as Judges 1 and Joshua 16:10.

<sup>7</sup> In a few places, the English and Hebrew texts employ slightly different verse-numbering systems. Whenever two verse numbers are given separated by a slash (e.g., Micah 5:2/1), the first number (2) refers to the English verse numbering, and the second number (1) refers to the slightly different Hebrew Masoretic Text (MT) number. This has no bearing on the text itself—only the verse number.

<sup>8</sup> Peter W. Stoner and Robert C. Newman, *Science Speaks: Scientific Proof of the Accuracy of Prophecy and the Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1976). This update followed the original 1958 edition.

In *Science Speaks*, Professor Stoner recounts an exercise he conducted with six hundred college students enrolled in twelve of his classes on “Christian Evidences.” As part of their coursework, the students examined eight specific Messianic predictions drawn from the Hebrew Bible and assessed their applicability to Jesus of Nazareth.

Using standard principles of probability, the students were asked to estimate the likelihood that a single individual (e.g., Jesus) might have coincidentally fulfilled all eight prophecies without any supernatural enablement. The resulting probability figures, even applying deliberately conservative numbers, were extraordinarily small.

Stoner and his students concluded that the probability of one man randomly fulfilling all eight prophecies is 1 in  $10^{17}$ —that is, one in 100,000,000,000,000,000, or one chance in one hundred quadrillion.<sup>9</sup>

## THE COIN ANALOGY

Stoner’s argument was impressive; however, most of us mortals can’t even begin to fathom the magnitude of such a number—one hundred quadrillion. So, to some extent, it loses its meaning. Just how big is this number anyway?

Dr. Stoner became curious about the hypothetical possibility of taking one hundred quadrillion silver dollars and spreading them all over the State of Texas—the second-largest state in the union at 268,596 square miles (roughly the size of France). How deep would that layer of coins be?

He started by performing what mathematicians call a “coin-as-a-cylinder” calculation.<sup>10</sup> In *Science Speaks*, Stoner used this model to estimate the depth of one hundred quadrillion silver dollars spread out over the State of Texas:

- 100 quadrillion =  $1 \times 10^{17}$  silver dollars
- Texas area  $\approx 268,596$  square miles  $\approx 6.96 \times 10^{11}$  m<sup>2</sup> (square meters)
- A US silver dollar is about 38.1 mm in diameter and roughly 2.5–3.0 mm thick.

Professor Stoner determined that the total volume (V) of that many silver dollars would be roughly 2.8 to 3.4 times ten to the eleventh cubic meters.

In this way, Professor Stoner calculated that the total volume V of this many silver dollars would be between  $2.8 \times 10^{11}$  and  $3.4 \times 10^{11}$  cubic meters. Expressed in scientific notation, this can be written as  $V_{\text{total}} \approx (2.8\text{--}3.4) \times 10^{11}$  m<sup>3</sup>.

The final calculation works out as follows:

$$d = \frac{V_{\text{total}}}{A} \approx \frac{(2.8 \text{ to } 3.4) \times 10^{11}}{6.96 \times 10^{11}} \approx 0.40 \text{ to } 0.49 \text{ m} \approx 1.3 \text{ to } 1.6 \text{ ft}$$

This tells us that one hundred quadrillion silver dollars would cover the entire State of Texas nearly two feet deep!

Nonetheless, that’s still a vast number to try to wrap one’s head around. So, Professor Stoner proposed a helpful analogy.

<sup>9</sup> To receive a PDF by return email describing Professor Stoner’s work, email your request to [info@cjfm.org](mailto:info@cjfm.org) with “Stoner PDF” in the subject line.

<sup>10</sup> A “coin-as-a-cylinder” calculation is a simple geometric approximation used to determine a coin’s volume by treating it as a right circular cylinder.

## The Professor’s Eight Prophecies

1. Messiah would be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2).
2. His arrival would be announced by a prophet-like forerunner (Mal. 3:1).
3. He would enter Jerusalem in a kingly Messianic procession, riding on a young donkey (Zech. 9:9).
4. He would be betrayed by a familiar and trusted friend (Psalm 41:9).
5. The price of the betrayal would be exactly thirty pieces of silver (Zech. 11:12).
6. The coins would be thrown back into the house of the LORD (Zech. 11:13).
7. Those coins would be turned over to the Temple potter—and rather than being placed in the Temple treasury, they would be ultimately used to purchase a potter’s field (Zech. 11:13).
8. Messiah would remain silent before His accusers (Isa. 53:7).

## THE ELUSIVE RED COIN

Dr. Stoner asked his readers to imagine one silver dollar being painted red and then buried somewhere in that vast sea of silver dollars spread across the entire State of Texas. No one knows where the red coin is hidden. It could be anywhere—as far north as Amarillo, or down south around Dallas, Houston, San Antonio, El Paso, Texarkana, or Brownsville—buried underneath layers of other coins.

Now imagine that you are released and asked to go find that lone, red silver dollar. Always up for a challenge, you spend a week canvassing the state by helicopter. At last, you select a site at random where you land, blindfold yourself, and nervously walk around, tapping a blind man’s cane, before kneeling and plunging your hand down deep into that sea of coins. You carefully pull up just one, solitary, stone-cold silver dollar. When the blindfold comes off, the odds that the coin you’re holding is the red one that was buried days earlier are roughly one in one hundred quadrillion.

This is how Dr. Stoner helps us see the likelihood of these eight prophecies being fulfilled by one person at random. One chance in one hundred quadrillion is slim enough, but the chances decline even further when other prophecies are added to the list—and there are hundreds to choose from.

Math isn’t my strong point, so I would be defenseless at a Blackjack table in Las Vegas—like a deer lost in the headlights. Even so, Professor Stoner managed to convince me that the chances of Jesus of Nazareth fulfilling the Messianic prophecies by mere coincidence were infinitesimally small. In fact, the mathematical probability is so small that it approaches a virtual *impossibility*.

## THE EIGHT PROPHECIES

In their analysis of statistical probability, Stoner and his students deliberately chose eight of the simplest and most clearly defined Messianic prophecies.

As we noted earlier, there are more than three hundred other prophecies that could have been included in the professor's investigation. However, he narrowed the field down to these eight to keep the numbers more manageable for his students—and because they are specific, non-vague, and beyond human control.

Here are the eight prophecies he chose:

### 1. *Messiah would be born in Bethlehem.*

*“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,  
Though you are little among the thousands of Judah,  
Yet out of you shall come forth to Me  
The One to be Ruler in Israel,  
Whose goings forth are from of old,  
From everlasting” (Micah 5:2/1).*

This is the most well-known of all the Bible's Messianic prophecies. Even rabbinic Judaism recognizes it as a statement about the Messiah. This is confirmed by Matthew 2:5–6, where Jewish scribes in the first century cited it without hesitation when King Herod asked them where the Messiah would be born.

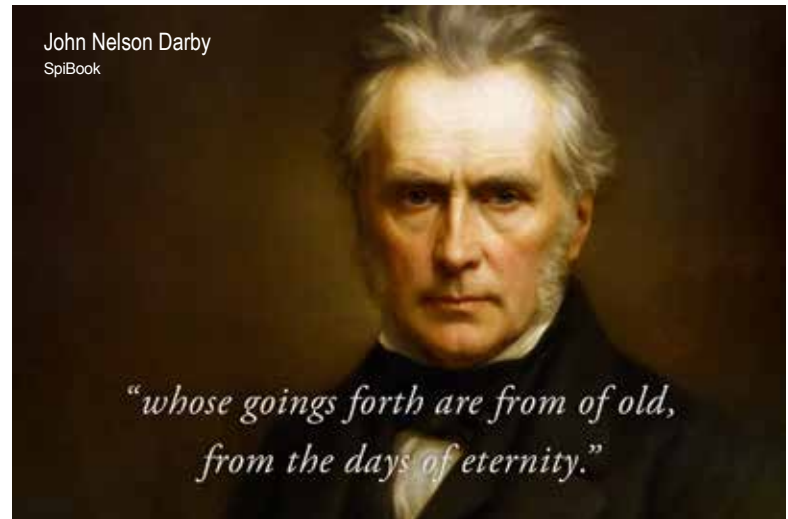
Several features mark the Micah 5:2/1 prophecy as Messianic:

- a. The first one derives from Messianic *geography*: Bethlehem Ephrathah is explicitly David's city (1 Sam. 16; Ruth 4). Any ruler arising from Bethlehem naturally evokes the Davidic covenant—the foundation of the Messianic office (2 Sam. 7).<sup>11</sup>
- b. The second feature has to do with *royal language*. “Ruler in Israel” (*Moshel b'Yisrael*) is kingship terminology in Hebrew. The expression “ruler in Israel” (*mōshēl b'Yisrā'ēl*) is standard Hebrew kingship terminology, denoting sovereign rule rather than mere leadership. In Micah 5:2/1, the term is explicitly Davidic and Messianic, identifying the coming Messiah as the rightful King of Israel.
- c. The third feature relates to the Messiah's extraordinary *origin*. The RSV translates Micah 5:2 as “whose origin is from of old” rather than “whose goings forth are from of old.” However, the RSV doesn't do the phrase justice. “From of old, from ancient days” (*miqqedem, mimei 'olam*) goes well beyond ordinary birth language. That's why we hesitate to use a term like “origin” to explain how He entered our world—because, as an eternal Being, the Lord has *always* existed, even before time itself was created.

When we speak about Messiah's “origin,” we are not referring to the beginning of His existence (because He had no beginning), but to the mysterious *way* in which He—being eternal and unbound by time or space—entered our finite time-space universe.

J. N. Darby captured this idea well when he translated the phrase as, “whose goings forth are from of old, from the days of eternity.” The question the term “origin” addresses is not how the Messiah came into being (because He didn't), but how He stepped out of the eternal realm and entered our limited, finite world.

<sup>11</sup>The qualifier “Ephrathah” distinguishes the Messianic/Davidic Bethlehem, nestled in the southern outskirts of Jerusalem, from Bethlehem of Zebulun, its non-Davidic counterpart in the north (Josh. 19:15).



It all happened in Bethlehem. His birth would put this small, insignificant Judean village on the map for generations to come. As far as traditional Judaism is concerned, the question is not whether Micah 5:2/1 is Messianic, but only whether Jesus qualifies.

### 2. *His coming would be announced in the first century by the last of the OT prophets.*

*“Behold, I send My messenger,  
And he will prepare the way before Me.  
And the Lord, whom you seek,  
Will suddenly come to His temple,  
Even the Messenger of the covenant,  
In whom you delight.  
Behold, He is coming,”  
Says the LORD of hosts (Mal. 3:1).*

This verse in Malachi foretells the arrival of a divinely commissioned messenger who would prepare the way for the Lord's coming. According to Matthew, Jesus explicitly identified John the Baptizer as His forerunner:

*“But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I say to you,  
and more than a prophet.*

*“For this is he of whom it is written: ‘Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, Who will prepare Your way before You’” (Matt. 11:9–10).*

John the Baptizer thus functioned as the final Old Testament prophet, standing at the close of the prophetic era and preparing Israel for the public appearance of her Messiah.



Saint John the Baptist Preaching in the Wilderness  
Pier Francesco Mola

### 3. *Messiah would enter Jerusalem in a kingly procession, riding on a young donkey.*

*“Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!  
Shout, O daughter of Jerusalem!  
Behold, your King is coming to you;  
He is just and having salvation,  
Lowly and riding on a donkey,  
A colt, the foal of a donkey”* (Zech. 9:9).

Note the Messianic features here in Zechariah’s prophecy:

- Zechariah says, “Your King”—explicit kingship language. Whoever he’s talking about here is King of Zion.
- Public arrival in Jerusalem—a royal, covenantal setting. Jerusalem is Israel’s eternal capital, so this is where the King presents himself.
- Mounted entry was traditional for ancient Near Eastern royal processions.
- The King is riding a donkey—an ordinary, everyday work animal—rather than a majestic war horse. This choice signaled humility, peace, and legitimacy rather than overt military conquest. That would come later.

John 12:12–15 records Yeshua’s entry into Jerusalem within Zechariah’s framework:

*The next day a great multitude that had come to the feast, when they heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem, took branches of palm trees and went out to meet Him, and cried out: “Hosanna! ‘Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD!’ The King of Israel!”*

*Then Jesus, when He had found a young donkey, sat on it; as it is written:*

*“Fear not, daughter of Zion; Behold, your King is coming, Sitting on a donkey’s colt.”*

John notes that Yeshua entered the city riding on a young donkey—a foal—thereby consciously enacting Zechariah 9:9. This was:

- Deliberate on Jesus’s part—He chose the animal
- Public—witnessed by large crowds during Passover
- Symbolic—at last, a self-disclosure of His Messianic identity

By entering Jerusalem in this manner, Yeshua openly presented Himself as Israel’s King, while simultaneously redefining kingship in terms of righteousness and peace rather than a military revolution.

In His entry into Jerusalem, the Lord implicitly affirmed His Davidic ancestry:

- The Messiah of Zechariah 9:9 is the rightful King of Zion.
- Matthew’s genealogy (Matt. 1:1) explicitly identifies Yeshua as “the son of David.”
- The procession, therefore, united prophetic expectation, royal lineage, and public action.
- Jesus was not rejecting kingship—He was claiming it on prophetic terms.

Zechariah 9:9 foretells that Messiah would enter Jerusalem publicly as Israel’s King, riding on a young donkey in a royal yet humble procession. John records Yeshua’s deliberate fulfillment of this prophecy, a symbolic act that affirmed both His Messianic identity and His Davidic kingship (John 12:12–15).

## How the OT and NT Texts Come Together to Form Messianic Allusions

Text	Contribution
Ex. 32:32	Establishes thirty silver shekels/pieces as the price of a deceased slave
Zech. 11:12–13	Uses that amount ironically as the price of Israel’s rejection of God’s Shepherd
Matt. 26 & 27	Narrates the historical enactment of both within a Messianic/NT framework.

*Matthew is not inventing his own symbolism with his understanding of the value “thirty”; rather, he is activating a judicial valuation already embedded in the Torah and recognized within Jewish legal tradition (halakha). He is calling attention here to the theological irony of the Messiah, Prince of Heaven, being valued as a slave—“that princely price.” What adds force to the irony is how the Lord Himself, in His Incarnation, purposefully and unhesitatingly embraced the role of a devalued Servant/Slave (Phil. 2:5–8).*

### 4. *He would be betrayed by a familiar and trusted friend.*

**My enemies speak evil of me: “When will he die, and his name perish?”**

*And if he comes to see me, he speaks lies; His heart gathers iniquity to itself; When he goes out, he tells it.*

*All who hate me whisper together against me; **Against me they devise my hurt.***

*“An evil disease,” they say, “clings to him. **And now that he lies down, he will rise up no more.**”*

*Even **my own familiar friend in whom I trusted**, Who ate my bread, Has lifted up his heel against me* (Psalm 41:5–9, emphasis added).

Many of the psalms are the lyrics of worship songs from the First Temple. The Davidic psalms often reflect David’s own life experiences of sinful failures, physical and emotional pain, family betrayal—and toward the end of his life, chronic and unrelenting illness. Psalm 41, in particular, is rich in Messianic allusions. If we overlay the Davidic story (from the OT) with the Jesus story (from the NT), the Messianic parallels are unmistakable—including a compelling and overriding Resurrection theme. The lyric says Messiah’s enemies want Him dead: “When will he die, and his name perish?” (v. 5). And they go on to say that when the fateful time comes, “He will rise up no more” (v. 8)—that is, there will be no resurrection. The Lord’s enemies, of course, turned out to be sadly mistaken about this—He did, indeed, “rise up.”

Who is this betrayer? Matthew tells us:

*Then one of the twelve, called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests*

*and said, “What are you willing to give me if I deliver Him to you?” And they counted out to him thirty pieces of silver.*

*So from that time he sought opportunity to betray Him (26:14–16).*

The betrayal of Jesus came from within His own inner circle. Judas Iscariot was a close associate. He was also the disciples’ trusted group treasurer (cp. John 12:6; 13:18).

The Gospels tell us that the enemies of Jesus finally succeeded in having Him put to death; however, He was only in the tomb for three days before He emerged, glorified and victorious!

#### **5. *The price of betrayal would be exactly thirty pieces of silver.***

*Then I said to them, “If it is agreeable to you, give me my wages; and if not, refrain.” So they weighed out for my wages thirty pieces of silver (Zech. 11:12).*

Precious metals were the currency of the ancient world, and Judas Iscariot entered into a sinister conspiracy with the Sanhedrin to betray the Lord for a price of thirty pieces of silver. Zechariah’s prophecy is very specific here—the betrayer would receive thirty silver coins as compensation for his role in their plot.<sup>12</sup>

#### **6. *The betrayal money would later be thrown back into the house of the LORD.***

*And the LORD said to me, “Throw it to the potter”—that princely price they set on me. So I took the thirty pieces of silver and threw them into the house of the LORD for the potter (Zech. 11:13).*



<sup>12</sup>Thirty silver coins was roughly four months’ wages, on average, in those days.

This verse in Zechariah is rather cryptic. First, who are “they”? And why are these thirty pieces of silver called a “princely price”? Also, why would the traitor end up throwing his wages (the coins) back “into the house of the LORD” rather than keeping them? And what does “throw it to the potter” mean? What role did clay pottery play in the business of Herod’s Temple?

As usual, the Gospels function here as a midrashic explanation and clarify what’s going on. Matthew picks up the narrative after Judas came to his senses and realized what he had done. He returned the bribery money to the chief priests in the Temple. When they refused to accept the bag of coins from him, Judas threw it down in front of them—probably scattering coins in every direction—and abruptly left the Temple precincts. Matthew tells us what happened next:

*But the chief priests took the silver pieces and said, “It is not lawful to put them into the treasury, because they are the price of blood.”*

*And they consulted together and bought with them the potter’s field, to bury strangers in.*

*Therefore that field has been called the Field of Blood to this day (Matt. 27:6–8).*

The fast-paced daily sacrifices and offerings on the Temple Mount required a large inventory of clay utensils (pottery) for routine tasks. This included hundreds of jars for the storage of oil, wine, grain, and other necessities for the Mosaic sacrificial system. Vessels that were dropped, cracked, or otherwise compromised had to be discarded as ritually unclean (Lev. 11:33). This daily routine resulted in large mounds of clay shards and useless rubble—requiring a suitable place for disposal outside the confines of the Temple Mount.

This is where the “potter’s field” enters the picture. Fields like this were barren tracts of land just outside the city walls. All the usable, workable clay had been mined from these fields, and what remained was an exhausted, barren parcel that was nearly worthless. However, despite its barrenness, such a field could still serve as a burial place for paupers and for the disposal of waste. Much of the debris from the Temple Mount consisted of hundreds of daily pottery fragments sent down by the priests who were busy in the Temple.

According to Matthew, that is exactly what the Temple officials did: they used the thirty pieces of silver to purchase a nearby potter’s field. He adds the interesting detail that this site was still known as the “Field of Blood” when he wrote his Gospel in the first century—some five hundred years after Zechariah’s prophecy.<sup>13</sup>

Judas realized too late that he had been used by the Evil One to betray innocent blood (Luke 22:3–6). He was so mortified and deeply remorseful that he decided to end his own life. But before he did, Judas took the silver coins to the Temple and threw them back at the chief priests and elders, with whom his earlier agreement had been made. However, they couldn’t accept the coins because they were “blood money”—that is, they were part of a plot to take an innocent Man’s life. Illicit funds of any kind were barred from the Lord’s House (Deut. 23:18; cf. Isa. 1:15; Jer. 7:9–11).

<sup>13</sup>The traditional site of the ancient Field of Blood (Akeldama) is located today south of Jerusalem, near the convergence of the Kidron and Hinnom Valleys. Like many archaeological sites, however, the precise location is considered uncertain by many experts.

## 7. *The bribery money would be used to purchase a potter's field rather than being deposited back into the Temple treasury.*

And the LORD said to me, "Throw it to the potter"—that princely price they set on me. So I took the thirty pieces of silver and threw them into the house of the LORD for the potter (Zech. 11:13).

Exodus 21:32 is the earliest biblical reference to thirty silver coins. By the Second Temple Period, centuries later, "thirty" coins or pieces of silver had evolved into its own judicial category in Jewish law—not merely a fixed amount of money.

Ordinarily, if there was a change of plans, the money would simply have been returned to the Temple treasury. Judas's thirty pieces of silver, however, could not be placed back into the treasury because those coins were now considered "blood money"—that is, illicit funds associated with the condemnation of an innocent man. This council ruling amounts to a tacit acknowledgment on the part of the Sanhedrin that they knew Jesus was innocent of the charges brought against Him. Otherwise, the coins would not have been considered "blood money."<sup>14</sup>

Matthew's reference to the "princely price" of thirty pieces of silver may be a deliberate use of irony. The irony lies in the fact that thirty silver coins was a pauper's price, not a prince's. The Son of God had come down from Heaven and humbled Himself (Phil. 2:5–8). Consequently, the Prince of Heaven, in His Incarnation, was valued at only thirty pieces of silver—under the Mosaic Law, the price of a deceased slave (Ex. 21:32).

## 8. *Messiah would remain silent before his accusers.*

He was oppressed and He was afflicted,  
Yet He opened not His mouth;  
He was led as a lamb to the slaughter,  
And as a sheep before its shearers is silent,  
So He opened not His mouth (Isa. 53:7).

In biblical times, an established principle of Jewish law (*halakha*) was that the accused should be given the opportunity to speak, be heard, and defend himself from any charges brought against him—especially in capital cases where the death penalty was on the table (Deut. 1:16).

This included his right to be face-to-face with the accusers during a formal arraignment. Part of that process was the presentation of eyewitness testimony—with the testimony of two or more credible witnesses being required for a conviction (Deut. 19:15–18). If the witnesses told different or conflicting stories, their statements were thrown out.

In Jesus's case, the Sanhedrin rounded up numerous people who were willing to speak against Him—possibly in exchange for payment or other favors. However, the witness statements didn't agree on key details, so the council was forced to abandon that approach (Mark 14:55–59).<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup>In Jewish law, bloodguilt (דמים, *damim*) arises when innocent blood is shed—that is, when a death is procured through unjust means. On the other hand, if the accused receives an impartial trial, based on the testimony of two or more witnesses whose statements agree, then there is no bloodguilt when the sentence is carried out (cf. Deut. 17:7; Num. 35:33).

<sup>15</sup>Since the Sanhedrin was so obviously biased against Him, why did they care that some of the witnesses offered conflicting testimony? Why didn't they just convict Him anyway? The reason may be that some members of the Sanhedrin were friends of Jesus—like Joseph of Arimathea (Luke 23:50–51) and Nicodemus (John 7:50–51; 19:39), for example. There are hints of a "silent minority" of other members, as well, who were sympathetic but didn't speak up (12:42). Nonetheless, the presence of these friends of Jesus on the council would have compelled the Lord's enemies to follow jurisprudence to lend some semblance of legitimacy to the rigged proceeding.

Through all of this, the Lord simply remained silent, refusing to defend Himself from the charges brought against Him in this kangaroo court. He just stood there, watching this mockery of a trial crumble under the weight of its own lies and deceit.

He finally broke His silence when the high priest adjured Him under divine oath to declare whether He was the Messiah, the Son of God:

And the high priest arose and said to Him, "Do You answer nothing? What is it these men testify against You?"

But Jesus kept silent. And the high priest answered and said to Him, "I put You under oath by the living God: Tell us if You are the Christ, the Son of God!"

Jesus said to him, "It is as you said. Nevertheless, I say to you, hereafter you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven."

Then the high priest tore his clothes, saying, "He has spoken blasphemy! What further need do we have of witnesses? Look, now you have heard His blasphemy!" (Matt. 26:62–65).



"The Son of Man sitting at the right hand of power" refers to a Messianic prediction from the Book of Daniel. Jesus's mention of the prophecy was not lost on the Sanhedrin. They knew full well that He was associating Himself with the prophet's "Son of Man," placing Himself on equal footing with God—the "Ancient of Days." He was referencing Daniel to assure His listeners—including the members of the Sanhedrin standing before Him—that someday He will return in power and glory to vanquish His enemies and rule over an everlasting Kingdom:

"I was watching in the night visions,  
And behold, One like the Son of Man,  
Coming with the clouds of heaven!  
He came to the Ancient of Days,

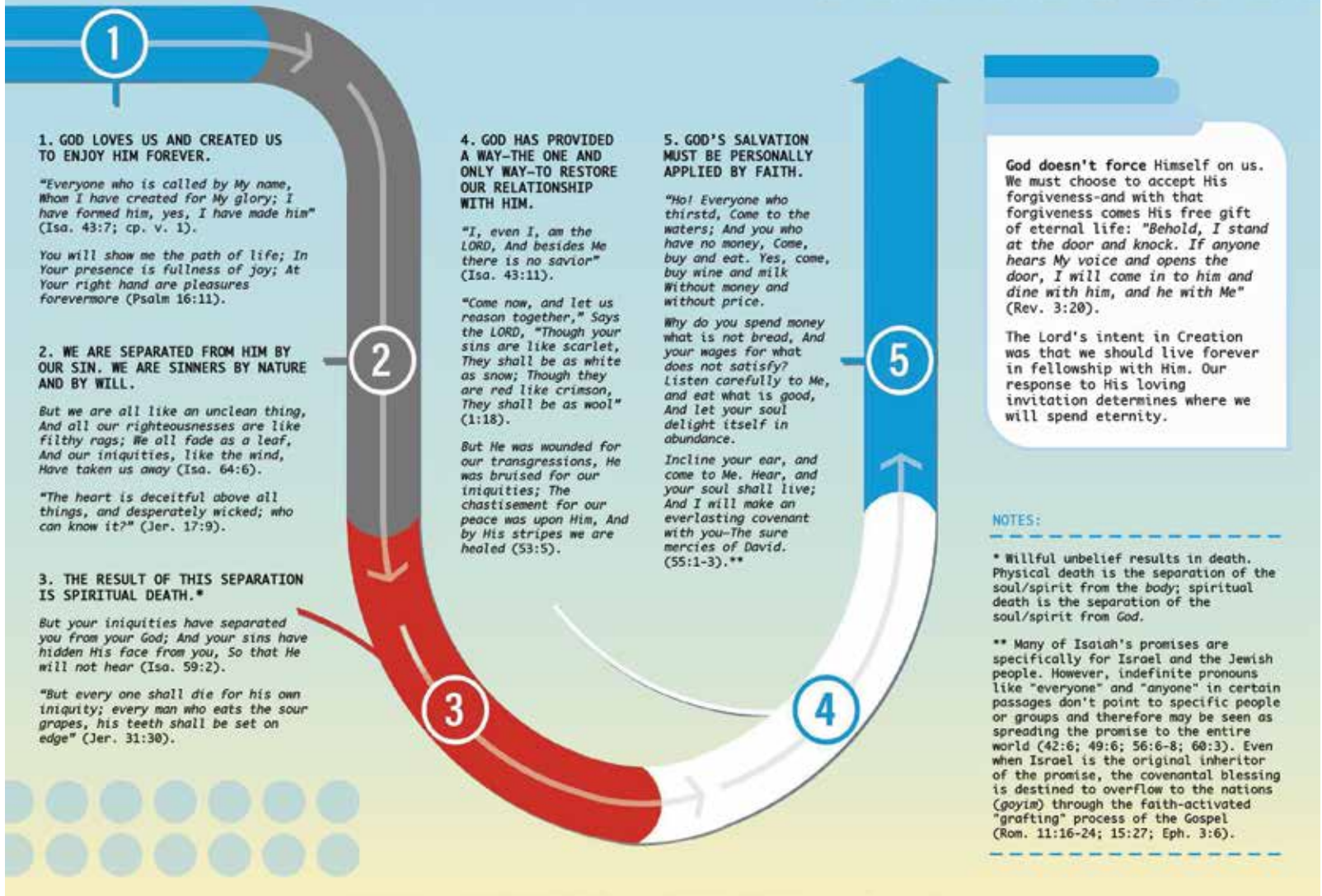
"And they brought Him near before Him.  
Then to Him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom,  
That all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him.  
His dominion is an everlasting dominion,  
Which shall not pass away,  
And His kingdom the one  
Which shall not be destroyed" (Dan. 7:13–14).

The members of the Sanhedrin were familiar with this prophecy. They understood that Jesus was saying that someday, at the end of the age, their roles would be reversed. Every corrupt member of that council would stand before Him in righteous judgment.

This evoked a profound sense of indignation in these self-righteous priests and scribes. The high priest responded by ripping his clothing—a sign that he believed they had just been exposed to blasphemy.

# THE ISAIAH TRAIL

## Five Simple Steps to Peace with God From the Hebrew Scriptures



## CONCLUSION

Here is Stoner's conclusion about the cumulative impact of all eight prophecies:

If these estimates are considered fair, one man in how many men, the world over, will fulfill all eight prophecies? This question can be answered by applying our principles of probability. In other words, by multiplying all our estimates together. . . .

This gives 1 in  $2.8 \times 10^{28}$ , where 28 means that we have 28 ciphers following the 2.8. Let us simplify and reduce the number by calling it 1 in  $10^{28}$ . Written out, this number is 1 in 10,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000.

This is the answer to the question: One man in how many men has fulfilled these eight prophecies? But we are really concerned with the answer to [yet another] question: What is the chance that any man might have lived from the day of these prophecies down to the present time and have fulfilled all of the eight prophecies? We can answer this question by dividing our  $10^{28}$  by the total number of people who have lived since the time of these prophecies. The best information available indicates the number to be about 88 billion or  $8.8 \times 10^{10}$ .

Clearly, the likelihood that these eight Messianic prophecies could be fulfilled purely by chance—without being orchestrated by God—is vanishingly small. Statistically speaking, the probability approaches zero. What we are dealing with here is not merely an improbability, but a virtual impossibility.

This brings us to the unavoidable question every one of us must face: Are we willing to stake our eternal destiny on the assumption—however remote—that these prophecies were somehow contrived by humans, and that the Gospel, after all, may not be true?

Or is it more sensible to take these prophecies at face value, accept their divine authority, and believe what they say?

This choice has eternal ramifications—and the decision is ours to make.



Dr. Gary Hedrick is president and CEO of CJF Ministries in San Antonio, TX.

# Bible Questions & Answers

by DR. GARY HEDRICK

## Have a Bible question?

Submit it to Dr. Hedrick at [garyh@cjfm.org](mailto:garyh@cjfm.org), or mail it to 611 Broadway, San Antonio, Texas 78215.

You may see your question addressed in a future issue of *Messianic Perspectives*.

**QUESTION:** *A friend and I are debating where believers go when we die. I argue that when a believer dies, their soul goes immediately to Heaven to be with the Lord. My friend, on the other hand, argues that believers who perish [die] go to a separate place called Paradise and remain there until the Lord's return. Would you please shed some light on this topic?*

**ANSWER:** You're both partially correct, which is probably why this debate feels so confusing! The issue here is primarily one of terminology—specifically, what we mean when we use the term “Heaven.”


The most important thing to know is that, when Christians die, their souls do go immediately into the presence of the Lord. Jesus himself, speaking to the thief on the cross, promised him that he would be with Him in Paradise that day (Luke 23:43). In his letters, Paul teaches that to be “absent from the body” is to be “present with the Lord” (2 Cor. 5:8). Elsewhere, Paul expresses his desire “to depart and be with Christ, which is far better” (Phil. 1:23).

Your debate with your friend, then, is less about theology and more about terminology. Regarding the term “paradise”—the word itself derives from the Old Persian *pairi-daeza*, meaning “walled enclosure” or “park.” This term was borrowed into Hebrew as *pardes* (פרדס), probably during the post-Exilic period (after 538 BC), and occurs only three times in the Old Testament: Song of Songs 4:13, Ecclesiastes 2:5, and Nehemiah 2:8. In each of these occurrences, the term retains its literal meaning of “orchard” or “enclosed park.” When the Septuagint translators rendered the Hebrew Bible into Greek sometime during the 3rd-1st centuries BC, they used the word *paradeisos* (παράδεισος) to translate both *pardes* as well as the more common Hebrew word *gan* (גן—“garden”). During the Second Temple period, however, “paradise” began to take on an additional layer of meaning in Jewish thought, eventually coming to be associated with the Garden of Eden, prophecies of Eden's restoration, and eventually the heavenly dwelling place of the righteous dead.<sup>1</sup>

In the NT, the term “paradise” is used to refer to the intermediate state where believers' souls dwell between death and resurrection. Paul speaks of being temporarily “caught up to the third heaven” and into “Paradise” (2 Cor. 12:2–4), suggesting Paradise is the present dwelling place of God.



It's important to note, however, that Paradise is not our final destination. When our Messiah returns, He will perfect not only our bodies (1 Cor. 15:51–52; 1 Thess. 4:16–17) but all of Creation—what the Bible calls the New Heavens and New Earth (Rev. 21–22). So, your friend has a point in that no one is yet in the *final* Heaven, that is, the perfect world in which we will dwell with the Lord forever.

As you can see, confusion arises because Christians often use the term “Heaven” loosely, in reference to (1) the intermediate Paradise where our souls go immediately at death, and (2) the final eternal state after resurrection, both of which exist as sequential stages in God's redemptive plan. So when we say a deceased loved one is “in Heaven,” we're right in the sense that they're with the Lord in Paradise. But the fullness of our heavenly existence—in glorified bodies, on the new earth—is still to come. 

<sup>1</sup> This can be seen, for example, in apocalyptic literature like the Apocalypse of Moses, which depicts Adam's body as being taken to “paradise” in the “Third Heaven” (Apocalypse of Moses 37:5–6, in M. D. Johnson, “Life of Adam and Eve,” in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 2, ed. James H. Charlesworth [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985], 291).

# Fruit from the Harvest



by Violette Berger



## Ministry News from Ukraine

“Dear brothers and sisters: The situation on the south-eastern front remains extremely tense. For the residents of this region, these locations have strategic importance because they are the last barriers on the occupiers’ path toward the administrative borders of the city. The situation is difficult, and shelling does not stop, especially targeting the energy infrastructure. Because of this, our ministry has had to adapt to these conditions. Thank God that spring is approaching, however frequent power outages and low temperatures are still challenges. We try to support one another as much as possible, both in prayer and in practical ways, and to continue the ministry. In general, we are surviving as best we can. We sincerely thank you for your support and prayers.”

## Joy of the Lord!

**Diann Parkas, CJFM representative (Hopatcong, NJ)**, holds a Chanukah celebration in her home every year. The holiday this time was exceptionally exciting and amazing, as the Lord surprised her. He made it possible for multiple Jewish believers with a Haredi (Orthodox) background to attend. Some of them were meeting each other for the first time. Diann writes: “The joy of the Lord was over the top! They shared testimonies, and we all enjoyed God’s presence and love as we worshiped together singing Chanukah and other worship songs in Hebrew, English, and Yiddish! Please pray that these individuals will grow in their faith and that their numbers will increase!”

## Mazel Tov!

**Richard Hill, CJFM representative and pastor of Beth Yeshua Messianic Congregation (Las Vegas, NV)**, and his wife, Oanh, have had the privilege of leading two Jewish women to the Lord. “R” was diagnosed with cancer and wanted someone to visit her home and pray for her. Her rabbi refused unless she paid him a large amount of money, so Rich and Oanh went to her home and prayed with her. Stunned that they did not charge her any money, she agreed to their picking her up for services when she was physically able. Upon hearing the Gospel message numerous times, and experiencing the love of the Lord from the congregants, she prayed with Oanh to receive Yeshua as her Messiah, Lord, and Savior. Rich baptized R while she was in the hospital during a prolonged stay.

“M” grew up in the church but never received Yeshua. Over many months of attending *Beth Yeshua*, she finally believed and prayed with Oanh to receive Yeshua. Rich baptized both her and her boyfriend in a beautiful ceremony. He comments: “She has grown in the Lord since getting saved, and we are thrilled at the changes she has made in her life.”

## Campus Update

**Eric Chabot, CJFM representative (Columbus, OH)**, thanks everyone who prayed for the collaborative event at Ohio State University (OSU) with Students Supporting Israel (SSI) on the topic, “How Should We Think About Christian Zionism?” Eric writes: “The event went really well, and we were encouraged to see both Christian and Jewish students impacted by it. There were no major issues, and the Q & A time was especially fruitful. One recurring question from several Jewish students was their frustration at not seeing more Christians engaged in the topic of Israel. That led to some good discussion and reflection.” Although the event wasn’t recorded in full, Eric did post a separate video on his YouTube channel covering the same material. The SSI group has now connected Eric with leaders from other SSI chapters. Please pray for more opportunities for Eric to speak with these groups over Zoom.

## Tradition!!

**Rob Styler, CJFM Director of Missions (Gilbert, AZ)**, continues a tradition whenever he returns to Israel. He asks the congregation of his home church to write out cards for him to hand to Jewish people on his travels. He gives them out to people at the gas station, the drug store, and restaurants. The cards are very simple. They contain a verse from the Old Testament and express to the Jewish people that we’re praying for them, thinking about them and supporting them. Rob says, “I have always had a fantastic response to giving out these cards. For example, I was buying gas but had a little trouble working the pump since my gas station Hebrew is not what it should be. I asked the woman at the next pump if she could help me, which she did. I thought I would like to give her a card but was afraid to stop pumping gas until my tank was full, and asked the Lord to please let her stay until I was done. “Faye” was still there, sitting in her car, when I finished. So I went up to her car and tapped on the window. She looked a little confused, but rolled the window down. I handed her a card and explained that my church back in Arizona was praying for the people of Israel and wanted me to give out cards to encourage them. After I went back to my car and was programming my GPS for the next stop, there was a tap at my window. Faye had read the card and was very emotional when she told me how much the card touched her heart and meant to her. Handing out a card was a small gesture, but it was such a great way for my church to connect with the people of Israel and to encourage them during a difficult time. It was a real blessing for me, as well.”

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