

# Justin Martyr And Messianic Prophecy



*“There were, then, among the Jews certain men who were prophets of God, through whom the prophetic Spirit published beforehand things that were to come to pass, ere ever they happened. And their prophecies, as they were spoken and when they were uttered, the kings who happened to be reigning among the Jews at the several times carefully preserved in their possession, when they had been arranged in books by the prophets themselves in their own Hebrew language.” (Justin 1:31)*

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## Introduction

- I. Jesus never left His followers in doubt that they had chosen the hard way (Mark 13:9).
  - A. The handing over to councils and the beatings in the synagogues refer to Jewish persecution.
  - B. The “rulers and kings” refer to trials before the Roman courts, such as Paul faced before Felix, Festus, and Agrippa.
  - C. As the New Testament church grew, most disciples experienced the kind of persecution Jesus spoke about here.
- II. Imagine living in a country where Christians were being put to death merely because they were Christians—no other charge had to be made against them.
  - A. They were being put to death on the order of a tyrannical government backed by the greatest and most powerful army the world had ever known.
  - B. With this background, imagine being able to deliver a letter to the leader of that government with the assurance that he would read and consider it.
  - C. What would you say to him?
  - D. This is precisely the position that a man known as Justin Martyr had in the second century when Christians were being executed regularly.
  - E. It had been more than a hundred years since the angels had sung “goodwill toward men” (Luke 2:14), and that song had now been heard for successive generations and was still coming from the lips of Christians as they were being crucified or beheaded for the cause of Christ.
- III. Justin Martyr was the most significant of the second-century defenders of the gospel.
  - A. He was born in the Roman city of Flavia Neapolis (ancient Shechem; modern Nablus), near where Jesus had talked to the Samaritan woman by the well (John 4).
    1. Justin was not a Samaritan by blood or religion, for his parents were pagans of Greek origin with Roman citizenship.
    2. They were wealthy and able to provide him with a first-class classical education in Greek and Latin.
    3. He did not learn of Moses or the prophets until well into his adult life.
    4. In his younger days, he sought to find life’s meaning in the pagan philosophies of his day—but this only brought a series of disappointments.
    5. As he grew older, Justin was impressed with the character of Christians who were martyred for their faith.
    6. “For I myself, too, when I was delighting in the doctrines of Plato, and heard the Christians slandered, and saw them fearless of death, and of all other things which are counted fearful, perceived that it was impossible that they could be living in wickedness and pleasure.” (Justin, *Second Apology*, 12)

- B. One day, around AD 130–132, he met an old man who challenged his thinking and shared the gospel with him.
  - 1. Justin then became a believer in Jesus Christ as the Son of God.
  - 2. He wore his philosopher’s cloak (literally) and sought to reconcile faith and reason.
  - 3. His teaching ministry first took him to Ephesus (c. 132), where he discussed with Trypho, a Jew, the true interpretation of Old Testament Scripture and the superiority of the New Covenant.
- C. Later, Justin moved to Rome, founded a school, and wrote two bold *apologies* (i.e., *defenses*—from the Greek word *apologia*).
  - 1. Justin’s *First Apology* was addressed to Roman Emperor Titus Aelius Adrianus Antoninus Pius Augustus Caesar, who ruled from AD 138–161 (usually referred to as Antoninus Pius).
  - 2. This *Apology* was also addressed to the two philosopher sons of Antoninus Pius, Verissimus and Lucius.
  - 3. This *Apology* begins with a refutation of anti-Christian slanders and a description of Biblical moral teaching.
  - 4. Justin asserted that Christianity was not a threat to the Roman Empire and should be treated as a legal religion.
  - 5. He also showed that Christianity was superior to paganism, that Christ fulfilled prophecy, and that paganism is a poor imitation of the true religion.
  - 6. This apology continues with a lengthy discussion of Old Testament prophecy as fulfilled in Christ, with remarks about philosophy.
  - 7. Justin asked the emperor to abandon the persecution of Christians.
  - 8. “...we only are hated on account of the name of Christ, and though we do no wrong, are put to death as sinners; other men in other places worshipping trees and rivers, and mice and cats and crocodiles, and many irrational animals... And this is the sole accusation you bring against us, that we do not reverence the same gods as you do, nor offer to the dead libations and the savor of fat, and crowns for their statues, and sacrifices.” (Justin, *First Apology*, 24)
- IV. In this lesson, I want to examine one of the questions that pagans (both Roman and American) often have concerning the identity of Jesus Christ of Nazareth.
  - A. The question is: “How do I know that Jesus is not a fraud?”
  - B. Justin posed this question to Emperor Antoninus Pius: “What should prevent that He whom we call Christ, being a man born of men, performed what we call His mighty works by magical art, and by this appeared to be the Son of God?” (Justin, *First Apology*, 30)
  - C. Justin then proceeded to prove the deity of Christ by making arguments based on the writings of the Old Testament prophets.
  - D. The writings of the Jewish prophets, translated into Greek at Alexandria in Egypt and known as the *Septuagint*, spoke about the life and deeds of Jesus centuries before the events of His life transpired.

- E. “There were, then, among the Jews certain men who were prophets of God, through whom the prophetic Spirit published beforehand things that were to come to pass, ere ever they happened. And their prophecies, as they were spoken and when they were uttered, the kings who happened to be reigning among the Jews at the several times carefully preserved in their possession, when they had been arranged in books by the prophets themselves in their own Hebrew language. And when Ptolemy king of Egypt formed a library, and endeavored to collect the writings of all men, he heard also of these prophets, and sent to Herod, who was at that time king of the Jews, requesting that the books of the prophets be sent to him. And Herod the king did indeed send them, written, as they were, in the aforesaid Hebrew language. And when their contents were found to be unintelligible to the Egyptians, he again sent and requested that men be commissioned to translate them into the Greek language. And when this was done, the books remained with the Egyptians, where they are until now. They are also in the possession of all Jews throughout the world...” (Justin, *First Apology*, 31)
- F. Justin argued that the emperor could read the writings of the Old Testament prophets for himself—knowing that they were already translated into Greek more than 200 years before Jesus was born—and that these writings spoke in precise detail about Jesus’s life and ministry.
- G. Justin’s arguments concerning the deity of Christ nearly 1900 years ago still hold true today.

#### Discussion

### I. Predicted By Moses

- A. After a very long introduction, Justin started his defense concerning the deity of Christ by quoting the words of Moses.
- B. “Moses then, who was the first of the prophets, spoke in these very words: ‘The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until He come for whom it is reserved...’” (Justin, *First Apology*, 32)
- C. These words of Moses were quoted from Genesis 49:10, where the Patriarch Jacob gave his final blessings to Judah, his fourth-born son.
  - 1. Ancient Jewish and Christian commentators almost uniformly have interpreted this verse as Messianic.
  - 2. Jacob said of Judah, “The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh comes...”
  - 3. These words are very generally understood to mean that the tribe of Judah’s supremacy would continue until it culminated in the personal reign of *Shiloh*, the bringer of peace.
  - 4. The point of this prophecy is that an eternal ruler should come in Judah’s line.
  - 5. This prediction is the first whisper of what was later distinctly declared: that David’s seed should sit on the throne forever (2 Sam 7:12–13).
  - 6. Many Psalms mention that the Davidic king was appointed to rule the nations, which seems to be the allusion in Genesis 49:10 (cf. Ps 72:8–11; 110:1–4).

- D. The general sense of Genesis 49:10 is that of the tribe of Judah's independence.
1. Judah would continue a distinct tribe until the Messiah came—and it did so—but after His coming, it was confounded with the others, so all distinction has been lost ever since.
  2. Justin then told the emperor, “It is yours to make accurate inquiry, and ascertain up to whose time the Jews had a lawgiver and king of their own. Up to the time of Jesus Christ, who taught us, and interpreted the prophecies which were not yet understood, [they had a lawgiver] as was foretold by the holy and divine Spirit of prophecy through Moses...” (Justin, *First Apology*, 32)
  3. Antoninus Pius could read the prophecy, knowing the words were written centuries before Christ was born.
  4. In the next chapter of his apology, Justin quotes from the prophet Micah to prove that Christ would be...

## II. Born In Bethlehem

- A. “And hear what part of earth He was to be born in, as another prophet, Micah, foretold. He spoke thus: ‘And thou, Bethlehem, the land of Judah, art not the least among the princes of Judah; for out of thee shall come forth a Governor, who shall feed My people.’ Now there is a village in the land of the Jews, thirty-five stadia from Jerusalem, in which Jesus Christ was born, as you can ascertain also from the registers of the taxing made under Cyrenius, your first procurator in Judaea.” (Justin, *First Apology*, 34)
1. A Roman *stadia* was about 600 feet ( $\frac{1}{8}$  of a mile).
  2. The distance between Jerusalem and Bethlehem is about 5.5 miles.
- B. Justin quoted from the prophecy of Micah, who lived during the days of Hezekiah, some 700 years before Christ was born (cf. Mic 1:1; 5:2).
1. Micah gave no clue as to *when* or *how* the Messiah would come, but he left absolutely no doubt as to *where* He would be born!
  2. It was well known among the Jews that the Christ would come from Bethlehem (cf. John 7:42).
- C. After the birth of Christ, wise men from the East came to King Herod as they were searching for the “King of the Jews” (Matt 2:1–2).
1. Herod inquired of the chief priest and scribes to find out “where the Christ was to be born” (Matt 2:4).
  2. The scribes assured Herod that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem (Matt 2:5–6).
- D. At the time of Jesus’ birth, Joseph and Mary were in Bethlehem to be counted for a census (Luke 2:1–5).
1. Justin refers to *Cyrenius*, who was the Roman procurator of Syria.
  2. The governor of Syria is mentioned because the Roman province of Syria included Palestine under its jurisdiction at this time.
  3. His full name was *Publius Sulpicius Quirinius*, a well-known Roman military and political figure.
  4. The Jewish historian Josephus mentions this same man.

5. “Now Cyrenius, a Roman senator, and one who had gone through other magistracies, and had passed through them till he had been consul, and one who, on other accounts, was of great dignity, came at this time into Syria, with a few others, being sent by Caesar to be a judge of that nation, and to take an account of their substance...” (Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.1.1)
  6. Now, the fascinating part is this: The emperor could easily find out from the tax records at Bethlehem if Jesus was born there!
  7. A quick check would reveal that Jesus was a real person, that He was of the tribe of Judah, and that He was born in the small village of Bethlehem!
- E. Not only was His birth predicted, but so was His death...

### III. Died On A Roman Cross

- A. “And again in other words, through another prophet, He says, ‘They pierced My hands and My feet, and for My vesture they cast lots.’ And indeed David, the king and prophet, who uttered these things, suffered none of them; but Jesus Christ stretched forth His hands, being crucified by the Jews speaking against Him, and denying that He was the Christ. And as the prophet spoke, they tormented Him, and set Him on the judgment-seat, and said, Judge us. And the expression, ‘They pierced my hands and my feet,’ was used in reference to the nails of the cross which were fixed in His hands and feet. And after He was crucified they cast lots upon His vesture, and they that crucified Him parted it among them. And that these things did happen, you can ascertain from the Acts of Pontius Pilate.” (Justin, *First Apology*, 35)
- B. Justin quotes King David’s words concerning the piercing of Jesus's hands and feet (Ps 22:16).
  1. Crucifixion was undoubtedly one of the most gruesome forms of torture and death humans have ever invented.
  2. It usually involved prolonged suffering for up to several days.
  3. The final cause of death was usually asphyxiation since the victim finally became too weak to lift his head far enough off his chest to gasp for air.
  4. The Romans widely practiced crucifixion, and the early Jewish historian Josephus mentions thousands of people crucified in first-century Palestine (mostly during rebellions against Rome).
  5. There are stories of Roman soldiers cruelly playing with different postures for crucified victims (e.g., Josephus, *Jewish War* 5.449–551).
  6. The use of nails and a crossbar appears to have been common.
- C. Justin also quoted David concerning the dividing of Christ’s clothing (Ps 22:18).
  1. While Jesus hung on the cross, gasping for breath, the soldiers gambled for His clothes.
  2. Roman law permitted the execution squad any minor possessions the executed person carried.
  3. The dividing of His clothing before He was dead was the last indignity inflicted on Him (John 19:23–24).
  4. Matthew also saw this as the fulfillment of prophecy (Matt 27:35).

5. Again, the interesting fact is that Justin challenged the emperor to investigate Jesus's death and claimed it was written in "the Acts of Pontius Pilate."
6. Not only was His birth and life predicted by the prophets, but so was the message that went forth from Jerusalem....

#### IV. "Out Of Zion Shall Go Forth The Law"

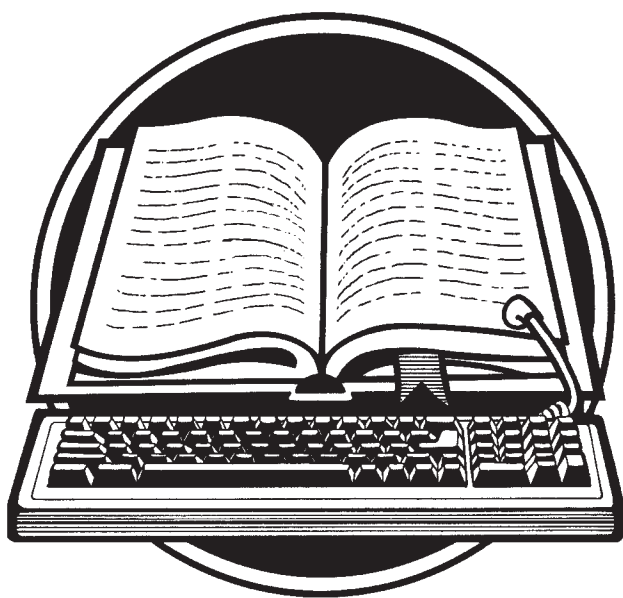
- A. "And when the Spirit of prophecy speaks as predicting things that are to come to pass, He speaks in this way: 'For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. And He shall judge among the nations, and shall rebuke many people; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.' And that it did so come to pass, we can convince you. For from Jerusalem there went out into the world, men, twelve in number, and these illiterate, of no ability in speaking: but by the power of God they proclaimed to every race of men that they were sent by Christ to teach to all the word of God; and we who formerly used to murder one another do not only now refrain from making war upon our enemies, but also, that we may not lie nor deceive our examiners, willingly die confessing Christ." (Justin, *First Apology*, 39)
- B. Justin quoted from Isaiah 2:3 concerning the gospel going forth from Jerusalem.
- C. Just before our Lord's ascension into heaven, He told the apostles to tarry in Jerusalem till they were "endued with power from on high" (Luke 24:46-53).
- D. The apostles waited in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit came (Acts 2:1-4).
- E. The gospel spread from Jerusalem to the world (Col 1:23; Rom 16:26).
- F. Justin also spoke of the change that the gospel message brought—evil men, even murderers, amended their lives and were now willing to confess Christ, even if it meant their death (Rom 6:17-18; 1 Cor 6:9-11).

#### *Invitation*

- I. I have only mentioned a few of the prophecies concerning Christ that Justin quoted in his letter to the emperor—he gave many more examples than we have time here to examine.
- II. "Though we could bring forward many other prophecies, we forbear, judging these sufficient for the persuasion of those who have ears to hear and understand; and considering also that those persons are able to see that we do not make mere assertions without being able to produce proof, like those fables that are told of the so-called sons of Jupiter. For with what reason should we believe of a crucified man that He is the first-born of the unbegotten God, and Himself will pass judgment on the whole human race, unless we had found testimonies concerning Him published before He came and was born as man, and unless we saw that things had happened accordingly—the devastation of the land of the Jews, and men of every race persuaded by His teaching through the apostles, and rejecting their old habits, in which, being deceived, they had their conversation; yes, seeing ourselves too, and knowing that the Christians from among the Gentiles are both more numerous and more true than those from among the Jews and Samaritans?" (Justin, *First Apology*, 53)



- III. Justin's *Second Apology* was written soon after Marcus Aurelius (AD 121–180) became emperor in .D 161.
- A. Marcus Aurelius is usually seen as the last emperor of the *Pax Romana*, a golden age of relative peace and stability for the empire.
  - B. In this apology, Justin tried to show that the gospel alone was truly rational.
  - C. He taught that Christ became incarnate to teach humanity truth and to redeem people from the power of Satan.
- IV. In AD 165, four years after Justin's *Second Apology*, he and his disciples were arrested for their faith.
- A. They were brought before the prefect of Rome, Quintus Junius Rusticus (lived c. AD 100–c. 170), and were commanded to sacrifice to the Roman gods.
  - B. After a brave refusal to sacrifice and an assurance of salvation in Christ, he and those with him were condemned to death.
  - C. Rusticus pronounced the sentence, saying, “Let those who have refused to sacrifice to the gods and to yield to the command of the emperor be scourged, and led away to suffer the punishment of decapitation, according to the laws.” (*The Apostolic Fathers With Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, ANF I)
  - D. They died praising God and confessing their Savior.
  - E. Since he gave his life for the cause of Christ, Justin has been surnamed Martyr.
  - F. His trial is reported in the almost contemporary record, the *Acts of Justin*.



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