The Old Testament shows the Messiah to be divine

Big picture: When looking at the promises in the Old Testament that point forward to the coming of the Messiah, we see that in many places the one to come is said to be God himself.

1. The Old Testament speaks of a coming Messiah



While Quran makes mention of Jesus many times, the Jesus of Islam is merely a human Jesus. He has a special status as a prophet of God, but still is, “no more than a messenger”1. To reconcile the Bible’s view of Jesus and the Quran’s, Muslims often claim that Christians invented the idea that Jesus is God in the preceding centuries after Jesus2.

The view that Jesus is God, however, is not only supported by the New Testament. The Old Testament too supports the idea that Jesus is fully divine.

The Bible is a record of the sinfulness of humanity but also the goodness of God in promising to save and rescue people from all nations from the penalty and consequences of their rebellion against God.

Right from the beginning of the Bible where we read of the account of the very first sin (Genesis 3), God starts promising to fix the problem. In Genesis 3:15 we read of one to be born of ‘the woman’ who will defeat Satan (‘he will crush your head’) through suffering (‘you will strike his heal’).

As the Bible progresses, the promises that God will send someone as a rescuer multiply, painting a clear picture of who the Messiah will be. The Old Testament includes many key details of his life, identity and the nature of the suffering through which humanity might know rescue from sin3.

The Old Testament doesn’t use “Messiah” in an absolute sense, or develop or present the idea as a formal doctrine. The term is derived from the Hebrew word "mashiach," which means "anointed one." In the Old Testament, prophets, priests, and kings were anointed with oil as a symbol of consecration and divine appointment to their respective offices. The term "mashiach" is used in reference to these anointed individuals but also in reference to a future “anointed one” who would bring salvation4.

2. The Quran speaks of Jesus as Messiah yet does know it’s meaning

The title “Messiah” also appears in the Quran a number of times5 with Jesus often identified as “the Messiah, the son of Mary”. In Quran 3.45 the title is used in a positive sense, passed on by the angels from Allah: “O Mary, indeed Allah gives you good tidings of a word from Him, whose name will be the Messiah, Jesus, the son of Mary”. In Quran 4.171, the fact that Jesus is the Messiah is referred to as “the truth”.

More commonly, the title appears in the many polemical texts where the Quran criticises Christians for falsely believing things like “Allah is the Messiah” (Quran 5.72), that the “Messiah is the Son of Allah” (Quran 9.30), or for taking the Messiah as “a lord alongside Allah” (Quran 9.31). In Quran 4.157 the Quran criticises the Jews for claiming to have “killed the Messiah”.

Never, however, does the Quran give any meaning, background, or hint that it is aware of what the title actually means. The Quran largely treats “Messiah” as Jesus’ surname.

3. The Messiah will be a great warrior who will reign

Themes in the Old Testament pointing to the Messiah follow two key themes laid down by Genesis 3:15. First is the idea that the Messiah would have kingly authority, coming to conquer.

Psalms 110 is a good example of this. It highlights the Lord's triumph over his enemies and his reign of justice and authority. It concludes with a declaration of God's sovereign rule and encouragement for his people to trust in His power.

In Jewish eschatology, there is an expectation of a future descendant of King David who will fulfil the Messianic prophecies. A foundation for this is the promise given to David in 2 Samuel 7:12-13 which speaks of the eternal kingship of one of his descendants. This figure, known as the "Mashiach ben David" or "Messiah son of David," is anticipated to be a great king and military leader who will restore the Davidic kingdom, rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem ushering in an era of peace and righteousness. Zechariah 14:1-5 speaks of the LORD “fighting against those nations, as he fights on a day of battle.”6

4. The Messiah will also be a meek King who will suffer for his people

However, the idea that the Messiah will come peacefully and in humility is also a key theme in many passages. While Daniel 7 speaks of the Messiah “coming on the clouds of heaven”, Micah speaks of him being born in humble circumstances. Isaiah 9 speaks of his royal splendour and authority, yet Isaiah 53 speaks of his suffering. Zechariah 9:9 speaks of the king coming, “lowly and riding on a donkey”.

This has led to the idea in Jewish thought of “Mashiach ben Yoseph” or “Messiah son of Joseph”. In Genesis, Jospeh was rejected by his brothers, being sold into slavery, but then exalted to the highest position in Egypt through wisdom and peaceful means. This has led the idea among Jewish scholars that there might be two Messiahs or that the nature of the Messiah will be determined by the spiritual state of God’s people when he comes7.

In Christianity, however, there is no contradiction between the royal reign and humble suffering of the Messiah, both are fulfilled in Jesus in first coming when he came to suffer and die on the cross for our sins, and his second coming where he will come as Lord and judge to reign as king.

5. The divine identity of the Messiah

What is surprising however, is that in a number of instances, in verses that look toward the coming of the Messiah, it seems that it is the LORD himself who is the one who will come, both as one who would reign and as one who would suffer8.

Isaiah, speaking of the coming Messiah, in chapter 7 speaks of one called, “Immanuel9”, which means “God with us”. Then in chapter 9 says of this child to be born:

> *“For to us a child is born,*
> *to us a son is given,*
> *and the government will be on his shoulders.*
> *And he will be called*
> *Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,*
> *Everlasting Father10, Prince of Peace.11”*
>
> *Some argue that the one spoken of in these verses is not the future Messiah, divine or not, but King Hezekiah whose prayer the Lord uses to delay the attack from Assyria12. While Hezekiah may serve as a symbol for the coming Messiah in Isaiah, his reign falls short of fulfilling the promises and descriptions in Isaiah 9.*
>
> *In particular, the phrase ‘Mighty God’, used here of the baby to be born, is the same phrase used of the Holy One of*

Israel in next chapter (Isaiah 10:21). The New Testament's reference to Isaiah 9 in Matthew 4:12-16 confirms the understanding of Jesus as the fulfilment of the divine Messiah described in the passage.

Malachi 3 points forward to the coming of a messenger who will prepare the way for the Messiah. In the New Testament, this messenger is identified as John the Baptist. Here though, we are told (Malachi 3:1) that the messenger will prepare the way specifically for the Lord himself, who with "come to his temple" (this is a theme that is explored in the Gospels as Jesus purifies the temple courts in Mark 11).

Micah 5:2 presents a clear prophesy of the Messiah. Here we see not just where the Messiah would be born, in the town of Bethlehem, but also his identity: "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me, one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times." Again, this is a clear reference to the deity of the Messiah with "from of old" being a reference to his eternal nature (See for example Psalms 55:19 which describes God in the same way13)

Similarly, Ezekiel points forward to the coming of Messiah in divine terms. In Ezekiel 34 the Lord denounces the shepherds of Israel who have been failing to care for his people. In Eziekiel 34:11-16, God compares himself to a shepherd who will seek out his scattered flock. He himself will rescue them from the hands of negligent shepherds promising to personally shepherd his people, providing them with good pasture and rest. This is seen fulfilled in the Lord Jesus, who describes himself as "the Good Sheperd" (John 10:11-14).

As we've seen, while Zechariah speaks of the Messiah in terms of one who will rule and conquer, he also presents the Messiah as one who will come meekly and suffer. In Zechariah 12:10 we read of God himself saying, "They will look on me, the one they have pierced". The apostle John later quotes this verse, showing us that it speaks of Jesus (John 19:37). Zechariah 9:14 is similarly clear in showing us that the one to come is the Lord himself.

While 2 Samuel 7:12-16 points forward to one who would rule in the royal line of David, Daniel 7:7-14 also serves as a key reference helping us understand the identity of the Messiah. Daniel 7 describes the "one like of a son of man". Not only does this 'son of man' rule an eternal kingdom, as Samuel mentioned; the 'son of man' is also worshipped as God. In Revelation 1:12-16, Jesus is referred to as the Son of Man, but is also seen to have the attributes of the Ancient of Days in Daniel 7. During his trial in Mark 14:62, Jesus uses Daniel 7 to affirm that he is indeed the promised Messiah. The response of the high priest Caiaphas on this occasion shows that he understands this as a claim to be God; Jesus was immediately charged with blasphemy (Mark 14:63-65).

In Jewish and Christian tradition alike, Psalms 110 is considered to be a Messianic psalm. It shows us that the one to come in the line of David is also the Lord himself. The Psalm is quoted by Jesus in Matthew 22:41-4614 as he challenges the Pharisees to consider his identity.

Finally, it is important to consider the exclusive claims the LORD makes for himself in Isaiah. In a context in which many were given over to worshipping false gods, the LORD states that he is the only God: "Before me no god was formed, nor will there be one after me. I, even I, am the Lord". Alongside this declaration of there being no other god, he also states, "apart from me there is no saviour." Any claims that the Messiah saves, as seen in passages like Isaiah 53 or in Matthew 1:18, must conclude the Messiah is divine.

These are some of the references in the Old Testament that show us clearly that the Messiah will come meekly and humbly to suffer, to reign in glory and power, but ultimately, he will be God himself. Even if this surprising claim offends our human sensibilities, it is the clear testimony of God's word.

References

1. *1 Quran 5.75, Quran 4.171.*
2. *2 See, "Deity of Jesus in Mark's Gospel" for a fuller explanation.*
3. *3 See https://ccistudyapp.com/key-sources/the-bible/prophecies-about-christ/ for a list of prophecies in the Old Testament fulfilled by Jesus.*
4. *4 For example, Isaiah 61:1, quoted by Jesus in Luke 4:18.*
5. *5 Quran 5.72, Quran 3.45, Quran 4.157, Quran 4.171, Quran 4.172, Quran 5.75, Quran 9.30 & Quran 9.31*

6. *6 Other key verses here would be Isaiah 11:1-5 - a future ruler who will come from the stem of Jesse (David's father) and be filled with the Spirit of the Lord, Jeremiah 23:5-6 - a righteous Branch arising from the line of David, who will reign as king and execute justice and righteousness in the land, Ezekiel 34:23-24 where God promises to raise up David to be a shepherd over His people, and He will be their prince forever.*
7. *7 From Sanhedrin 98a: Rabbi Alexandri says: Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi raises a contradiction between two depictions of the coming of the Messiah. It is written: "There came with the clouds of heaven, one like unto a son of man...and there was given him dominion and glory and a kingdom...his dominion is an everlasting dominion" (Daniel 7:13–14). And it is written: "Behold, your king will come to you; he is just and victorious; lowly and riding upon a donkey and upon a colt, the foal of a donkey" (Zechariah 9:9). Rabbi Alexandri explains: If the Jewish people merit redemption, the Messiah will come in a miraculous manner with the clouds of heaven. If they do not merit redemption, the Messiah will come lowly and riding upon a donkey. https://www.sefaria.org/Sanhedrin.98a.13?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en*
8. *8 See https://www.jewsforjesus.org.au/articles/two-messiahs-in-judaism-ben-david-and-ben-joseph, also https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FIePyf1MrRI&*
9. *9 The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. Isaiah 7:14*
10. *10 The idea of the Messiah being the "everlasting Father", doesn't mean that the Messiah would be the person of the Father as we define in the Trinity, but as God himself a father figure over God's people.*
11. *11 Isaiah 9:6*
12. *12 See chapters 36-38*
13. *13 Psalms 55:19 helps us triangulate Jesus' identity as God – his origins are from on old and as Hebrews 12:8 tells us, he is unchanging.*
14. *14 See also Mark 12:35-37*