

# Prophetic Fulfillment in Matthew

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**ABSTRACT:** *This article addresses biblical illiteracy via Matthew by understanding Jesus as the fulfilment (plēroō) of the Old Testament. It culminates in an exploration of Matthew 5:17.*

**KEY WORDS:** *fulfilment; prophecy; hermeneutics; Jesus; Law; Gospel; Covenants*

One of the major challenges Christians encounter in proclaiming the gospel is widespread biblical illiteracy in the culture—and sadly, even within the church. Biblical illiteracy is always a problem because it obscures the gospel and takes people away from the central message of Jesus Christ.

The New Testament Gospel of Matthew is an excellent place to start to remedy these problems. As the first book of the New Testament, it forms a bridge between Old Testament and New Testament, and shows us how to interpret the Bible by demonstrating that Jesus fulfills the Old Testament promises of God along with the practical entailments of that fulfillment. In this essay, Matthew's emphasis on how Jesus fulfills the Old Testament Scriptures and some of the interpretive implications of that fulfillment will be explored.

Biblical theology, which helps us understand the Bible as God's revelation from beginning to end, can greatly aid the study of Matthew's Gospel.<sup>1</sup> Too often the Bible is approached in a piecemeal

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<sup>1</sup> I am using biblical theology to describe the study of the Bible which focuses on the individual contributions of the biblical authors, seeking to learn how they contribute to the unfolding metanarrative of God that is progressively revealed from Genesis through to Revelation. Cf. Brian S. Rosner, "Biblical Theology" in *New Dic-*

fashion and treated like a repository out of which we pull texts and cobble them together. Biblical theology helps us appreciate the organic structure of the Bible. New possibilities for growth and increased unity among Christians exist the better we understand the Bible as God's word and our final authority in faith and practice.

In their *Introduction to the New Testament*, Carson, Moo, and Morris highlight six emphases that enrich our understanding of the person, ministry, teaching, passion, and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah. Among these is Matthew's rich and complex use of the Old Testament, and his use of what are called "fulfillment formulae" which reveal his post-Pentecost understanding of the relationship between the Old and New Testaments and the way they are tied to Jesus Christ.<sup>2</sup>

For Matthew it is not simply a matter of the Old Testament predicting something that the New Testament records as having taken place. The relationship between the testaments is much deeper and more profound than that. One place where this is particularly seen is in Matthew's treatment of the law. He sees Jesus as coming to fulfill the law (5:17). But what does this mean? In what way does he fulfill the law? Does Matthew understand Jesus to be rearticulating it, internalizing it, radicalizing it, expounding its relationship to love, or is he teaching us something else? I believe that Matthew understands the Law to have a *prophetic function*. Jesus fulfills the Law which points to him in a variety of ways.

Ten times in Matthew's Gospel he tells us that Jesus fulfilled something that was previously said in the Old Testament.<sup>3</sup> By looking (even briefly) at all ten, we will see the richness of fulfillment when it comes to Jesus, and this in turn will help us read and understand the Scriptures and the gospel.

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tionary of Biblical Theology, ed. T. Desmond Alexander, Brian S. Rosner, D. A. Carson, and Graeme Goldsworthy (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2000), 3–11.

2 See: D. A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992, 83–85.

3 Cf. 1:22; 2:15, 17, 23; 4:14; 8:17; 12:17; 13:35; 21:4; 27:9. The number of Old Testament quotations has been variously estimated to be between ten and fourteen (cf. Carson, Moo, and Morris, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 84).

The first of these fulfillment passages is Matt 1:22 where Jesus' supernatural conception in the womb the virgin Mary is the result of the work of the Holy Spirit to fulfill (*plēroō*) what was spoken hundreds of years earlier by the prophet Isaiah: "the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel" (which means "God with us").<sup>4</sup> Whatever preliminary fulfillments there might have been—and this is debated—there is no doubt that Jesus' conception is the ultimate fulfillment.

The second of these passages is Matt 2:15 which tells us that the hurried flight of Mary, Joseph, and Jesus to Egypt to escape the devilish wrath of King Herod, as well as their subsequent return to Israel after Herod's death, fulfilled (*plēroō*) Hos 11:1, where the prophet speaks of God calling his son Israel out of Egypt. It is a remarkable passage because in its Old Testament context these words seem historical not prophetic, and yet, for Matthew they speak prophetically because he sees Jesus as the ultimate Son of God and true Israel. Jesus' escape to Egypt and his return home are thus the fulfillment of Scripture and mark out Jesus as the one who redefines Israel and what it means to be an Israelite.

Third, when Herod was unable to kill Jesus, he orders the execution of all the boys two years of age and younger in the vicinity of Bethlehem, the town identified to the Magi as the birthplace of the king (Matt 2:17). Matthew sees the anguished cries of the mothers as fulfilling (*plēroō*) ancient words of Jer 31:15, "A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more." Rachel's weeping for her children is ultimately fulfilled in the cries of Bethlehem's mothers in connection with the coming of Jesus, the ultimate child of promise. Again, these historical events point to something greater.

Fourth, Matthew 2 ends with a final example of fulfillment, but in a different sense from the others in that there is no one corresponding Old Testament passage. After the death of Herod, Joseph took the child Jesus and his mother and returned to the land of Israel. But along the way he was warned in a dream about returning to

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4 Isaiah 7:14.

territory ruled by Herod's son Archelaus, so he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. Matthew then writes, "And he went and lived in a city called Nazareth, so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, that he would be called a Nazarene" (2:23). The best explanation has to do with the plural "prophets" versus singular "prophet." While there is not a single Old Testament verse that speaks about Jesus' residence in Nazareth, there are number that speak about his humble origins and this seems to be what Matthew is referring to when he refers to the backwater of Nazareth.<sup>5</sup>

Fifth, in Matt 4:14 when Jesus begins his ministry after John had been incarcerated, he leaves Nazareth and goes to Capernaum. These are more than just geographical details for Matthew. They further attest to the ways in which Jesus fulfills Old Testament prophecy. Capernaum was by the lake near Zebulun and Naphtali. Both locations recall the words of Isa 9:1–2 that speak of the inhabitants of those lands seeing a great light, a light has dawned on those living in the land of the shadow of death. Matthew sees these words fulfilled (*plēroō*) by the preaching circuit of Jesus.

Sixth, after the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7), Matthew records three miracles of Jesus: the healing of a man with leprosy (8:1–4), the healing of the centurion's servant (8:5–13), and the healing of Peter's mother-in-law (8:14–15). Then he tells us that when evening came, Jesus healed the sick and the many demon-possessed who were brought to him (8:16). Again, Matthew sees Jesus in the prophecy of Isaiah and understands this amazing display of healing power as fulfilling (*plēroō*) "He took up our infirmities and bore our diseases" (8:17 cf. Isa 53:4). Jesus is the servant of the Lord, the Messiah, predicted by the prophet Isaiah, who brings healing to the sick and oppressed.

Seventh, in Matthew 12, Jesus is confronted by the Pharisees, who accused his disciples of violating their Sabbath rules and regulations. Jesus exposes their failure to understand the Sabbath, which now culminates in Jesus, the Lord of the Sabbath (v. 8). To reinforce what he is saying, Jesus heals a man with a shrivelled hand in the synagogue on the Sabbath day. This infuriates the Pharisees

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5 Cf. Ps 22:6–8, 13; 69:8, 20–21; Isa 11:1; 49:7; 53:2–3, 8; Dan 9:26.

and they plot how to kill Jesus (v. 14). Jesus, however, does not stay around to argue; he withdraws and continues his ministry of healing among those who come to him for help. Once again, Matthew sees the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy, this time Isa 42:1–4. He has come to heal and deliver, not to quarrel and cry out. He deals tenderly with those who are perishing, and in this way brings justice through to victory (12:20).

Eighth, Matthew 13 contains eight parables of Jesus about the kingdom of heaven. Jesus' use of parables is not accidental, it is also the fulfillment of the prophetic word. This time it is the word of Asaph in Ps 78:2, who is using parable to instruct people in the ways of God. But Matthew does not see the psalm exhausted in Asaph's time: rather, it continues to speak through the ministry of Jesus—the ultimate prophet—as he now instructs God's people in things hidden since the creation of the world.

Ninth, Matthew's Gospel, like all the other gospels, eventually takes us to Jerusalem and the showdown between Jesus and those who want to do away with him once for all. This too is seen as the fulfillment of the Old Testament, in this case, the words of the prophet Zechariah, who according to Matthew foretold these events many years before (Zec 9:9). When the time comes for Jesus to face his accusers, he mounts a donkey and rides into Jerusalem. Matthew's retelling of the event stresses Jesus' complete control of the situation. No one will catch him by surprise. He knows exactly what he is doing down to the smallest detail just as the Scriptures foretold.

The tenth use of the fulfillment formula in Matthew's Gospel is found connected to the suicide of Judas Iscariot, the disciple who betrayed Jesus for thirty pieces of silver. Filled with remorse, Judas returned the silver and hanged himself (27:5–10). The chief priests did not want to put this “blood money” into the temple treasury, so they use it to buy the potter's field as a burial place for foreigners, a field notoriously henceforth known as the Field of Blood. Like the other events tied to the formula in Matthew's Gospel, this event also fulfills Scripture, the word spoken by the prophet Jeremiah (32:6–9) as well as Zechariah (11:11–12), who is not mentioned on this occasion.

These ten usages of the fulfillment formula are an important part of Matthew's presentation of Jesus. But there is another passage in the Sermon on the Mount that needs to be discussed if we are to understand the significance of what he is doing because it provides us with a concise summary of his understanding of Jesus and his relation to the Old Testament. That passage is Matt 5:17–20.

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus' ministry created a stir in first century Palestine. For many, his ministry was a breath of fresh air, and he amazed his listeners because his teaching was different from that of the scribes and Pharisees. He spoke with unique first-person authority. Christians knew that his authority was indicative of his divine sonship. It revealed itself in his mastery and comprehensive grasp of the Hebrew Scriptures and his relationship to those Scriptures that spoke about him.

In Matt 5:17, Jesus speaks of himself as, “the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets.” The law is the Pentateuch comprised of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The Prophets refers to the rest of the Hebrew Scriptures. To abolish (*kataluō*) is to destroy or do away with. Although there were things that Jesus said and did that may have given that impression, his ministry was not in opposition to the Hebrew Scriptures.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> For example, he spoke about the Promised Land belonging to his people (Matt 5:5), describes peacemakers as his children (Matt 5:9), his followers as the light

Rather, Jesus had a high view of the Hebrew Scriptures. This is confirmed in Matt 5:18 when he uses solemn language to assert that until the end of the age, not the smallest letter (*iōta* – smallest Greek letter), nor the least stroke of the pen (*keraiā* – serif, distinguishing mark), will by any means disappear from the law (referring to the whole Hebrew Bible), until everything was accomplished. This is the strongest possible assertion of the authority and inerrancy of the Old Testament Scriptures. For Jesus, the Old Testament Scriptures are more than a testimony to the past; they do not become the word of God as they make an impression on us. Rather, they are true and trustworthy down to the smallest letter and the most minute stroke of the pen, and all that is written in them will come to pass. As Christians we should affirm the same – everything in the Old Testament will be accomplished in God’s time and according to his plan.

But there is more, and to understand it we should clarify what he does not mean. He does not mean that he came to merely keep the Law of God himself and insist that his followers do the same. Salvation is not a matter of sinful human beings endeavoring to keep the Law of God. There is no law that can save them because they are unable to keep God’s law and pay for its violation.

Besides, if “fulfill” means he came to ratify, rearticulate, and reinforce the entire Law and Prophets, how could Jesus declare all foods clean as he did in Mark 7:19? Why are there no Levitical priests in the new covenant church as in the Old Testament community, offering animal sacrifices as prescribed by God in the Old Testament? Clearly some things mandated in the law are no longer binding in their Old Testament form.

For instance, people are not stoned to death for gathering sticks on the seventh day or for exceeding a Sabbath day’s journey. Adulterers and homosexual offenders are not put to death, neither are those who hold false doctrines, or chronically disobedient chil-

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of the world (Matt 5:14). All these represent an interpretive shift away from ethnic Israel. His teaching on the Sabbath (Matt 12:1–8) might also be mistaken for abolishment of the Sabbath, but in fact he was speaking about the fulfillment of the Sabbath in himself.

dren.<sup>7</sup> We do not keep the feasts of Passover, Tabernacles, or Pentecost as they were set forth in the Mosaic Law. We wear clothes with more than one type of fibre. We do not (always) rise in the presence of the aged, and mercifully, we cut the hair at the sides of our heads and clip off the edges of our beards!

This doing of the Law may provide a contrast to abolishing the Law and the Prophets, but it is not the contrast Jesus had in mind since the New Testament does not require us to do any of these things in the way they were originally laid down in the Old Testament. Something else is going on.

Other interpreters have divided the Law into moral, ceremonial, and civil categories as a kind of hermeneutical way of explaining what does and does not apply to the Christian.<sup>8</sup> According to this schema, the civil laws which governed Israel as a covenant, theocratic nation, ceased to be literally binding when Israel ceased to be a theocratic nation. The ceremonial laws which regulated the cultic aspects of Israel's life including the Levitical priesthood and the sacrificial system, are no longer operational because Jesus, our great high priest, has offered himself as the ultimate Lamb of God to take away our sins. Moral laws, like the Ten Commandments, do not change and abide forever because they reflect the unchanging moral nature and demands of God. And so, in this approach to the Old Testament when Jesus says that he did not come to "abolish" the Law or the Prophets but to "fulfill" them he is referring to the moral law which continues to be binding on the Christian.

The trouble with this interpretation is that the text does not divide the Law in this way *as a way* of determining what is binding on God's people and what is not. In context, v. 17 points in the opposite direction. Jesus has not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets.

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7 In the past, Christians were sometimes put to death by other Christians because of doctrinal disagreements. It is one thing to be disfellowshipped from a church, another to give confused church leaders the power to execute people because these same leaders have misinterpreted the Scriptures. Cf. Leonard Verduin, *Reformers and Their Stepchildren* (Reprinted: Brogden's Books, La Vernia, TX, 2020).

8 As examples of this approach see: The Westminster Confession of Faith, John G. Eccles, Scotland, 1976, Chapter 19; The Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689, Carey Publications Ltd, Great Britain, 1975, Chapter 19.



And in v. 18, Jesus says that nothing will pass from the Law (which in v. 18 includes the prophets) until everything is accomplished. In v. 19, anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands will be called least in the kingdom, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. According to Jesus, the whole Law, in one way or another, no matter how you divide it up for the purposes of analysis, points to Jesus and finds its fulfillment in him. He is the one who determines how the Old Testament is binding on God's people and how it applies to their lives.

What may be categorized as “ceremonial” or “civil” laws were *all* “moral” laws for Jews living under the old covenant. They could not pick and choose what laws or categories of law they would obey. They were expected to obey the whole Law, and they could not ignore ceremonial or civil laws or give preference to the so-called moral laws. The Law is seen here as a unit.

When Jesus describes himself as the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets, he is teaching that in an important sense the whole Old Testament is prophetic and prophesies about his person and work, his kingdom, and all that God has planned to do through him. In Matt 11:13 Jesus says, “For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John.” The arrival of Jesus marks a profound epochal change. The time of fulfillment has come. The time has now come by Jesus’ teaching, life, death, resurrection, ascension, giving of the Holy Spirit, the ministry of the apostles, and ultimately his return at the end of the age, to bring out the full meaning of the Old Testament and the righteousness, grace, and mercy of God. He is speaking about that myriad of ways the Old Testament points to him and will continue to do so until everything is accomplished. This includes moral instruction about how we should live, but far more! Jesus is presenting himself as the hermeneutical centre of the entire Old Testament revelation.

In his Gospel, Matthew gives us a glimpse of what this means. Sometimes the Old Testament simply predicts what will take place. For example, Mic 5:2 predicts the birthplace of the Messiah and Matt 2:5 confirms that he was born in Bethlehem. Or Isa 9:1–2 tells

us where the Messiah would begin his ministry, and this is confirmed by Matt 4:12–17.

Other times, the prophesying is more complex. Matthew's reference to Hos 11:1 in Matt 2:15 as predicting the flight of Jesus—God's Son—to Egypt and back again depends on him understanding that the history of the nation of Israel as God's firstborn son foreshadows aspects of the life of Jesus the ultimate firstborn son. He is the faithful Son who recapitulates the history of Israel, and so where they failed, he succeeds and does the will of his Father.

Something similar is going on in Matt 4:1–4 where Jesus does what Israel so often failed to do. In the wilderness under extreme Satanic attack, Jesus is true to his calling and demonstrates that “man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord” (Deut 8:3). In this and other ways, he sets himself apart as the long-promised Messiah who has come to do the Father's will and therefore is central to the outworking of God's plan of salvation.

Jesus' place at the heart of God's plan and revelation explains why the Old Testament has so much to say about him. He is foreshadowed in the tabernacle and the temple, the sacrificial system, and the promises of a new covenant that God will make with a new Israel and Jacob, not like the one he made with their forefathers at Mt. Sinai. Sabbath rest in the Promised Land anticipates the rest that only Jesus can bring, as the feasts of Passover, Tabernacles, and Pentecost point to other aspects of his work. He is the mediator that the people request when they are filled with fear at Sinai, the perfect judge who will not fail to establish justice, the prophet greater than Moses, the priest greater than Aaron, the king greater than David. He is the blessed man of Psalm 1, the anointed of Psalm 2, the lamb slain, the true Israel, the Son on whom the Father's favour rests. He can bring his people into the possession of the Promised Land where they will never have to fear their enemies again.

Furthermore, the prophecy/fulfillment structure explains why some things have changed with the coming of Jesus and the inauguration of the kingdom of heaven. Prophecy by its very nature is provisional: it anticipates something greater to come. The shadows

give way to the fullness of the reality that God has ordained to come to pass in his own time. When God’s work is complete, the scaffolding necessary during the time of construction comes down and we can see things as they really are. No more hints, suggestions, types, shadows, or riddles. Jesus has come and the Scriptures that anticipated and spoke of his coming from the time that human beings fell into sin are fulfilled down to their smallest detail.<sup>9</sup>

Another thing we must keep in mind is that while Jesus perfectly keeps the Law in its Old Testament form when he comes to save his people from their sins, in his person and by his teaching and work he brings out the full and true meaning of the Law and the Prophets. He has come to save his people, a new Israel, from their sins. He has come to do for them what they could not do for themselves by paying the price for their sins and imputing his righteousness to them by faith. The church which he will gather (Matt 16:18) will be a people who will know the Lord, have God’s righteous requirements written on their hearts, possess God’s Spirit, and have their sins forever forgiven.

In Matt 5:19–20, Jesus explains the implications of his fulfillment of the Law. He tells us that, “whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” The commands he is talking about are the commands of the Old Testament as illuminated by his teaching, person, and work. The commands are not just the Ten Commandments, but all that God has revealed in the Old Testament, now seen in the light of Jesus.

This means that although in the new covenant there are not priests, sacrifices, or animals on altars, though these remind sinful people that they cannot come into God’s presence anyway they want—they are sinful and God is holy. So much so, that they need

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9 Cf. Heb 9:8–10; 10:1f; Luke 24:27, 44; John 5:39.

the ultimate priest to offer the ultimate sacrifice so that they can stand before God and not be condemned.

This is also why foods can now be eaten that were formerly considered unclean. They were temporarily unclean to teach the old covenant people of God that he is the one who defines what is clean and unclean. He made it plain that they, and all sinners, are unclean unless he cleanses them and declares them clean—which he does for those who put their faith in Jesus.

This is why the Sabbath is more than just a day of physical rest, but is instead a day over which Jesus claims lordship (Matt 12:8), a day which speaks of salvation rest now available in him (Matt 11:28–30), and forever in the ultimate rest of God to come (Heb 4:1–11).

This is why in the new covenant church there are elders and deacons (1 Tim 3:1–13), not priests. This is also why many of the heroes of the Old Testament who had multiple wives are unqualified to be elders and deacons in the church. God’s goal from the beginning was to have a people of his own who were zealous to do what is good (Titus 2:14), and this time has begun with more to come. By God’s grace his people are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ (1 Pet 2:5).

As D. A. Carson has observed, “The law is properly obeyed by conforming to his (Jesus’) word. As it points to him, so he, in fulfilling it, establishes what continuity it has, the true direction to which it points, and the way it is to be obeyed.”<sup>10</sup> Jesus changes everything. Now ranking in the kingdom depends on the degree to which we obey God’s commands as expounded by Jesus.

The apostle Paul says something similar when writing about his ministry and the freedom he has in Christ (1 Cor 9:19–23). He speaks about three different positions in relationship to the Law: those who are under the Law, those not having the Law, and being under Christ’s law. He is not under the Law as the Jew was in the old covenant. He is certainly not without the Law as the Gentiles who did not know God. But he is instead under Christ’s law in that Jesus Christ

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10 D. A. Carson, *Matthew: The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 146.

and obedience to him—which includes reading and interpreting the Old Testament as he did—summed up Paul’s life and ministry.

Jesus brings this important instruction to a close by warning his listeners: “For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (5:20). The “righteousness” of the Pharisees and teachers of the Law was a defective legal righteousness that kept them from seeing how much they needed Jesus, the fulfillment of the law and the prophets. They viewed the law as a means to an end. They were proud to possess it, it gave them something to do, and structured their relationship to God. But their approach to the Old Testament was fundamentally wrong because it did not lead them to Jesus, the only one who could give them the righteousness required by heaven.

Matthew’s exposition of the many ways Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament and his inclusion of Jesus’ sweeping proclamation that he is the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets (5:17) teach us that the Scriptures are about Jesus. His glorious person and monumental work not only hold the Scriptures together but are the key to their interpretation, and most important of all, to finding salvation in him. In the end, we must read, interpret, and obey the Old Testament and New Testament Christocentrically because in the final analysis the Scriptures are exactly what they claim to be—the word of God.