

John the Baptist as Elijah

Introduction

In his ministry to the nation of Israel, Malachi prophesied that Elijah would come before the Messiah and before the “great and terrible day of the LORD” (Malachi 3.1, 4.5-6). Jewish families that celebrate the Passover seder provide an empty chair at the table. The empty chair is reserved for Elijah and serves as an invitation for him to return.

Matthew quoted Isaiah (Matthew 3.1-3; cf. Isaiah 40.3) and applied his prophesy to John the Baptizer. According to Luke’s account, the angel prophesied to Zacharias (Luke 1.13-17) of John’s birth that he would come in the spirit and power of Elijah. Yet John himself declared he was not Elijah (John 1.19-23). Has Elijah come or is he still future?

The Once and Future Elijah

After Jesus revealed his glory to Peter, James, and John, (Matthew 17.1-9) His disciples asked Him this very question. His answer was most interesting. Here is Matthew’s account:

¹⁰ “And His disciples asked Him, ‘Why then do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?’ ¹¹ And He answered and said, ‘Elijah is coming and will restore all things; ¹² but I say to you that Elijah already came, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they wished. So also the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands.’ ¹³ Then the disciples understood that He had spoken to them about John the Baptist” (Matthew 17.10-13 cf. Mark 9.11-13).

Jesus told his disciples two things—that Elijah is coming, a future occurrence, and that Elijah had come already—a past occurrence. He went on to explain that Elijah’s past coming

had been fulfilled by John the Baptizer but that the nation had refused to listen to him. Instead, they put him in prison and Herod beheaded him. Following this explanation, Jesus predicted His own demise with the words, “so also the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands”. Who is “their?” It was the Jewish leadership led by the Sanhedrin and the Roman power personified by Pilate (Psalm 2.2). The disciples failed to comprehend any of this (Luke 18.31-34).

Earlier, Jesus had said much the same thing to his disciples.

⁷ As these men were going away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John, “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? ⁸ “But what did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Those who wear soft clothing are in kings’ palaces! ⁹ “But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and one who is more than a prophet. ¹⁰ “This is the one about whom it is written, ‘BEHOLD, I SEND MY MESSENGER AHEAD OF YOU, WHO WILL PREPARE YOUR WAY BEFORE YOU.’ ¹¹ “Truly I say to you, among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist! Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. ¹² “From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and violent men take it by force. ¹³ “For all the prophets and the Law prophesied until John. ¹⁴ “And if you are willing to accept it, John himself is Elijah who was to come. ¹⁵ “He who has ears to hear, let him hear” (Matthew 11.7-15).

Jesus’ disciples were not the only ones who did not understand what was going on. John the Baptist himself was puzzled (Matthew 11.1-3). He knew he was the herald of the Messiah. But if Jesus was the Messiah and he was the prophesied forerunner (a.k.a., Elijah) why was he in Herod’s jail? That

seemed the last place he should be if he was the King's messenger and Jesus was about to establish his Kingdom. Jesus' reply (Matthew 11.1-19) forced John to reflect on Jesus' deeds. His deeds confirmed that he was the Messiah. But how or when the kingdom would be established was not revealed to John.

John had declared when asked that he was not Elijah. In the Gospel of John we read the following:

*¹⁹ This is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent to him priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" ²⁰ And he confessed and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ." ²¹ They asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" And he *said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" And he answered, "No." ²² Then they said to him, "Who are you, so that we may give an answer to those who sent us? What do you say about yourself?" ²³ He said, "I am a voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as Isaiah the prophet said" (John 1.19-23).*

What did he mean in light of the Lord's words? John meant that he was not Elijah, i.e., the Elijah who had ministered to Israel in the 9th century B.C. But according to the Lord, John would have fulfilled Malachi's prophecy had Israel responded to his message.

What if Israel had accepted John's message instead of rejecting it? We can only speculate what would have transpired. If the nation had accepted John's message of repentance, John would have fulfilled Malachi's prophecy and the Messianic Kingdom would have come following the day of the Lord (the Tribulation). Jesus would still have been crucified since his death had been prophesied (Psalm 22.1-17; 16.10; Isaiah 53.3-12). In such an event, the Romans would have probably been the chief instigators of Jesus' crucifixion

instead of the Jews since His kingship would have threatened Caesar. What we can know is that the Jewish people had a free choice. Pilate also had a free choice and God knew how they would choose: they would reject His Son. This rejection had been typified in the Old Testament (e.g. Joseph and Moses cf. Acts 7.12-13, 35, and Psalm 2.1-3).

Jesus' message of repentance and offer of Himself to the nation of Israel was genuine. Had the Jews repented, the day of the Lord, i.e., tribulation or "time of Jacob's trouble" (Jeremiah 30.4-7) would have occurred and Jesus would have returned to deliver Israel. The Scriptures indicate that the apostles expected Jesus to return in their lifetime and establish His Kingdom. But Jesus intimated that such would not be the case (Luke 19.11-27 cf. Acts 1.6-7). Since Israel rejected her Messiah, the prophesied Messianic Kingdom was delayed. It has been delayed for almost 2,000 years. During this time God has created and brought into being the Church, the body of Christ.

The ascended Lord revealed to Paul the "secret" ([μυστήριον](#)) of the body of Christ, the Church. When the body of Christ is complete God will remove it from the earth and focus His attention once again upon national Israel. During this period of time, God will fulfill the prophesied final seven years of Daniel's 70th week. According to Daniel's prophetic chronology (Daniel 9.24-27), 70 weeks or 490 years were allotted to Israel from the decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until the coming of the Messiah. After 69 weeks or 483 years, the Messiah would be "cut off" and "have nothing." This prophecy documented the nation's rejection of the Messiah. The remaining time span is thus one week or seven years. These seven years are the final years of Israel's history on earth prior to the Lord's return to establish His Messianic Kingdom. During these seven years, the Antichrist will manifest himself as the false Messiah and God will pour out His wrath in judgment upon a Christ-rejecting, evil world.

Elijah will come, just as Jesus prophesied (Matthew 23.39). This future appearance of Elijah will fulfill all the prophecies related to him regarding the nation. National Israel will repent and accept Jesus as the Messiah (Zechariah 12.10, 13.6). In Revelation 11.3-13, John gave an account of two "witnesses." These witnesses are not specifically identified but it is certain that one of them will be Elijah in light of Malachi's prophecy. One of the interesting facts of Scripture is that Elijah never died. He was taken by God in a whirlwind (2 Kings 2.1-11). The two witnesses will reprise Elijah's powers to call down fire and to prevent rain. The other witness will probably be Moses. The Lord Himself buried Moses (Deuteronomy 34.5-8) and Satan disputed with Michael about Moses' body (Jude 9). There's more to this than meets the eye and likely has to do with a future reappearance of Moses.

At the end of seven years, Jesus will return to deliver Israel and establish the Messianic Kingdom. In this Kingdom, Jesus will reign as King from Jerusalem (Zechariah 14.9; Luke 1.32-33). It will be a golden age and His rule will be characterized by peace and righteousness such as the world has never experienced (Isaiah 11.1-10). Israel will be preeminent among the nations of the world (Deuteronomy 28.1, 13) and God will fulfill all the covenants He made with them.

Conclusion

John the Baptist could have fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies of Elijah if the nation of Israel would have repented. If they had repented the prophesy "restore the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers" (Malachi 4.5-6) would have been fulfilled. Since all prophecy will be fulfilled (because the Scripture cannot be broken) a future day remains for Elijah. In his second appearance, national Israel will repent and accept Jesus as the Messiah. As a result, as Paul wrote, "all Israel will be saved" (Romans 11.26).

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