

Was John the Baptist Elijah?

response by Tami Jelinek

At Easter time, we attended a Seder with some friends. At one end of the table there was an empty seat reserved for Elijah. As was explained by our Jewish host, that was to symbolize that Elijah returns again and again to the aid of the poor and oppressed and imprisoned [Jewish] people, until that final time he will return to put an end to their bondage once and for all. But currently, as long there remains even one Jew in bondage, all Jews everywhere understand they are not yet free, and pray for Elijah to come again, if not in finality, at least for a visit. The side bar going on at my end of the table began with a statement by one of my friends that "the Jews don't believe Elijah has come already. They don't believe it was John the Baptist." Another friend expressed surprise that John the Baptist was considered by anyone to be "Elijah" and wondered where she might read this in the Bible. An interesting discussion followed and led to my promise to send her some documentation. The following is my response to her question, "Does it really say that?"

John the Baptist:

The Elijah who was to come before the great and dreadful day of the Lord

To the question, "Does it actually say that John the Baptist was Elijah?" we may answer confidently and irrefutably "yes," if we take this clear, emphatic statement of Jesus Himself, and the inspired apostles' interpretation of it, as proof:

Matthew 17:10 And His disciples asked Him, saying, "Why then do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?" 11 Jesus answered and said to them, "Indeed, Elijah is coming first and will restore all things. 12 But I say to you that *Elijah has come already*, and they did not know him but did to him whatever they wished. Likewise the Son of Man is also about to suffer at their hands." 13 *Then the disciples understood that He spoke to them of John the Baptist.*

Jesus states plainly in this passage: "Elijah has come already." The statement is in response to the disciples' inquiry about Malachi's prophecy specifying that Elijah must come *first* (in other words, *before* the Messiah *and* the great and dreadful day of the Lord). It is important to understand that they did not separate the advent of Messiah and the Day of the Lord by thousands of years, but understood according to the prophets, that those two events were to occur together. Jesus, by his response: 1) acknowledged that their understanding of the prophecy was accurate, and 2) stated that the prophecy had already been fulfilled.

That was the short answer. Now let's examine a few aspects of the prophecy about Elijah and its fulfillment in more depth. Here is the prophecy from Malachi, *in its context* (notice all of the elements which are mentioned together in this prophecy):

Malachi 3:1 "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. 2 "But who can endure the day of His coming? And who can stand

when He appears? For He is like a refiner's fire And like launderer's soap. 3 He will sit as a refiner and a purifier of silver; He will purify the sons of Levi, And purge them as gold and silver, That they may offer to the Lord An offering in righteousness. 4 "Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem Will be pleasant to the Lord, As in the days of old, As in former years. 5 And I will come near you for judgment; I will be a swift witness Against sorcerers, Against adulterers, Against perjurers, Against those who exploit wage earners and widows and orphans, And against those who turn away an alien-- Because they do not fear Me," Says the Lord of hosts. 6 "For I am the Lord, I do not change; Therefore you are not consumed, O sons of Jacob...

Malachi 4: 1 "For behold, the day is coming, Burning like an oven, And all the proud, yes, all who do wickedly will be stubble. And the day which is coming shall burn them up," Says the Lord of hosts, "That will leave them neither root nor branch. 2 But to you who fear My name The Sun of Righteousness shall arise With healing in His wings; And you shall go out And grow fat like stall-fed calves. 3 You shall trample the wicked, For they shall be ashes under the soles of your feet On the day that I do this," Says the Lord of hosts. 4 "Remember the Law of Moses, My servant, Which I commanded him in Horeb for all Israel, With the statutes and judgments. 5 *Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet Before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord.* 6 And he will turn The hearts of the fathers to the children, And the hearts of the children to their fathers, Lest I come and strike the earth with a curse."

The disciples were obviously familiar with this prophecy, and equated it with the coming of Messiah. They would have been acquainted with all of its elements (not just the short excerpts quoted in the gospels) and therefore rightfully equated the advent of Messiah with judgment, and not just any judgment, but *the* judgment, or what Malachi calls "the great and dreadful day of the Lord." So when Jesus said to them, "Elijah has come already," they would have understood Him to be saying "that day is at hand."

Two major objections futurists (those who do not believe, in spite of Jesus' words, that Malachi's prophecy has been fulfilled, but look for a future fulfillment) present are: 1) The angel Gabriel said of John that he would come "in the Spirit and power of Elijah," which is not the same thing as saying he would *be* Elijah; and 2) John the Baptist himself, when directly asked, denied that he was Elijah. Notwithstanding the fact that Jesus' words are authoritative and render these objections irrelevant, we will examine them in light of broader Scriptural contexts to which they should rightly be subjected.

"In the spirit and power of Elijah":

Luke 1:13 But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your prayer is heard; and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. 14 And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth. 15 For he will be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink. He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. 16 And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. 17 He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, 'to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children,' and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people

prepared for the Lord."

We should ask ourselves how the Hebrews familiar with the language of the prophets would have understood the phrase, "in the spirit and power of Elijah." It is not necessary to assert they understood this as Elijah literally returning from the dead in order to accept John the Baptist as Malachi's "Elijah the prophet." Compare John the Baptist's mission "in the spirit and power of Elijah" to Christ's embodiment of "the sure mercies of David":

Isaiah 55:3 Incline your ear, and come unto me: hear, and your soul shall live; and I will make an everlasting covenant with you, even the sure mercies of David. 4 Behold, I have given him for a witness to the people, a leader and commander to the people. 5 Behold, thou shalt call a nation that thou knowest not, and nations that knew not thee shall run unto thee because of the LORD thy God, and for the Holy One of Israel; for he hath glorified thee.

The Jews, looking for their coming Messiah, certainly did not believe He would be David returning from the grave. And yet their prophets used the name David to refer to Christ:

Jeremiah 30:7 Alas! for that day is great, so that none is like it: it is even the time of Jacob's trouble; but he shall be saved out of it. 8 For it shall come to pass in that day, saith the LORD of hosts, that I will break his yoke from off thy neck, and will burst thy bonds, and strangers shall no more serve themselves of him: 9 But they shall serve the LORD their God, and David their king, whom I will raise up unto them.

Ezekiel 34:23 And I will set up one shepherd over them, and he shall feed them, even my servant David; he shall feed them, and he shall be their shepherd. 24 And I the LORD will be their God, and my servant David a prince among them; I the LORD have spoken it.

Ezekiel 37: 24 And David my servant shall be king over them; and they all shall have one shepherd: they shall also walk in my judgments, and observe my statutes, and do them. 25 And they shall dwell in the land that I have given unto Jacob my servant, wherein your fathers have dwelt; and they shall dwell therein, even they, and their children, and their children's children for ever: and my servant David shall be their prince for ever.

In addition to Gabriel's prophecy that John would come in "the Spirit and power of Elijah," the angel also quotes directly from Malachi's prophecy and says of John exactly what Malachi says of "Elijah":

Luke 1:17 He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, *'to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children,'* and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

Compare to:

Malachi 4:5 Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet Before the coming of the great

and dreadful day of the Lord. 6 And he will *turn The hearts of the fathers to the children*, And the hearts of the children to their fathers, Lest I come and strike the earth with a curse."

Not only is the apparent nuance between "the spirit and power of Elijah" and "Elijah the prophet" not a "problem", or contradictory to Jesus' emphatic statement that John was the fulfillment of Malachi's prophecy; but a closer examination of Gabriel's announcement in light of the larger context of Malachi 3 and 4 confirms Jesus' interpretation with even more certainty. Furthermore, Gabriel's phrase, "the spirit and power of Elijah," sheds light on the *nature* of Malachi's prophecy, and its fulfillment. As so many New Testament apostolic writers do, Luke brings clarity and a more complete interpretation to an Old Testament prophetic text.

"I am not Elijah":

John 1:19 Now this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" 20 He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ." 21 And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" And he answered, "No." 22 Then they said to him, "Who are you, that we may give an answer to those who sent us? What do you say about yourself?" 23 He said: "I am 'The voice of one crying in the wilderness: "Make straight the way of the Lord," as the prophet Isaiah said." 24 Now those who were sent were from the Pharisees. 25 And they asked him, saying, "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" 26 John answered them, saying, "I baptize with water, but there stands One among you whom you do not know. 27 It is He who, coming after me, is preferred before me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose."

Before dealing with what John said was not true of himself, let's look at what he affirmed was true:

John 1:23 He said: "I am 'The voice of one crying in the wilderness: "Make straight the way of the Lord," as the prophet Isaiah said.

In quoting Isaiah he is confirming that the One whose way he is preparing is God:

Isaiah 40:3 The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

So John clearly understood that he was the one who was to come announcing Messiah, whose "sandal strap he was not worthy to lose." He would have also understood even from childhood, that according to the angel's herald, he was the fulfillment of the "Elijah" who was to come prophesied by Malachi.

Why then did he say, "I am not?" First of all, the source of the question should not be overlooked. It was coming from the Pharisees. John answered rightly that he was not literally Elijah reincarnated. Knowing the hardness of their hearts, it is reasonable to conclude that he simply chose not to elaborate, or correct their fleshly interpretation of Malachi, since they weren't listening anyway. There are many

examples of Jesus being intentionally evasive and brief in His answers to these very same people; while He was always truthful, He was not always comprehensive. So we need not conclude from John's statement, "I am not," that he was unaware of who he was.

Notice also what Jesus said to the masses regarding John's identity:

Matthew 11:13 For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John. 14 And if you are willing to receive it, he is Elijah who is to come. 15 He who has ears to hear, let him hear!

Of course, many of them were not willing to receive it, and did not have ears to hear, which is why the kingdom was taken away from them:

Matthew 21: 42 Jesus saith unto them, Did ye never read in the scriptures, The stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner: this is the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes? 43 Therefore say I unto you, The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof. 44 And whosoever shall fall on this stone shall be broken: but on whomsoever it shall fall, it will grind him to powder. 45 And when the chief priests and Pharisees had heard his parables, they perceived that he spake of them.

In conclusion, the plain meaning of Jesus' statements identifying John as "the Elijah who was to come" should not be set aside in favor of "objections" which upon closer examination have no Scriptural foundation.

in Christ,
Tami