

# *Elijah to reappear?*

Elijah!

What comes to your mind when I mention this name – Elijah?

If, like me, you're a classical music lover, maybe you think of the beautiful oratorio by Felix Mendelssohn. Maybe, for some readers, Elijah's "contest" with the prophets of Baal comes to mind. Or perhaps the time when he was fed by the ravens in the wilderness. Or the time he raised the poor widow's son from the dead.

To be sure, there are many important lessons to be learnt from the accounts of Elijah's life as written in the first and second books of Kings. But what about the well-known prophecies that tell us that Elijah will reappear prior to the return of Jesus Christ? Are they true? Is Elijah *really* going to reappear?

First, let us examine the appropriate scriptures:

**Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me: and the Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple, even the messenger of the covenant, whom ye delight in: behold, he shall come, saith the LORD of hosts. (Malachi 3:1)**

Here, Jesus Christ, the LORD of the Old Testament, tells us that, before His coming, He will send His messenger to prepare the way. Continuing in chapter 4:

**Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD: and he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse. (Malachi 4:5-6)**

Here we are told that Elijah will reappear before the great and dreadful day of the Lord. In recent years, we in God's church have so often concentrated on the fulfillment of verse 6 of this prophecy – on the turning of the hearts of the fathers to the children and vice-versa. That is all well and good. It certainly has been something that needed to be worked on. But what about verse 5? Again, the question: Is it true? Is the prophet Elijah going to reappear? Should we be watching for him? In this article, I would like to discuss these Malachi prophecies, and try to answer the question: "Will the prophet Elijah reappear on earth before the return of Jesus Christ?"

We have seen that these prophecies appear in the book of Malachi, which (although the books are considered by modern scholars to be out of order) is at the *very end* of the Old Testament. The place to look for our answers on this subject is in the gospel accounts, which are located at the *very beginning* of the New Testament. In the gospel accounts, Jesus Christ reveals that there were to be two fulfillments of the Malachi prophecies regarding the reappearance of Elijah.

## ***First fulfillment: Second Elijah***

**But the angel said unto him, Fear not, Zacharias: for thy prayer is heard; and thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John... And many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God. And he shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elias, 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. (Luke 1:13, 16-17)**

Here the archangel Gabriel tells Zacharias that his future son – John the Baptist – would go before the Lord God in the spirit and power of Elijah. Gabriel did not say that John would actually *be* Elijah resurrected or reincarnated! Also, the angel directly quoted from Malachi 4:5-6 and 3:1, the original prophecies of Elijah's "reappearance." About thirty-odd years later, John's cousin, Jesus repeated this fact:

**For this is he, of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee. Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist: notwithstanding he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he... And if ye will receive it, this is Elias, which was for to come. (Matthew 11:10-11, 14)**

Jesus plainly told the crowds that had come to hear Him that John the Baptist was one of the two fulfillments of Malachi 3:1 and 4:5.

## ***Second fulfillment: Third Elijah***

Some time after the event described in Matthew chapter 11, on the journey back down the mountain after the "transfiguration," Peter, James and John were asking Jesus about the very subject we are discussing here – the prophecies dealing with the reappearance of Elijah:

**And his disciples asked him, saying, Why then say the scribes that Elias must first come? And Jesus answered and said unto them, Elias truly shall first come, and restore all things. But I say unto you, That Elias is come already, and they knew him not, but have done unto him whatsoever they listed. Likewise shall also the Son of man suffer of them. Then the disciples understood that he spake unto them of John the Baptist. (Matthew 17:10-13)**

In His reply, Jesus virtually repeated what He had told the crowds back in Matthew chapter 11, and what the archangel Gabriel had told Zacharias – that John the Baptist *had* already come as the first fulfillment of those prophecies. But that was not all. That was not the end of it!

Can we say, "Jesus states that John the Baptist was the fulfillment of the Malachi prophecies, so now we can forget all about it"? No. Not at all! Jesus also said, "Elias truly shall first come, and restore all things." Curiously, the Greek word for "come" is in the present tense. Some Bible versions render this verb as "is coming" which, in the English too, can refer to a future event (e.g.

"Your Grandma is coming to see us next week"). The Greek word for "restore," however, is solidly in the future tense! A better rendering of this phrase might be, "It is true that Elias is coming first and he will restore all things." This means that the prophecy was dual and that there was to be a second fulfillment!

Did not the original prophecies say that Elijah would reappear before the great and dreadful day of the Lord? Yes. Although the period between Malachi's lifetime and "the the great and dreadful day of the Lord" is a great span of time, the context strongly implies that this *Elijah* will appear shortly before the Day of the Lord. If not, why would he logically even mention that future, historical landmark? Had the great and dreadful day of the Lord come during or shortly after John the Baptist's time? No, of course not. As we move into the twenty-first century, the Day of the Lord still lies ahead of us, in the future.

This "third Elijah" would do a similar work as the first and second Elijahs were doing in their days – sounding a strong warning to the rebellious children of Israel, restoring God's true values to His people, and turning the hearts of the fathers to the children and vice-versa. In our recent past, God's church has applied this second fulfillment of the Malachi prophecies to the late Herbert W. Armstrong and it certainly is true that Mr. Armstrong did fit the bill:

- He did blast a powerful warning message to modern day Israel,
- He did put the accent on family life – especially in his later years,
- Through him, God restored many, many previously lost truths to the church,
- He even at one time ran three college campuses – just as Elijah had done!

Herbert Armstrong may have been the prophesied "third Elijah." Or maybe another servant of God is yet to appear; someone who better fits the role. Perhaps one of the two witnesses of Revelation chapter 11. Time will tell. Yet it may well be that there is a broader application of this second fulfillment of the Malachi prophecies: that they will be fulfilled for the second time by the people of God's end-time church as a whole, rather than by just one man. If this is true, then each and every one of us has the responsibility of collectively representing the end-time reappearance of "the spirit and power of Elijah."

Although God's people have been severely scattered and weakened, they have not been totally silenced. If we think about the ongoing work and teachings of God's church today, we should be able to see that the spirit and power of Elijah did not die with Herbert Armstrong back in January 1986.

## ***What this should mean to us***

If God's people are, in fact, the second and final reappearance of the prophet Elijah, what difference should this knowledge make to each and every one of us?

When Jesus was in the area of Caesarea Philippi, the local people thought that he was either Elijah or John the Baptist resurrected:

**When Jesus came into the region of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, saying, "Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?" So they said, "Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." (Matthew 16:13-14)**

King Herod and others (possibly Herod's advisors) received the same impression:

**Now King Herod heard of Him, for His name had become well known. And he said, "John the Baptist is risen from the dead, and therefore these powers are at work in him." Others said, "It is Elijah." And others said, "It is the Prophet, or like one of the prophets." But when Herod heard, he said, "This is John, whom I beheaded; he has been raised from the dead!" For Herod himself had sent and laid hold of John, and bound him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife; for he had married her. For John had said to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." Therefore Herodias held it against him and wanted to kill him, but she could not; for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a just and holy man, and he protected him. And when he heard him, he did many things, and heard him gladly. (Mark 6:14-20)**

If Jesus was so much like John and Elijah that He was mistaken for either or both of them then, conversely, they must have been very much like Him! Other scriptures support this idea. James 5:16-17 tells us that Elijah was a righteous man. Mark 6:20 tells us that John was known to be a just, righteous, even a holy man. What a tremendous responsibility this knowledge puts on us! If the first Elijah was very much like Jesus Christ, and if the "second Elijah" – John the Baptist – was very much like Jesus Christ, then what is the responsibility for us who may be considered to represent the "third Elijah"?

Yes! We too must strive to be very much like Jesus Christ! Of course, we are only human. We know that, and God knows it. But John and Elijah were "only human" too, with the same passions and weaknesses as we have (James 5:17). The point for us to note is that God has put us in "the big league," as it were – shoulder to shoulder with two of His top men, and we need to be working hard to be like them as they were so much like Jesus Christ.

I hope that this article has clarified to you that:

- John the Baptist was the first fulfillment of the Malachi prophecies,
- God's end-time church collectively may be the second fulfillment of those prophecies,
- Each and every member of God's church needs to be striving to be more like John the Baptist, more like Elijah, and more like Jesus Christ!

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