

Elijah is Coming

by John C. Whitcomb

For 2,400 years Jews have anticipated the literal return of Elijah as the forerunner of Messiah. At the Passover meal (*the seder*), "there is an extra place setting and a special cup on the seder table designated just for Elijah... The meal is followed by a prayer, and a member of the family is then asked to go to the door, open it, and see if Elijah the prophet is coming."¹ This expectation, of course, is based on the final words of the prophet Malachi at the very end of our Old Testament: "Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the LORD. And he will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the land with a curse."

When Peter, James and John beheld *Elijah* on the Mount of Transfiguration, they were astounded. Could it really be true that Elijah would personally, physically, and visibly appear as the forerunner of Christ at the inauguration of His Kingdom? A week before they climbed this mountain, the Lord Jesus had told them: "Truly I say to you, there are some of those who are standing here who shall not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom" (Matt. 16:28). So this was a foretaste, a powerful visual aid, of the manner in which the Son of Man would return to the earth: personally, physically and visibly, in glory (cf. Acts 1:11).

But why did this foreview also include the visible presence of Elijah? Peter, James and John were very concerned about this. Coming down from the mountain, they asked the Lord: "'Why then do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?' And He answered and said, 'Elijah is coming and will restore all things'" (Matt. 17:10-11). Thus, the Lord Jesus was agreeing with the scribes that the prophecy of Malachi should be interpreted literally, just as the chief priests and scribes had interpreted Micah 5:2 literally when they were asked concerning the birthplace of the Messiah.²

The Greatness of John the Baptist

Now this created a great dilemma for the disciples. If Elijah was to prepare Israel for the Kingdom (which they expected to happen at any moment), when and how would he appear, and how did John the Baptist, their former (and now dead) mentor (John 1:35-40) fit into this scenario? Was not the Baptizer "the lamp that was burning and... shining," in whose "light" the disciples "were willing to rejoice" because "he has borne witness to the truth" (John 5:33-35)? Was he not "more than a prophet" (Matt. 11:9)? Was he not the fulfillment of Isaiah 40:3 ("A voice is calling, 'Clear the way for the LORD in the wilderness...' " Cf. Matt. 3:3)? Was he not "My messenger" whom God would send "to clear the way before Me" (Mal. 3:1; cf. Matt. 11:10)? In fact, the Lord Jesus asserted that "among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist" (Matt. 11:11). Thus, in the mind of our Lord, John was personally and prophetically at least as great as Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, David, Solomon, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, --- and even Elijah!

It is perfectly clear, then, that it was not because of some lack of dedication or wisdom that John the Baptizer failed to bring Israel to the place of spiritual readiness to acknowledge Jesus of Nazareth as the long-awaited Messiah. The national rejection of

Jesus was entirely the fault of the people and their leaders! With respect to John, therefore, our Lord explained: "If you care to accept it, he himself is Elijah, who was to come" (Matt. 11:14). Then, amazingly, He added: "'Elijah already came, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they wished'... Then the disciples understood that He had spoken to them about John the Baptist" (Matt. 17:12-13).

Israel's Responsibility

Thus, *John could have been Elijah if Israel had accepted his message*. This is a theme that dominates the entire Bible -- *men are responsible moral agents before God*, and can never reject this accountability by arguing that since *God is the sovereign LORD of history* they cannot make genuine choices (cf. Rom. 9:18-24). Thus, Joseph could say to his murderous brothers: "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to...preserve many people alive" (Gen. 50:20). Judas Iscariot could have reasoned: "Since my betrayal of the Messiah has been predestined [e.g., Luke 22:22a -- "Indeed, the Son of Man is going as it has been determined..."], I have been deprived my freedom of choice, and am therefore innocent!" But our Lord, anticipating such depraved thinking, added: "but woe to that man by whom He is betrayed!" (Luke 22:22b; cf. Acts 2:23 concerning the entire nation).

There are at least three reasons for concluding that John was *not* Elijah. First, the angel Gabriel announced to Zacharias the priest concerning his son John: "It is he who will go as a forerunner before him *in the spirit and power of Elijah*" (Luke 1:17). Therefore, he was not literally Elijah. Second, our Lord stated, soon after the death of John, "Elijah is coming and will restore all things" (Matt. 17:11). Thus, the Lord Jesus interpreted Malachi's prophesy literally: "Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet..." (Mal. 4:5). Third, the leaders of Israel confronted Jesus with a direct question: "Are you Elijah?" His answer was unequivocal: "I am not" (John 1:21).

However, in spite of the fact that John was not Elijah, *his offer of the Kingdom to Israel was absolutely genuine*: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 3:2). This identical appeal was made by our Lord, and by the Twelve and the Seventy. Therefore, no Jew could say, "We never heard a clear and genuine offer of the Kingdom!"

The Theological Antinomy

But here we must face **a great theological antinomy**, namely, an apparent contradiction of logic that mere human intelligence cannot resolve: both *the offer* and also *the contingency* were genuine! *The contingency* was this: *the coming of the Kingdom was dependent upon the believing response of the nation of Israel*. Without national repentance on the part of God's chosen people, there can be no Messianic kingdom on this earth (see Romans 11:12, 15, 25-29, and many Old Testament prophecies). Also for individuals, whether Jew or Gentile, there can be no salvation without genuine faith in God and His Word. This is a fundamental reality in all human history under God.

No Jew could escape the ultimate urgency of the Baptizer's message by reasoning: "John himself admits that he is not Elijah. Therefore, since the Kingdom cannot come until Elijah appears, we have no need to humble ourselves before this non-Elijah!" To excuse themselves, the Jewish leaders finally concluded that John had a demon! (cf. Matt. 11:18).

A similar dilemma faces people today. No one, however exalted (in political, social, economic, educational, or scientific realms), may dismiss the urgency of the Gospel message because of the personality traits of the messenger. Like the Corinthians long ago, people in our day sometimes make a great issue of who won them to the Lord and/or baptized them. Paul's response to the Corinthians was pointed: "What then is Apollos? And what is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, even as the Lord gave opportunity to each one" (I Cor. 3:5; cf. 1:12-17; 3:21-23; 4:6).

John's appearance and life-style (like Elijah's -- 2 Kings 1:8; cf. Zech. 13:4) were not impressive to sophisticated Jews: a garment of camel's hair and a diet of locusts and wild honey (Matt. 3:4). Who among the leaders would want to be identified with such a strange-looking character? But God intended for his appearance to be a rebuke to the luxurious materialism of the royal family and the Pharisees and the priests (Matt. 11:8). Many of the common people, however, did respond to his powerful preaching (Matt. 3:5-6; 11:12; 21:26).

Thus, to summarize the antinomy: God assures us, on the basis of His unchangeable foreknowledge, that Elijah -- not John -- will bring the nation to repentance.³ But human responsibility required that John's message be received with genuine repentance and faith, just as fervently as if Elijah himself had been God's messenger.

Has Elijah Been Glorified?

Elijah is coming back as a messenger to Israel. But how can he come back to the earth in a physical, mortal body? Was he not last seen being swept "to heaven" by a whirlwind (2 Kings 2:11)? This is a major reason why many evangelical theologians deny that Elijah can literally return to the earth and be killed (Rev. 11:7). If Elijah was glorified without dying, how can he return to the earth and die?

A very important factor in solving this problem may be found in our Lord's statement: "No one has ascended into heaven, but...the Son of Man" (John 3:13). In the immediate context, our Lord was explaining to Nicodemus that He alone could testify concerning things in heaven, because He alone had been there. While this statement sheds significant light on our Lord's unique authority to speak of "heavenly things," His statement also seems to exclude the possibility that anyone, including Enoch and Elijah, could ever have ascended to the third heaven.

Furthermore, the Lord Jesus was "the first fruits of those who are asleep," in the sense of receiving a glorified body; and no one else will receive such a body until "those who are Christ's" have that inconceivably marvelous experience "at His coming" (I Cor. 15:20-23). Technically, of course, it could be argued that our Lord was referring only to a resurrection from the dead, and that neither Enoch nor Elijah had died. But, in the light of the "first fruits" statement of I Corinthians 15:20, 23, it is very difficult to believe that two men could have been physically glorified (even without dying) before the Savior was glorified.

Renald E. Showers agrees that "Enoch and Elijah did not receive glorified bodies when God took them from the earth." But he also finds strong evidence in Hebrews 11:5 that Enoch did not "see" (=experience; cf. Luke 2:26) death. The text states that the very purpose for God's taking Enoch was so that he should not experience death.⁴ So we are left with the question of Enoch's condition after he was "taken up."

After the glorification of Christ, the apostle Paul "was caught up to the third heaven...into Paradise (2 Cor. 12:2, 4). But he was not glorified, for the experience was temporary, and he returned to the earth with a mortal body (complete with a sin nature) and finally died. The truly amazing statement, however, is that he didn't know whether his brief visit in heaven was "in the body or apart from the body" (12:2-3). Renald Showers sees 2 Corinthians 12:2-4, therefore, as indicating that Paul "believed in the possibility of a human being in a mortal body being caught up to and existing in God's heaven for some period of time."⁵

This brings us again to the fascinating statement of Hebrews 11:5 -- "By faith Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death." The termination of his life on earth was totally different from that of any before him -- he simply disappeared! Now it should be noted that two other God-honored men in the Old Testament shared the distinction of leaving this world with no one seeing them dying or dead -- *Moses* (Deut. 32:48-52; 34:1-6) and *Elijah* (2 Kings 2:11-14). The author of Hebrews stated: "...it is appointed for men to die once" (9:27). However, the "mystery" (divine truth once hidden but now revealed) of the rapture of the Body and Bride of Christ without dying (1 Cor. 15:51-52; 1 Thess. 4:15-17) is the glorious exception to this "die-once rule." But is it really legitimate to stretch this exception to include Enoch or Elijah? Old Testament saints were not members of the Body and Bride of Christ to whom this "blessed hope" was exclusively given (cf. Eph. 3:4-10). That Enoch entered the realm of the righteous dead without dying seems to be the teaching of Hebrews 11:5. That he was physically glorified is highly unlikely.

Enoch did not "see death." But the Scriptures do not say this of Elijah. In fact, there seems to be some support for the concept that Elijah finally did die after he was caught up by a whirlwind. Nearly 900 years after that event, three of our Lord's disciples saw *Moses* (who had died 1,400 years earlier) and *Elijah* together (Matt. 17:1-8). Since Moses could not have had a glorified body (cf. 1 Cor. 15:20, 23), the implication is quite strong that Elijah did not either. Like Samuel 1,000 years earlier (1 Sam. 28:15), they were temporarily "brought up" from their place of rest in the "Paradise" of pre-resurrection-of-Christ history (compare Luke 23:43 with 2 Cor. 12:2-4 and Eph. 4:8-10), which our Lord also described as "Abraham's bosom" (Luke 16:22), and which was located at that time in "the heart of the earth" (Matt. 12:40; cf. 1 Pet. 3:19).

Moses and Elijah appeared briefly to Peter, James and John, but had nothing to say to them. Instead, they were conversing with their Lord. As they "were talking with Him" (Luke 9:30), they "were speaking of His departure [Gk. exodus = a euphemism for His death] which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem" (Luke 9:31). They were presumably concerned about the fact that not until their great King/Priest/Messiah shed His blood upon the Cross could they be fully redeemed. However, in the meantime, they had been redeemed, like Abraham (Gen. 15:6), as it were "on credit," because the blood payment of the Lamb of God for pre-Calvary believers was already accomplished in the mind of God (cf. Rom. 3:25-26; Eph. 1:3-11). If Elijah was concerned about the "departure" which his Lord was soon to accomplish in Jerusalem, the implication is that he (like Moses) had not yet been physically glorified. Thus, the fact that they appeared "in glory" on the mount was merely a visual foretaste of their ultimate glorification at the time of Christ's Second Coming. A significant analogy to this experience may be seen in the face of Moses which glowed brightly after he communed with God on Mount Sinai (Exodus 34:29-35).

On the basis of these theological inferences, then, we understand that Elijah will be brought back from the dead (like Lazarus and several others) to mortal life, and to die again 3 and 1/2 years later (Rev. 11:3-13). In Bible times God raised some people from the dead *after only a few hours*, and Lazarus *after four days* (when it was evident to everyone that his body was decomposing [John 11:39]). The main point at issue here, however, is that God is not limited by time or by the availability of any part of a person's physical body in order to perform the miracle of glorious resurrection, or even the miracle of resuscitation/restoration to mortal life.

We read in 1 Corinthians 15:38 that God gives "to each of the seeds a body of its own," and "that which you sow [in death and burial], you do not sow the body which is to be." This is the basic reality of all resurrections and even resuscitations. On the human level, we might describe it this way: God knows the unique "blueprint" or "DNA information code" of every human being, and is perfectly capable of giving a person another mortal body (complete with the original sin nature) after thousands of years, just as He will give a glorified body to those believers, who, like Abel, have been dead since the dawn of human history.

Elijah and Moses

Yes, Elijah is coming back to this earth again, and he will not come alone as he did at the beginning of his first ministry. Rarely does God send a servant into a significant ministry without a co-worker. Robert L. Thomas has observed: "The OT required two witnesses as competent legal testimony to secure a conviction (Deut. 17:6; 19:15; Num. 35:30; cf. Heb. 10:28). Jesus also made the number two a minimum to confirm a point of discipline (Matt. 18:16) or verify truth (John 8:17). Paul too alluded to the need of a plurality of witnesses to validate a judgment (2 Cor. 13:1; 1 Tim. 5:19).⁶

But who will be Elijah's companion witness? Many have suggested *Enoch*; but this great antediluvian saint and prophet would not be an appropriate fellow-witness with Elijah in a *prophetic ministry directed exclusively to Israel*. Far more appropriate for such a unique function would be *Moses*. For future apostate Israel, after the rapture of the Church, no men in her entire history would have greater respect and appreciation than Moses and Elijah. In fact, Moses is named **80** (eighty) times in the New Testament, and Elijah **30** (thirty)! God raised up these men *to confront Israel in times of deep apostasy*. Moses was God's great deliverer and lawgiver for Israel, of whom He said: "No prophet has arisen in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face, for all the signs and wonders which the LORD sent him to perform in the land of Egypt...and for all the mighty power and for all the great terror which Moses performed in the sight of all Israel" (Deut. 34:10-12). By the time our Lord appeared in Israel, the Jews actually thought that *Moses* had given them the bread in the wilderness (John 6:32).

As for *Elijah*, surely one of the greatest of the prophets, God answered his humble prayer (cf. James 5:17-18) by sending *fire from heaven* to consume his sacrifice on Mount Carmel and thus to defeat the 450 prophets of Baal; and finally to vindicate him by means of "a chariot of fire and horses of fire" to escort him out of Satan's world.⁷ When he was almost overwhelmed by the spiritual darkness of Israel under the demonic Jezebel, Elijah identified himself with Moses by fleeing to "the cave" (Hebrew text) where Moses 600 years earlier was hidden by God as His glory passed by (1 Kings 19:9; Exod. 33:21-23). So highly did the Jews of Jesus' day think of Elijah, that when they saw His miracles, some concluded that Elijah had returned (Matt. 16:14). Also when our Savior

cried out from the cross, "Eli, Eli...", they believed He was calling for Elijah to save Him! (Matt. 27:47-49; Mark 15:35-36).⁸

When the two witnesses appear in Jerusalem at the beginning of the Seventieth Week, "they immediately begin their prophetic ministry. Just prior to this (hours, days, weeks?) the rapture will have removed all believers from the earth. Therefore, there will be no one to train these two witnesses, and no time to train them. They must be men already possessing full knowledge of the Scriptures and well seasoned for such a demanding ministry. Moses was the lawgiver; Elijah was the law-enforcer. Both will be men of experience. They will be perfectly equipped for a ministry to Israel before a world-wide audience."⁹

Neither Moses nor Elijah ever entered Jerusalem, though Moses might have seen it from a distance (Deut. 34:2), and Elijah wrote a letter of judgment to one of the worst kings Jerusalem ever knew (2 Chron. 21:12-15). And, as we have seen, both Moses and Elijah, emerging temporarily from "Paradise" to appear on the Mount of Transfiguration, were very concerned about something soon to happen in Jerusalem.

The Lord Jesus said that "it cannot be that a prophet should perish outside of Jerusalem" (Luke 13:33)! In the light of this statement, it is noteworthy that these two great Israelite prophets will not only enter Jerusalem, but will experience their second and final physical death in its streets at the hands of "the beast that comes up out of the abyss" at the mid-point of the Seventieth Week (Rev. 11:7-10; cf. Dan. 9:27).

One of the most convincing evidences that *Elijah* and *Moses* will be the two witnesses in Revelation 11 is the nature of the judgment-miracles these men will perform. "If anyone desires to harm them, fire proceeds out of their mouth and devours their enemies...These have the power to shut up the sky, in order that rain may not fall during the days of their prophesying; and they have power over the waters to turn them into blood, and to smite the earth with every plague, as often as they desire" (Rev. 11:5-6). The first two types of judgments listed were those which Elijah inflicted upon Israel (three and one half years of drought -- 1 Kings 17:1; cf. Luke 4:25; James 5:17) and upon one of her kings (fire from heaven -- 2 Kings 1: 10, 12); and the second two types of judgments (blood from water and a variety of plagues) were those which Moses inflicted upon Egypt (Ex. 7-12).

Why are Elijah and Moses not named as the two witnesses in Revelation 11? Perhaps the Old Testament and the Gospels are so clear on this point that the Holy Spirit deemed it unnecessary to identify them by name. Would not the final words God addressed to Israel in the Old Testament have been sufficient? "Remember the law of *Moses* My servant, even the statutes and ordinances which I commanded him in Horeb for all Israel [cf. Matt 24:20]. Behold, I am going to send you *Elijah* the prophet..." (Mal. 4:4-5).

Conclusion

The true Church is not destined to see the Antichrist or the two witnesses in Jerusalem. Our "blessed hope" is to see Christ our Bridegroom and our Head (Titus 2:13, 2 Cor. 11:2). Nevertheless, our covenant-keeping God also has a special appointment for His Chosen People Israel (Rom. 11:25-32); and that appointment includes national repentance through the prophetic ministry of Elijah (and Moses). Even before "the great

and terrible day of the LORD" (the second half of the Seventieth Week) begins, Zion will have "brought forth her sons" (Isa. 66:8), and through them (presumably disciples of the two witnesses), "this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world for a witness to all the nations" (Matt. 24:14). When contemplating the destiny of ethnic Israel in the light of the unbreakable Abrahamic Covenant promises, we can only say with Paul, "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!" (Rom. 11:33).

End Notes:

¹Bruce Scott, The Feasts of Israel (Bellmawr, NJ: Friends of Israel, 1997), pp. 44, 47, 54. cf. Alfred Edersheim, The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah (New York: Longman, Green, and Co., 1896), Vol. I, pp. 142-43; Vol. II, pp. 706-09.

²The ultimate tragedy, of course, was the refusal of the Jews to worship Jesus when they understood perfectly His claim to be God's Son and saw His undeniable Messianic sign - miracles (John 5:18-36). Many orthodox Jews today are still waiting for a personal Messiah; but they do not believe He will have a divine nature. Peter himself, while on the Mount, was confused as to the absolute uniqueness of the Lord Jesus in contrast to Elijah and Moses (Matt. 17:4), even though God the Father had illumined him on this matter a week earlier (Matt. 16:17; cf. 2 Pet. 1:16-18)! God's explanation for human suppression of biblical Christology is that "no one can say, 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the Holy Spirit" (I Cor. 12:3). For a helpful analysis of the deity of Messiah, see Ron Rhodes, Christ Before the Manger: The Life and Times of the Preincarnate Christ (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992). Cf. John N. Oswalt, The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40-66 (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1988), pp. 328, 336.

³Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum has pointed out, in light of Mark 9:9-13, that "if Elijah had come before the first coming of Christ and restored all things, then the prophecies of the sufferings of the first coming would remain unfulfilled" (The Footsteps of the Messiah [Tustin, CA: Ariel Press, 1982], p. 90.)

⁴Personal correspondence, Nov. 4, 1998

⁵Ibid.

⁶Robert L. Thomas, Revelation 8-22: An Exegetical Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), p. 87.

⁷"The mystery surrounding Moses' death (Jude 9) and the translation of Elijah offer some corroborations of these as the two witnesses" -- Robert L. Thomas, op. cit., p. 88.

⁸See the high praise of Elijah, who will "restore the tribes of Jacob," in *Ecclesiasticus* (*Sirach*) 48:10. Cf. H. Bietenhard, "Elijah," in Colin Brown, ed., *Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975) I, p. 543-45.

⁹Personal communication from Scott M. Libby, Pastor of the Grace Brethren Church, Coventry, VT, September 20, 1998.