

# JOHN THE BAPTIST AND ELIJAH

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The purview of this paper is to examine the relationship between John the Baptist and Elijah. The paper will be divided into four parts: Old Testament background to the Elijah motif, John the Baptist and the Elijah motif in the Synoptic Gospels, as well as in the Johannine Gospel, and correlative issues.

## *Old Testament Background to the Elijah Motif*

Behind the use of Elijah in the New Testament lie the texts and traditions of the Old Testament. Of primary consideration is the narrative from 1 Kings 17 - 2 Kings 2, 14. This passage gives the basic information in regard to the original identity and function of Elijah. His ministry is seen as prophetic opposition to the evils of the Omride dynasty in Israel. Elijah is the chief figure in the forces of those who insist on unadulterated Yahwism, which is mainly opposed by Ahab and his queen, Jezebel, who seems to have been energetic in pushing the worship of Baal and Asherah, her native deities from Tyre. Elijah is pictured in austere terms, possibly as a Nazirite, certainly as a prophet, and throughout appearing sporadically in order to contend for YHWH. Elijah's appearance in the text is initially sudden, when, as an adult, he abruptly announces the coming of a drought which has religious overtones. During the drought he provides two miracles in assisting a widow in Zarephath, and he appears at the end of the drought period to provoke the challenge on Mount Carmel. He flees Jezebel's anger after the confrontation and hides in the desert. Finally he vanishes in a fiery chariot as Elisha, his successor, looks on.

Aside from the foregoing material, little specific reference to Elijah can be found in the Old Testament. 2 Chronicles 21, 12-15 has a possible reference to a letter from Elijah to Jehoram, King of Judah. It has no immediate bearing on this essay, so its presence is merely noted. The remaining significant reference is in Malachi 4, 5 - 6. This passage gives the most explicit Old Testament reference to a coming Elijah, which coming is reflected in the New Testament. The pericope is generally considered to be a later addition to Malachi that functions as either a conclusion to the book itself or as a clarification of the 'messenger' of Malachi 3, 1. Bruce Malchow suggests that the verses and the reference to the covenant in 3, 1 were added in an interpretation that followed Daniel. This would have grown out

of the situation with Antiochus Epiphanes and given assurance that the desecration would be remedied.<sup>1</sup>

A few observations need to be made about Malachi 4, 5 - 6, particularly in some areas that affect New Testament conceptions. The passage is present prior to the time of Jesus and specifically mentions a future coming of Elijah. This coming of Elijah is associated with an event, not with a person, and he comes before the day of YHWH, not before Messiah or some other figure.

### ***John the Baptist and the Elijah Motif in the Synoptic Gospels***

There are at least three instances from the Synoptics in which an association of John the Baptist with Elijah is brought to the forefront. Mark 9, 11 - 13 and Matthew 17, 10 - 12 contain one reference in conversation between Jesus and the disciples which occurs on the way down from the mount of transfiguration. Luke skips this dialogue, going straight from the transfiguration to events of the next day when they are already down from the mountain (Lk 9, 37). Matthew includes an additional reference to the Elijah-John connection in 11, 14 that is given during Jesus' discussion about John with the multitudes. Luke has a parallel account (7, 24 - 28), and he includes a reference to Malachi 3, 1 as does Matthew, but he does not explicitly link John with Elijah. Mark 1, 2 also includes the same Old Testament reference and gives an additional phrase from Isaiah 40, 3 both of which he ascribes to Isaiah. However, Mark utilizes this quotation differently in opening his narrative with it, applying it to John, but making no allusion to Elijah. The third Synoptic reference to John is in Luke 1, 17. Here the association is set in the prophecy of an angelic herald and links John with the spiritual power of Elijah.

The first of these occurrences mentioned above, from Mark 9 and Matthew 17, is found in a question the disciples asked Jesus, 'Why do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?' The two passages are very similar, though there are some significant variations. Matthew adds *ouk epegnosan auton* to the description of the response to Elijah's coming and his reception. Mark has *kathos gegraptai ep' auton* appended to the description of Elijah's coming and his reception. Further, Matthew and Mark reverse the order of the affirmation of Elijah's coming and the statement about the suffering of the Son of Man. In Matthew's version *houtos* makes much plainer the parallel drawn between the Elijah figure and Jesus as the suffering Son

1. Bruce V. Malchow, "The Messenger of the Covenant in Malachi 3, 1", *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 103 (1984) 253.

of Man. In addition, Matthew makes plain the association left unstated in Mark, 'Then the disciples understood that he spoke to them about John the Baptist' (Matt 17, 13). Mark's purpose in not making this a definite connection may be that he parallels his presentation of the messianic secret with the presentation of an Elijahian secret. This is supported by the fact that Mark nowhere makes the association an explicit one, even attributing a quotation of Malachi 3, 1 (Mk 1, 2) to Isaiah, masking what might have been seen as a more evident reference to Elijah.

Matthew 11, 14 occurs in a section in which Jesus discusses with a multitude the person and ministry of John the Baptist. The discussion follows immediately the interchange with John over Jesus' identity carried out through John's disciples. Jesus proceeds to speak approvingly of John. He calls him a prophet, and more than a prophet. He quotes a passage which has clear linguistic parallels to Malachi 3, 1a. The quotation affirms that John is a forerunner, and in this context, it would be Jesus, thus to Messiah. Jesus goes on to state that John is the greatest man born of women, though at least one in the kingdom is greater. At the end of the pericope, Jesus states, 'This is Elijah, the one who is going to come.' He qualifies this with, 'if you are willing to receive it.' The quotation in the narrative is found likewise in Luke 7, 27 without any reference to Elijah, and in Mark 1, 2 which is put in a different setting and omits any reference to Elijah as well as contains a quotation of Isaiah 40, 3. Thus, Matthew makes clear an association between Elijah and John that would have, at best, only been inferred from the other Synoptics.

In Luke 1, 17 an angel of the Lord appears to Zechariah to announce the birth of a son to this older man and his wife, a childless couple. In describing the future son, the angel includes the following: 'And he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of fathers to children, and the disobedient to the mind of the righteous, to ready a people prepared for the Lord.' This verse obviously contains a reference to Malachi 4, 5 – 6. John is not directly identified with Elijah (c.f. Matt, 11, 14; Mk 9, 13), but is simply to be inspired by the same spiritual power as Elijah (c.f. 2 Kgs 2, 9 – 15). Two observations about the passage are important. As with Malachi 3, 1 and even 4, 5 – 6, Luke does not associate the preparatory ministry of this Elijah-like figure with the Messiah. He simply prepares people for the Lord. Second, Luke avoids saying that John is Elijah, perhaps because he later uses Elijah associations in connection with Jesus. This would also apply to 7, 27 and the transfiguration account mentioned earlier, where references to Elijah in other Synoptics are omitted in Luke.

In addition to the specific associations of John with Elijah presented in the Synoptics, there are some possible less direct parallels in the lives of the two men. Their corresponding life-styles are similar (2 Kgs 1, 8; Matt 3, 4), though it may be that John simply dresses in the recognized garb of a prophet. The location of their ministries is similar. Following Elijah's ministry, the guild of prophets transferred their allegiance to Elisha, somewhat like the disciples who leave John to follow Jesus. Jesus' baptism by John is seen by some to be like Elijah's mantle being passed on to Elisha. Again, John's arrest may be the point of Jesus's preaching beginning, consequently simulating a chronological succession as was the case with Elijah and Elisha.<sup>2</sup>

As a rein on the above identification, some caution is necessary. There are at least three ways in which the parallellism between John and Elijah breaks down. John did not pass from the scene following Jesus' baptism. Jesus did not continue John's ministry as Elisha did for Elijah. Miracles were more a feature of Elijah's ministry than that of John.

### ***John the Baptist and the Elijah motif in the Johannine Gospel***

When one turns to examine John the Evangelist's presentation of John the Baptist as it relates to the Elijah motif, an essential variation from the Synoptics is found. The identification of Elijah with John the Baptist which is depicted implicitly in Mark, stated openly in Matthew, and suppressed in Luke, is denied by the Baptist himself in John 1, 21. Through the Evangelist's portrayal, John the Baptist is seen as a witness to Jesus. He bears witness verbally to Jesus' identity (1, 15. 29 – 36), and he makes a point in directing his disciples to Jesus (1, 35 – 37). John is also presented as a witness in his denials that he is to be identified with any of a number of figures from Jewish thought. He says he is not the Christ, Elijah, or the prophet.

The reasons for this denial of John's association with Elijah are not clear, though some factors are certainly present. In announcing the one who was to come without naming him, John saw himself as merely one who anonymously cried in the wilderness. This ties in with John's assessment in John 1, 23 drawn from Isaiah 40.<sup>3</sup> Walter Wink ties this feature to a polemic in John's Gospel against a lingering loyalty to John the Baptist by some who viewed him as more important than Jesus.<sup>3</sup>

2. R. E. Brown, "Jesus and Elisha", *Perspective*, 12 (1971) 88.

3. Walter Wink, *John the Baptist in the Gospel Tradition*, (The University Press; Cambridge 1968) 91.

Hence John the Evangelist has taken away the forerunner concept because it would place John before Jesus. More about this possible polemic will be given later.

### *Correlative Issues*

Having looked at the association of John the Baptist with Elijah, it will be helpful to notice also some of the additional motifs used to identify John. Jean Danielou posits Davidic parallels in the account of Mary's visit to Elizabeth in Luke 1, 39 – 45.<sup>4</sup> Some of the elements and even language echo the story of David's reception about the Ark of the Covenant when it comes to Jerusalem in 2 Samuel 6, 1 – 15; however Danielou's discussion neglects to mention some key differences, so there is some doubt on this point.

Another of the motifs used to describe John in general prophetic imagery employed, which should not specifically be seen in connection only with Elijah. This includes John's dress, his message of judgement and demand for repentance, and his relationship to Herod and Herodias showing characteristic prophetic confrontation against ungodly rulers.

Again, John is sometimes identified with or seen to be influenced by the Qumran community. Among similarities are eschatological expectations, ritual washing, the use of Isaiah 40, 3, and the association with the desert. Nevertheless, some differences argue against this association, such as diet and garb, and especially the attitude toward the temple. Marshall comments that on the whole it is improbable that John was a member of the Qumran community, although he would almost certainly have known of its existence and might well have been influenced by its views.<sup>5</sup> Obviously, the issue is far from settled, but the association needs to be mentioned in looking at John's background.

Other Elijah motifs in the Gospels are helpful. One factor in particular which will tend to moderate the association between John and Elijah is that Jesus is likewise associated with Elijah. This is especially evident in Luke, which may be the reason Luke suppresses the identification of John with Elijah. Examples of this identification are Jesus's response to rejection at Nazareth which uses illustrative from the ministries of both Elijah and Elisha. The raising of the son of the widow from

4. Jean Danielou, *The Work of John the Baptist*, (trans. Joseph A. Horn) (Helicon; Baltimore 1966) 23.
5. I. H. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, (Eerdmans; Grand Rapids 1978) 96.

Naim (Lk 7 11 – 16) is similar to 1 Kings 17, 17 – 24. But there are at least two pericopes which argue against this association. Jesus refuses to call down fire (Lk 9, 54 – 56), and he rejects an Elijah role in using language antithetical to Malachi 4, 5 – 6 (Lk 12, 50 – 53).

The New Testament furthermore contains several other references to Elijah which do not indicate any link to John the Baptist. Elijah's ministry provides evidential material for various situations (Lk 4, 25; Jn 5, 17; Rom 11, 2 – 5). Elijah and Moses appear on the mount of transfiguration. Elijah is also hinted at as one of the two witnesses in Revelation 11 due to the three and one half year duration.

Moreover, a motif which has bearing on the identification of John the Baptist and Elijah is the presentation of Jesus in terms drawn from Elisha's life. Some of the general parallels discussed above between John and Elijah tend to support the association of Jesus and Elisha. Gerald Bostock notes that Jesus' quotation of a passage from the Elijah narratives and then of one about Elisha is a possible hint toward drawing the same kind of parallel between John and Jesus.<sup>6</sup> Two factors, nonetheless, moderate this association. Jesus is not John's successor as Elisha was in respect to Elijah, and the Baptist did not pass from the scene following Jesus's baptism. The association of Jesus with Elisha is not certain, but it may be present, and this would tend to make more probable the association of John with Elijah.

Having looked at the Elijah motif as it relates to John the Baptist, there are two additional issues that may be touched. These are the question about the origin of Elijah as forerunner motif and the question about the possible polemic against a Baptist sect that may be present in one or more of the Gospel narratives.

In investigating the origin of the concept of Elijah as forerunner, it is worthwhile to point out that the consensus of opinion would at least trace this notion to the intertestamental period, with its roots being in the Malachi 4, 5 – 6 passage discussed previously. Recently, Morris Faierstein contends that the concept of Elijah as forerunner must be strongly considered to be an original idea to New Testament.<sup>7</sup> Dale Allison attempts to re-evaluate Faierstein's analysis and argues for a pre-Christian origin.<sup>8</sup> In all, one needs to be careful in drawing conclusions in this

6. D. Gerald Bostock, "Jesus as the New Elisha," *The Expository Times*, 92 (1980) 40.

7. Morris M. Faierstein, "Why do Scribes Say that Elijah Must Come First," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 100 (1981) 75.

8. Dale C. Allison, "Elijah Must Come First," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 103 (1984) 295. Cf. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, "More About Elijah Coming First," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 104 (1985) 295-296.

regard, though it seems that since the plainest and earliest reference to this conception is in the New Testament, one could lean toward the plausibility that its origin arises in that context.

The final correlative issue to be taken cognizance of is the presence of polemic in the Gospels against some group loyal to John who refused to transfer allegiance to Jesus as the Christ. One may question this feature in the Synoptics, noting that Mark seems to have no elements of disputation at this point, particularly since Jesus is subordinated to John in baptism and since, in a way, Jesus is seen as John's successor (Mk 1, 14). Wink, nevertheless, sees some polemic evidence in Q since there is no linking of John and Elijah. He thinks the church is trying to circumscribe John's ministry in contrast to some who evidently did not.<sup>9</sup> In the Gospel of John the polemic feature is much more likely. Since the Evangelist John makes it clear that John the Baptist never claimed to be Elijah nor the Christ, nor the prophet, it is presumable that someone was making those claims about John. The transfer of allegiance to Jesus by John's disciples is polemic, suggesting to some in the audience that they do likewise. If there is indeed a disputation involved in the presentation of John the Baptist, one can understand the hesitancy in associating him with Elijah, and the denials of such an association by the Baptist himself.

### **Conclusion**

In trying to tie together all of the foregoing information, some definite thoughts can be affirmed. It is evident that the Elijah motif is an important aspect of the identity and ministry of John the Baptist. This is especially true in the Synoptics, for the Evangelist John presents the Baptist simply as a witness; an association, nonetheless, which does not preclude the Elijah association. The origin of this motif is uncertain, but it is definitely related to Old Testament themes which might not be explicitly linked until the Gospels. The relation of John's identity to polemic concerns is also probable, though the extent of this feature is uncertain. In the end, one must be cautioned in drawing a one-to-one equation between Elijah and John. The wider descriptions of John and the wider use of Elijah materials both argue against such an attempt. The Elijah association is one motif by which John is presented, and though it may be the most significant for understanding John, it is not the only one, nor is its application to be limited to John alone.

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9. Wink, *John the Baptist*, 26-26. See also Brown, "Jesus and Elisha", 86.

