

Elijah and John

In the Old Testament books of Isaiah and Malchi there are several references made to the coming messenger who would precede the arrival of the promised Messiah. In an ancient royal procession the messenger went before the King to announce his arrival, to indicate the route, and to remove any obstacles found in the road. John the Immerser fulfilled this exact ministry for Jesus. Isaiah wrote in chapter 40:1-3 [RSV], **1. “Comfort, comfort My people,” says your God. 2. “Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.” 3. A voice cries: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.”** We then have in Malachi 3:1 and Malachi 4:5-6 [RSV] these additional prophecies concerning this coming prophet who was to prepare the way for the Lord: **1. “Behold, I send My messenger to prepare the way before Me, and the Lord Whom you seek will suddenly come to His Temple; the Messenger of the covenant in Whom you delight, behold, He is coming,” says the Lord of hosts. 5. “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. 6. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the land with a curse.”**

So the question is, “Was John the Immerser really Elijah?” The answer may surprise you, for it is both yes and no.

In a sense, it was not unreasonable that the people of Israel would have believed that the literal Elijah would return to prepare the way for the promised Messiah. After all, there was no indication Elijah ever died. If you recall, just after telling Elisha, Elijah's replacement, that he was about to depart from his presence, Elijah was carried away by a chariot of fire and horses in a whirlwind into Heaven (2 Kings 2:11).

Since we have said already that the answer to the question of whether or not John the Immerser was both yes and no, let us begin this evening by taking a few moments now to examine how John the Immerser was **not** Elijah.

John was not Elijah in the sense that he was not reincarnated. The teaching of reincarnation is against the Old Testament, and it is also against New Testament doctrine. As the Hebrews writer states is in Hebrews 9:27 [RSV], **“And just as it is appointed for men to die once, and after that comes judgment.”** Some people during the time of John and Jesus felt that a reincarnated Elijah would appear on the scene.

In the *Gospel of John* chapter 1 verses 19-27 [RSV], we have this encounter recorded between the priests and Levites and John as he was baptizing the people in the wilderness.

19. And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" 20. He confessed, he 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. They said to him then, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for 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 they had been sent from the Pharisees. 25. They asked him, "Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" 26. John answered them, "I baptize with water; but among you stands One Whom you do not know, 27. even He Who comes after me, the thong of Whose sandal I am not worthy to untie."

So we see from what John says he denies that he is Elijah, and he denies that he is the Christ or the Prophet. Although they were correct in their understanding that they were living in the time of the imminent arrival of the return of Elijah and the coming promised Messiah, it is also equally clear from their very questions it is easy to see that they had misunderstood much concerning these events. To begin with, they had failed to make the connection that the promised Prophet prophesied to come by Moses was also the same Person as the long awaited Messiah. They believed these were to be two separate individuals. Moses had quoted God and told the people of Israel shortly before his death, **18. "I will raise up for them a Prophet like you from among their brethren; and I will put My words in His mouth, and He shall speak to them all that I command Him. 19. And whoever will not give heed to My words which He shall speak in My name, I Myself will require it of him."** (Deuteronomy 18:18-19 [RSV])

Later on in chapter 1 of the *Gospel of John* John the Immerser points to Jesus as **"the Lamb of God,"** and two of John's own disciples, one of them being Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter, began following after Jesus from that point on. Although the religious leaders of the day were incorrect in their understanding regarding the prophesied Prophet of Moses being the same as the promised coming Messiah, at least some of the people knew better. Philip knew the Messiah and the Prophet like Moses were One and the same Person.

35. The next day again John was standing with two of his disciples; 36. and he looked at Jesus as He walked, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God!" 37. The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus.

38. Jesus turned, and saw them following, and said to them, “What do you seek?” And they said to Him, “Rabbi” (which means Teacher), “where are You staying?” 39. He said to them, “Come and see.” They came and saw where He was staying; and they stayed with Him that day, for it was about the tenth hour.

40. One of the two who heard John speak, and followed Him, was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. 41. He first found his brother Simon, and said to him, “We have found the Messiah” (which means Christ). 42. He brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him, and said, “So you are Simon the son of John? You shall be called Cephas” (which means Peter).

43. The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. And He found Philip and said to him, “Follow Me.” 44. Now Philip was from Beth-saida, the city of Andrew and Peter. 45. Philip found Nathana-el, and said to him, “We have found Him of Whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.” 46. Nathana-el said to him, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip said to him, “Come and see.” (John 1:35-46 [RSV])

So even though some religious leader says something is true, that does not make it true. Even though I tell you something is true, that does not make it true, either. What makes something true is whether or not it is true, and in God's word truth can be found, for Jesus Himself is truth (John 14:6). Therefore, we can see from this misunderstanding that the religious leaders of John's day had regarding God's word just how important it is for each and every one of us to do as the Apostle Paul says in 2 Timothy 2:15 [RSV], **“Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.”** We must all study God's word for ourselves so that we need not be ashamed. We must learn to rightly handle the word of truth.

The answer to the question being yes as to whether or not John the Immerser was Elijah can be explained by the fact that Jesus Himself said John the Immerser was Elijah. But even though Jesus said John the Immerser was Elijah returned, this does not mean He was teaching reincarnation, either.

Remember what we read earlier from Malachi 4:5 [RSV]? **“Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes.”** Jesus refers to this prophecy as He was coming down from the Mount of Transfiguration.

9. And as they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, “Tell no one the vision, until the Son of Man is raised from the dead.” 10. And the disciples asked Him, “Then why do the scribes say that first Elijah

must come?” 11. He replied, “Elijah does come, and he is to restore all things; 12. but I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not know him, but did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of Man will suffer at their hands.” 13. Then the disciples understood that He was speaking to them of John the Baptist. (Matthew 17:9-13 [RSV])

Jesus was referring to the prophecy concerning Elijah. We see that the coming of Elijah was in the spirit of Elijah, and this is explicitly stated in Luke 1:13-17 [RSV]. We do not have to guess to draw this conclusion. We know it is true, for it was spoken to John’s father, Zechariah, by an angel of God while Zechariah was serving in the Holy of Holies in the Temple of God Almighty. Gabriel, this angel of God, was also simultaneously standing in the presence of God when he made this prediction. Therefore, we can be completely confident that what Gabriel told Zechariah was true.

3. But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, 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 before the Lord, and he shall drink no wine nor strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb. 16. And he will turn many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God, 17. and he will 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 for the Lord a people prepared.”

So the context is that John the Immerser was in the spirit of Elijah, but not actually Elijah reincarnated.

If this is not enough to convince you, then we do have even more words of Jesus Christ Himself to confirm that John fulfilled this prophecy: **13. For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John; 14. and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. (Matthew 11:13-14 [RSV])**

By the way, is it not wondrously ironic that Elijah did return literally, but in a manner none of the religious leaders expected, and none of them were privileged to witness? Jesus’ inner core companions of Peter, Andrew, and John, three humble, uneducated fishermen, were the ones chosen to witness the literal Elijah, for he it was, along with the great Moses, who were seen in the Mount of Transfiguration with Jesus.

Now back to how John was Elijah. There is, however, a little more information that might prove interesting. Elijah wore, most probably, a camel’s hair girdle. **“They answered him, ‘He wore a garment of haircloth, with a girdle of leather about his loins.’ And he said, ‘It is Elijah the Tishbite.’” (2 Kings 1:8 [RSV])**

According to the *Treasury of Scripture Knowledge*, in reference to 2 Kings 1:8, Elijah “wore a rough garment, either made of camels’ hair, as that of John Baptist, or of a skin, dressed with the hair on. Sir J. Chardin informs us, in a MS. note on this place, cited by Mr. Harmer, that the eastern dervishes and fakeers are clothed just as Elijah was, with a hairy garment, girded with a leathern girdle.”

Concerning John the Immerser, it says in Matthew 3:4 [RSV], “**Now John wore a garment of camel's hair, and a leather girdle around his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey.**” It may be that Zechariah, who had access to the Temple and things in the Temple, may have acquired Elijah's camel hair garment and given it to John to wear. This is speculation, but it is an interesting possibility nonetheless, especially in light of what the angel Gabriel told him in the Temple itself.

As we have seen, John was not Elijah literally, but he was like Elijah in many ways. Both Elijah and John lived rustic, austere lives (2 Kings 1:8; Matthew 1:21). Both prophets preached judgment (1 Kings 17:1; Matthew 3:7-10). Both men denounced a sitting king, Herod with John, and Ahab with Elijah (Matthew 14:4; 1 Kings 21:19). A woman who was the wife of the king brought both of these men down, and they became discouraged. For Elijah this would be Jezebel, and for John it was Herodias (1 Kings 19:4; 1 Kings 19:10; Matthew 11:2-3). Finally, even greater prophets than themselves followed both of these prophets, Elisha with Elijah, and Jesus with John (1 Kings 19:16; Matthew 3:11-12).

Both John and Elijah reached the adherence to the laws, precepts, and principles of God.

Both men preached repentance and a return to the faith once delivered.

Both of these prophets of God came to restore God's worship system to what it was when it was originally given to the Israelites at Mount Sinai.

Both of these men had limited success in convincing people to repent and worship the one true God.

The Old Testament is full of passages which look forward to Christ's coming such as we have studied this evening. The coming of the Messiah was so central to the old dispensation that we find hundreds of passages which speak of it. The prophecies were themselves part of the preparation for the coming of Christ. They pointed God's people to Christ and His coming. They not only informed God's people that “**the Messenger of the covenant**” was coming but they also produced in God's true people a longing for His coming. That is what the old dispensation was all about.

John the Immerser was the last of a long line of prophets who spoke of Christ's coming and thus prepared the way for that coming. He was privileged actually to see Christ when He came. That is what made him the greatest of all the old dispensational prophets.

What a glorious day that was when Christ came! The Angel of the covenant came not as an angel but as a man. What a glorious day when the virgin conceived in her womb. The power of the Highest overshadowed her. The Holy Spirit came upon her. What a glorious day when in that lowly stable the Christ Child was born. ***"The Messenger of the covenant"*** became flesh of our flesh and bone of our bone. He became like you and me in all things, with the exception of sin. What a glorious day when He began His public ministry, when He was seen by John the Immerser and others, and when He declared Himself to be the Promised Messiah by His words and works.

That coming of ***"the Messenger of the covenant"*** was the most significant event in all of history. For when Christ came, God came. We read in His holy and glorious word, ***" . . . and the Lord . . . shall suddenly come . . . even the Messenger of the covenant. . . ."*** This verse speaks of the Lord coming. That can be none other than God. Yet, that Lord is identified as ***"the Messenger of the covenant."*** The meaning is clear. In the coming of ***"the Messenger of the covenant,"*** God came. ***"The Messenger of the covenant"*** is God come in the flesh. That is why this ***"Messenger of the covenant"*** was given the names "Jesus" (Jehovah is Salvation) and "Immanuel" (God with us). In the coming of Christ, Jehovah God came to save us!

John was a great man of God, and he fulfilled the prophesy of God sending Elijah to His by having the same type of spirit as did Elijah. John had impeccable character and performed a great work for God. The birth and ministry of John the Immerser was the second most important birth and ministry that has ever happened on Earth, because John made the announcement of the coming of the Messiah Who would reveal and proclaim the good news from God the Father.

How did John the Immerser prepare the way for the first advent of Jesus? John made the announcement of the coming of the Messiah to redeem humanity. Among other things, John's message contained the foundational elements of the things that Jesus Christ would later teach, such as repentance, forgiveness of sin, baptism, and the Kingdom of God.