

Jesus, the Messiah, and the Elijah Question

Thomas Ward
January 5, 2019



At about the age of thirty, Jesus initiated his public ministry and proclaimed redemption in the towns and villages of Herod's Galilee. By the time that Jesus began his ministry, his cousin John the Baptist had already established spiritual standing as a prophet amongst many of the Jewish faithful.

Just as many Christians expect the return of Jesus in the clouds of Heaven in the Last Days, the Jews of Jesus' day awaited the return of Elijah on a chariot of fire as a definitive sign of the Messiah's impending arrival. Elijah's mission had been to purify and renew Judaism. The first Book of Kings tells us that the false prophets of Elijah's day were eradicated by Elijah, even though this enraged Israel's Queen Jezebel.

Israel experienced a fleeting revival where Jehovah was recognized as the only Lord but, in years that followed, Israel lapsed again into faithlessness. For that reason, the Book of Malachi stipulated the need for Elijah's return to make "straight the way"

for the coming Messiah (Malachi 4:5-6) before the Messiah could appear.

When Jesus began his ministry, the rumors of his messianic role soon spread. A predictable question which arose was, "If Jesus is the Messiah, where then is Elijah that the prophet Malachi said must precede him (Malachi 4:5-6)?" Jesus responded on more than one occasion that his cousin John the Baptist was the awaited Elijah who had preceded him and made "straight the way" for the coming Lord (Mark 9:11-13; Matt 11:14; Matt 17:10-13).

However, when John was asked by the scribes whether or not he was Elijah, he responded that he was not (John 1:19-21), creating distance and dissonance between the declarations of Jesus and John.

It had been prophesied to Zechariah that John would go forward "in the spirit and power of Elijah (Luke 1:17)." Indeed, even as John languished in Herod Antipas' prison for denouncing Herod's marriage to Herodias (previously wed to Antipas' brother Phillip), Jesus reiterated that John the Baptist was the Elijah whom the Jews had awaited. He surely lamented John sending his disciples to ask him whether or not he, Jesus, was "he who is to come" (Matt 11:7). John had already testified to Jesus being the Messiah earlier in his mission (John 1:28-29) yet he failed to follow him and become his chief disciple. He lamented that in spite of all John's sacrifices and many talents that "the least in the Kingdom of Heaven is greater than" John (Matt 11:11). John was among "the many who are called" but not among "the few who are chosen" (Matt 22:14) due to his failure to become a disciple of Jesus.

John's denial of his role as Elijah largely undermined any suggestion by Jesus that he had come as the Messiah. Those who felt threatened found a legitimate rationale for not following Jesus when John declared that he was not Elijah. Jesus could be viewed as the Messiah by some, but the scriptures told the informed Jews, who were convinced that Elijah had not come, that he was an imposter (Matthew 27:63).

By failing to declare his role as Elijah and by doubting Jesus, John failed to make straight the path of the Lord (John 1:23). Instead he became a major obstacle on that path. Jesus pointed to the real reason that "humble" John was not worthy to untie the sandal straps of the coming Lord (John 1:27):

Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me (Matt 10:38).

Jesus surely understood how severely the success of his own ministry had been compromised by John's denial of his role as Elijah. Because of John's failure, a rocky road lay ahead for Jesus and his followers, but also for John.

When John's disciples and Jesus' disciples baptized nearby each other at the Jordan river a few days after their historic encounter, John was asked by his disciples about Jesus. John responded, "He must increase but I must decrease (John 3:30)."

But why did John have to decrease? He had to decrease in his role as the leading prophetic figure of the time because that role had ended. In Jesus' words, "all the Prophets and the law were until John (Matt 11:13)." Nevertheless, John would not have decreased as a providential figure if he, instead of Peter, had become Jesus' main disciple. He was far better prepared to assume this role and garner the support of everyone from the humblest Jews to the most influential of the Pharisees.

If John had recognized Jesus, he, rather than Saul of Tarsus, might have been the first Paul-like figure of Christianity to secure Jesus' acceptance by a critical mass of devoted believers. Instead, John is mainly remembered as the voice who, on one occasion, publicly hailed Jesus as the Lamb of God but who had his life cut short by the dance of a temptress.

John could have been not only the greatest of prophets but the greatest of saints. Instead he was described by Jesus as less than "the least in the Kingdom of Heaven (Matt 11:11)." By denying his role of Elijah and doubting Jesus' Messianic role, John did not just become less than Jesus. He became less than Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. He became less than Peter, less than Saint Paul, less than Mother Mary, less than Mary Magdalene, even less than the thief on Jesus' right side who found faith at the final moment, as he rebuked the thief on the left and cast his fate with Jesus who was accused of being an imposter:

"... we indeed are suffering justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong." And he was saying, "Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!" And he (Jesus) said to him, "Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise (Luke 22:40-43)."

John chose his own path rather than accept the self-effacing "cost of discipleship." John continued down his own path, proclaiming the Kingdom while failing to come before the King and ask Jesus, "What did the revelation I receive about you really mean and what am I supposed to do now?" John chose instead to stand apart, to prioritize his challenge to the legitimacy of Herod Antipas' marriage over helping Jesus to be recognized and welcomed by the religious and civic leaders of Judea.