

The Coming of Elijah

Rev. Angus Stewart

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 (Mal. 4:5-6).

I. Who is this Elijah?

Elijah in our text is John the Baptist, not the literal Tishbite revived.¹ This is clearly established in the New Testament. The angel Gabriel spoke to Zecharias of the child (John the Baptist) whom the old man would soon father: "And he [John] shall go before him [Christ] 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" (Luke 1:17). Christ spoke to the multitude of John the Baptist: "And if ye will receive it, this is Elias, which was for to come" (Matt. 11:14). He taught the same thing about John to His disciples: "Elias is come already, and they knew him not, but have done unto him whatsoever they listed" (Matt. 17:12). John the Baptist himself understood that he was Elijah; thus we find him dressed in camel's hair with a leather belt (Matt. 3:4; II Kings 1:8).

Malachi 4:5 speaks of Elijah's *office* rather than His *person*. He is called "Elijah the prophet," not "Elijah the Tishbite" as he is introduced in I Kings 17:1. Moses is also treated in his official role in Malachi 4:4: "Moses my servant."

But how can Malachi 4:5 speak of John the Baptist as Elijah? We need to see that even the Old Testament speaks of Elijah as doing that which was done by His successors acting according to his spirit. Thus in I Kings 19:15-16 it is said that Elijah will anoint three persons: Hazael as king of Syria, Jehu as king of Israel and Elisha as prophet in his stead. Elijah personally appointed Elisha prophet in his place. But Elisha, not Elijah personally, designated Hazael king of Syria. Moreover, one of the children of the prophets was sent by Elisha to anoint Jehu king of Israel (so Elijah was *two* stages removed). Thus *Elijah is said to do what his successors acting in his spirit did*. This is exactly what Gabriel said: "And he [John] shall go before him [Christ] in the *spirit and power* of Elias" (Luke 1:17).

We ought not think it strange that the Old Testament prophesies the coming

¹"The Coming of Elijah" was delivered as the introductory address at the 2004 British Reformed Fellowship Family Conference.

of John the Baptist under the name of "Elijah," for it also predicts the coming of Christ under the name "David" (Jer. 30:9; Eze. 34:23-24; 37:24-25; Hos. 3:5). The idea is obvious. It is not teaching that David will arise and rule again. Instead, it is saying that Christ will be a great king like David. Similarly, Malachi is not prophesying that Elijah will return and labour again. Rather, one like Elijah will do a work like Elijah. Remember Gabriel's words: "And he [John] shall go before him [Christ] in the *spirit and power* of Elias" (Luke 1:17).

There still remain some things to clear up. The Pharisees asked John the Baptist, "Art thou Elias? And he saith, I am not" (John 1:21). Is not John here contradicting what we have said? No. John is saying that he is not Elijah *in the sense that the Pharisees who were asking him meant*, that is, he is not Elijah *restored in the flesh*. John came "in the *spirit and power* of Elias" (Luke 1:17).

But some might object, Did not Jesus say that John was Elijah with some uncertainty: "*And if ye will receive it, this is Elias, which was for to come*" (Matt. 11:14)? We ought to note that Jesus was speaking to an unbelieving crowd and He knew that they would not believe Him. Thus Christ continues, "*He that hath ears to hear, let him hear*" (Matt. 11:15). In other words, "John *is* Elijah but only those with spiritual ears will receive it."

Someone might ask, What then of Elijah's appearance at the Mount of Transfiguration? How does this fit in? Malachi 4:5-6 prophesies of the coming of John the Baptist (as does Malachi 3:1 which refers to John as "my [Christ's] messenger" who "shall prepare the way before me [Christ]") but Malachi does not predict Elijah's appearance at the Mount of Transfiguration. He prophesies of Elijah's work *with the people* (preparing them for Christ [3:1] and turning their hearts [4:6]) but not of His speaking with Christ of His decease. Just as there is no Old Testament prediction that Moses (who was also present at the Mount of Transfiguration) would come to speak with Christ, so there was none of Elijah either. Moses and Elijah were with Christ on the "holy mount" (II Peter 1:18) as representatives of the law and the prophets respectively, but this meeting was not predicted in the Old Testament.

Having seen that Malachi 4:5-6 prophesies *exclusively* of John the Baptist who came in the spirit and power of Elijah to prepare the way of the Lord (Mal. 3:1),² we need to ask, Why is John presented as one coming in the spirit and power of *Elijah* and not some other OT prophet?

First, Elijah preached in a day of *terrible apostasy*, a day in which only 7,000

²William Marrion Branham (1909-1965), initiator of the post-World War II healing "revival," claimed that he was the second fulfilment of the prophecy of Elijah in Malachi 4:5-6.

in the Northern Kingdom had not bowed to Baal. Similarly, Jesus called the people of His (and John's) day "a wicked and adulterous generation." That generation filled up the cup of its iniquity by killing Christ, "the messenger of the covenant" (Mal. 3:1), and His forerunner, John the Baptist. Clearly, the day in which John preached and baptized was like that in which Elijah laboured.

Second, Elijah had to *battle against false teachers*, the prophets of Baal and the prophets of the groves. Likewise, John's opponents were the Pharisees and Sadducees whom he denounced as a "generation of vipers" (Matt. 3:7).

Third, in keeping with the depth of the apostasy, Elijah had to be and was a *particularly powerful prophet*. Thus Luke 1:17 speaks of "the *spirit and power* of Elijah." God is saying in Malachi 4:5-6, "I will send one like Elijah because only one clothed with his power and zeal will be fit for the task." Truly, John, like Elijah, was a bold and fearless mouthpiece of God.

Fourth, Elijah's powerful preaching brought *repentance*. Not all or most repented through Elijah's ministry but some at Mount Carmel (I Kings 18) and on other occasions did. Even so John had some success, for it was predicted that he would "turn the heart of the fathers to the children" (Mal. 4:6).

Fifth, those who did not repent at Elijah's preaching were destroyed in the *coming judgment*. After Elijah, the devastation of the Northern Kingdom at the hands of Assyria hastened. Similarly, John declared that the axe was laid at the root of the tree and that wrath and judgment were coming (Matt. 3:7, 10, 12). The apostate Jewish nation was destroyed by the Romans in AD 70.

Thus John the Baptist came in the spirit and power of Elijah because, like him, John was a particularly powerful prophet who battled against false prophets in a day of apostasy and who was used to turn many to repentance. Impending doom hastened upon the impenitent. Our day is similar. We need the spirit and power of Elijah in a day of grievous departure from God's Word.

II. What will he do?

The text declares, "And he [John the Baptist] 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" (Mal. 4:6). There are two interpretations of the work here ascribed to John.

Some say that the "fathers" are male parents, and so the text speaks of a restoration of domestic unity in accordance with the fifth commandment: "Honour thy father and thy mother." However, there are two main arguments against this view. First, Malachi nowhere speaks of this sin in his book. Second,

the New Testament does not refer to John the Baptist bringing reconciliation between parents and children. Of course, the gospel *does* do this. Sin wrecks homes and sets parents against children and children against parents so that there is nothing but fighting and bickering. Many a time the Word of Christ has healed homes so that now hatred is replaced by love and concord. But this is not the idea of the verse.

The correct interpretation is that the “fathers” are the godly Israelites of former days. By God’s grace, John the Baptist will bring the hearts of the children back to the hearts of the fathers in the true worship of the living God. This will bring the hearts of the fathers back to the children as they see their ancestors rejoicing in the same faith. Thus the text speaks of a reformation, a returning to the old paths.³

This interpretation is in full accord with the message of Malachi, who continually sought to bring Israel back to her better days. Listen to the prophet’s preaching! Remember Jehovah’s electing love of Jacob (1:2). Treasure His covenant of life and peace with Levi (2:4-5). Recall former days when the priests were godly (2:5-7). Is not Jehovah our Father who created us as a nation (2:10)? Return to monogamous marriage as the first couple, Adam and Eve (2:15). When the Messiah, the “messenger of the covenant” (3:1) comes “the offering of Judah and Jerusalem [shall] be pleasant ... *as in the days of old, and as in former years*” (3:4). Often Malachi refers to earlier revelation (1:8; 3:7-8). Just before our text, he urges Israel to true obedience to the law of Moses (4:4). John the Baptist brought God’s people back to faithfulness to His Word.

This interpretation is also in full accord with the message of Gabriel. The angel declared that John the Baptist would “turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, *and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just*” (Luke 1:17). The italicised last clause amplifies and explains the former—a direct quotation from Malachi 4:6. The “just” are the justified believers (of former years), and not the literal parents of John’s hearers. Their “wisdom” was their receiving the Word of God. Thus John will prepare the way for Christ (Mal. 3:1) by bringing the Israelites back to obedience to Old Testament Scripture.

Clearly, John was not an innovator but a reformer: “Elias truly shall first

³Cf. John Calvin, *Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi*, trans. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Baker, repr. 1993), part 2, pp. 630-631; T. V. Moore, *Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi* (Great Britain: Banner, repr. 1993), p. 405; C. F. Keil, *The Twelve Minor Prophets*, trans. James Martin (Grand Rapids Eerdmans, repr. 1986), part 2, pp. 472-473. Keil notes that this is also the interpretation of E. W. Hengstenberg (p. 472).

come," Christ said, "and *restore* all things" (Matt. 17:11). John preached a return to faithfulness to the Old Testament. He declared the God of the Old Testament. He threatened the judgement of the Old Testament: the day of the Lord. He preached the repentance required by the Old Testament. He pointed to the Christ promised in the Old Testament. John saw that a true return to and understanding of the Old Testament prepared the way for proper reception of Jesus the Messiah.

How different was the view of the scribes and Pharisees! They claimed that the (Old Testament) Scriptures forbade faith in Christ. Yet Christ told them, "had ye believed Moses, ye would have believed me: for he wrote of me" (John 5:46).

Today, we need a return to the wisdom of the fathers. The book of Malachi may even serve as something of a manifesto for reformation as even a brief running commentary will show. First, the church must preach the absolute sovereignty of God, including unconditional election (love) and reprobation (hatred): "I loved Jacob, and I hated Esau" (Mal. 1:2-3). Second, the church must return to the regulative principle of worship, heartfelt biblical worship, and not "will worship" (Col. 2:23) for the latter is "polluted worship" which despises God's name (Mal. 1:6-14). Third, the church must recover the truth of God's covenant which is "life and peace" (2:4-5). Fourth, we need godly and learned ministers, men whose lips "keep knowledge" from whom the people will hear God's Word (2:7). Fifth, a reform of church discipline is necessary for many office-bearers are "partial in the law" (2:9). Sixth, we need a restoration of biblical marriage where the "wife of [one's] covenant" and "youth" is treated as a true "companion" and both "seek a godly seed" (2:14-15). Where today do we hear that the Lord "hateth" divorce (2:16)? Seventh, Christ crucified must be preached, and preached as the covenant Christ who came as God's "messenger of the covenant" (3:1) to effect the holiness of His people (3:3). Eighth, what of the glory of God, the immutable God, the One who thunders, "I am the Lord, I change not: therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed" (3:6)? Yet the pulpits of our land preach a changeable god forever desiring things which never come to pass, one whose supposed love for the reprobate changes at death into hatred. Ninth, where today is there generous giving to faithful churches? Hear God's Word: "Will a man rob God? Yet ye have robbed me," by stingy offerings for the cause of Christ (3:8-12). Tenth, the communion of the saints must be furthered: "Then they that feared the Lord spake often one to another: and the Lord hearkened, and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before him for them that feared the Lord, and that thought upon his name" (3:17).

By God's grace, the British Reformed Fellowship (BRF) seeks reformation, turning the hearts of the children to the fathers. We must return to the Bible as God's inerrant, authoritative and sufficient Word. We must hold fast the ecumenical and Reformed creeds. We must maintain the Reformed faith in its fullest and purest development. This alone is the way forward for Christ's cause in the British Isles. To this end the BRF sends out a journal and hosts conferences and mini-conferences.⁴ We already have some resources on our website and we plan to add more articles.⁵ These are small efforts; we wish they were greater. But we go forward in the confidence of the worth of our cause, the gospel of Jesus Christ, whom we love.

Surely there is a dire need for reformation in our land. Much of the professing church world is destroyed by modernism (including higher criticism of the Bible, unbelieving psychology, political correctness, feminism, scientism, etc.). Most of what is not openly modernist is charismatic or revivalist or Arminian. How much of Presbyterianism in the British Isles do you think John Knox would say shared his faith? Is Anglicanism today of the same heart as Latimer or Ridley? If John Owen returned would he recognise many of today's Congregationalist worship services or would he think he must be in the wrong building? There can only be one answer: the heart of today's church world does not beat with the same love for the truth as the fathers of the church. The worthies of the past would disown those who say they are their children, calling them instead bastard sons and daughters. More importantly God disowns them! He smites "with a curse" those who apostatise from the faith of the fathers (4:6).

And what about us? Is your heart united with the heart of Moses, David, Malachi, John the Baptist, Paul, Augustine, Calvin, and Dordt in the love of the true gospel of Jesus Christ? The BRF is making an issue of the unity of the church. Most think of the unity of the church only with respect to currently existing churches. However, the unity of the church is also served by a heartfelt unity with the faithful church of the past. The BRF is seeking to turn the hearts of the children to the fathers, a ministry like that of John the Baptist. We need more of the spirit and power of Elijah today, the Spirit of Jesus Christ, who gathers, defends and preserves His church!

⁴A report on the 2004 BRF Conference is included in this issue of the *British Reformed Journal*.

⁵see www.britishreformedfellowship.org.uk