

JESUS AND THE ESCHATOLOGICAL ELIJAH

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It is evident from reading the Gospels that Jesus of Nazareth was designated, and in a sense defined, by various titles in the early Church. Some of the most obvious and important are: Son of God, Lord, Son of David, and Son of Man. The central and most significant title which early Christians attached to Jesus was clearly Christ. It was this fundamental affirmation which distinguished Christians from other Jews in first-century Palestine.

The principal text in the Gospels which illustrates this christological affirmation is the Petrine confession pericope (MK.8:27-30; par. Matt. 16:13-20; LK. 9:18-21). While the writers of the Gospels appropriated the pericope to clarify and define the nature of Jesus' messianic ministry, some scholars have seen traces of an early confession of Jesus as the eschatological Elijah (MK. 8:28; par.). The purpose of this paper is to investigate the relationship between Jesus and the eschatological Elijah.

Elijah the Tisbite occupied a lively place in popular Jewish thought. The reasons for his prominence are twofold:

- (1) his mysterious translation into heaven (2 Kgs. 2:11; cf. Sir. 48:9, 12; Eth. En. 89:52; 93:8; Josephus, Ant., 9:28), which the writer of 1 Maccabees viewed as the reward of his zeal for the Law (2:58), and
- (2) the prophecy of his return in Malachi 4: 5-6). In addition to the Elijah tradition, Jewish religious thought envisioned another figure, the eschatological prophet like Moses (Deut. 18: 15-18).

Although clearly distinct in function, the difference of substance between the two types was sometimes blurred, as in the transfiguration story, with Jesus being flanked by both Elijah and Moses.

The oldest passage referring to the return of Elijah envisions him as a precursor of Yahweh (Mal. 4:5). He prepares the way for Yahweh, leading the people to repentance, thereby restoring their spiritual condition. According to Ecclesiasticus 48: 10, Elijah was to restore the twelve tribes of Israel. With this shift in emphasis, Elijah's religious office is charged with a more political function.

The question of the function of Elijah's return as precursor of the Messiah has been debated. Some exegetes suggest that the concept entered during the time of the pseudepigraphical literature (Eth. En. 89:52; 90:31; and 4 Esr. 6:26). Morris Faierstein, however, has recently challenged this idea, stating that contrary to the accepted scholarly consensus, almost no evidence has been preserved which indicates that the concept of Elijah as forerunner of the Messiah was widely known or accepted in the first century.¹ He goes on to suggest that the tradition about Elijah as a messianic precursor is best viewed as a *novum* in the New Testament.

Faierstein's stance inspired two responses, from Dale Allison and Joseph Fitzmyer respectively. Allison took issue with Faierstein's position and argued for the presence of a pre-Christian tradition about Elijah's messianic function (as forerunner).²

Fitzmyer, on the other hand, while agreeing with Allison that the tradition about Elijah coming first in Mrk 9: 11-13 probably is not a Christian development, argues nevertheless

1. Morris Faierstein, 'Why Do the Scribes Say that Elijah Must Come First,' *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 100 (1981) 86.

2. Dale Allison, 'Elijah Must Come First,' *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 104 (1984) 256-258.

that Faierstein's position has not been undermined.³ While the question is difficult to decide in any univocal manner, it is perhaps safe to say that portions of the Gospels present Elijah as some type of messianic precursor of Jesus - Messiah.

The primary passages in the Gospels which relate Jesus to Elijah are: Mark 6: 14-16 (par. Matt. 14: 1-12, LK. 9: 7-9); and Mark 8: 27-30 (par. Matt. 16: 13-20, LK. 9: 18-21).

The first association of Jesus with Elijah in Mark occurs at 6:15. This is in the context of the report about the increasing fame of Jesus. Herod is told by his servants that some people are saying that Jesus is John the Baptist *redivivus*, while others say he is Elijah. Luke adds that Herod was perplexed at the thought of Jesus *redivivus*. Matthew omits the reference to Elijah and has Herod assert that Jesus is John without hearing the reports from the servants (Matt. 14:2). By doing this, Herod's lack of understanding stands alone for emphasis, and in contrast to the crowd's correct recognition of John as a prophet (14:5). This designation of Jesus as Elijah in Mark occurs within the larger story of the death of John (6: 14-29).

The other major reference to Jesus as Elijah is given in the Petrine confession pericope (MK. 8:27-30; par. Matt. 16: 13-20; LK. 9: 18-21). The expression *eis ton propheton* is a Semitism.

David Aune lists four important considerations which emerge from the popular assessments of Jesus as a prophet in Mark 6:15 and 8:28.

- (1) The figure of the 'prophet' was the object of widespread eschatological fantasy in the first-century Palestine.
- (2) This nostalgic emphasis on prophets of the past was partially motivated by the desire to replace the dismal realities of the present with the idealized glories of Israel's past.
- (3) The prophetic figures of Jewish eschatological expectation were never really expected to emerge from within the existing social, political, or religious structures of first-century Palestine, but rather from the peripheral or marginal segments of Judaism.
- (4) There was a great eagerness in first-century Palestine to assign those persons with the proper credentials to eschatological categories.⁴

If Aune is correct in his analysis of the considerations of these two verses, then numbers 3 and 4 are particularly important for our understanding of Jesus.

Our preliminary concerns involving the nature of the pericopes now move to the question of the veracity of the attributions of Jesus as Elijah.

In relation to the Jesus/Elijah theme, RH Fuller observes that there is no evidence that the post-Easter church ever interpreted Jesus as John the Baptist *redivivus* or even as Elijah *redivivus*, adding that it would seem then that on traditio-historical grounds, mark 6:15 and 8:28 should be taken as genuine historical reminiscence.⁵ Fuller contends that this attribution of Jesus as Elijah was understood not in the sense that the End was breaking in through him, but rather in the sense that Jesus was the immediate herald of the End (thus a messianic precursor). Taken in this way, the Elijah association is in no way a christological confession.

Oscar Cullmann concurs with Fuller's estimation, and hints that we find in the narrative one of the oldest explanations of the puzzle of Jesus' person and work.⁶ He also notes the absence of the primary christological titles for Jesus in the three attributions.

3. Joseph Fitzmyer, 'More About Elijah Coming First,' *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 104 (1985) 295-296.

4. David Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), p. 154.

5. RH Fuller, *The Foundations of New Testament Christology*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965), pp. 126-127; cf. R Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition*, trans. John Marsh (New York: Harper and row, 1963), pp. 301, 257.

6. Oscar Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament*, trans. Shirley Guthrie and CAM Hall (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1959), p. 31.

Edward Schillebeeckx classifies the references to Elijah as among the ready-to-hand Jewish models of latter-day salvific figures.⁷ He views Elijah, in this context, as directly preparing the way for God, not as the forerunner of the Messiah.

Given the almost univocal consensus by these scholars that the attributions of Jesus as Elijah are historically authentic, which is supported by certain stylistic and textual considerations (such as the Semitisms in MK. 6:15 and 8:28), it is difficult to argue that the account is solely a post-Easter appreciation.

Turning to the notion of Jesus as Elijah in the Gospels and as one reads Matthew 11: 17-19 (par. LK. 7:24-35), it would seem that at least Jesus himself understood the role of John the Baptist as 'Elijah who is to come' (11:14). The passage in Mark 9: 11-13 may also be an indication that Jesus understood John as Elijah, although the reference is not as explicit here. Does Matthew and Mark portray John as Elijah instead of Jesus?

A Jewish scholar presents an interesting case for understanding Jesus as an Elijah-type. Accepting the presence of a pre-Christian tradition depicting Elijah as forerunner of the Messiah, Robert Hammer postulates that Elijah and Elisha are associated so closely as to virtually form one figure ideally suited for legend and folklore.⁸ Elijah and Elisha performed miracles during their tenure as prophets. Since John the Baptist did not perform miracles (at least the Gospels do not report that he did), and Jesus did, then Jesus is actually a better Elijah-type than John, so Hammer reasons. Some areas in which Jesus' activities parallel those of Elijah/Elisha are:

- (1) healing the sick (2 Kgs. 5: 1-14); 6:20/MK. 1:40-42; 8: 22-25),
- (2) reviving the dead (1 Kgs. 17:17-14; 1 Kgs. 4:31-37/MK. 5:35-43),
- (3) miraculously multiplying food (1 Kgs. 17: 12-16; 2 Kgs. 4:1-7/MK. 6:30-44), and
- (4) gathering disciples (1 Kgs. 19: 19-21/LK. 9:59-62). In light of this, Hammer concludes that the role first assumed by Jesus was that of Elijah rather than of Messiah Son of David. The thrust of Hammer's argument is that Jesus initially understood himself as a messianic precursor (Elijah) and only eventually as Messiah (son of David).

Other scholars have seen Jesus' miracles as paralleling both Elijah and Elisha; and if Hammer is correct about the figures of Elijah/Elisha coalescing into one figure, then the Gospel writers may have presented Jesus, at some significant points, as Elijah.

In spite of Hammers' postulation, which utilizes the miracles in Mark and Matthew for its support, as well as the probable allusions to Elijah/Elisha in the feeding stories, it does not appear to be the case that Matthew and Mark present Jesus as the eschatological Elijah. The saying in Matthew 9: 12-14, together with the support of Mark 1: 2-3 and 9: 11-13, seem to mitigate against seeing the Elijah/Elisha theme as a dominant one in Matthew and Mark. Both of these Gospels reserve the Elijah motif for John the Baptist.

When we come to the Gospels of Luke and John the situation is a bit different. Luke 7: 24-35, which parallels Matthew 11: 7-19, explicitly omits the reference to John the Baptist as Elijah (cf. Matt. 11:14). Jesus simply says in Luke 7:28, 'I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John'. Luke has a double Elijah theme. On the one hand, Jesus is attributed to be Elijah by John in 3: 16 and 7:19, while in 7:27 Jesus identifies John as Elijah.

Luke presents John the Baptist as acting 'with the spirit and power of Elijah' (1:17a). In 7:27, Luke identifies John as Jesus' precursor. Since there is no clear reference to Eljah as messianic precursor, this verse cannot be taken as evidence for such a view. It is,

7. Edward Schullebeeckx, *Jesus: An experiment in Christology*, trans. Hubert Hoskins (New York: The Seabury Press, 1979), p. 441.

8. Robert Hammer, 'Elijah and Jesus: A Quest for Identity,' *Judaism*, 19 (1970) 209.

nonetheless, an implicit identification of John by Jesus as Elijah, although not as messianic precursor. It should also be pointed out that in the earliest stage of the Gospel tradition, John seems to have thought of Jesus as Elijah *redivivus*.

Concerning Jesus as Elijah, in Luke 9:54-55 Jesus definitely forbids to act like Elijah and call down fire from heaven (cf. 1 Kgs. 18: 36-38; 2 Kgs. 1:9-14). On a more positive note, Jesus compares himself to Elijah in 4:25-27. There are also parallels to Elijah in Jesus' raising of the son of the widow of Nain (7: 16; cf. 1 Kgs. 17:23).

With respect to the Elijah theme in Luke, it is not just that Jesus is depicted as Elijah, but that through Jesus God is pouring forth his Spirit in the last days (Acts 2: 17, 33).

In regard to Luke's second volume, Acts, John AT Robinson posits on the basis of 3:12-26 that in addition to Jesus being the Prophet like Moses, Jesus was likewise equally and evidently Elijah in all but name.⁹ Robinson's position is based on his comprehension that Jesus came first 'to restore all things' (a role designated for Eljah), and was to come as Messiah at his second advent. Jesus was indeed to be the Christ, but he was Elijah first. Regardless of what one makes of Robinson's notion, it does not appear to be the case that Luke presents Jesus as an Elijah-type.

When one turns from the passages discussed above in the Synoptics, the impressions are not similar. All of the references to either John the Baptist or Jesus being Elijah are missing in the Fourth Gospel. There is only one specific reference to Elijah in the Gospel, and that is the Baptist's insistent denial that he is the Christ, the Prophet, or Elijah (1:19-23).

John's denials have not seemed particularly perplexing. The most common explanation is that by having John deny his association with these three titles, the Evangelist is reserving them for Jesus. In so doing, the writer of John wants to reserve this title (the returned Elijah) for Jesus, along with the other christological designations and concepts.

J Louis Martyn has analysed the fourth Gospel's presentation of the Elijah theme. In his search for Elijah-like traits, he points out that the evidence is divided.¹⁰ John 3:13 seems to be an expressive denial of Jesus as Elijah. On the other hand, four passages appear to illustrate these traits (2:1-11; 4:43-54; 6: 1-14; and 11: 41-44; these are miracles or 'signs' of Jesus). One may go on to ask whether there is not, on the part of the Evangelist, also an explicit suppression in 1: 20-23 of a tradition which identified Jesus as Elijah.

The Evangelist is writing for members of his church, as well as potential Jewish converts. The writer allows these potential converts to hear the Baptist deny for himself the three key titles (1: 19-23), and then shows the fulfilment of the messianic hopes in Jesus of Nazareth, a man who is the Messiah, the Eschatological Elijah, and the Mosaic Prophet. In the final analysis, the Evangelist has consciously left Elijah-like traits associated with Jesus in his Gospel, but could not permit a definite identification of Jesus as Elijah, and at the same time maintain the integrity of his own massive Christology.

In conclusion, Matthew and Mark do not seem to present Jesus as the new Elijah (unless one wants to argue from the miracles), but reserve that role for John the Baptist. Luke, on the other hand, appears to portray both John and Jesus as types of Elijah. John also leaves traces of the Elijah theme in his picture of Jesus.

9. John AT Robinson, 'Elijah, John and Jesus; An Essay in Detection,' *New Testament Studies*, 4 (1958) 277.

10. J Louis Martyn, 'We Have found Elijah,' in *Jews, Greeks and Christians*, eds. R. Hamerton-Kelly and robin Scroggs (Leiden: EJ Brill, 1976), pp. 196-197.