



TGP: Mark 8:27-33

A detailed woodcut-style illustration of the prophet Elijah. He is depicted as an elderly man with a long white beard, wearing a dark, heavy robe. He stands in a rocky, wooded landscape, looking upwards with his right hand raised in a gesture of prayer or proclamation. In his left hand, he holds a small, round object, possibly a stone or a piece of food. The background shows gnarled trees and a horse grazing in the distance. The entire scene is rendered in a golden-brown color palette.

Elijah

*and Messianic
Expectations*



By Steve W. Lemke

WHEN JESUS ASKED who people thought He was, His disciples answered that some said He was John the Baptist resurrected from the dead, or Elijah the prophet, or some other prophet (Mark 8:27-28). When Jesus then asked who they thought He was, Peter answered, “You are the Messiah!” (v. 29).¹

This familiar passage brings to mind several important questions. Why would some people think Jesus might be Elijah or John the Baptist returned to life? What did first-century Jews expect about end times and the coming Messiah?

In the Old Testament

First Kings 17-21; 2 Kings 1-2; and 2 Chronicles 21 describe Elijah’s life and ministry in Israel. Elijah’s ministry occurred about 862-852 B.C. He presented God’s Word to King Ahab and his wife Jezebel (challenging their support for Baal worship and their murderously seizing Naboth’s vineyard), as well as Kings Jehoram and Ahaziah.

Through Elijah, God performed several miracles, including sending a famine, providing oil and flour for a widow in Zarephath, raising the widow’s son from the dead, praying down fire from heaven to burn the altar in his Mount Carmel confrontation

Left: Close-up of a fan-tailed raven (*Corvus rhipidurus*), which lives among the cliffs near the Dead Sea. As the 3½ year drought began, God had ravens bring Elijah

food, thus ensuring his survival.

Above: Silver cup for the prophet Elijah; gold plated; mid-19th cent.; this cup would be used during the Passover celebration.



Mar Elias, Arabic for “Saint Elijah” is in the Ajlun region of northern Jordan. The location has had a long association with Tishbe, the hometown of Elijah.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ KRISTEN HILLER (38/0801)

with the prophets of Baal, sending fire on Ahaziah’s soldiers, and parting the waters of the Jordan River. Elijah left this life in an unusual way—in a chariot of fire powered by a whirlwind.

Later prophets spoke of Elijah as reappearing at the end of time. Malachi prophesied about the coming of a “messenger” who would “clear the way before Me” (Mal. 3:1). Elijah would return

before “the great and awesome Day of the LORD” (4:4-5). The “Day of the LORD” referred to the end of time at which the Messiah would appear. This eschatological (meaning “end-time”) Elijah would “turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers,” thus averting a “curse” on the land (v. 6).

Devout Jews knew well Malachi’s prophecy that Elijah would return to herald the coming Messiah, ushering in the end of time. On Sabbaths and feast days, someone in each

synagogue read a Scripture from both the Law (*Torah*) and the prophets. After the reading from the prophets (called the *Haftarah*), the congregation repeated four benedictions. The third benediction featured a prayer for Elijah’s return and the restoration of the kingdom of David. Every Jew was thus intimately familiar with this oft-repeated Malachi text.

Intertestamental Thought

Between the writing of the Old and New Testaments, many writings record the theological reflections of Jews during this intertestamental period. Among the ruins of the Qumran community, which overlooks the Dead Sea, archaeologists have found many documents that recorded a variety of first-century Jewish speculations about the Messiah and end times. Although these writings are neither canonical nor God-inspired, they do reflect the thoughts many Jews held in Jesus’ time about the coming Messiah and His forerunner.²

The Qumran writings present a variety of speculations about

RAVEN (ABOVE): ISTOCK PHOTO

CUP: ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ KRISTEN HILLER (38/0560)

ELIJAH: ISTOCK PHOTO

RAVEN (LEFT): ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BRENT BRUCE (608203)

eschatology. They present at least three distinguishable roles and terms associated with the Messiah: (1) a prophet and forerunner of the Messiah, (2) a priest, and (3) a Davidic prince or king. The specific descriptions of these three roles vary widely. Some scholars believe the different roles represent two or three different persons, while others believe the Messiah is a composite figure who plays all three roles of prophet, priest, and king.

Elijah and Moses were the persons most associated with the roles of eschatological prophet and priest. Most intertestamental writers identified Elijah as the prophet and Moses as the priest. However, some Qumran writers identify Elijah as the eschatological priest (since he did priestly functions like anoint kings and offer sacrifices), and Moses as the eschatological prophet (since the Jews considered him the first prophet). Some writers thought two or three different messiahs would usher in the end of time. In some later rabbinic writings, the role of Elijah transitioned from being a forerunner prophet to being virtually equal to the Davidic messiah. They believed the eschatological Elijah would guide students of Scripture to truth, restore the people of Israel, and bring about the resurrection of the dead (as had Elijah during his ministry).

Below: The Carmel Mountain Range in the distance—where Elijah confronted prophets of Baal.

Right: Grove that is likely site of Naboth's vineyard as seen from atop Tel Jezreel.

In the New Testament

The New Testament interacts multiple times with the expectations about Elijah's return and the Messiah's coming. In the most commonly held expectation, Elijah would return before the Messiah, heralding His coming (Mal. 3:1; 4:4-6). The disciples reported the Jewish scribes' belief that Elijah "must come first" before the Messiah, and that Elijah would "restore everything" (Matt. 17:10-11). The New Testament describes John the Baptist as fulfilling the prophecy that Elijah would reconcile fathers and sons, bring peace to the land, and prepare the way for the coming Messiah (Luke 1:16-17; see Mal. 4:4-6; Isa. 40:3). John the Baptist ministered "in the spirit and power" of Elijah (Luke 1:17). Elijah and John the Baptist had some similarities in attire (2 Kings 1:8; Mark 1:6), teaching, and mission. In announcing to

Zechariah the birth of his son John (Luke 1:16-17), the angel Gabriel explicitly identified John as the fulfillment of the Elijah role from Malachi 4:4-6.

Jesus had little confidence that most people would interpret these prophecies properly. He sometimes warned the disciples not to tell others He was the Messiah, perhaps because the Jews had misconceptions about the Messiah and His mission (Mark 8:29-30)—such as His being merely an anointed earthly king who would lead the Jews to victory over the Romans (John 6:15; 18:36; 19:12). Regarding Elijah's return, Jesus said clearly that the Jewish religious leaders "didn't recognize" Elijah upon his return (speaking of John the Baptist), and "did whatever they pleased to him" (Matt. 17:12-13). Jesus specifically identified John the Baptist as this Elijah-like forerunner (Matt. 11:7-14;

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ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BOB SCHATZ (10/24/7)

Below: Basalt relief depicting a two-person warrior chariot running over enemy, from a war scene; dated 950–850 B.C. Found at Carchemish.

Right: Platform in the distance marks the site where, according to tradition, Elijah ascended in the chariot. In the distance and off to the west is the Jordan River Valley.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ KRISTEN HILLER (38/1051)

of the miracles He did (6:14-15). When Jesus cried out on the cross “Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?” some bystanders thought He was calling for Elijah’s help (15:34-36), not realizing that Jesus was quoting Psalm 22:1.

Elijah and Moses met Jesus in the transfiguration (Mark 9:2-9).³ This encounter “stressed that Jesus is the unique Son

of God, whose authority exceeds even that of the law (Moses) and the prophets (Elijah).”⁴ Perhaps at least in part because of Elijah’s and Moses’ unusual departures from this world and Elijah’s association with resurrection, Jesus discussed with them His own departure through the cross and resurrection in Jerusalem (Luke 9:30-31). Seeing Elijah led the disciples to ask Jesus questions about Elijah’s role in eschatology, inquiring if the scribes’ teaching was that the returning Elijah “must come first” before the Messiah (Matt. 17:10). Jesus confirmed that Elijah would be a forerunner of the Messiah and that John the Baptist fulfilled the type of Elijah. Some Christian interpreters also believe the “two witnesses” in Revelation 11:3-6 refer to Elijah (with his capacity to deny rain) and Moses.

After King Herod had imprisoned him, John the Baptist sought Jesus’ assurance that He was truly the Messiah. Jesus provided the evidence that He met the criteria in Isaiah 61:1-5 and Psalm 146:5-9 of preaching to the poor, bringing sight to the blind, and raising the dead (Matt. 11:2-5; Luke 7:22). Clearly, Jesus was the Davidic Messiah of Old Testament prophecies.

The question Jesus asked His disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” (Mark 8:29), may be the most important question in human history. Simon Peter answered rightly, “You are the Messiah!” (v. 29). For us, the question remains. Who do you say Jesus is? 🔥

17:12-13). John the Baptist fulfilling the prophesied return of one like Elijah also lends credence to Jesus’ death and resurrection fulfilling the prophecies of a Davidic Messiah (Mark 9:12-13).

John himself denied he was literally Elijah reincarnated, but did affirm that he fulfilled the Elijah-like forerunner role as Isaiah prophesied (Luke 3:15-17; see Isa. 40:3). John also denied being the Messiah, pointing out Jesus as the Messiah instead (John 1:6-9, 19-37).

The Elijah figure was so prevalent in the Jewish mind-set that some associated Jesus with the Elijah role. Jesus’ disciples reported that some people had this perception (Mark 8:28). Likewise, Herod’s advisers reported that many people thought Jesus was Elijah or John the Baptist risen from the dead, because

1. All Scripture quotations are from the Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB).

2. J. Julius Scott Jr., *Jewish Backgrounds of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995), 318-19.

3. At the transfiguration, Peter suggested building three booths to honor Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. At this event, the Father also spoke aloud and instructed the disciples to listen to Jesus. “Peter had wanted to honor Moses, Elijah, and Jesus as equals. The voice, in contrast, singles out the Son.” Darrell L. Bock, *Jesus According to Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 235.

4. Donald A. Hagner, *The New Testament: A Historical and Theological Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 173.

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