

## THE PROMISE OF THE ARRIVAL OF ELIJAH IN MALACHI AND THE GOSPELS

WALTER C. KAISER, JR.

*Was John the Baptist the fulfillment of Malachi's prediction about Elijah the prophet who was to come before that great day of the Lord comes? The hermeneutical solution to this question is offered in a generic fulfillment, or what the older theologians called the novissima. Therefore, Elijah has come "in the spirit and power" witnessed in John the Baptist, and will yet come in the future. Generic prophecy has three foci: (1) the revelatory word, (2) all intervening historical events which perpetuate that word, and (3) the generic wholeness (one sense or meaning) in which the final or ultimate fulfillment participates in all the earnestness that occupied the interim between the original revelatory word and this climactic realization.*

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THE NT's interest in the prophet Elijah may be easily assessed from the fact that he is the most frequently mentioned OT figure in the NT after Moses (80 times), Abraham (73), and David (59); Elijah's name appears 29 or 30 times.<sup>1</sup>

Even more significant, however, are the six major and explicit references to Elijah in the Synoptic Gospels. There, some of Jesus' contemporaries identified our Lord—in the second of three opinions—as Elijah (Mark 6:14-16; Luke 9:7-9). Jesus' disciples were also aware of this popular confusion, for they too repeated it (Matt 16:13-20; Mark 8:27-30; Luke 9:18-21). This connection between Jesus and Elijah continued to hold its grip on many even up to the time of the crucifixion, for those who heard Jesus' fourth word from the cross thought he was calling on Elijah to rescue him (Matt 27:45-49; Mark

<sup>1</sup>J. Jeremias, "ἠλ(ε)ιας," *TDNT* 2 (1964) 934. The disparity of 29 or 30 is due to a textual problem in Luke 9:54.

15:33–36). And who should appear on the mount of transfiguration but Moses and Elijah, talking to Jesus (Matt 17:1–19; Mark 9:2–10; Luke 9:28–36)?

But there were two other references in the Synoptics which referred to a future coming of Elijah. One came when Jesus' disciples asked why the scribes claimed it was necessary that Elijah had to come first (Matt 17:10–13; Mark 9:11–13). Jesus responded that "Elijah had come" and said it in such a way that the disciples knew that he meant he was John the Baptist. If any doubt remained, Jesus said just that in Matt 11:14—"he is Elijah, the one who was to come."

However, when one turns from the Synoptics to the Fourth Gospel, none of these six references are present. Instead, we find John categorically denying that he was either Christ, "that [Mosaic] prophet," or *Elijah* (John 1:21, 25)! John's clear disavowal is so stark by way of contrast with the way he is presented in the Synoptics that the Synoptics and John appear to contradict one another flatly. What explanation can be offered for this phenomenon? And what impact does it have on the question of the NT author's use of OT citations?

#### I. THE ISSUES

At stake in this discussion are three critical points of tension: (1) the identity of that coming messenger or future prophet named Elijah, (2) the time of his coming, and (3) the task(s) assigned to him. Each of these three questions raises a number of hermeneutical and theological issues that have left their mark on various traditions of interpretation.

However, even before these three tension points have been joined, perhaps there is a prior question which asks if Elijah's coming is at all connected with the coming of the Messiah. A recent study by Faierstein concludes 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 C.E. . . . The only datum . . . is the *baraita* in *b. Erubin* 43a–b, a text of the early third century C.E. . . . The further possibility, that the concept of Elijah as forerunner is a *novum* in the NT must also be seriously considered.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Morris M. Faierstein, "Why Do the Scribes Say That Elijah Must Come First?" *JBL* 100 (1981) 86. John H. Hughes, "John the Baptist: The Forerunner of God Himself," *NovT* 14 (1972) 212 is of the same opinion: "There is no reliable pre-Christian evidence for the belief that Elijah was to be the forerunner of the Messiah, and this helps support the suggestion that the conception originated with Jesus." [!]

Faierstein, while conveniently avoiding the strong evidence of Mal 3:1; 4:4–5 and the repeated NT allusions, tends to assign either a post-Christian date or to reserve judgment on a whole series of evidences to the contrary from the Jewish community. Certainly the Qumran fragment J. Starcky cited (*lkn ʔšlh ʔlyh qd[m]*, “therefore I will send Elijah befo[re]. . .”) is incomplete;<sup>3</sup> but it should have reminded Faierstein to take another look at Mal 3:1; 4:4–5 [Heb 3:24–25]. Faierstein also sets aside the same eighteen rabbinic texts which L. Ginzberg analyzes differently.

Now, in no fewer than eighteen passages in the Talmud, Elijah appears as one who, in his capacity of precursor of the Messiah, will settle all doubts on matters of ritual and judicial.<sup>4</sup>

But the *locus classicus* of these eighteen, *m. ʕEd. 8.7*, is exceptionally clear. Elijah would establish legitimate Jewish descent, family harmony, and resolve differences of opinion and religious controversies. He would do all this, says *m. ʕEd. 8.7* “. . . as it is written, *Behold I will send you Elijah, the prophet . . . and he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children and the heart of the children to their fathers.*”<sup>5</sup> Once again, we are brought back to the Malachi texts if we are to make any decision on what was normative either for pre-Christian Judaism or the NT itself. To this day, Judaism continues to reserve for Elijah a distinguished place and loosely to relate it to their fading expectation of the coming of the Messiah. This can best be seen in the cup of Elijah and the seat reserved for him at every Passover meal. The hope and prayer of every Jew at the conclusion of the Passover—“next year in Jerusalem”—is one piece of a larger picture of the coming Messianic era. And at the heart of it remains the open door for the new Elijah.

## II. MALACHI 3:1; 4:4–5

### A. *The Identity of ‘My Messenger’*

God’s answer to the impious complaints of the wicked men and women of Malachi’s day who mockingly sneered: “Where is the God of justice?” was to send *his* messenger to prepare the way for the God

<sup>3</sup>J. Starcky, “Les Quatre Etapes du Messianisme à Qumran,” *RB* 70 (1963) 489–505. The fragment is 4QarP. See p. 498 as cited in Faierstein, “Elijah Must Come First?” 80, nn. 33–34.

<sup>4</sup>L. Ginzberg, *An Unknown Jewish Sect* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1976) 212. These 18 texts all end 18 talmudic discussions and are known by the term *teyqu* which came to mean “The Tishbite will resolve difficulties and problems.” Ginzberg lists the location of these 18 passages in n. 14 on p. 212.

for whom they allegedly searched. He did not promise merely a messenger, but one that was already familiar to them from the informing theology of Isa 40:3, for the words used to describe this messenger were the same as those used there: he was "to prepare the way."

No doubt the words "my messenger" (מִלְאָכִי) were intended to be both a play on the name of the prophet Malachi and prophetic of a future prophet who would continue his same work. But he was certainly to be an earthly messenger and not a heavenly being. This can be demonstrated from three lines of evidence: (1) in Isaiah the voice which called for the preparation of the nation came from someone in the nation itself; (2) this same messenger in Mal 3:1 is associated with Elijah the prophet in Mal 4:5; and (3) he is strongly contrasted with "The Lord," "even the messenger of the covenant" in Mal 3:1.<sup>6</sup>

Thus this messenger cannot be the death angel, as the Jewish commentator Jarchi conjectured,<sup>7</sup> or an angel from heaven as another Jewish commentator Kimchi alleged from Exod 23:20, a passage which finds its context in a time when Israel was being prepared for a journey into the desert. God's mouthpiece was an earthly proclaimer.

#### B. *The Identity of the Lord and the Messenger of the Covenant*

"The Lord" (יְהוָה) can only refer to God when used with the article.<sup>8</sup> That he is divine personage is also evident from these additional facts: he answers to the question of Mal 2:17, "Where is the *God* of justice?" (2) he comes to "his temple" (Mal 3:1) and thus he is the owner of that house in which he promised to dwell; and (3) he is also named the "Messenger of the covenant" (מִלְאָךְ הַבְּרִית). Furthermore, it is clear from passages such as Zech 4:14 and 6:5, "יְהוָה of the whole earth," that יְהוָה is used interchangeably with Yahweh.<sup>9</sup>

The title "Angel or Messenger of the Covenant," is found nowhere else in the OT. Nevertheless, the title is very reminiscent of the more

<sup>5</sup>Herbert Danby, *The Mishnah* (London: Oxford University, 1958) 437 [italics his].

<sup>6</sup>These three arguments are substantially those of E. W. Hengstenberg, *Christology of the Old Testament* (trans. James Martin) (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1875) 4.164.

<sup>7</sup>R. Cashdan, *Soncino Books of the Bible: The Twelve Prophets* (ed. A. Cohen; London: Soncino, 1948) 349.

<sup>8</sup>So argues T. V. Moore (*The Prophets of the Restoration: Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi* [New York: Robert Carter and Bros., 1856] 376). He refers to Exod 23:17; 34:23; Isa 1:24; 3:1; 10:16, 33; Mal 1:12, etc. In Dan 9:17 יְהוָה seems to refer to the Son.

<sup>9</sup>So argues Joyce G. Baldwin (*Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi* [Tyndale Old Testament; 1).

frequently used, "Angel of the Lord." That was the same "Angel" who had redeemed Israel out of the land of Egypt (Exod 3:6), had gone before the army as they crossed the Red Sea (Exod 14:19), led Israel through the wilderness (Exod 23:20) and filled the temple with his glory. He was one and the same as Yahweh himself. This Angel was God's own self-revelation, the pre-incarnate Christ of the numerous OT Christophanies.<sup>10</sup> He is the same one discussed in Exod 23:20-23; ("Behold, I send an Angel . . . My name is in him") 33:15 ("My Presence [or face] shall go with you") and Isa 63:9 (The Angel of his Presence or face").

The covenant of which he is the messenger is the same one anciently made with Israel (Exod 25:8; Lev 26:11-12; Deut 4:23; Isa 33:14) and later *renewed* in Jer 31:31-34 as repeated in Heb 8:7-13 and 9:15. Therefore, while the covenant was a single plan of God for all ages, this context addressed mainly the Levitical priesthood (Mal 1:6-2:9) and the nation Israel (Mal 2:11; 3:5, 8) for violating that covenant relationship.

Still, it must be stressed that there are not two persons represented in "The Lord" and the "Messenger of the Covenant" but only one, as is proven by the singular form of "come" (בָּא).<sup>11</sup> Thus the passage mentions only two persons: "The Lord" and the preparing messenger.

### C. *The Connection Between the Announcer's Task and the Work of the Lord*

The preparing messenger was "to clear the way before [the Lord]." The striking similarity between this expression (וּפְנֵה דֶרֶךְ לַפְנֵי) and that found in Isa 40:3, (פְּנוּ דֶרֶךְ יְהוָה) 57:14 and 62:10 is too strong to be accidental. The resemblance between Isaiah and Malachi was drawn out even to the omission of the article from דֶרֶךְ, "way"; the only difference is that in Malachi the *messenger* is to prepare the way while in Isaiah the *servants* of the Lord are urged to prepare the road.

Under the oriental figure of an epiphany or arrival of the reigning monarch, the text urged for a similar removal of all spiritual, moral, and ethical impediments in preparation for the arrival of the King of Glory. Whenever a king would visit a village, the roadway would be straightened, leveled, and all stones and obstacles removed from the road that the king would take as he came to visit the town. The only other instance of this expression is in Ps 80:9 [Heb 10]: פְּנִיתָ לְפָנֶיךָ, "You cleared [the ground] before it [= the vine (or the nation

<sup>10</sup>See W. C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978) pp. 85, 120, 257-58. See references to the "Angel of the Lord" in such texts as Gen 16:7; 22:11, 15; Judg 2:1; 6:11, 14.

<sup>11</sup>So argues E. W. Hengstenberg, *Christology*, 4.168.

Israel) brought out from the land of Egypt].” Once again, however, it was necessary to do some *clearing away* as a preparation before the nation Israel, here represented as a vine, was to be able to be planted and to take deep root in the land.

This future messenger would likewise clear out the rubbish, obstacles, and impediments “before me”—the same one who was identified in the next sentence as “*The Lord*,” “even the *Messenger of the Covenant*.” The equation of these three terms can be argued for even more convincingly when it is noticed that the *waw*, “and,” which introduces the phrase “and the messenger of the covenant whom you desire” is an exegetical *waw* used in apposition to the phrase “The Lord whom you are seeking.” Therefore we translate the whole verse:

Behold, I will send my messenger. He will clear the way ahead of me. Suddenly, the Lord whom you are seeking will come to his temple; even the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come, says the Lord of hosts.

Over against this preparatory work, the Lord and Messenger of the Covenant was to arrive “suddenly” (עָרַבְרָב) at his temple. The people had longed for the coming of God in judgment as a redress to all wrongs (Mal 2:17). Indeed, he would come, but it would be “unexpectedly.”<sup>12</sup> The ungodly hoped for a temporal deliverer, but Mal 3:2 warned that most would not be able to stand when that day of judgment came. Not only would the heathen gentiles be judged, but so too would the ungodly in Israel. It would appear that the final judgment associated with the second advent has been blended in this passage with the Lord’s arrival in his first advent. It was necessary to be prepared for both!

#### D. *The Identity of Elijah the Prophet*

Does Malachi expect the Tishbite to reappear personally on the earth again? It would not appear so, for Mal 4:5–6 specifically said, “Behold, I will send you Elijah *the*<sup>13</sup> *prophet*, before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes.” Only the LXX reads “Elijah the Tishbite.” The reason Elijah was selected is, (1) he was head of the prophetic order in the nation Israel and (2) many of his successors

<sup>12</sup>T. Laetsch (*Bible Commentary: The Minor Prophets* [St. Louis: Concordia, 1956] 531) says “Suddenly, *pit'om*, is never used to denote immediacy; it always means unexpectedly, regardless of the lapse of time (Joshua 10:9; 11:7; Num. 12:4; Ps. 64:5, 8, A.V. 4, 7; Prov. 3:25; 6:15; Isa. 47:11; Jer. 4:20, etc.).”

<sup>13</sup>Jack Willsey (“The Coming of Elijah: An Interpretation of Malachi 4:5,” [unpublished Master’s dissertation, San Francisco Conservative Baptist Theological Seminary, 1969] 31) notes that the use of the article with עָרַבְרָב refers “to Elijah: specifically, the Elijah who was known to the readers as *the prophet* (as opposed to any other possible Elijah).”

indirectly received the same spirit and power that divinely was granted to him. There was, as it were, a successive endowment of his gifts, power, and spirit to those who followed in his train.

This phenomenon is known already in the OT, for 2 Chr 21:12 mentions "a writing from Elijah the prophet" during the reign of King Jehoram when Elijah had already been in heaven for many years. Furthermore, many of the acts predicted by Elijah were actually carried out by Elisha (2 Kgs 8:13) and one of the younger prophets (2 Kgs 9:13). Indeed, Elisha had asked for a double portion, the portion of the firstborn (בְּרִוְחֵי, 2 Kgs 2:9), as his spiritual inheritance from Elijah. Thus, just as the spirit of Moses came on the seventy elders (Num 11:25) so the "spirit of Elijah"<sup>14</sup> rested on Elisha" (2 Kgs 2:15).

We are to expect a literal return of Elijah no more than we expect a literal return of David as the future king over Israel. Surely passages like Jer 30:19; Hos 3:5; Ezek 34:23; and 37:24 promise a new David. But it is universally held that this new David is none other than the Messiah himself who comes in the office, line, and promise of David. Consequently, we argue that the new Elijah will be endowed with this same spirit and power without being the actual Elijah who was sent back long after his translation to heaven.

#### *E. The Connection Between Elijah and the Forerunner*

There can be little doubt that Elijah the prophet is one and the same as the messenger whom the Lord will send to prepare the way before him. Mal 4:5 marks the third great "Behold" in this book (3:1; 4:1, and here) and therefore carries our mind and eye back to the other two passages. A second similarity is to be found in the participial phrase, "I am sending." There is also, in the third place, a similarity of mission; for both the verbs "to clear the way" (פְּנֹה) and "to restore" (שׁוּב) are based on verbs which also mean "to turn" and hence imply a repentance or turning away from evil and a turning towards God. In the fourth place, the play on *sending* "my messenger" with Malachi's name in 3:1 is matched in 4:5 by *sending* "Elijah." Finally, both 3:1 and 4:5a are followed by references that speak of the awesomeness of the day of the Lord (3:2; 4:5b).

#### *F. The Time of Day of the Lord*

This messenger, who is called the prophet Elijah, is to appear "before that great and terrible day of the Lord comes." That day was

<sup>14</sup>For a long discussion of the Christian history of interpretation of the NT identity of Elijah, see E. B. Pusey, *The Minor Prophets*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1950) 2. 499-502 and E. W. Hengstenberg, *Christology*, 4. 195-200.

described in similar terms in Joel 2:11, 31 and Zeph 1:14. A number of the OT prophets view that day as *one* day and a *collective* event which entailed this three-way puzzle: (1) though five prophets refer to that day as "near" or "at hand," their prophecies are spread over four centuries (Obad 15; Joel 1:15; 2:21; Isa 3:6; Zeph 1:7, 14; Ezek 30:3); (2) these prophets also saw different immediate events belonging to their own day as being part of that "day of the Lord" including destruction of Edom, a locust plague, or the pending destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.; and (3) nevertheless, that day was also a future day in which the Lord "destroyed the whole earth" (Isa 13:5) and reigned as "King over all the earth" (Zech 14:1, 8-9), a day when "the elements will be dissolved . . . and the earth and the works that are in it will be laid bare" (2 Pet 3:10), as well as a day of salvation and deliverance (Joel 2:32).

It is just such a day that Mal 3:2; 4:1, 5 mention. The principle of generic or successive fulfillment is most important if we are adequately to explain and be faithful to all the biblical data. T. V. Moore stated it this way:

There are a number of statements by the sacred writers that are designed to apply to distinct facts, successively occurring in history. If the words are limited to any one of these facts, they will seem exaggerated, for no one fact can exhaust their significance. They must be spread out over all the facts before their plenary meaning is reached. There is nothing in this principle that is at variance with the ordinary laws of language. The same general use of phrases occurs repeatedly. . . . Every language contains these formulas, which refer not to any one event, but a series of events, all embodying the same principle, or resulting from the same cause.

[Thus] . . . the promise in regard to the "seed of the woman," (Gen. 3:15) refers to one event but runs along the whole stream of history, and includes every successive conquest of the religion of Christ . . . [This] class of predictions . . . is . . . what the old theologians called the *novissima* . . .<sup>15</sup>

Thus, the "Day of Yahweh" is a generic or collective event which gathers together all the antecedent historical episodes of God's judgment and salvation along with the future grand finale and climactic event in the whole series. Every divine intervention into history before that final visitation in connection with the second advent of Christ constitutes only a preview, sample, downpayment or earnest on that climactic conclusion. The prophet did not think of the day of the

<sup>15</sup>T. V. Moore, *Zechariah, Malachi*, 396-99.



Lord as an event that would occur once for all, but one that could "be repeated as the circumstances called for it."<sup>16</sup>

Now, the future Elijah, the prophet, will appear "before that great and terrible day of the Lord comes." Furthermore, as shown in Mal 3:1 and Isa 40:3, he will prepare the way for Yahweh. But which coming of the Messiah is intended by Malachi—the first or second advent? Since most conclude along with the NT writers that the messenger's preparation was for the first advent of our Lord, and since the events included in that day in Mal 3:2ff and Mal 4:1ff involve the purification of the Levites, the judgment on the wicked and the return of the Yahweh to his temple, it is fair to conclude that that day embraces both advents. This is precisely the situation which Joel 2:28–32 presents. The fulfillment of Joel's words at Pentecost is as much a part of that day as the seismographic and cosmological convolutions connected with the second advent.

The basic concept, then, is that Malachi's prophecy does not merely anticipate that climactic fulfillment of the second advent, but it simultaneously embraces a series of events which all participate in the prophet's single meaning even though the referents embraced in that single meaning are many.<sup>17</sup> In this way, the whole set of events make up *one* collective totality and constitute only *one* idea even though they involve many referents which are spread over a large portion of history. Perhaps the best way to describe this phenomenon is to call it a generic prediction which Willis J. Beecher defined as:

... one which regards an event as occurring in a series of parts, separated by intervals, and expresses itself in language which may apply indifferently to the nearest part, or to the remoter parts, or to the whole—in other words, a prediction which in applying to the whole of a complex event, also applies to some of its parts.<sup>18</sup>

### III. JOHN THE BAPTIST AND NEW TESTAMENT FULFILLMENT

The NT question may now be asked: "Was John the Baptist the fulfillment of Malachi's prophecies or was he not?"

<sup>16</sup>Willis J. Beecher, *The Prophets and the Promise* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1905; reprinted, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970) 311.

<sup>17</sup>A most helpful distinction can be found in G. B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980) chap. 2. He distinguishes between meaning<sup>V</sup> (= value: "This means more to me than anything else"), meaning<sup>E</sup> (= entailment: "This means war"), meaning<sup>R</sup> (= referent: identifies person(s) or thing(s) named or involved), meaning<sup>S</sup> (= sense: gives qualities of person or thing) and meaning<sup>I</sup> (= intention: the truth-commitment of the author).

<sup>18</sup>W. J. Beecher, *The Prophets and the Promise*, 130.

### A. Three Basic Positions

Three basic answers have been given to this inquiry: (1) John the Baptist fully fulfilled all that was predicted of the messenger who would prepare the way and Elijah will not come again;<sup>19</sup> (2) Elijah the Tishbite will personally reappear and minister once again at the end of this age;<sup>20</sup> and (3) John the Baptist did come as a fulfillment of this prophecy, but he came in "the spirit and the power of Elijah" and is thereby only one prophet in a series of forerunners who are appearing throughout history until that final and climactically terrible day of Yahweh comes when it is announced by the last prophet in this series of forerunners.<sup>21</sup>

### B. A Generic Fulfillment of the Elijah Prophecy

From our examination of Malachi's prophecy it is clear that we should adopt the third alternative. The identity, timing, and tasks of this messenger in Malachi all argue for his appearance in two different individuals, if not a series of them, rather than a single individual such as John the Baptist.

The NT evidence yields a similar construction. Matt 11:14 quotes Jesus as affirming that "he [John the Baptist] is himself (αὐτός ἐστιν) Elijah, the one who is to come." Again in Matt 11:10 (= Luke 7:27), "This (οὗτος) is the one of whom it is written, 'Behold I send my messenger before thy face, who shall prepare the way before thee'." So John was that one—Elijah the prophet!

Yet it is just as clear that John denies that he is Elijah: "I am not [Elijah] (ἐγὼ οὐκ εἰμί, John 1:21, 23); and that Luke assures us that John the Baptist came only in the "spirit and power of Elijah" (ἐν πνεύματι καὶ δυνάμει, Luke 1:17). Even when it is clear that John only denied being Elijah in the popular misconceptions entertained by the people of John's day, John could be identified as Elijah only because the same Spirit and power that had energized Elijah had now fallen on him.

<sup>19</sup>John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950) 5. 627; E. W. Hengstberg, *Christology*, 4. 165; Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1974) 49; David Allan George Knight, "John the Baptist and Elijah: A Study of Prophetic Fulfillment," (Unpublished M.A. thesis; T.E.D.S., Deerfield, IL, 1978) 115-16.

<sup>20</sup>John Paul Tan, *The Interpretation of Prophecy* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 1974) 185-87; Tertullian, "A Treatise on the Soul," 3:217.

<sup>21</sup>Justin Martyr, "Dialogue with Trypho," 1:219-20; Aurelius Augustine, "St. John's Gospel," 7:27; T. T. Perowne, *Malachi* (The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1890) 39; J. T. Marshall, "The Theology of Malachi," *ExpT* 7 (1895-96) 126; J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958) 311-12.

### C. *The New Elijah's Tasks*

Even the task of this coming prophet had this same two-pronged focus. Mark 9:12 answers the inquiry of Peter, James, and John ("Why do the scribes say the first Elijah must come?") as they were returning from the Mount of Transfiguration and hearing about the Son of Man suffering and being raised again by saying: "Elijah has come [ἐλθὼν, past] first and is restoring [ἀποκαθιστάνει, present] all things." Matt 17:11, referring to the identical event, combined the present with the future tense: "Elijah is coming (ἔρχεται, present) and he will restore [ἀποκαταστήσει]<sup>22</sup> all things." Since this present is coupled with a future tense, the present must be interpreted as a futuristic present—"Elijah is coming."

Now the term "restoration" is used in the OT both as a technical term for the restoration of Israel to their own land<sup>23</sup> and as a moral restoration of the inner man.<sup>24</sup> We believe that Matthean and Markan uses of this verb are parallel, in part, to the noun form (ἀποκαταστήσεως) used in Acts 3:21. In Acts, Peter states that Jesus now remains in heaven "until the time of the restoration (or 'establishing')<sup>25</sup> of all things that God has spoken by the mouth of his holy prophets." That too is a future work associated with the *parousia*.

Luke has described John's work as one of going before the Lord to prepare his ways, of giving the knowledge of salvation to his people and giving light to those in darkness (Luke 1:76-79). He would also "turn the hearts of the fathers to the children (ἐπιστρέψαι καρδίας πατέρων ἐπὶ τέκνα, Luke 1:17, which follows the MT of Mal 4:6 in the verb ἐπιστρέφω instead of the LXX ἀποκαθίστημι)."

### IV. CONCLUSION: HERMENEUTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The emerging picture is clear. How can we disassociate Elijah who is to come from the day of the Lord? And how can we limit the day of the Lord entirely to the second advent and the *parousia*? Both errors will lead to a result less than what was intended by Malachi.

<sup>22</sup>Both Matthew and Mark's word for "restoration" is found in the LXX. The Hebrew MT of Mal 4:6 has כָּשַׁף. The text of Sir 48:10 followed the LXX.

<sup>23</sup>Jer 15:19; 16:15; 23:8; 24:6; Hos 11:10

<sup>24</sup>Amos 5:15. I owe these references to David A. G. Knight, "John the Baptist and Elijah," 93.

<sup>25</sup>Some prefer to link this idea with the fulfillment or establishment of OT prophecy; see K. Lake and H. J. Cadberry, *The Acts of the Apostles, The Beginnings of Christianity* (ed. F. J. Foakes Jackson and K. Lake; 5 vols.; London: Macmillan, 1933) 4. 38, as cited by Knight, "John the Baptist and Elijah," 94. This is a strange word to express that concept when so many others were available and used by Luke. The OT usage appears to be too fixed to allow this novel meaning—especially in a passage that appeals to the prophets!

Elijah still must come and "restore all things" (Matt 17:11) "before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes" (Mal 4:5).

Nevertheless, let no one say that Elijah has not already in some sense come, for our Lord will affirm the contrary: "Elijah has come." Now, what explanation will adequately answer all of these phenomena? Were it not for the fact that this same type of phenomenon occurs with so many other similar prophetic passages, we would need to conclude that the text presented us with internal contradictions. But this is not so, for the list of generic prophecies wherein a single prediction embraced a whole series of fulfillments when all those fulfillments shared something that was part and parcel of all of them is a long one.<sup>26</sup>

Some will argue that this is nothing more than what most name "double fulfillment of prophecy." This we deny. The problem with "double fulfillment" is threefold: (1) it restricts the fulfillments to two isolated events and only two; (2) it usually slides easily into a theory of double senses or dual intentionality in which the human author usually is aware of none of these referents or meanings or at most only one (if it is contemporaneous) with the other or both fulfillments left as surprises for the future generation in which they take place; and (3) it focuses only on the predictive word (usually given in abstraction from the times in which that word came) and on the final fulfillment without any attention being given as to how God kept that word alive in the years that intervened between the divine revelation and the climactic fulfillment.

Only generic prophecy can handle all three foci: (1) the revelatory word; (2) the series of intervening historical events which perpetuate that word; and (3) corporate, collective, and generic wholeness of that final fulfillment with whatever aspect of realization that event has had in the interim as God continued to promise by his Word and to act by his power throughout history. The intervening events, then, while being generically linked with that final event, were earnest, down-payments, samplers, partial teasers until the total payment came in God's climactic fulfillment.

That exactly is what happened in the case of John the Baptist. He was only a sample of a portion of the work that was to be done in the final day. We can show this by referring to the identities, tasks, and timing given in Malachi and the Gospels without adding at this time the further evidence of the work of one of the two witnesses in Revelation 11.

<sup>26</sup>See W. C. Kaiser, Jr., "The Promise of God and the Outpouring of the Holy Spirit: Joel 2:28-32 and Acts 2:16-21," *The Living and Active Word of God*, ed. Morris Inch and Ron Youngblood (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1982).

John then was Elijah as an earnest, but we still await the other Elijahs and especially that final Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of our Lord. The meaning<sup>1</sup> is *one*; not two, three, or *sensus plenior*. Only that sense given by revelation of God can be normative, authoritative, and apologetically convincing to a former generation of Jews or to our own generation. We urge Christ's Church to adopt the single meaning of the text and a generic meaning for prophecies of the type found in Mal 3:1 and 4:5-6.