

## "ELIJAH MUST COME FIRST"

In an article recently published in this journal, "Why Do the Scribes Say That Elijah Must Come First?" (*JBL* 100 [1981] 75–86), Morris M. Faierstein argued 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." (p. 86). According to Faierstein, the only solid piece of evidence is the *baraita* in *b. 'Erub.* 43a–b; but the passage is late (early third century C.E.) and, given its uniqueness, may have been influenced by the Gospel tradition. So the suggestion that the concept of Elijah as a forerunner of the Messiah is a *novum* in the NT lies near to hand.<sup>1</sup>

Faierstein has, I think, showed how difficult it is to assume that the expectation under review was widespread or well established in first-century Judaism. Nevertheless, there remain reasons for thinking that we are not here dealing with a NT *novum*, and it is the purpose of this note to list those reasons.

(1) In Mark 9:11 the disciples, after the transfiguration of Jesus, ask their master, "Why do the Scribes say that Elijah must come first?" Two things are to be said about this question. First, from its context (9:12–13) it is clear that the query has reference to the coming of Jesus Messiah; that is, it is here asked why some say that Elijah must come before the Messiah. Then, second, the expectation concerning the prophet is attributed to scribal opinion: "Why do the scribes say . . . ?" Now any one wishing to affirm that the concept of Elijah as forerunner was a Christian development must explain why that concept came to be imputed to the Scribes. Quite a few novel eschatological notions emerged within the early church, and those notions were not—to state the obvious—typically linked up with scribal teaching. Further, Mark 9:11–13 is, as a perusal of the commentaries demonstrates, readily interpreted as the precipitation of someone's struggle with a real difficulty—How do we handle the belief that the Tishbite must come first? Yet Faierstein's article not only seemingly prohibits such a reading but at the same time fails to put anything in its place. This is scarcely satisfactory. Until one offers a plausible explanation of why the Christians attributed to the Scribes their own reinterpretation of the Elijah expectation, the clear, explicit testimony of Mark 9:11 must be given a great deal of weight.

(2) The obscure and anonymous *baraita* in *b. 'Erub.* 43a–b both quotes Mal 3:23–24 [4:5–6] and contains the idea that Elijah will return before the Messiah.<sup>2</sup> This

<sup>1</sup> Faierstein cites the support of John A. T. Robinson ("Elijah, John and Jesus," *NTS* 4 [1958] 263–81) and J. A. Fitzmyer ("The Aramaic 'Elect of God' Text from Qumran Cave 4," *Essays on the Semitic Background of the New Testament* [London: Chapman, 1971] 137). He might also have noted J. Louis Martyn, "We Have Found Elijah," in *Jews, Greeks and Christians: Religious Cultures in Late Antiquity. Essays in Honor of William David Davies* (ed. R. Hamerton-Kelly and R. Scroggs; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1976) 189 n. 17.

<sup>2</sup> "Come and hear: [If a man said,] 'Let me be a nazirite on the day on which the son of David comes,' he may drink wine on Sabbaths and festival days, but is forbidden to drink wine on any of the weekdays. Now, if it is granted that the law of Sabbath limits is applicable, it is quite intelligible why the man is permitted [to drink wine] on Sabbaths and festival days; but if it be contended that the law of Sabbath limits is inapplicable why [it may be asked] is it permitted [for the man to drink wine] on Sabbaths and festival days?—There the case is different since Scripture said, *Behold I will send you Elijah the prophet*

Faierstein admits. But he asserts that the text "is too flimsy a foundation on which to support the idea that Elijah as forerunner of the Messiah was widely known or accepted in rabbinic circles" (p. 83). True enough. But this remark would not remain correct if the word "widely" were removed. In other words, *b. 'Erub.* 43a–b—which, if the issue under review be excluded, hardly betrays any Christian influence—does prove that Elijah was expected by at least somebody to be the precursor of the coming Messiah. (For later evidence see *Pesiq. R.* 35:3; *Pirqe R. El.* 43; and *Tg. Ps.-J.* on Deut 30:4.) Beyond this, it is significant that the reference to Mal 3:23–24 [4:5–6] is employed as if the concept of Elijah as forerunner could be taken for granted.

(3) Mal 3:23–24 [4:5–6] does not expressly announce that Elijah will appear in advance of the Messiah. "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the land with a curse." If, however, one believed (as did many first-century Jews) in a Messiah who would come on the day of the Lord, then, by the following simple logic, the idea of Elijah as forerunner would almost inevitably be read into the text. Since the Messiah is to come on the day of the Lord and since Elijah is to come before that day, it follows that Elijah must come first. Thus, although Mal 3 [4] does not itself teach that Elijah will be the Messiah's precursor, the chapter could easily have been read this way by many (cf. Luke 1:17 and *b. 'Erub.* 43a–b).

(4) If it is possible to argue that the idea of Elijah as forerunner was taken by the rabbis from the Christians (something Faierstein suggests), it is also possible to propose something quite different, namely, that the dearth of rabbinic references to the idea reflects a reaction to Christian claims. If it was believed that Elijah would precede the Messiah and if Christians claimed both that the Messiah had come and that his predecessor, John the Baptist, had exhibited Elijah-like traits (Mark 9:12–13; Matt 11:13–14; Luke 1:17), the rabbinic response might have been a playing down of the role of Elijah as precursor. That is, it might have been opportune to refocus the Elijah expectation on functions that John the Baptist had clearly not fulfilled, such as raising the dead, restoring the manna, and resolving questions of Torah. This would certainly help explain why the dominant rabbinic characterizations of the eschatological Elijah have so little in common with the NT portrait of John the Baptist/Elijah.

(5) One must underline the fragmentary and select nature of the sources that have come down to us. We by no means have certain knowledge of all the eschatological expectations held in the variegated Judaism of Jesus' time. Much of what was believed and hoped for must, regrettably, remain hid from our eyes forever. So it is always hazardous to conclude too much from arguments mostly about silence. For

etc. and Elijah, surely, did not come on the previous day. If so, even in the case of weekdays, [the drinking of wine] should be permitted on any day since Elijah did not come on the previous day? But the fact is that we assume that he appeared before the high court, then why should we not here also assume that he appeared before the high court?—Israel has long ago been assured that Elijah would not come either on Sabbath eves or on festival eves owing to the people's pre-occupation.

"Assuming that as Elijah would not come the Messiah also would not come, why should not [the drinking of wine] be permitted on a Sabbath eve?—Elijah would not, but the Messiah might come because the moment the Messiah comes all will be anxious to serve Israel." Trans. of I. W. Slotki for the *Hebrew-English Edition of the Babylonian Talmud, Seder Mo'ed: 'Erubin* (ed. I. Epstein; New York: Traditional Press, n.d.) 85–86.

the same reason, if the NT attributes a certain opinion to the Scribes that is not clearly discernible in extant Jewish documents, that in itself is no sufficient reason to disbelieve the NT, which is, after all, one of our best sources for first-century Judaism.

In conclusion, while Faierstein has rightly raised a question mark over sweeping generalizations about the universality of the belief that Elijah would appear shortly before the coming of the Messiah, it is difficult to endorse the suggestion that Christians might be responsible for the idea of Elijah as precursor. The implications of Mark 9:11 and the other points we have considered seem to tip the scale of probabilities slightly in favor of a more traditional conclusion.

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