

CHAPTER 12

"On the Millennium, and the Scriptural Testimonies to the Doctrine of It"

by
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Part 1 First Proposition

(Condensed and Paraphrased)

Let us now proceed to inquire into our first proposition: *a personal reappearance of the prophet Elijah before the second advent of Jesus Christ.*

And His disciples asked Him, saying, "Why then do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?" Jesus answered and said to them, "Indeed, Elijah is coming first and will restore all things" (Matt 17:10,11).

These words are part of the conversation between our Savior and the three disciples (Peter, James, and John) as they were coming down the mountain after having witnessed the transfiguration, where Elijah and Moses had just been seen. This appearance of Elijah no doubt suggested the words, "*Why then do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?*" The scribes had taught the people to expect to see Elijah before the appearance of the Messiah. But the ministry of Jesus Christ himself, whom the apostles certainly believed to be the Messiah, had been going on now nearly two and a half years.

That the scribes or teachers of the people themselves entertained this expectation of an appearance of Elijah appears from the question, "*Are you Elijah?*" This question was put to John the Baptist by the deputation from the Sanhedrin the day before our Lord's return to Bethabara from the scene of the temptation, and we find that Elijah was still expected to appear even at the time of the crucifixion. The foundation of this belief is doubtless traced to Malachi 4:5,6, the only passage of the Old Testament that predicts an appearance of Elijah by name as the precursor of the Messiah: "*Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of Yahweh. And he will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the earth with a curse.*"

Thus, the scribes taught and the people believed in an actual future personal reappearance of Elijah before the advent of the Messiah. It was natural therefore for the disciples to ask their Master why the scribes had taught them all along to expect this appearance of Elijah before Jesus when he had appeared first.

If there were no foundation for the doctrine and expectation, then the Lord would certainly have said so. But he says no such thing. Instead, he confirms the truth of the expectation of a coming of Elijah: "*Indeed, Elijah is coming first and will restore all things.*" Here we have a consequence with an antecedent, or an effect with a cause, that justifies us in contending that it cannot be construed to refer to some past event, for it would be inconsistent to have spoken of the effect to follow upon the coming of Elijah as something still future when the coming itself that was to produce it had long since taken place. The Lord is referring to some *future* appearance of Elijah and to some *future* effect as the consequence of it, and both prior and preliminary to some advent of the Messiah. It is, therefore, a *Second Advent*, for the first one had already taken place.

Now as a second advent of the Messiah is naturally in contrast to a first, so is a harbinger of a second advent as naturally contrasted to a first; and if every advent of the Messiah must have its harbinger and that harbinger must be Elijah in some sense or other, then if the harbinger of the second is the literal Elijah, then the harbinger of the first could not be Elijah in person but might be so in figure. John the Baptist was the forerunner of the first advent of the Messiah, and therefore Elijah in person will be the forerunner of the second advent.

He is so spoken of by the angel who announced the birth of John the Baptist to his father Zacharias:

For he will be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink. He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, "to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children," and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord (Luke 1:15-17).

By quoting the words that Malachi had used in describing the effect to be produced by the ministry of Elijah before the day of the Lord, the angel clearly intimates that the office to be fulfilled by the mission of Elijah would be similarly discharged by the ministry of John. But by setting forth beforehand that John should perform this part in the spirit and power of Elijah and not in his person, he plainly distinguishes between the agents even while he affirms the similarity of the thing to be done by them; that is, Elijah in power and spirit is contrasted with Elijah in power and person. Anyone who discharged an office resembling Elijah's might be called Elijah in spirit. Only Elijah himself could be called Elijah in person.

Thus, it cannot be inferred from the testimony of the angel that the prophecy of Malachi was intended exclusively of John. It might indeed be applied to him as a type of Elijah, answering to Elijah in spirit; but that it was always designed to be so applied that it had no respect to any personal appearance of Elijah does not follow.

It is, indeed, usual to consider Elijah a type of John the Baptist, and to explain the similarity of their characters on that principle. And I am willing to admit that in some parts of the personal history of the two, and in some circumstances of their personal character, the historical relation between them might actually hold good. Nevertheless, it is with respect to their *ministerial relation to the Messiah* that the similarity consists, which is that they should go before the face of the Lord to produce such-and-such effects preparatory to the Lord's own appearance. In other words, John the Baptist was a type of Elijah. On John's first appearance he did that which Elijah was also to do on his next appearance. But John would not be called Elijah in spirit except in contrast to Elijah in person. Nor would it be said that he should go before as Elijah in spirit if it were not supposed that Elijah himself should some time go before in person.

There are some who object to this interpretation and say that the words of the angel mean that John should go before the Lord on this occasion as Elijah in spirit, just as Elijah had gone before on some former occasion in his own person. I would then ask, On what occasion was that, and who was the Lord who followed after Elijah in his own person on that occasion?

It is certain that the prediction of Malachi promised an appearance of Elijah in person. It is not less certain that the Jews, construing it literally, expected Elijah in person. Consequently, they were not prepared to receive an assurance that the appearance of any man who answered merely to Elijah in spirit was the appearance of the Elijah whom they expected. But such an assurance they received from our Lord concerning John the Baptist, yet it was mixed with a significant intimation that they would not readily admit it: "*And if you are willing to receive it, he is Elijah, who is to come*" (Matt. 11:14).

What was the difficulty implied in our Savior's words? It is enough to reply that the Jews expected Elijah in person and therefore would not readily believe that a different individual could in any sense be he; that they were still less prepared to believe this of such an individual as John the Baptist, whom they had long before determined to reject and who had now been nearly eighteen months in prison. But more importantly, they could not believe John to be the expected Elijah who was to precede without also believing that Jesus was the expected Messiah who was to follow; and this was a point that they were not prepared to concede.

Let us now return to Matthew's account of the transfiguration in chapter 17 to hear the whole conversation:

And His disciples asked Him, saying, "Why then do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?" Jesus answered and said to them, "Indeed, Elijah is coming first and will restore all things. But I say to you that Elijah has come already, and they did not know him but did to him whatever they wished. Likewise the Son of Man is also about

to suffer at their hands." Then the disciples understood that He spoke to them of John the Baptist (Matt 17:11-13).

There is no inconsistency between the statement that Elijah was come already and that Elijah should still come first if one is meant of the spiritual and the other of the literal Elijah; that is, if one is meant of John the Baptist as a type of Elijah in his proper character of the precursor of the Messiah at his first advent and the other of Elijah in person as the antitype of the Baptist in precisely the same relation to the Messiah at his second advent.

I conclude by observing that the belief in the futurity of this second advent before the inauguration of the millennium was generally received among the fathers, who are unanimous also in considering one of the two witnesses mentioned in the book of Revelation to be Elijah.