

THE COMING OF ELIJAH

—Future or Fulfilled?

As a young Christian I assumed that most of the prophecies in the Bible were about things that were still in the future. By the time I wrote *GREAT PROPHECIES OF THE BIBLE* (1971), however, and *HIS TRUTH IS MARCHING ON!* (1977), I had come to the realization that *many* Bible prophecies have already been fulfilled. They are not still future; they are past. Over the years since that time, *and even more so*, have I realized this is the case.

Today, there are those who will take prophecies that were fulfilled long ago, ignore the fulfillment, and attempt to match them to some present-day headline. Here is an example: Did you know that in the Bible, Zephaniah prophesied about the destruction of the Twin Towers in New York and related events of September 11, 2001? So some would have us believe.

“And it shall come to pass in that day, saith the Lord, that there shall be the noise of a cry from the fish gate [the Twin Towers were located adjacent to the Fulton Fish Market, New York’s “fish gate”], and an howling from the second [the crash into The Pentagon in Washington D.C.], and a great crashing from the hills [the crash of the airplane in the hills of Pennsylvania]....A day of the trumpet and alarm against the fortified cities, and against the high towers [the Twin Towers in New York]” (Zeph. 1:10,16).

I will not take time to refute the folly of such speculation; one can simply read the passage in context and see there is no connection. It brings to mind how some back in the 1970s, upon finding the word “Water gate” in the Bible, supposed Nehemiah predicted the Nixon scandal (Neh. 8:1-3).

A good example of a fulfilled prophecy—yet one that many suppose is still future—may be seen in the prophecy about the coming of Elijah. In the book of Malachi, at the very end of the Old Testament, we read these words:

“Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord: and he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse” (Mal. 4:5,6).

According to the *fulfilled* view, which we believe to be correct, the prophecy about the coming of Elijah was fulfilled by the ministry of John the Baptist. This is solidly based on the words of Christ, who said of John: “If you will receive it, **THIS IS ELIJAH, WHICH WAS FOR TO COME**” (Matt. 11:14). In other words, though it may have been hard for some to receive, John the Baptist was the fulfillment of this Old Testament prophecy. He was the Elijah “which was for to come.”

But the evidence does not rest on this verse only. In another passage, the disciples asked Jesus why the scribes were saying that Elijah must first come. “And Jesus answered, Elijah truly shall first come, and restore all things”—quoting Malachi’s prophecy. “But I

say unto you, that ELIJAH IS COME ALREADY, and they knew him not...Then the disciples understood that he spake unto them of John the Baptist” (Matt. 17:10-13).

Failing to accept this explanation of Jesus, over the centuries there have been men who have claimed to be Elijah or to have the “Elijah ministry.” Many years ago, the Chicago preacher, healer, and founder of Zion, Illinois, John Alexander Dowie, believed he was Elijah. An interesting and controversial character, with his beard and forceful preaching, he could have well fit the part. But his kingdom fell into discord, after years of preaching against doctors, he was afflicted, divorced by his cousin-wife, and accused of polygamy.

Quite a number of people believed William Branham was Elijah and that his ministry was the forerunner of Christ’s return. But he was killed in a tragic car accident over 30 years ago now. Altogether there have probably been hundreds who have made the Elijah claim. Such has commonly resulted in misunderstanding and ridicule—all of which could have been avoided by recognizing that John the Baptist, as Jesus explained, had fulfilled the Elijah prophecy.

Now it is true that when John the Baptist began his ministry and was asked: “Are you Elijah?” he answered: “I am not” (John 1:21). He was not the Elijah that had lived many centuries before. The scriptures clearly explain who his parents were and the circumstances surrounding his birth. He was not Elijah in the *literal* sense of the word.

The sense in which John fulfilled the prophecy of Malachi was that he ministered in the spirit and power of Elijah. Before the birth of John, an angel announced: “And many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God. And he shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children...” (Luke 1:16, 17). Again, this wording ties in with the Malachi prophecy.

Did John indeed turn the hearts of the fathers to the children? Did he cause many of the children of Israel to turn unto the Lord? Yes, he did. Multitudes were brought to repentance through his ministry (Matt. 3:5,6). The angel said he would do these things, and he did!

“This is Elijah,” Jesus said, “which was for to come.” We think the evidence for the fulfilled position is clear. Yet there are those, like Scofield, who say the coming of Elijah prophesied in Malachi is “yet to be fulfilled.” (*Scofield Reference Bible*, p. 1023). Another speaks of “the folly of those who persist in casting aside the precious promise of Malachi 4:5, claiming this auspicious event has already been fulfilled in the person and mission of John, and by such persistence endeavor to overthrow the faith of some.” (*The Coming of Jesus and Elijah*, p. 28). I can only say I do not consider it “folly” to accept what Jesus taught on this. Believing what Jesus taught is not “casting aside the precious promise of Malachi,” nor does believing John the Baptist fulfilled the prophecy “overthrow the faith” of anyone.

Because John was not Elijah in a literal sense, there are those who will more or less ignore what Jesus said about John, believing that all prophecy must have a *literal* fulfillment. The following quotation, from Hal Lindsey's well-known book, is typical of this thinking: "ALL prophecy about past events has been fulfilled LITERALLY, particularly the predictions regarding the first coming of Christ." (*The Late Great Planet Earth*, p. 176).

We agree, of course, that many of the prophecies which pointed to Christ's first coming had to do with literal things and events—He would be born at Bethlehem, would heal the sick, speak in parables, be numbered with transgressors, be killed, his bones would not be broken, etc.—but not "ALL" prophecies of Christ's first coming were fulfilled in the LITERAL sense.

Christians recognize Psalm 22 as a prophecy of Christ's first coming and crucifixion, yet LITERAL "bulls" did not attack him, LITERAL "dogs" did not compass him about, nor was he saved from the mouths of LITERAL "lions."

Another example is Psalm 118:22: "The stone which the builders refused is become the head stone of the corner." According to Christ himself, this prophecy found fulfillment in his first coming and rejection (Matt. 21:33-44); but it was not fulfilled in a LITERAL sense!

According to Matthew, Isaiah 42:1 was fulfilled in connection with Christ's first coming: "A bruised reed shall he not break, and smoking flax shall he not quench" (Matt. 12:15-21). Such language prefigured the kindness and mercy of Christ. But the real meaning would not be understood by taking words like "reed" and "flax" in a LITERAL sense.

John referred to Jesus as "the lamb of God" (John 1:29), but Jesus was not a literal lamb.

Jesus said: "I am the good shepherd" (John 10:11), but he was not a keeper of literal sheep. His trade had been carpentry.

Jesus said: "I am the door" (John 10:9), but he was not a door in the literal, material sense. He said: "I am the true vine" (John 15:1), but he was not a literal vine. He said: "I am come to send fire on the earth" (Lk. 12:49). This must be understood in a spiritual sense. He did not go about lighting fires in the literal sense.

A prophecy closely related to Christ's ministry had to do with John—as the one who would prepare the way of the Lord: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight" (Isa. 40:3,4).

Now the literalist might see in a passage like this modern free-way construction, with mountains being cut down, valleys filled in, and the crooked highway made straight! But turning to Luke 3:2-5, it may be clearly seen this was a prophetic picture of John preparing the way for the ministry of Christ 2,000 years ago. It is highly poetic language that was never intended in a literal sense.

Some even try to use the literal method in interpreting the book of Revelation—a book of *symbols*! What about the "woman" of Chapter 12, clothed with the sun, the moon under her feet, and with 12 stars in her crown? Would any take this to be a literal woman, clothed with the literal sun, and so huge that her feet could reach

all the way to the moon? Or what about the great red dragon who takes his tail and casts a third of the stars to the earth? If this is a literal dragon, and the stars are literal stars, how big would it have to be?

The literalist cries: "WE take the Bible just as it reads!"—as though other Christians didn't. Or a statement like, "The Bible means just what it says and says just what it means," sounds good on the surface. But in fact, the Bible often presents truth in veiled language. It uses figures of speech. It uses parables. It uses satire. It uses poetry. It uses types and shadows. It uses symbolism. It uses hyperbole. It uses all of these things—as well as literal statements.

The big question is this: How did Christ and the apostles interpret the Bible? By reading the Old Testament references they quoted in the New Testament, it is evident they did not follow the literal method of interpretation. If the Old Testament was to always be taken in the strict literal sense—just as it reads!—it would not have been necessary for Jesus to "open" and explain the real meaning to his disciples (Lk. 24:25-32). Often there was a SPIRITUAL meaning the strict literalist would never grasp.

Being misled by the concept of literal interpretation, the Jews of Christ's day misunderstood much of his teaching. When he said: "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up," the Jews took this literally. "Then said the Jews, Forty and six years was this temple in building, and will you raise it up in three days?" But Jesus spoke of the temple of his body (John 2:19-21).

Or consider the case of Nicodemus. When Jesus spoke of being born again, Nicodemus took it literally. "How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born?" (John 3:4). But Jesus spoke of a *spiritual* birth.

To the woman at the well, Jesus spoke about water she could drink and never get thirsty again! Thinking in the literal sense, she wanted this water so she would no longer have to make the trip to the well. But there was a deeper meaning; Jesus spoke of spiritual water. Later, when the disciples returned with food, Jesus said: "I have meat to eat that you know not of." Thinking literally, the disciples wondered who had given him food (John 4:14-34).

At the time of Jesus's ministry, the Jews wanted a Messiah who would overthrow the Roman government and set them up as the ruling power in a kingdom of Jewish supremacy. Basing their ideas on a LITERAL interpretation of certain Old Testament prophecies, they supposed Messiah's kingdom would be an earthly, materialistic, political kingdom. But, the kingdom which Christ set up was far greater than this—a spiritual kingdom that would ultimately extend to the whole world, not on the basis of race, but grace!

—Ralph Woodrow