

## Was John the Baptist Elijah?

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*“Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.”*” (John 1:21, NKJV)

*“And if you are willing to receive it, he is Elijah who is to come.”*  
(Matthew 11:14).

We have what seems to be a contradiction between John the Baptist’s emphatic statement that he was not Elijah, and Jesus’ words which seem to imply that John the Baptist was Elijah. We all know that there can be no contradictions in the Bible, so any confusion is not the result of anything in God’s Word, but is a result of our lack of complete understanding. To resolve the apparent contradiction, we follow the rules of biblical interpretation of understanding the unclear passage in light of the clearest passage, and understanding all passages within their own context, the entire context of all the Scriptures, and within the Bible’s whole theological and doctrinal framework.

John the Baptist’s words as recorded in the Gospel of John are as follows, *“Now this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?” He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, “I am not the Christ.” And they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you the Prophet?” And he answered, “No.” Then they said to him, “Who are you, that we may give an answer to those who sent us? What do you say about yourself?” He said: “I am ‘The voice of one crying in the wilderness: “Make straight the way of the LORD,”” as the prophet Isaiah said”*” (John 1:19-23).

Jesus’ words concerning John the Baptist as recorded in the Gospel of Matthew are as follows, *“As they departed, Jesus began to say to the multitudes concerning John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? But what did you go out to see? A man clothed in soft garments? Indeed, those who wear soft clothing are in kings’ houses. But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I say to you, and more than a prophet. For this is he of whom it is written: ‘Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, Who will prepare Your way before You.’ “Assuredly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist; but he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force. For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John. And if you are willing to*

*receive it, he is Elijah who is to come. He who has ears to hear, let him hear!”* (Matthew 11:7-15). *“ 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”* (Matthew 17:10-13).

The angel Gabriel’s words concerning John the Baptist as recorded in the Gospel of Luke are as follows, *“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 1:17).

There are three Old Testament passages that are relevant to the ministry of John the Baptist and Elijah. This establishes a point of similarity between the ministries of both of these prophets. Additional verses setting these passages in context are provided here, so that we will be sure to follow this proper rule of biblical interpretation. *“The voice of one crying in the wilderness: “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 brought low; The crooked places shall be made straight And the rough places smooth; The glory of the LORD shall be revealed, And all flesh shall see it together; For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.””* (Isaiah 40:3-5). *““Behold, I send My messenger, And he will prepare the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, Will suddenly come to His temple, Even the Messenger of the covenant, In whom you delight. Behold, He is coming,” Says the LORD of hosts. “But who can endure the day of His coming? And who can stand when He appears? For He is like a refiner’s fire And like launderers’ soap. He will sit as a refiner and a purifier of silver; He will purify the sons of Levi, And purge them as gold and silver, That they may offer to the LORD An offering in righteousness”* (Malachi 3:1-3). *“Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet Before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD. 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.”* (Malachi 4:5-6). What we find here is that all three of these Old Testament passages deal with the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, and not His First Advent.

We conclude then that John the Baptist was not Elijah based upon the following lines of reasoning.

1. John clearly stated that he was not Elijah.
2. Jesus stated that John was Elijah who is to come, drawing a distinction between the two individuals. One present and one to come in the future. The Elijah who has come already is identified as John the Baptist, the type of Elijah to come.
3. Jesus stated that John was only Elijah for those who believe in Him. How could he be Elijah for some people and not for other people?
4. Gabriel makes a distinction between John and Elijah.
5. Elijah was born in Tishbi around 900 BC. John the Baptist was born about 900 years later in Ein Kerem. According to Jesus, John was greater than any other prophet born of women. That would include Elijah, making them distinct individuals. The Bible does not teach reincarnation, so these cannot be the same person (Hebrews 9:27-28).

We also make the following theological and eschatological conclusions based upon all the evidence.

1. John the Baptist is both a fulfillment in type of Elijah and also a type of Elijah who is to come.
2. John the Baptist had the function of being the forerunner (or herald) of Jesus in His First Advent. He came exercising his prophetic ministry according to the power of God the Holy Spirit. John was murdered, then Jesus was murdered.
3. Elijah will have the function of being the forerunner (or herald) of Jesus in His Second Coming. He came exercising his prophetic ministry according to the power of God the Holy Spirit. He will return exercising his prophetic ministry according to the power of God the Holy Spirit.
4. Reading the Scriptures literally, we take God at His Word that Elijah will literally return to herald the Second Coming. Having been taken to heaven, he will return to perform the function of heralding the Second Coming of King Jesus in the same glorified state that we find him in at the Transfiguration in Matthew 17:3. Elijah will come in victory, then Jesus will come in victory.