

THE COMING OF ELIJAH: WHO? AND WHAT?

By Paul Penno Jr.
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The prospect intrigues thoughtful people worldwide. Elijah was the man who single-handedly confronted apostate Ahab and wicked Queen Jezebel during gross apostasy in Baal worship. When the nation's rulers tried to kill him he had to hide in an unknown spot by the Brook Cherith, and later as a guest of a widow in the heathen land of Sidon. And Elijah is not dead: he was translated without seeing death, a type of those living today (do I dare say, "us"?) who will welcome Jesus at His second coming in glory. We must read the great promise as it is word for word in Malachi 4:5, 6:

"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. . ."

Why hasn't God's promise yet been fulfilled? What is Elijah going to do when he comes? Why has God chosen to send him rather than say Enoch, who was also translated without seeing death? In all the 6000 years of human history, only these two people have escaped the ravages of death. Enoch was translated before the flood of Noah, obviously has had more experience watching earthly events.

Elijah must be someone special for he was chosen to accompany the resurrected Moses to

visit with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matthew 17) and encourage Him as He faced the horror of His cross.

Elijah is a live human being, never tasted death, and he must possess a glorified body. Where he is in the universe no one knows. Is Elijah being forced to hide in some modern "Brook Cherith" or as a guest of some foreign "widow of Zarephath" who is outside "Israel"? You remember, when Ahab and Jezebel tried to kill him and Elijah found refuge in Sidon, Jesus cited that fact to the acute embarrassment and anger of the true church of that day. What made them angry were these words of Jesus:

"I tell you truly, many widows were in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was great famine throughout all the land; but to none of them was Elijah sent except to Zarephath, in the region of Sidon [a pagan land]. . . All those in the synagogue, when they heard these things, were filled with wrath. . ." (Luke 4:26, 28).

This promise of sending us Elijah is sure.

Jesus promises, "I will come again," and we believe that one; that's why we are Seventh-day Adventists. We must believe this promise, too! It's the next great event on His calendar. We make much of the terrible things coming—religious persecution, for example, and we publish our magazine *Liberty*—which is very good. But do we have a magazine devoted to "Elijah's" work and his message?

Actually, Elijah is good news and he encourages our children, whereas the frightening political situation is bad news. And what the Lord wants to tell the world is good news. He wants a new covenant motivation to replace our time-honored old covenant one.

The common perception some have of “Elijah” is of a fiery-tempered reformer who specializes in chopping heads off religious leaders with whom he disagrees—that is, prophets of Baal. But that is not a balanced view of Elijah’s ministry. True, he arranged for 450 of them at Carmel to be taken down to the Brook Kishon for that to be done to them.

And the Lord may appoint Elijah to do the equivalent to modern “prophets of Baal,” but that is not the primary work he will do. Note, he will “turn the hearts” of “fathers” and “children,” and that requires turning marital hearts also. In other words, the topic of our Sabbath School lessons this last quarter is the Elijah message of “turning hearts” in our homes. That’s what we call “reconciliation,” and reconciliation is the same as “atonement,” making two to be one. According to the prophecy of Daniel 8:14, we are living in the great antitypical Day of Atonement which comes just before “the great and dreadful day of the Lord.” In fact, today is that day, the special time of reconciliation, of turning hearts.

Therefore it becomes clear that Elijah’s work and message will be found in the unique remnant-church-truth of the cleansing of the heavenly sanctuary. We know that the bulk of God’s true people are still in “Babylon.” There are modern

“Obadiah’s” who keep them alive with a little famine food and water. We too easily forget that the three angels’ messages of Revelation 14 are primarily directed to the Sunday-keeping churches; that’s where the bulk of God’s people are still to be found.

You already know the story of the original Elijah.

In 1 Kings 17:1 he appears out of nowhere, no designation of “prophet” or evidence that the Lord had sent him. He just suddenly crashes the king’s gate and startles him at his desk with the news that no more rain will fall until he agrees for it to come, “except at my word.” Face it, this sounds arrogant. He doesn’t say, “until the Lord agrees for rain to fall.” He says, “at my word.” Shocking as it is, Elijah has taken over the administration of the Lord’s work in Israel. God has entrusted enormous responsibility to him personally, including control of the elements. Elijah is a forerunner of that group of overcoming people in Revelation 3:21 to whom Jesus says He will grant to “sit with Me in my throne, even as I overcame and sat down with My Father in His throne.” Just as God gave executive authority to Elijah, so He will give executive authority to those who overcome even as Christ overcame. Elijah will have some important part to have from now on.

James in the New Testament does not say that the drought was the primary will of God; rather, it was His answer to the initiative of Elijah’s prayer:

“Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months. And

he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain . . .” (James 5:17, 18).

Ahab, you better send your soldiers quick and catch that man before he gets away; he has your kingdom in the palm of his hand!

But he did get away, and we follow him as he takes refuge at a little tributary of the Jordan where the ravens brought him gourmet meals (swiped probably from Ahab’s dinner table). But even providential water dries up and Elijah is directed to pagan Sidon—because (this is to the shame of God’s people!) there wasn’t a widow in Israel who had the faith or the nerve of this believing pagan lady of Zarephath. She preserved his life and fed him to nourish him until he took the long journey back to Ahab.

After the famine had sobered even Ahab and Jezebel, Elijah suddenly confronts Obadiah; the king slinks humiliated to meet him, the appointment is made to call the people to Mt. Carmel, Elijah taunts the Baal preachers, demands that they demonstrate before the crowd the lie that their imported Baal worship is, and he prays a prayer that gives us a clue to what the modern “Elijah” will do when he comes again:

“Hear me, O LORD, hear me, that this people may know that You are the LORD God, and that You have turned their hearts back to You again” (1 Kings 18:37; emphasis added)

Did you catch it? “Turning hearts” is Elijah’s main concern, and that will be his work for the church and for the world when he comes just before the return of Jesus. And we know that turning alienated

hearts in atonement (at-one-ment) is something only the message of Christ’s cross can accomplish. Therefore it follows that Elijah’s message will be lifting up “Christ and Him crucified.” Jesus says something parallel to sending Elijah,

“Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be cast out. And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself.’ This He said, signifying by what death He would die” (John 12:31-33).

As an evangelist, Paul caught the idea. This at last is real “evangelism”:

“And I, brethren, when I came to you, . . . determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified” (1 Corinthians 2:1, 2).

Paul turned his world upside down with that message. From this we conclude that the message of that fourth angel which lightens the earth with glory (Rev. 18:1-4) will not be a fear-motivated brand of spiritual terrorism. Wherever and whoever “Elijah” is, he is not a spiritual terrorist scaring people into conversion; he is pleading as an “ambassador for Christ, . . . we implore you, be reconciled to God” (2 Cor. 5:20). What is the message he bears? What Christ accomplished on His cross:

“For He [the Father] made Him [Jesus] who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (vs. 21).

What was ancient Israel’s fundamental problem?

Something called “Baal worship.” We are inclined to think the people were stupid to confuse such an

apparently clumsy counterfeit as Baal for Him who is the true God. But it was extremely sophisticated and subtle. Don't kid yourself into thinking you are too smart to be misled. Almost everybody got swept in, the elite included. Is there such a thing as Baal-worship today that presents a challenge to us as it did to ancient Israel? The Lord's servant has some serious insights. It's a time of a serious crisis in the Lord's work:

"Infidelity has been making its inroads in our ranks; for it is the fashion to depart from Christ, and give place to skepticism. With many the cry of the heart has been, 'We will not have this Man to reign over us.' [Lk 19:14] Baal, Baal, is the choice. The religion of many among us will be the religion of apostate Israel, because they love their own way, and forsake the way of the Lord. The true religion, the only religion of the Bible, that teaches forgiveness only through the merits of a crucified and risen Saviour, that advocates righteousness by the faith of the Son of God, has been slighted, spoken against, ridiculed, and rejected."¹

The date gives this startling statement its context: the 1888 message of Christ's righteousness which was "in a great degree" rejected and "kept away by our own brethren," she says, and from the world. What happened when the latter rain and the Loud Cry had to be withdrawn? She explains:

"By exciting that opposition Satan succeeded in shutting away from our people, in a great measure, the special power of the Holy Spirit that God longed

to impart to them. The enemy prevented them from obtaining that efficiency which might have been theirs in carrying the truth to the world, as the apostles proclaimed it after the day of Pentecost. The light that is to lighten the whole earth with its glory [Revelation 18:1-4] was resisted, and by the action of our own brethren has been in a great degree kept away from the world."²

The crisis Elijah faced in Israel was terrible.

We need to grasp how exceedingly clever was this counterfeit of Baal worship. Almost entire Israel was deceived. The word Baal was common. In ancient terminology, the husband was the master, the ba'al, of the wife who was dependent on him for her whole livelihood and over whom he had total authority. "Baal" being the simple everyday word for "lord," the people used it for God just as we today use the word "Lord." They were actually afraid to pronounce the sacred name which even today we are not sure how to pronounce—Yahweh, Yakweh, or Jehovah.

The Bible describes three aspects of Baal worship. Ellen White says it took the people about a century on this slippery slope (cf. Jer. 23:12) of confusion to descend to the Baal worship of Ahab's and Jezebel's day.

(1) It was an unconscious apostasy. Like a frog in warm water that gradually gets hot until he is boiled, the people were unconscious of this falling away. After Israel fell, the southern kingdom Judah also

¹ *Testimonies to Ministers*, pp. 467, 468; 1890.

² Letter to Uriah Smith, 1SM 234, 235; 1896.

became infatuated with it. Jeremiah remonstrates with them,

“How can you say, I am not polluted? I have not gone after the Baals? See your way in the valley, know what you have done” (Jer. 2:23).

They were as unconscious of their falling away as is modern Laodicea of ours, to whom the Lord Jesus says in our genuine sincerity, “You . . . do not know . . .” your true condition before God, before the world, and before the universe (Rev. 3:17).

(2) This Baal worship was subtly combined with the true worship of the Lord in His Jerusalem Temple:

“The children of Judah . . . have set their abominations in the house which is called by My name to pollute it” (Jer. 7:30).

(3) To make bad become worse, this Baal worship was promoted by the very priests who were ordained to lead the people in the worship of the true Lord:

“Both prophet and priest are profane. . . They prophesied by Baal and caused My people Israel to err. . . Profaneness has gone out into all the land” (Jer. 23:11-15).

A simple definition of Baal-worship, both ancient and contemporary, is this: the worship of self disguised as the worship of Christ. It's the assimilation of the thinking of “nations” around us in modern “Babylon.” The only remedy: the crucifixion of self “with Christ.” But that in turn becomes possible only as we understand what happened on the cross. Babylon just cannot grasp it due to their

embracing the pagan-papal doctrine of natural immortality of the human soul. We say it humbly: no church on earth can proclaim what happened on the cross as can Seventh-day Adventists. This is said with deep respect to the Sunday-keeping popular churches; their doctrine has blinded them. They may be ever so sincere.

Here is one of the most comforting assurances ever penned for those who stand for the right against opposition and apostasy in the church:

Those who, while spending their life energies in self-sacrificing labor, are tempted to give way to despondency and distrust, may gather courage from the experience of Elijah. God's watchful care, His love, His power, are especially manifest in behalf of His servants whose zeal is misunderstood or unappreciated, whose counsels and reproofs are slighted, and whose efforts toward reform are repaid with hatred and opposition. . . .

Those who, standing in the forefront of the conflict, are impelled by the Holy Spirit to do a special work, will frequently feel a reaction when the pressure is removed. Despondency may shake the most heroic faith and 'weaken the most steadfast will. But God understands, and He still pities and loves. . . . To wait patiently, to trust when everything looks dark, is the lesson that the leaders in God's work need to learn. Heaven will not fail them in their day of adversity. Nothing is apparently more helpless, yet really more invincible, than the soul that feels its nothingness and relies wholly on God. . . . He who was Elijah's strength is strong to uphold every struggling child of His, no matter how weak. .

. . In the might of God he may be strong to overcome evil and to help others to overcome.”³

The apostasy in Elijah’s day was the sophisticated deception of Baal-worship, in our modern parlance a counterfeit righteousness by faith. After a century of gradually deepening spiritual darkness, the national leadership and the people actually supposed that it was genuine worship (PK 119-124; 127, 133, 147, 153). Why? The name “Baal” was the common word for “lord” or “husband” (the Israelites were afraid to pronounce God’s sacred name). Baal was the ecumenical idea of God as understood by the surrounding nations. Why not be like them? Why not import from the “Babylon” of that day their concepts of theology and worship? The leadership and the vast majority of the “true church” of Elijah’s day had unwittingly slipped into apostasy. “Nearly the whole of Israel united in denouncing Elijah” (PK 126).

As a direct result of rejecting the 1688 message of Christ’s righteousness Ellen White says that “we” created a vacuum into which has rushed the confusion of modern Baal worship:

The prejudices and opinions that prevailed at Minneapolis are not dead by any means; the seeds sown there in some hearts are ready to spring into life and bear a like harvest. The tops have been cut down, but the roots have never been eradicated, and they still bear their unholy fruit to poison the judgment, pervert the perceptions, and blind the understanding of those with whom you connect, in

³ PK 173-175.

regard to the [1888] message and the messengers.

. . .

With many the cry of the heart has been, “We will not have this man [Christ] to reign over us.” Baal, Baal, is the choice. The religion of many among us will be the religion of apostate Israel, because they love their own way, and forsake the way of the Lord. The true religion, the only religion of the Bible, that teaches forgiveness only through the merits of a crucified and risen Saviour, that advocates righteousness by the faith of the Son of God, has been slighted.”⁴

“Is there Biblical evidence that Elijah understood and preached the grace of God, that is, righteousness by faith? Was he stern, hard, lacking compassion?” We know:

1. God sent him (1 Kings 17; 18), and “God is love” (1 John 4:8).

2. His message was preeminently reconciliation of alienated hearts in home and national life (Mal. 4:5, 6). That took “grace unlimited.”

3. His prayer on Mt. Carmel was calm, simple, heart-felt, gracious.

4. The people’s “heart” was “turned . . . back again” (1 Kings 18:37).

5. What did it was God’s acceptance of the blood sacrifice that clearly prefigured Christ’s sacrifice on His cross (vs. 33). It’s not too much to say: Elijah preached to the nation a great sermon on the cross that day.

⁴ Ellen G. White, “Danger of Adopting Worldly Policy in the Work of God” (1892), P. 118.

6. The people responded, believed, humbled their hearts before this divine revelation of the abounding grace and forgiveness of God. But the priests of Baal hardened their hearts against it; in hopeless rejection, they would crucify Christ a thousand times over. This demonstration was in miniature the judgment at the end of the millennium (Rev. 20:11-15). To execute the priests of Baal was the people's choice, their unanimous will. It was clear: their sin was the unpardonable one.

7. The fruit of Elijah's ministry? Genuine reformation and revival. And God translated him! (2 Kings 2:11). Pretty good evidence of grace.

If at the tsunami someone knowledgeable had yelled and screamed at you, "Run for higher ground!" would you have said, "Stay put. He doesn't sound sweet and mild!"? There are times when love (agape) must scream at you.

Who is "Elijah" today, and where is He?

God honored the faith of the honest Jews of Christ's day and sent them "Elijah" in fulfillment of Malachi's promise because they sincerely expected that the coming of their Messiah would be "the great and dreadful day of the Lord." Even the disciples wondered "who" and "where" their "Elijah" was. Jesus told them he had already come in the person of John the Baptist:

"Assuredly I say to you, among those born of woman there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist. . . . And if you are willing to receive it, he is Elijah who is to come" (Matthew 11:11-13).

But John's day was not "the great and dreadful day of the Lord." That day is now. Therefore we

may expect "Elijah" to come as a message in the same way that John's message was the fulfillment of Malachi's promise. The message to come as a shaking message will "slay" the modern "prophets of Baal." "Elijah" won't need to decapitate anyone; each "prophet of Baal" will create his own disappearing act (emphasis in each statement is added):

"There will be a refining, winnowing process in every church, for there are among us wicked men who do not love the truth or honor God."⁵

"We are in the shaking time, the time when everything that can be shaken will be shaken."⁶

"In the absence of persecution there have drifted into our ranks men who appear sound and their Christianity unquestionable, but who, if persecution should arise, would go out from us."⁷

"Those who . . . continue to counterwork the work God would have accomplished will be purged out, for God accepts the service of no man whose interest is divided."⁸

"Those who have had great light and precious privileges but have not improved them will, under one pretext or another, go out from us."⁹

"Many a star that we have admired for its brilliance will then go out in darkness."¹⁰

⁵ RH March 19, 1895.

⁶ 6T 332 (1900).

⁷ Ev 360 (1890).

⁸ Ms. 64 (1898).

⁹ 6T 400 (1900).

¹⁰ PK 188 (c. 1914).

“Frequent will be the apostasies of men who have occupied responsible positions.”¹¹

“The great issue so near at hand will weed out those whom God has not appointed, and He will have a pure, true, sanctified ministry prepared for the latter rain.”¹²

“Elijah” will proclaim nothing but positive “straight testimony.”

It will be the best Good News the world or the church has ever heard.

How can one tell the difference between a genuine “Elijah” message that God sends, and a clever counterfeit? When God fulfills His promise to send “Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord” (Mal. 4:5), there will be very certain evidences:

(1) The message will be as unpopular as Elijah’s was in his day. The news of what Elijah said to King Ahab about “no rain” flew throughout the kingdom like word goes on the Web today. Many far and near will condemn it while at the same time the message will “go” far and near.

(2) The message will be uncomfortable to those who love sin and worldliness, because it will be inspired by a Visitor, the Holy Spirit, whose first work is to “convict . . . of sin.”

(3) Elijah’s message will proclaim full religious freedom. To those in Israel who wanted to worship Baal, Elijah gave the ultimate in opportunity. Risking his life on Mt. Carmel, he invited the 450 prophets of Baal to do their thing before everybody. Gave

¹¹ RH, Sept. 11, 1888.

¹² 3SM, 385; 1886.

them full access to every advantage the media of the day could afford. It was a full, unhindered demonstration of Baal worship. It follows that in these last days, the true Christ will give full liberty to “Baal” to do his thing, publicity, swollen budgets. Let the people have a big dose, so they can get sick of it on their own. There might even be something to that proportion of 450 to 1. When the final showdown comes, as it was on Mt. Carmel, we read that when the storm at last begins to blow, multitudes of what we have thought were true disciples will be like “dry leaves,” like in Jesus’ day when “many of His disciples went back, and walked no more with Him” (John 6:66).

(4) “Elijah” will have a positive message, as he had on Mt. Carmel. He didn’t spend his precious time railing against Baal worship, but re-built the broken down altar of the true God, and called on the people to see what happens when His worship is restored.

(5) The fruit of Elijah’s message? A national repentance: “When all the people saw it, they fell on their faces: and they said, The LORD, he is the God” (1 Kings 18:39). As in John the Baptist’s fulfillment of the Elijah message, so the message that comes “before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord” will “make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (Luke 1:17).

It appears that “the third angel’s message in verity” (Rev. 14:1-12) and the “Elijah message” are the same: repentance permeating the “body of Christ.”

His message will be the “third angel’s message in verity,” which will be a clearer concept of “the everlasting gospel” since Pentecost’s message. The Protestant Reformers of the 16th century understood justification by faith clearly for their time; but they, including the Wesleys, lived too soon to grasp the cleansing of the heavenly sanctuary in this Day of Atonement. Even Ellen Harmon failed to grasp it until after the Great Disappointment of October 22, 1844. When she came to her 60’s she eagerly welcomed a message brought by two young men to a General Conference Session in 1888 that brought a more clear understanding of justification by faith, the beginning of the Loud Cry of Revelation 18. She exclaimed with enthusiasm that it’s initial “showers from heaven of the latter rain.” It was the Elijah message.