



---

Conducted by  
Frank Worgan

---

**Question:** *"How are we to reconcile the seemingly contradictory statements in the following passages: Mal. 4:5, Matt. 11:14, Luke 1:17, with John 1:21-22?"*

I think it would be useful to quote the passages to which our questioner refers and I am pleased to see that he underlines the word 'seemingly', because it reveals that whatever difficulty these verses present, our brother realizes that the contradiction is more apparent than real. These are the quotations:

**Mal. 4:5.** *"Behold I will send you Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes . . ."*

**Matt. 11:14.** *"If you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come"* (The words of the Lord Jesus concerning John the Baptizer).

**Luke 1:17.** *"He (John) will go before him (the Messiah) in the spirit and power of Elijah"*. (The words of the angel of the Lord to John's parents).

**John 1:21-22.** *"What then? Are you Elijah?" "I am not"*. (The question put to John by the Jews, and his reply).

In offering an answer to the question I would like to change the order in which the New Testament passages are listed; which means commencing with:

**The Context: John 1:21-22**

The passage in John ch. 1 is the passage which seems to create the difficulty. It will help, therefore, to think about the series of questions put to John by the delegation sent to him by the priests and Levites in Jerusalem.

1. Their first question was, *"Who are you?"* v. 19.

Now, it is obvious that they were not asking about *his ancestry or parentage*, because, since his father was Zechariah the priest this would be well known. It is true that Zechariah was already an old man when John was born (**Luke 1:18**), and at the commencement of his own ministry John would be at least 30 years old.

But even if Zechariah had died - which is by no means certain - we may be sure that it is unlikely that the priests did not know of his relationship to John. After all, the miraculous circumstances surrounding John's birth had created a sensation, as we read in **Luke 1**, and the event itself was common knowledge.

John obviously understood what the priestly delegation was asking. They wanted to

know if *he claimed to be the Messiah*, even though they did not use that name.

His reply was a resounding and emphatic, "*I am not the Christ.*"

2. Then came a second question. If he did not claim to be the Messiah, *precisely what role did he claim to be fulfilling?* Notice that this question was not "*Who then?*" but "*What then?*" In other words, "*So! Do you think that you are fulfilling the role of the prophet Elijah?*" John realised the implication of this question also, and again immediately answered in the negative.

3. Then came a third question; "*Are you that prophet?*" - which is a reference to **Deut. 18:15**, where Moses prophesied that God would raise up a prophet like himself to whom the people must listen. Yet again, John answered "*No*". It is interesting to notice, also, that, in response to these three questions, John's answers became progressively shorter. His replies were, "*I am not the Christ*" v20. "*I am not*" v21. "*No*" v21.

He did not offer elaborate explanations or make extravagant claims, but merely responded with denials.

This may account for the obvious exasperation revealed by his inquisitors in v22.

#### John's Explanation-

But, when he eventually explained his mission, it is unlikely that these priestly messengers were made either much happier or much wiser! John said, "*I am a voice (not, 'the' voice) crying in the wilderness.*" His humility revealed itself. No great personality! No claim to greatness or importance, here! Just a voice!

This can only mean that John rejected any suggestion that he might be Elijah *in the literal and physical sense of Jewish expectation.*

#### Jewish Expectations

There is no doubt that no Old Testament prophet exerted such a tremendous fascination upon the Jewish mind as did Elijah. They certainly looked for the ancient prophet to *return to earth* - (remember the miraculous manner of Elijah's departure, described in **2 Kings 2:1**) - as the prelude to the coming of their Messiah, and they expected a quite literal fulfilment of the familiar promise found in **Mal. 4:5**.

Indeed, this was a popular item of Jewish doctrine in the days of the Lord Himself.

The 'Mishna', which is the section of the Jewish Talmud setting out the teaching of Judaism, declares that at His coming, Elijah's mission would be the establishing of order in readiness for the appearance of the Messiah. There is even a Jewish doctrine which claims that the Messiah would remain hidden until Elijah pointed Him out and anointed Him.

Furthermore, even today, orthodox Jews firmly cling to their belief in the re-appearance of Elijah. It is seen whenever a Jewish family celebrates the Passover meal, called the 'Seder'. An empty chair is placed at the table, in expectation of Elijah's coming.

#### The Key to John's Identity: Luke 1:17

But the answer to the question of John's identity and mission must be sought in the statement made by the angel of the Lord, who was sent to announce the gift of a son to the aged Zechariah and Elizabeth.

The heavenly messenger declared that John would go before the Messiah *'in the spirit and power of Elijah'* **Luke 1:17**. This establishes clearly and emphatically that John was not to be thought of as Elijah *in the physical sense*, nor should his birth be regarded as a *bodily* re-appearance of the ancient prophet, or that there would be any *physical* resemblance between the two men.

There was, in fact, a *re-appearance* of Elijah! It occurred on the Mount of Transfiguration, as recorded in **Matt. 17:3**. However, by that time Herod had executed John (**Matt. 14:1-12**). Yet, when we read the account of the Transfiguration it becomes

quite clear that the three disciples who witnessed it, Peter, James and John, did not think that they were observing a re-appearance of John the Baptizer, whom they must have seen during his ministry and whom they would certainly have recognised.

Somehow - and please do not ask me *how!* - they were able to identify both Moses and Elijah, whom they could never have seen before.

Would it not seem strange, if, having moved Elijah from the earth miraculously (2 Kings 2:11), God then brought him back to suffer a cruel death at the hands of such a wicked man as Herod?

**The Lord's Own Comment: Matt. 11:17**

Here we have a definitive statement made by the Lord Himself, after John, who was in prison at the time, sent his disciples with a question which some of those who heard it mistakenly took to imply that John had begun to have doubts about the identity and mission of Jesus.

Defending John against such base suspicions, the Lord pointed out that, not only was John more than an ordinary prophet, he was, in fact, the one whose coming was predicted by the prophet Malachi, and who was to proclaim the approach of the King Messiah.

In the verse in Malachi, God calls this future herald '*My messenger*' - (which is interesting, because the Hebrew name 'Malachi' means '*Messenger of Jah*').

In speaking about John and figuratively calling him '*Elijah who is to come*', the Lord knew that he was contradicting the popular and firmly held belief in the physical return of Elijah.

This is why he prefaced his words in v.14, with '*if you are willing to accept it*'.

And the proof that he was not saying that John was Elijah, physically returned to earth is seen in his use of a formula which shows that he was speaking in a figurative sense.

That form of words, "*He who has ears to hear, let him hear*", is one which he frequently used at the end of a parable, and when using parabolic illustrations.

We conclude, therefore, that the Lord was, in effect, saying:

*"Those among you who are able - and prepared - to receive the truth, will no longer look for a future return of Elijah. You will recognise that, in John, the prophecy of Malachi has already been fulfilled, for John came to do the work of which the prophet spoke."*

(Questions to: Frank Worgan, 5 Gryfebank Way, Houston  
Renfrewshire, Scotland. PA6 7NZ.)