“Was John the Baptist Elijah?”

Was John the Baptist Elijah? John 1:21 and Matthew 11:14 appear to give different answers to this question.

To begin, the Lord had promised Israel that He would send them Elijah the prophet before “the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord” (Mal. 4:5). When the Jews saw John, and heard his preaching, they clearly wondered if he might be the promised figure of Elijah. But why?

First, as Edwin Blum points out in his commentary on John, “John had an Elijah-type ministry. He appeared on the scene suddenly and even dressed like Elijah. He sought to turn people back to God as Elijah did in his day” (*The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, eds. John Walvoord and Roy Zuck [Victor Books, 1983], 274). Thus, when the Jews saw someone who dressed like Elijah and had a similar ministry as Elijah’s, they rightly wondered whether he might in fact BE Elijah.

But John said he was not Elijah. And, as you pointed out, this seems odd because in Matt. 11:14 Jesus says of John, “And if you care to accept it, he himself is Elijah, who was to come.” So what’s going on here? Charles Ryrie comments on this verse, “Jesus is saying that if the Jews had received Him, they would also have understood that John fulfilled the O.T. prediction of the coming of Elijah before the day of the Lord” (*Ryrie Study Bible*, 1463). But of course the Jews did not receive Jesus at His first coming. Indeed, in the next chapter (Matt. 12) there is clear evidence of the rejection of Jesus by the Jewish religious establishment (vv. 22-45). Afterward, Jesus began to veil His message in parables (see Matt. 13:10-15). And later still, after the Transfiguration when the disciples ask Jesus why the scribes say that Elijah must come first, Jesus responds by saying, “Elijah is coming and will restore

all things; but I say to you, that Elijah already came, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they wished." Then the text goes on to say, "Then the disciples understood that He had spoken to them about John the Baptist" (Matt. 17:10-13).

Here's what I think is going on. John the Baptist would have served as the fulfillment of God's promise to send Elijah before the day of the Lord (Mal. 4:5) IF the Jews had received Jesus as their Messiah. They did not, however, and so, as Jesus makes clear in Matt. 17:11, Elijah is still to come. Indeed, some commentators believe that one of the two witnesses mentioned in Rev. 11:3 may be "Elijah". Of course, as in the case of John the Baptist, this does not necessarily mean the literal, historical Elijah, but simply someone who comes in the spirit and power of Elijah and performs a similar ministry. At any rate, this is how I think we should understand the Baptist's response in John 1:21. He is led to deny that he is Elijah because God already knows that the Jews would reject His Son. Hence, as Jesus later affirms in Matt. 17:11, Elijah is still to come.

Hope this helps. God bless you!

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"How Did John the Baptist Get the Idea to Baptize People?"

Where did John the Baptist get the idea to dunk people in water and call it baptism? It can't be the same as our baptism today, depicting the death, burial, and resurrection; that

hadn't happened yet. He preached baptism for the remittance of sin. But where did the idea come from?

Thanks for your question. D.S. Dockery has a good discussion of this issue in his article on "Baptism" in the *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* [eds. Joel Green and Scot McNight (Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1992), 55-58].

Although the Jews practiced a form of proselyte baptism, "there is no clear evidence prior to A.D. 70 that proselytes underwent baptism as a requirement of conversion" (Ibid., 56). Dockery presents the following arguments against the view that Jewish proselyte baptism served as the model for John's baptism (ibid., 56):

1. There is no clear reference to Jewish proselyte baptism in the OT, Philo, or Josephus.
2. Jewish proselyte baptism was self-administered; John's baptism was administered by John.
3. There are grammatical differences between how the term "baptism" is used in the NT and how it is used in texts mentioning Jewish proselyte baptism.
4. John baptized *Jews*, conditioned on their repentance; Jewish proselyte baptism was only for Gentiles.

But if John did not get this idea from Jewish proselyte baptism, where did he get it? Dockery thinks a more likely borrowing occurred from the Qumran community. He does not, however, commit John to having been an Essene. In support of his thesis, Dockery offers the following arguments (Ibid., 57):

1. Both the Qumran community and John stressed the importance of repentance in relation to baptism.
2. Both viewed their ministries in terms of Isaiah 40:3.
3. Both baptized Jewish people.

However, there was one important distinction between the Qumran community and John regarding baptism: the Qumran rite

was self-administered and practiced frequently, while John's baptism was administered by John and was a one-time rite of initiation.

Thus, Dockery believes John got his idea for water baptism from the Qumran community. Of course, it's important to note that if John originally received this idea from Qumran, he nonetheless revised and adapted it to fit his own unique purpose and calling as the one who was preparing the Jewish nation to receive her Messiah. Also, it's important to remember that this is simply one scholar's expert opinion. I happen to think it a good one, but as he himself observes, "…the background of John's baptism remains fiercely debated" (Ibid., 56).

God bless you,

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