

AN IN-DEPTH BIBLE STUDY

ELIJAH AND JOHN THE BAPTIST

A Prophecy, a Denial, and the Coming of "Elias, Which Was for to Come"

Malachi 4 · Luke 1 · John 1 · Matthew 11 and 17

A journey through history, biblical languages, and a man who said "I am not" to the very question Jesus answered "yes"

Table of Contents

Table of Contents	2
Introduction: A Prophecy and a Puzzling Denial	4
How to Use This Study	4
Chapter 1 — Malachi's Closing Words: "Behold, I Will Send You Elijah"	6
A Specific Promise, Not a Vague Hope	6
A Ministry of Reconciliation	6
The Last Words of the Christian Old Testament	6
Chapter 2 — Elijah's Life and Ministry: A Brief Review	8
A Prophet Introduced Without Introduction.....	8
A Ministry of Direct Confrontation With Royal Idolatry.....	8
An Unusual Departure From Ordinary Death.....	8
Chapter 3 — Gabriel's Announcement: "The Spirit and Power of Elias"	9
A Direct Citation of Malachi's Language.....	9
"In the Spirit and Power of Elias" — A Crucial Qualifying Phrase.....	9
A Ministry Already Described in Full	9
Chapter 4 — "Art Thou Elias?": John's Direct Denial.....	11
An Official Delegation, a Direct Question.....	11
A Question Likely Rooted in Expectation of Literal Return	11
A Denial at the Level the Question Was Asked	11
Chapter 5 — "This Is Elias, Which Was for to Come": Jesus's Direct Affirmation	13
Spoken to Crowds, About John, Not to John Himself.....	13
A Notable Qualifying Phrase: "If Ye Will Receive It"	13
Function Fulfilled, Not Identity Claimed.....	13
Chapter 6 — Reconciling the Tension: Function Versus Identity	15
Restating the Resolution Directly.....	15
A Pattern Consistent With How Prophecy Often Functions.....	15
Neither Statement Is Softened or Compromised.....	15
Chapter 7 — The Transfiguration: When Elijah Actually Appeared	17
The Historical Elijah, Genuinely Present.....	17
What Elijah and Moses Discussed	17
The Disciples' Own Question, Immediately Afterward	17
Matthew's Own Explicit Narrative Confirmation	17
Chapter 8 — Parallels in Ministry: Wilderness, Kings, and Confrontation.....	19

Matching Garments	19
A Wilderness Ministry	19
Direct Confrontation With a Compromised Royal Court.....	19
Chapter 9 — Common Questions and Interpretive Caution	21
"Does this study's resolution require reading John 1:21 or Matthew 11:14 non-literally?"	21
"Does the book of Revelation's 'two witnesses' (Revelation 11:3-12) refer to a future, additional appearance of Elijah?"	21
"Does Jesus's statement in Matthew 17:11 ('Elias truly shall first come, and restore all things') imply a still-future appearance of Elijah, separate from John?"	21
Chapter 10 — Practical Applications for the Christian Life	23
1. Fulfilling a Calling Does Not Require Claiming More Than Is True	23
2. God's Patterns Repeat Without Requiring Identical Repetition.....	23
3. Careful Attention to Precise Language Resolves Apparent Contradictions	23
4. Costly Faithfulness May Not Look Identical Across Similar Callings	23
5. Genuine Humility Distinguishes Function From Self-Importance	23
A Closing Reflection: The Voice That Pointed Away From Itself	25
Summary of Key Points.....	26
Further Reading by Theme	27
On Elijah's Ministry.....	27
On Malachi's Closing Prophecy.....	27
On John the Baptist's Ministry and Identity	27
On the Transfiguration	27
On Revelation's Two Witnesses (for further, more speculative study).....	27
Bibliography and Recommended References	28
Commentaries on 1-2 Kings.....	28
On Malachi.....	28
On the Gospels' Treatment of John the Baptist	28
On the Transfiguration	28
On Jewish Expectation Regarding Elijah's Return	28
Dictionaries and Original-Language Tools	28

Introduction: A Prophecy and a Puzzling Denial

The Old Testament, in most Christian canonical orderings, closes with a specific, named promise: 'Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD' (Malachi 4:5). Roughly four centuries later, when priests and Levites sent from Jerusalem ask John the Baptist directly, 'Art thou Elias?' — he answers, without qualification, 'I am not' (John 1:21). And yet Jesus, speaking of this same John, tells the crowds, 'if ye will receive it, this is Elias, which was for to come' (Matthew 11:14), and later tells His own disciples even more plainly, 'Elias is come already, and they knew him not... then the disciples understood that he spake unto them of John the Baptist' (Matthew 17:12-13).

This study exists to sit with this apparent tension rather than rushing past it: what Malachi actually promised; what Elijah's own historical ministry involved; how the angel Gabriel described John's coming role to his father Zacharias before John's birth; John's own direct denial and its likely context; Jesus's own direct affirmation and how it can be reconciled with John's denial without either party being mistaken; the remarkable scene at the Transfiguration where Elijah himself actually appears; the striking parallels between Elijah's and John's specific ministries; and what remains genuinely open regarding any future expectation connected to Elijah.

As with the other studies in this series, this study is especially careful to distinguish a genuine textual tension that has a coherent, well-supported resolution from questions that remain more genuinely open or speculative.

Did You Know?

In the Hebrew Bible's traditional ordering (as opposed to the Christian Old Testament's ordering, which places the prophets last), the book of Chronicles, not Malachi, stands as the final book. The placement of Malachi — and therefore its Elijah prophecy — as the Old Testament's closing words is thus a feature specifically of the Christian canonical arrangement, not the traditional Jewish ordering of the same books, though the prophecy's content and significance remain identical regardless of which book concludes the collection.

How to Use This Study

Each chapter includes: (1) the central biblical text; (2) historical and linguistic context; (3) explanations of Hebrew and Greek terms; (4) cross references; (5) 'Did You Know?' boxes with historical background; (6) suggestions for illustrations for those teaching this material in a classroom or small group; and (7) questions for personal or group reflection. At the end, you will find a consolidated summary of the main points, a list of further reading organized by theme, and a recommended bibliography for deeper study.

Suggested Illustration

Opening page with a simple side-by-side comparison: Elijah in his hairy garment with leather girdle confronting Ahab, and John the Baptist in his camel's-hair garment with leather girdle preaching in the wilderness — visually establishing the striking parallel this study will examine in depth.

Chapter 1 — Malachi's Closing Words: "Behold, I Will Send You Elijah"

"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." — Malachi 4:5-6

A Specific Promise, Not a Vague Hope

Malachi's prophecy names Elijah specifically, rather than speaking generally of 'a prophet' or 'a forerunner.' This specificity matters: it is not merely a promise that God would send prophetic warning before a coming day of judgment, but a promise framed around a particular, already well-known historical figure, whose ministry and unusual departure from ordinary death (examined in Chapter 3) made him a natural figure for this kind of anticipatory expectation.

A Ministry of Reconciliation

The prophecy's stated purpose is relational and reconciling: turning 'the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers' — language addressing broken or estranged family and generational relationships, framed as necessary preparation averting a coming 'curse' upon the land. This reconciling function becomes directly relevant to Chapter 4's examination of Gabriel's description of John's ministry.

The Last Words of the Christian Old Testament

In the ordering followed by most Christian Bibles, this promise constitutes the final words of the entire Old Testament — meaning readers moving directly from Malachi into Matthew's Gospel encounter, as the very last thing said before four hundred years of prophetic silence (the 'intertestamental period'), a specific promise regarding Elijah's return, immediately preceding, several pages later, the appearance of a wilderness preacher whose ministry many readers would recognize as bearing this promise's fulfillment.

Did You Know?

The roughly four-century gap between Malachi and the events of the Gospels (traditionally dated from around 430 B.C. to the birth of John the Baptist) is often called the 'intertestamental period' or, in some older Christian traditions, 'the four hundred silent years' — a period during which no new prophetic books were added to the Hebrew canon, making Malachi's closing promise the last direct prophetic word Israel possessed before John's appearance.

 **Further Reading:** *Malachi 4:1-6; Malachi 3:1 (an earlier related promise of a preparatory messenger).*

Reflection Questions

1. Why might God have chosen to name Elijah specifically, rather than speaking more generally of a future prophet or forerunner?
2. How does knowing this promise constitutes the Old Testament's closing words (in Christian canonical ordering) shape the weight you give to it?

Chapter 2 — Elijah's Life and Ministry: A Brief Review

A Prophet Introduced Without Introduction

Elijah appears in 1 Kings 17:1 with no preceding genealogy or backstory — 'Elijah the Tishbite, who was of the inhabitants of Gilead' — immediately confronting King Ahab with a declared drought. This abrupt introduction, itself notable within a book generally more attentive to genealogical and geographical detail for its major figures, sets the tone for a ministry characterized throughout by sudden appearance, direct confrontation, and equally sudden departure.

A Ministry of Direct Confrontation With Royal Idolatry

Elijah's ministry centers on direct opposition to King Ahab and Queen Jezebel's promotion of Baal worship in the northern kingdom of Israel, culminating in the dramatic contest at Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18:16-40), where fire from heaven consumes Elijah's water-soaked sacrifice in decisive vindication of the LORD over Baal's prophets. This pattern of a prophet directly confronting a compromised or hostile royal court establishes a template this study will compare directly to John the Baptist's own ministry in Chapter 9.

An Unusual Departure From Ordinary Death

2 Kings 2:11 records Elijah's departure from earthly life in a manner unique among all biblical figures except Enoch (Genesis 5:24): 'there appeared a chariot of fire, and horses of fire...and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven' — he did not die in the ordinary sense the text records for other figures, but was taken up bodily. This detail matters directly for understanding the specific expectation surrounding his 'return,' examined further in Chapter 5.

Did You Know?

Jewish tradition developed, over the centuries following Malachi's prophecy, an expectation of Elijah's return specifically connected to his unusual departure without death — a tradition still reflected today in the custom, at the Jewish Passover Seder, of setting an empty chair and cup of wine for Elijah, and opening the door during the meal in anticipation of his possible arrival as herald of the Messiah.

 **Further Reading:** 1 Kings 17:1-24; 1 Kings 18:1-46; 1 Kings 19:1-18; 2 Kings 2:1-12.

Reflection Questions

1. How does Elijah's abrupt, backstory-free introduction in 1 Kings 17 shape the tone of his entire recorded ministry?
2. Why might Elijah's unique departure without ordinary death have specifically shaped later expectations regarding his return?

Chapter 3 — Gabriel's Announcement: "The Spirit and Power of Elias"

"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 Elias, 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 1:16-17

A Direct Citation of Malachi's Language

Gabriel's words to Zacharias, delivered before John's conception, deliberately echo Malachi 4:6's specific language of turning 'the hearts of the fathers to the children' — an unmistakable, direct verbal connection to the closing prophecy examined in Chapter 1. This is not a vague or general resemblance; Gabriel's announcement uses Malachi's own phrase almost verbatim, applying it specifically and directly to the child Zacharias's wife Elizabeth would bear.

"In the Spirit and Power of Elias" — A Crucial Qualifying Phrase

It is worth pausing carefully on Gabriel's exact wording: John would go before the Lord 'in the spirit and power of Elias' — not 'as Elijah returned' or 'being Elijah himself,' but functioning with the same prophetic spirit and power that had characterized Elijah's ministry. This precise phrasing, given by an angel before John's birth, establishes from the very outset of the entire narrative the interpretive key this study will use throughout to reconcile John's later denial (Chapter 5) with Jesus's later affirmation (Chapter 6): a correspondence of function and spiritual empowerment, not a claim of literal identity or reincarnation.

A Ministry Already Described in Full

Gabriel's description already anticipates the entirety of John's adult ministry — turning many in Israel to God, preparing a readied people for the Lord's coming — establishing, before John had even been conceived, the theological framework within which his entire subsequent public ministry should be understood.

Did You Know?

Gabriel is named in only two other biblical contexts prior to Luke's Gospel: Daniel 8:16 and Daniel 9:21, where he delivers highly significant prophetic explanations to Daniel — meaning the same angelic messenger associated with major prophetic revelation in the Old Testament is the one Luke records delivering both this announcement regarding John (Luke 1:11-20) and, shortly afterward, the announcement of Jesus's own conception to Mary (Luke 1:26-38).

 **Further Reading:** *Luke 1:5-25; Malachi 4:5-6; Daniel 8:15-17; Daniel 9:20-23.*

Reflection Questions

1. How does Gabriel's precise phrasing — 'in the spirit and power of Elias' — set up the resolution this study will trace in later chapters?
2. What does it mean that John's entire future ministry was described, in these specific terms, before he had even been born?

Chapter 4 — "Art Thou Elias?": John's Direct Denial

"And this is the record of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, Who art thou? ... And they asked him, What then? Art thou Elias? And he saith, I am not. Art thou that prophet? And he answered, No." — John 1:19-21

An Official Delegation, a Direct Question

This exchange occurs as part of a formal inquiry: 'priests and Levites' sent specifically from Jerusalem to investigate John's identity and authority, given the evident stir his wilderness ministry and baptism were causing. Their question, 'Art thou Elias?', asked in this direct, second form after John has already denied being 'the Christ,' suggests a structured line of inquiry working through the specific figures Jewish expectation associated with the coming messianic age.

A Question Likely Rooted in Expectation of Literal Return

Given Elijah's unusual departure without death (Chapter 2) and the developed Jewish tradition anticipating his literal, personal return (also noted in Chapter 2), the priests' and Levites' question was very likely asking whether John claimed to be Elijah himself, returned in person — the same individual who had departed in the whirlwind, now physically present again. John's answer, 'I am not,' addressed at this level, is straightforwardly and simply true: John was not a returned, reincarnated, or resurrected Elijah; he was a distinct individual, son of Zacharias and Elizabeth, born in the ordinary way (Luke 1:57-63).

A Denial at the Level the Question Was Asked

This study holds that John's denial addresses precisely and only the question as posed — a claim to literal personal identity with the historical Elijah — without contradicting Gabriel's earlier description of John ministering 'in the spirit and power of Elias' (Chapter 3). John denies being Elijah reincarnated; he does not, in this exchange, comment on or deny fulfilling Elijah's prophesied preparatory function, a distinction Jesus will make explicit in Chapter 6.

Did You Know?

John's threefold denial in this passage — not the Christ, not Elijah, not 'that prophet' (likely referring to the prophet like Moses anticipated in Deuteronomy 18:15, 18) — reflects a recognized triad of distinct messianic-era figures under active first-century Jewish discussion and expectation, with John clarifying his own role falls into none of these specific, named categories as popularly understood, even while, as this study will show, genuinely fulfilling one of them at a different level of meaning.

 **Further Reading:** John 1:19-28; Deuteronomy 18:15-19; Luke 1:57-63.

Reflection Questions

1. How does understanding the likely context of the priests' question — literal, personal reincarnation — change the way you read John's direct denial?

2. Why is it significant that John's answer addresses precisely the question asked, without requiring him to deny a different claim (fulfilling Elijah's function) that nobody in this exchange had actually raised?

Chapter 5 — "This Is Elias, Which Was for to Come": Jesus's Direct Affirmation

"For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John. And if ye will receive it, this is Elias, which was for to come." — Matthew 11:13-14

Spoken to Crowds, About John, Not to John Himself

This statement occurs within Jesus's extended tribute to John (Matthew 11:7-15), delivered to the surrounding crowds after John's own disciples had come to Jesus with a question from John, then imprisoned (11:2-3). Jesus is not correcting or contradicting John's own earlier self-denial to the priests and Levites (a different audience, a different question, recorded in a different Gospel); He is offering His own authoritative interpretation of who John is and what John's ministry has accomplished.

A Notable Qualifying Phrase: "If Ye Will Receive It"

It is worth noting Jesus's own qualifying language here: 'if ye will receive it' (Greek εἰ θέλετε δεξασθαι, *ei thelete dexasthai*, 'if you are willing to accept/receive this'). This phrase suggests Jesus is aware that this identification requires a particular kind of spiritual readiness or willingness to accept — not because the claim itself is uncertain, but because accepting it required the crowds to recognize a fulfillment operating differently than the more common, literalistic expectation of Elijah's bodily return that (as Chapter 4 discussed) likely lay behind the priests' and Levites' question to John.

Function Fulfilled, Not Identity Claimed

Jesus's statement, read alongside Gabriel's earlier description (Chapter 3) and John's own denial (Chapter 4), completes this study's resolution of the apparent tension: Jesus affirms that John fulfills the Elijah role Malachi prophesied — going before the Lord 'in the spirit and power of Elias' — without this requiring or implying that John was, in fact, the literal historical Elijah returned in person. Jesus and John are not making contradictory claims; they are answering different questions (one about function and fulfillment, the other about literal personal identity).

Did You Know?

The parallel account in Luke 7:24-28 records much of the same tribute to John but does not include Luke's own version of the specific 'this is Elias' statement found in Matthew 11:14 — a difference in the Synoptic accounts' selection of material that does not create a contradiction (each Gospel writer selects material suited to his own purposes) but is worth noting for readers comparing the parallel passages directly.

 **Further Reading:** *Matthew 11:1-15; Luke 7:18-28.*

Reflection Questions

1. How does recognizing that Jesus and John are answering different questions (function versus literal identity) resolve the apparent tension between their statements?
2. Why might Jesus have added the qualifying phrase 'if ye will receive it' to this specific identification?

Chapter 6 — Reconciling the Tension: Function Versus Identity

Restating the Resolution Directly

Having examined each relevant text in sequence, this chapter states the resolution this study has been building toward as plainly as possible. The apparent contradiction between John's 'I am not' (John 1:21) and Jesus's 'this is Elias' (Matthew 11:14) is resolved once two distinct senses of 'being Elijah' are distinguished: (1) literal personal identity — being the same individual historical person who ascended in the whirlwind in 2 Kings 2, now returned; and (2) prophetic-functional fulfillment — coming 'in the spirit and power of Elias' (Luke 1:17) to accomplish the specific preparatory role Malachi 4:5-6 assigned to a coming Elijah figure. John denies the first sense. Jesus affirms the second.

A Pattern Consistent With How Prophecy Often Functions

This distinction between literal identity and functional fulfillment is not an ad hoc solution invented merely to resolve this specific tension; it reflects a broader pattern of how biblical prophecy regularly operates, in which a coming figure fulfills an earlier type or pattern by function and empowerment rather than requiring literal biological or personal identity with the earlier figure (compare this series' treatment of Jonah's sign, David's greater son, and various Old Testament 'type' figures examined throughout this study series).

Neither Statement Is Softened or Compromised

This resolution does not require reading John's denial as somehow less than fully honest, nor Jesus's affirmation as somehow less than fully confident. Both statements stand as stated, at full strength, once it is recognized they address genuinely different questions. This is a meaningfully different situation from several other 'tensions' addressed elsewhere in this series (such as the John/Synoptic Passover chronology question), which involve genuine historical uncertainty without full resolution; this specific tension, by contrast, has a clear, textually well-supported resolution once Gabriel's precise language in Luke 1:17 is taken into full account.

Did You Know?

This 'function versus literal identity' resolution has been the standard, majority position among careful biblical interpreters across a wide range of theological traditions for centuries, rather than a novel or minority position — reflecting the strength and clarity of the textual evidence (particularly Gabriel's precise wording) supporting this reading.

 **Further Reading:** *Luke 1:17; John 1:21; Matthew 11:14; Matthew 17:10-13 (examined further in Chapter 8).*

Reflection Questions

1. How does this resolution model a broader principle worth applying to other apparent tensions you may encounter elsewhere in Scripture?

2. Why is it important to identify precisely which question each biblical statement is actually answering before assuming a contradiction exists?

Chapter 7 — The Transfiguration: When Elijah Actually Appeared

"And was transfigured before them: and his face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was white as the light. And, behold, there appeared unto them Moses and Elias talking with him."
— Matthew 17:2-3

The Historical Elijah, Genuinely Present

This scene provides a crucial complement to this study's resolution: the actual, historical Elijah — not a functional fulfillment, but the same individual who had ascended in the whirlwind centuries earlier — appears directly, alongside Moses, conversing with Jesus. This confirms that Elijah's personal identity and John's functional fulfillment of his role are genuinely distinct categories, since here the two are, quite literally, present in entirely separate forms within the same narrative world: the historical Elijah in a heavenly appearance, and John (recently imprisoned, and soon to be executed, per Matthew 14:1-12) fulfilling Elijah's earthly, prophesied function.

What Elijah and Moses Discussed

Luke 9:31 specifies the subject of their conversation: they spoke with Jesus 'of his decease which he should accomplish at Jerusalem' — using the Greek word ἔξοδος (exodos, 'departure' or 'exodus'), directly evoking, for readers attentive to the term, the earlier exodus from Egypt Moses himself had led, now applied to Christ's own coming death and its redemptive significance.

The Disciples' Own Question, Immediately Afterward

Matthew 17:10-13 records the disciples, having just witnessed Elijah's actual appearance, asking Jesus directly: 'Why then say the scribes that Elias must first come?' Jesus's response provides the New Testament's clearest, most direct statement resolving this entire study's central question: 'Elias truly shall first come, and restore all things. But I say unto you, That Elias is come already, and they knew him not... Then the disciples understood that he spake unto them of John the Baptist.'

Matthew's Own Explicit Narrative Confirmation

It is worth noting that Matthew 17:13 is not merely Jesus's own claim but the Gospel writer's own explicit narrative confirmation — 'then the disciples understood that he spake unto them of John the Baptist' — meaning this identification carries the weight of direct authorial clarification, not merely an ambiguous saying left open to interpretation by the reader.

Did You Know?

The disciples' question — 'why then say the scribes that Elias must first come?' — reflects a specific scribal teaching, evidently well known in first-century Judaism, regarding Elijah's necessary prior appearance before

the Messiah's full, final coming; Jesus's answer both affirms this teaching's essential correctness ('Elias truly shall first come, and restore all things') and identifies its fulfillment as having already occurred in John, distinct from any further, future appearance some scribal teaching may have anticipated.

 **Further Reading:** *Matthew 17:1-13; Mark 9:2-13; Luke 9:28-36.*

Reflection Questions

1. How does the Transfiguration's depiction of the actual historical Elijah alongside John's separate functional fulfillment reinforce this study's central resolution?
2. What significance do you see in Elijah and Moses discussing Christ's coming death specifically, using the language of 'exodus'?

Chapter 8 — Parallels in Ministry: Wilderness, Kings, and Confrontation

Matching Garments

2 Kings 1:8 describes Elijah as 'an hairy man, and girt with a girdle of leather about his loins.' Matthew 3:4 describes John: 'the same John had his raiment of camel's hair, and a leathern girdle about his loins.' This specific, detailed correspondence in clothing description is difficult to read as coincidental, and many scholars regard it as a deliberate signal, on the Gospel writers' part, identifying John visually with Elijah even before any explicit statement of their connection is made in the narrative.

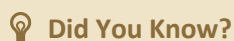
A Wilderness Ministry

Both prophets conducted much of their ministry in wilderness or remote settings, away from the centers of settled, urban religious life — Elijah at the brook Cherith, on Mount Horeb, and throughout various wilderness locations (1 Kings 17:3-5; 19:4-8); John explicitly identified as 'the voice of one crying in the wilderness' (Matthew 3:3, citing Isaiah 40:3), baptizing in the Judean wilderness region near the Jordan.

Direct Confrontation With a Compromised Royal Court

Elijah confronted King Ahab and Queen Jezebel directly over their promotion of Baal worship and general covenant unfaithfulness (1 Kings 18:17-18; 21:17-24). John confronted Herod Antipas directly over his unlawful marriage to Herodias, his brother Philip's wife (Mark 6:17-18) — a specific, named moral confrontation with a ruling authority, structurally comparable to Elijah's earlier confrontations.

Element	Elijah	John the Baptist
Distinctive garment	Hairy garment, leather girdle (2 Kings 1:8)	Camel's hair garment, leather girdle (Matthew 3:4)
Primary setting	Wilderness locations throughout his ministry	The Judean wilderness, near the Jordan
Royal confrontation	Ahab and Jezebel, over Baal worship	Herod Antipas, over his unlawful marriage
The hostile royal wife	Jezebel, who sought Elijah's death (1 Kings 19:1-2)	Herodias, who orchestrated John's execution (Mark 6:19-28)
Outcome of royal hostility	Elijah fled and survived (1 Kings 19:3-8)	John was imprisoned and executed (Mark 6:27-28)



Did You Know?

The parallel between the hostile royal wives — Jezebel seeking Elijah's death and Herodias successfully orchestrating John's execution — includes a notable difference worth observing directly: Elijah survived Jezebel's threat and continued his ministry for a considerable time afterward, while John did not survive Herodias's request, making his own ministry's earthly conclusion more severe than his prophetic predecessor's, even while fulfilling the same essential preparatory role.

 **Further Reading:** *2 Kings 1:8; Matthew 3:1-4; 1 Kings 18:17-19:8; Mark 6:14-29.*

Reflection Questions

1. How does the detailed correspondence in clothing description strengthen your sense that the Gospel writers intended readers to notice the Elijah connection even before it is stated explicitly?
2. What does the difference in outcome — Elijah's survival versus John's execution — add to your understanding of how their otherwise similar ministries concluded?

Chapter 9 — Common Questions and Interpretive Caution

This study's central resolution is well supported, but several related questions deserve honest, direct treatment.

"Does this study's resolution require reading John 1:21 or Matthew 11:14 non-literally?"

No. Both statements are read at full, literal strength within this study's resolution; the key is recognizing that 'Elias' functions with two distinct senses across these passages — personal historical identity in John 1:21, and prophetic function in Matthew 11:14 — rather than reading either statement as figurative, exaggerated, or somehow qualified beyond its plain sense.

"Does the book of Revelation's 'two witnesses' (Revelation 11:3-12) refer to a future, additional appearance of Elijah?"

This is a genuinely speculative question this study does not attempt to resolve. Revelation 11:6 describes the two witnesses having 'power to shut heaven, that it rain not' — an ability closely resembling Elijah's drought-inducing ministry (1 Kings 17:1) — leading many interpreters to propose Elijah as one of the two witnesses (with Moses or Enoch commonly proposed as the second, given Enoch's similar translation without death). This study presents this identification as a reasonable, widely held speculative proposal within the broader range of interpretive approaches to Revelation's highly symbolic imagery, without asserting it as a settled conclusion, consistent with this series' general caution regarding specific eschatological identifications in apocalyptic literature.

"Does Jesus's statement in Matthew 17:11 ('Elias truly shall first come, and restore all things') imply a still-future appearance of Elijah, separate from John?"

This is a fair question given the verse's grammar, which some readers take as affirming the general truth of the scribal expectation (implicitly allowing for a further future fulfillment) before then identifying John as the fulfillment already accomplished. Other readers understand Jesus's statement as referring entirely to John's own ministry, with 'restore all things' describing what John's ministry of repentance accomplished for those who received it. This study holds the primary, most direct reading — pointing to John as the fulfillment matching Malachi's prophecy for the Messiah's first coming — while acknowledging some interpreters leave room for a distinct, future application connected to Christ's second coming, a question this study does not resolve definitively.

Did You Know?

This consistent practice of clearly distinguishing a well-resolved textual tension (John's denial versus Jesus's affirmation) from genuinely open, more speculative questions (the identity of Revelation's two witnesses)

has been applied throughout this study series, allowing the strongest claims to be received with confidence while more speculative questions are held with appropriate humility.

 **Further Reading:** *John 1:19-21; Matthew 11:14; Matthew 17:10-13; Revelation 11:3-12.*

Reflection Questions

1. Which of this study's claims do you hold with the most confidence, and which do you consider more genuinely open to interpretation?
2. How does distinguishing well-resolved tensions from genuinely speculative questions shape the way you approach other difficult passages in Scripture?

Chapter 10 — Practical Applications for the Christian Life

The relationship between Elijah and John the Baptist, carefully examined, carries direct implications for how believers understand calling, humility, and the nature of prophetic fulfillment.

1. Fulfilling a Calling Does Not Require Claiming More Than Is True

John's willingness to deny being the literal Elijah, even while genuinely fulfilling Elijah's prophesied role, models a valuable humility: believers can fulfill significant, even prophetically anticipated, roles without needing to claim grander or more literal status than what is actually and honestly true of them.

2. God's Patterns Repeat Without Requiring Identical Repetition

The relationship between Elijah and John — genuine functional correspondence without literal identity — offers believers a broader pattern for recognizing how God's work in one era can genuinely echo and fulfill earlier patterns without requiring an exact, literal repetition of the earlier figure or event.

3. Careful Attention to Precise Language Resolves Apparent Contradictions

This study's entire resolution rests on careful attention to Gabriel's precise wording ('in the spirit and power of Elias') and the specific, different questions John and Jesus were each answering. This models a broader practice worth applying to other apparently difficult or contradictory passages: careful, patient attention to exact wording and context frequently resolves tensions that appear, on a quick reading, to be genuine contradictions.

4. Costly Faithfulness May Not Look Identical Across Similar Callings

Elijah's survival of Jezebel's threat and John's execution by Herodias, despite their otherwise closely parallel ministries, remind believers that faithful fulfillment of a genuine calling does not guarantee an identical outcome to others who have walked a similar path before.

5. Genuine Humility Distinguishes Function From Self-Importance

John's example — genuinely significant, prophesied, and divinely announced before his birth, yet content to say 'I am not' when a grander claim was implicitly offered to him — models a mature humility worth emulating: recognizing one's genuine significance and calling without inflating it beyond what is actually true.

Did You Know?

John the Baptist's own words elsewhere in the Gospel of John — 'He must increase, but I must decrease' (John 3:30) — reflect this same posture of humble, accurate self-assessment regarding his role relative to

Christ, consistent with his earlier direct denial of claims (Christ, Elijah, 'that prophet') that would have overstated his actual identity and significance.

Reflection Questions

1. Which of these five applications feels most relevant to how you currently understand your own calling or role?
2. How might John's example of humble, precise self-description ('I am not...he must increase') shape the way you talk about your own significance or accomplishments?

A Closing Reflection: The Voice That Pointed Away From Itself

John could have claimed more than was true. The crowds were ready to believe almost anything about him — that he was the Christ, that he was Elijah returned bodily from the whirlwind, that he was the long-awaited prophet like Moses. Each denial cost him nothing in popularity; if anything, claiming one of those titles would have secured him a following far larger than a voice crying in the wilderness ever attracts on its own. He said no to all three, and then spent his entire recorded ministry pointing at someone else.

That is, in the end, the real correspondence between Elijah and John worth carrying forward — not the matching leather girdle, not the wilderness address, not even the precise resolution of who was and was not literally returning from a whirlwind. Both men existed to make a way for someone greater than themselves, and both were willing to say so plainly, without inflating their own role to make the story more comfortable. 'He must increase, but I must decrease.' Whatever else this study has clarified about Malachi's promise, that posture is the one the text asks every reader to notice most.

 **Further Reading:** *Malachi 4:5-6; Matthew 17:12-13; John 3:30.*

Summary of Key Points

- Malachi 4:5-6, the closing words of the Christian Old Testament, promises that God will send 'Elijah the prophet' before the coming of 'the great and dreadful day of the LORD,' with a stated ministry of reconciling generations.
- Elijah's own historical ministry (1 Kings 17-2 Kings 2) involved direct confrontation with King Ahab and Jezebel's promotion of Baal worship, culminating in his unusual departure from earthly life without ordinary death, taken up in a whirlwind.
- The angel Gabriel, announcing John's coming birth, directly cites Malachi's language, stating John would go before the Lord 'in the spirit and power of Elias' (Luke 1:17) — establishing, before John's birth, the key distinction between functional fulfillment and literal personal identity.
- John directly denies being Elijah when asked by priests and Levites (John 1:21), a denial most plausibly addressing the specific question of literal, personal reincarnation or return, consistent with Jewish expectations rooted in Elijah's unusual, deathless departure.
- Jesus directly affirms, to the crowds, that John is 'Elias, which was for to come' (Matthew 11:14), a statement addressing John's functional fulfillment of Elijah's prophesied preparatory role rather than contradicting John's own denial of literal identity.
- The Transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-13) records the actual historical Elijah appearing alongside Moses and conversing with Jesus, while Jesus's own explanation to His disciples afterward, confirmed by Matthew's direct narrative comment, identifies John as the one who fulfilled Elijah's prophesied coming.
- Elijah and John share striking ministry parallels: matching distinctive garments, wilderness settings, and direct confrontation with a compromised royal court and its hostile queen, though their ultimate personal outcomes (survival versus execution) differed significantly.
- The identity of Revelation's 'two witnesses' as possibly including Elijah remains a genuinely speculative question this study does not resolve, consistent with this series' general caution regarding specific eschatological identifications.
- Practically, this study grounds humility in fulfilling significant callings without overclaiming status, confidence that God's patterns can genuinely repeat without requiring literal repetition, the value of careful attention to precise language in resolving apparent scriptural tensions, and a model of mature, accurate self-assessment regarding one's own significance.

Further Reading by Theme

On Elijah's Ministry

1 Kings 17:1-24; 1 Kings 18:1-46; 1 Kings 19:1-21; 2 Kings 2:1-14.

On Malachi's Closing Prophecy

Malachi 3:1-5; Malachi 4:1-6.

On John the Baptist's Ministry and Identity

Luke 1:5-25, 57-80; Matthew 3:1-12; John 1:19-34; John 3:22-30.

On the Transfiguration

Matthew 17:1-13; Mark 9:2-13; Luke 9:28-36; 2 Peter 1:16-18.

On Revelation's Two Witnesses (for further, more speculative study)

Revelation 11:1-14.

Bibliography and Recommended References

The works below are recommended for readers who wish to go further than this introductory study, whether through academic commentaries or accessible reference resources.

Commentaries on 1-2 Kings

- HOUSE, Paul R. 1, 2 Kings. New American Commentary. Nashville: B&H Publishing Group.
- PROVAN, Iain W. 1 and 2 Kings. New International Biblical Commentary. Peabody: Hendrickson.

On Malachi

- STUART, Douglas K. 'Malachi,' in The Minor Prophets: An Exegetical and Expository Commentary. Grand Rapids: Baker Books.
- VERHOEF, Pieter A. The Books of Haggai and Malachi. New International Commentary on the Old Testament. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

On the Gospels' Treatment of John the Baptist

- FRANCE, R. T. The Gospel of Matthew. New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- MARSHALL, I. Howard. The Gospel of Luke. New International Greek Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- CARSON, D. A. The Gospel According to John. Pillar New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

On the Transfiguration

- EDWARDS, James R. The Gospel According to Mark. Pillar New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

On Jewish Expectation Regarding Elijah's Return

- FAIERSTEIN, Morris M. 'Why Do the Scribes Say That Elijah Must Come First?' Journal of Biblical Literature.
- ÖHLER, Markus. 'The Expectation of Elijah and the Presence of the Kingdom of God,' Journal of Biblical Literature.

Dictionaries and Original-Language Tools

- BROWN, DRIVER, BRIGGS. A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament (BDB).
- KITTEL, Gerhard (ed.). Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (TDNT), entry on Elias.
- VINE, W. E. Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words.

— *End of Study* —