

# IS JOHN THE BAPTIST THE REINCARNATE OF ELIJAH? A STUDY OF THE BIBLICAL MALACHI 3:1 AND MARK 9:11-13

Philip Igbo

## Abstract

There have been arguments concerning the identity of John the Baptist. The arguments have tended to focus on whether, John the Baptist, the forerunner of the Messiah, is Elijah who has come back from the dead. This article explores what it might mean to describe John the Baptist as the returned Elijah, suggesting that we need clearly to distinguish this concept from Elijah typology. If, as it is argued, the expectation of Elijah's return in Mark's Gospel points to John the Baptist's angelic identity, this has interesting ramifications for other NT issues such as Christology and eschatology.

**Keywords:** Bible, Reincarnation, Elijah, John the Baptist.

## 1. Introduction

Elijah lived and preached during the days of the king Ahab and his wicked queen, Jezebel, who introduced the worship of Baal into Israel. Elijah was the champion of orthodoxy; his main mission was the spiritual revival of the nation, i.e., to "turn" the minds of the people to God. Jewish tradition holds that Elijah did not die, rather he was taken corporeally into heaven by God (cf. 2 Kgs 2:11; Sir 48:12). The Jewish tradition firmly held that Elijah would come again to prepare the people before the arrival of the Messiah (Mk 9:11-13; Lk 1:17, 76). This conviction based on Mal 3:1-3 and 4:5-6. Malachi had announced that God would send his messenger to prepare the way for the Lord. In Mal 4:5f, Malachi identifies this unnamed messenger as Elijah, whose mission is to turn the hearts of the people to the Lord. The declaration in Mal 4:5 that Elijah would first come "before the great and terrible Day of the Lord" (*lipnê bô' yôm yhw haggādôl wəhannôrā*) has given vent to debates among scholars. Is Malachi's statement to be taken literally or figuratively? The Synoptics explicitly identify the messenger of Mal 3:1 with John the Baptist, the forerunner of Christ (Matt 11:10/Lk 7:27; Mk 1:2; Lk 1:76). In Matt 11:14, John the Baptist is referred to as "Elijah who is to come". The identification of John the Baptist with Elijah is partly based on the angel's Gabriel's statement concerning John at the Annunciation to Zachariah: "With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, ... to make ready a people prepared for the Lord" (Lk 1:17). In what sense is John Elijah? Is the Elijah in question the historical Elijah or one who functions in the manner and spirit of Elijah? What is the connection between John's mission and Elijah's ministry? What is the import of "with the spirit and power of Elijah" in Lk 1:17? These are the questions that this article sets out to address.

## 2. Life and Ministry of Elijah (1 Kings 18-19)

Elijah's preached in the 9<sup>th</sup> century B.C., during the days of King Ahab and his wicked wife, Jezebel, who introduced the worship of Baal in Israel. Elijah was the champion of orthodoxy. His mission was to turn the hearts of the people to God. Elijah excoriated the Israelites for their syncretism and laxity in religious matters. He assembled the people of Israel on the mountain and accused them of "limping with two different opinions" – i.e., halting between two opposites – the worship of Yahweh and the worship of Baal. Elijah called on the people to decide which god to worship: "If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him" (1 Kgs 18:21). Elijah had challenged the religious aberration in Israel. Before the entire nation of Israel, Elijah challenged the prophets of Baal (450 of them) to a contest on Mount Carmel to see whose god is real – Yahweh or Baal. Each side was to erect an altar and prepare a bull for sacrifice without kindling fire and call on its god to send fire from heaven to consume the sacrifice (1 Kgs 18:18-46). The point is: the god who answers by fire is God indeed and worthy of worship. Baal's prophets accepted the challenge, set up their altar, prepared the victim of sacrifice and cried to Baal to send down fire to consume the sacrifice. Despite hours of effort, nothing happened. The Historian's comment hints at the emptiness of Baal worship: "There was no voice, no answer, and no response" (1 Kgs 18:29).

After taunting the prophets of Baal and ridiculing their ineffective measures and nonresponsive god, Elijah prepared his own sacrifice and poured a large amount of water over the sacrifice he has prepared. Then, he called on Yahweh to reveal himself by consuming the sacrifice by fire (1 Kgs 18:37) and God did what Baal could not do – immediately "the fire of the Lord fell and consumed the burnt offering" that Elijah has prepared (1 Kgs 18:38). Elijah's victory on Mount Carmel fulfills to some extent his long-time goal. First, this event demonstrates that the Lord was indeed God, and that Baal was a powerless wannabe. Second, it demonstrates that Elijah is God's prophet and that God's hand is upon him. Elijah had a great victory against the prophets of Baal. Elijah then commanded the people to put the prophets of Baal to death in keeping with the Deuteronomic teaching about false prophets: "If prophets...appear among you and...say, 'Let us follow other gods' ...those prophets...shall be put to death for having spoken treason against the Lord your God" (1Kgs 18:40; 19:1; cf. Deut 13:1-5.6-10). Elijah's action, however, was not without a price. When Jezebel heard about what Elijah had done to the prophets of Baal, she was determined to take Elijah's life in revenge (1 Kgs 19:2). Elijah flee to Mount Horeb, where, according to Jewish tradition, he was taken corporeally by a whirlwind to heaven.

## 3. The Mission of Elijah

Elijah became a central figure in Jewish socio-religious history. Elijah's mission is restorative, i.e., the revival of the nation and restoration of the true spirit of Yahwism in Israel. The prophet Malachi concludes his prophetic book with a declaration that Elijah would return to "turn" (*šûb*) the hearts of the people to Yahweh and to "restore" (Heb. *hēšîb* hiphil of the verb *šûb* - to turn, restore) the hearts (*lēb*) of

parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents” (Mal 4:6, MT 3:24). The second aspect of Elijah’s mission is to resolve conflicts that produce division (*mahloqet*) among people by promoting the respect for each human being in his relationship to the heavenly Father. Thus, Elijah’s mission is the restoration of *shalom*, i.e., wholesomeness in human relations as well as wholesomeness in their relationship to God himself.

#### **4. Messenger of the Lord in Malachi 3:1ff**

The return of the prophet Elijah is suggested in Malachi 3:1ff. Earlier in Mal 2:17-3:5, the fundamental question of God’s justice for both the righteous and the wicked is addressed. Mal 3:1-5 seems to be a response to the questions posited in 2:17. Why does God seem to grant favours to those “who do evil”? “Where is the God of justice?” The solution offered by the divine response is futuristic and eschatological. Justice (*mišpāṭ*) will be restored only through a future divine intervention (Schuller, 1996). Malachi announced that the coming of a “great king” (Mal 1:14) who will restore true justice to the world. The prophet announced that before the advent of this divine personage, God would send a messenger or an agent to prepare the hearts of the people to receive him (Mal 3:1b-4; cf. Isa 40:3). The task of the Messenger of the Lord is essentially to prepare the people to receive the Lord. This preparation is both moral and spiritual. On the spiritual level, his task involves the cleansing of the cult: “He will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness” (Mal 3:3). The priests will be cleansed so that they may make acceptable offerings to God, and God may again bless the people (cf. vv. 12, 18; 4:3). Malachi here, in the tradition of the classical prophets, puts the Temple and its ritual at the center of a just moral order (Carstensen, 1971). The moral aspect of the purification has an eschatological character; it involves the judgment of God on evil doers within the land - those who oppress the innocent, sorcerers who victimize others by witchcraft, adulterers, false witnesses, those who exploit the poor, the widow and the orphan (Mal 3:5).

The identity of the messenger announced by Malachi (3:1) is not specified here. Some commentators have raised the possibility that the messenger in question is the prophet Malachi himself. The identification of the messenger with the prophet Malachi is untenable since it would eliminate the whole eschatological thrust of the passage. Mal 4:5-6 (MT 3:23-24) identifies the “messenger” with the prophet Elijah: “Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes....” In the New Testament, the synoptic Gospels explicitly identify the unnamed messenger of Mal 3:1 with John the Baptist, the forerunner of Christ (Matt 11:10/Lk 7:27; Mk 1:2, Lk 1:76).

#### **5. Is John the Baptist the Elijah who is to Come?**

Early Christian tradition understands Elijah’s mission as replicated in the mission of John the Baptist. Matt 3:3 and Lk 3:4 identify John as the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight’” (cf. Isa 40:3). John, too, in response to the question put before him regarding his identity, denies being the Christ, but

identifies himself as “the voice crying in the wilderness to clear the way for the Lord” (Jn 1:23; cf. Isa 40:3). There is a discernible connection between John’s mission and Elijah’s ministry. This connection is captured by Luke’s rendition of the angel Gabriel’s description of John’s mission at the Annunciation to Zachariah: “with the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him” (*kai autos proleusetai enōpion autou en pneumatic kai dunamei Eliou*, Lk 1:17). The mission of John is defined by the angel Gabriel in Lk 1:17: he “will turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (*Epistrepesai kardias paterōn epi tekna kai apeitheis en phronēsei dikaiōn, etoimasai kuriō laon kateskeuasmēnon*). John’s mission is similar to the mission of Elijah given in Mal 4:6 [MT 3:24]: “He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse.”

Mk 9:11-13 (par Matt 17:10-14) makes an explicit identification of John the Baptist with Elijah. In this passage, the disciples asked Jesus, “Why, then, do the scribes say that Elijah must come first” before the coming of the Messiah? (Mk 9:11; cf. Mal 4:5-6). The question asked by the disciples regarding the coming of Elijah arises from his presence in the story of the Transfiguration (Taylor, 1959). This question has a background. The disciples of Jesus had cherished the idea that Jesus is the Messiah. But the Jewish tradition firmly held that Elijah would appear before the Messiah could come, a conviction based on Mal 3:2-3 and 4:5-6: “Behold, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes.” The Scribes i.e., the Jewish theologians, had interpreted Mal 4:5-6 to mean that Elijah would return from heaven before the advent of the Messiah. The question is: how then can Jesus be the Messiah when Elijah had not made his appearance? The disciples of Jesus, wondering why Elijah’s coming had not preceded that of Jesus, posited this question to him. Jesus seems to grant this understanding of the Malachi’s oracle but holds that it has been fulfilled in the coming of John the Baptist.

In the first part of Jesus’ answer to the question put by his disciples, Jesus affirms the truth of Malachi’s oracle and thus acknowledges that the scribes are, to that extent, right (v.12a). Jesus concedes the reality of Elijah’s coming “first” as a restorer, in line with the ancient prophecy which foresees Elijah coming again to “turn” the “hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents” (Mal 4:6 [Mt 3:24]) Jesus’ answer suggests that the tradition about Elijah is based on Scripture. Jesus seems to underline the compatibility of the two passages - Mal 3:1-3; 4:5-6 and Mk 9:12 - by implicitly identifying the Baptist with Elijah of the Malachi prophecy (Sloyan, 1960). Jesus first quotes the (Septuagint) text of Malachi approvingly: “He said to them, ‘Elijah is indeed coming first to restore all things.’” The phrase, “restore all things” could mean “to make everything new again, implying to its former condition (Bratcher et al, 1961). The phrase, “to restore all things” (*apkathistanei panta*), alludes to Mal 3:2-3; 4:5-6 (cf. Sir 48:1-3). As a fiery reformer, Elijah would “turn the hearts of fathers to their sons, and the hearts of sons to their fathers” (Mally, 1968). Jesus, then, goes on to give his definitive interpretation of the prophecy: “But I

tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but they did to him whatever they pleased.

The saying that they did to John “as it is written of him” (*kathōs gegraptai ep auton*) is obscure. Jesus seems to imply here that the faithless Israel, in the person of a Jewish king Herod, martyred John as many other prophets of Israel were martyred. Bratcher (1961) interprets the phrase, “as it is written of him” (*kathōs gegraptai ep auton*) as a paratactical clause which would mean “as it is written of him in the Scriptures” (Bratcher et al, 1961), but nowhere, as Pherigo (1971) has remarked, do we find such prediction about John. Jesus implies here that Elijah had come in the person of John the Baptist (cf. Matt 11:9-14), but the literal-minded Israel did not recognize the eschatological fulfillment which transcended the letter of the prophecy of Malachi (Senior, 1974). The second part of Jesus’ reply (Mk 9:12b-13) further adds stress to the Christian claim that John the Baptist was the promised Elijah-figure. Elijah had indeed come, but men maltreated him and killed him (and so, are disposed to maltreat the “Son of Man” also). The Baptist’s fate is prophetic of the fate of the Messiah (Harrington, 1979). The fate of the Baptist resembles the fate of Elijah. Elijah was persecuted and his life sought by Jezebel, the wife of Ahab, the king of Israel, but he escaped by fleeing to Mount Horeb, and lived to resume his prophetic ministry (1 Kgs 19; 21:1-27; 2 Kgs 1-2). The enemies of John brought him to his death: “they did to him whatever they pleased, as it is written about him” (Mk 9:13). In this way, the fate of John the Baptist resembles that of Elijah. Both were persecuted the monarch of their respective times in Israel on account of their prophetic missions.

## **6. Is John the Reincarnation of Elijah?**

The OT does not have an explicit teaching on reincarnation. But several NT stories apparently support the reality of reincarnation. The most prominent of these indications are found in Mk 9:11-13 (cf. Lk 1:13-17; Matt 17:10-14; Jn 1:19-21; and Jn 3:1-15 [esp. 3-4]). Taken out of context, Mark Mk 9:11-13 seems to suggest that John the Baptist is the reincarnation of Elijah, but when examined in the context of the late Israelite and early Christian religious thought, it will be found that these verses in no way point to reincarnation. Though the Jews were expecting Elijah to come back, they did not expect him to come reincarnated as a newborn baby. They were rather expecting Elijah to reappear in his full stature of adulthood and prophetic glory. This is because, in the first place, Elijah did not die. He was taken up alive into heaven (2 Kgs 2). Since he had experienced assumption and not death, the Jews expected him likewise to descend and not reincarnate, (Ezeogo, 1995).

Secondly, Mk 9:11-13 is placed almost immediately after the story of the Transfiguration in which Elijah and Moses (also believed by the Jewish piety to have assumed into heaven) appear in conversation with Jesus (Mk 9:2-10). The fact of the Transfiguration helps our inquiry significantly: if the individual self, the “I” of Elijah had wholly passed over into John the Baptist through reincarnation, from where did Elijah who appeared on the mountain come? Is John the Baptist ontologically Elijah whole and entire? Perhaps, the testimony of John himself will help resolve the puzzle.

## 7. The Testimony of John (Jn 1:19-21)

Jn 1:19-21 is one of the passages of the gospel narratives which discuss the identity of John. The expectation among the Jews was that, at the dawn of the Messianic age, Elijah would return to earth to take a part in the establishment of God's kingdom (Mal 3:22-23; Sir 48:4-12). We may see why the Jews, i.e., the Jewish authorities, sent learned men - priests and Levites - to conduct an enquiry concerning John's real identity. Here the priests and Levites are named since their enquiry concerns the question of baptism and purification. The question they put before John is: "who are you (*su tis eis*)?" (Jn 1:19). The intention here is to enquire into the authorization of the baptism action by John. John does not answer this question of identity directly. First, he said explicitly, "I am not the Messiah (*ego ouk eimi ho Christos*)." The answer, "I am not the Messiah," points us to the background of the question. It seems, as their question suggests, that the Jewish authorities thought John was claiming to be the Messiah. Not satisfied with the negative reply, they further asked if he is Elijah, and when he denied this, they asked him if he was "the prophet," which he equally denied (Jn 1:21). The questions presume certain possibilities: if John were Elijah or the "prophet", then there would be a reason for his baptizing. This rests on two assumptions: (1) that baptism is a messianic act; (2) that Elijah or the "prophet" are messianic figures (Bultmann, 1975). John equally denied being Elijah whose return was foretold in Mal 4:5f (MT 3:23f).

Note that John denied the three titles: Christ, Elijah, and the prophet. Though he baptized the people, his baptism was a baptism of repentance, an eschatological sacrament preparing people for the coming of God's kingdom. Mal 3:1 had announced that God would send his "the messenger" ("my messenger" [*mal'ākī*]) who would precede the arrival of the Messiah. In Mal 3:22 (NRS 4:5), that "messenger" (*mal'āk*) is identified as the prophet Elijah: "Look, I shall send you the prophet Elijah before the great and awesome Day of Yahweh comes." That John denied being Elijah is difficult to understand in view of Mk 9:11-13 and Matt 11:14 (Howard et al, 1952). It is equally difficult to understand John's denial of being Elijah considering what the angel Gabriel said at the annunciation to Zechariah which apparently applied the prophecy of Malachi to the Baptist, with the qualification, "With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." The Jewish expectation was that Elijah himself would return in bodily form. In the Synoptics, Jesus states that John the Baptist had fulfilled the role of Elijah, whom Malachi had prophesied would come before the day of the Lord (Matt 11:14; 17:13; Mk 9:13). In Matt 11:14, John the Baptist is referred to as "Elijah who is to come".

Equally, John denied that he is "the prophet." The allusion, "the prophet," no doubt, is to the Deuteronomic words ascribed to Moses in Deut 18:15: "The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet." The reference is repeated in Jn 6:14, where after the people had seen

the sign that Jesus had done in the feeding of the multitude with five loaves of bread, began to say, “This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world” (cf. Jn 7:40). From Acts 3:22 and 7:37, it is clear that the early Christians found this promise (Deut 18:15, 18) realized not in John the Baptist, but in Jesus. This is due to the contemporary identification of “the prophet” with the Messiah (Howard, 1952). John the Baptist not only denied being the Christ or Elijah, but he also denied being “the Prophet”. The only role he claims for himself in all four gospels is that of the Isaian voice of one crying in the wilderness (*phōnē boōntos en tē erēmō*; Matt 3:3, 11; Mk 1:3; Lk 3:4, 16). These passages cite the opening words of Deutero-Isaiah, the prophet of Exile: “A voice crying in the wilderness” (*qôl qôrē’ bammidbār*; Isa 40:3).

John’s only authority for baptizing is the fact that he has a task to prepare the way for the Messiah, who John refers to as the one coming after him, “one who is more powerful than I... I am not worthy to carry his sandals, the one who will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire (Matt 3:11; Lk 3:16). Here, John the Baptist plays a very important role as witness (*marturia* from verb *martureo*) to Jesus (MacRae, 1966). Here John the Baptist explicitly denies being Elijah even though, he is said to be so by Jesus in Matt 17:12: “I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but they did to him whatever they pleased” (cf. Mk 9:13). In Matt 11:13-14 Jesus explicitly speaks of the prophecy of the return of Elijah as already fulfilled in John: “...it was towards John that all the prophecies of the prophets and of the Law were leading; and he, if you will believe me, is the Elijah who was to return.” From the foregoing it is a fact that John denied being Elijah and Jesus affirms that John is “the Elijah who was to come.” We may ask: who is in error, Jesus or John? The only answer is perhaps, “none of the above.” The question is: How is John Elijah, and how is he not Elijah? The clue to this is supplied by Luke’s record of the words of the Angel Gabriel to Zachariah: “With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (Lk 1:17).

Any ambiguity about the import of “with the spirit and power of Elijah” (*en pneumati kai dunamei Eliou*) is clear by the Good News Bible which reads: “He will go ahead of the Lord, *strong and mighty like the Prophet Elijah.*” From this we see that John the Baptist was a type of Elijah both in the work he was to do, i.e., the revival of Israel’s faith through prophetism, and the manner in which he was to do it (strong and mighty). In his prophetic career, John lived like Elijah. Yet Elijah remained Elijah and John remained John. John was not the reincarnation of Elijah; for it is unthinkable that Elijah, who was “taken” up by God in a whirlwind to heaven (2 Kgs 2:11), would come back to begin another cycle of corporeal existence. Ezeogu (1995) argued that what was reborn in John was not Elijah in his personal and unrepeatable individuality but the nature and characteristics of Elijah. Nature is repeatable, the person is not.

### **8. Meaning of Spirit and Power of Elijah in Lk 1:15-17**

The angel Gabriel announces that John the Baptist would be utterly dedicated to God's service, for he is the promised herald of the Messiah. The angel announced that "even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit" (Lk 1:15). His mission, like that of Elijah of old, will be to bring about the revival of Israel: "He will bring back many of the Israelites to the Lord their God" (Lk 1:16), the same task accomplished by Elijah (1 Kgs 18). He will accomplish his mission in the manner, spirit and power of Elijah: "With the spirit and power of Elijah, he will go before him to reconcile fathers to their children and the disobedient to the good sense of the upright, preparing for the Lord a people fit for him" (Lk 1:17). He would play the part of Elijah in preparing a people for the coming of the Lord (Caird, 1963). John's mission is defined in Lk 1:15-16. He will perform the ancient function of a prophet; he will also make the people ready for the coming of the Lord, as predicted of God's forerunner in Mal 4:5f (MT 3:22f). It is not stated that John the Baptist will be Elijah redivivus, i.e., brought back to life (as in Matt 11:14 and Mk 9:13), but he will exhibit the spirit and power of Elijah, *en pneumatikē kai dunamei Eliou* (Gilmour et al, 1952). In retaining the description of John as one endowed with the spirit and power of Elijah, Luke identifies John with Elijah, not in person but in similar prophetic traits.

In Lk 1:17a, John is explicitly related to Elijah, as one endowed with his "spirit" and "power" as was Elisha (cf. 2 Kgs 2:9-16). The first implication of this assertion, as J. Fitzmyer (1981) has said, is that John is to be "great" in the Lord's sight (v.15). In the Gospel we see John carrying out the role of the reform prophet, thus acting in the "spirit" of Elijah (*en pneumatikē Eliou*), but he is never depicted as exercising the "power" of Elijah (*dunamei Eliou*), which is meant his power to work miracles (Fitzmyer, 1981). Mal 3:1, 23 indicates that the coming Elijah would play Elijah's role as a reformer. Lk 1:17b resumes v.16, which is the theme of turning "many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God." In v.17, the mode in which the turning to the Lord is made specific. The first specification alludes to the one of conversion mentioned in Mal 4:6 (MT 3:24): "He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents". This is similar to the task John was to fulfill: "he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children" (Lk 1:17). The conversion is to remedy a paternal neglect of the young in Israel. The second specification is a turning of a disobedient to the understanding (or wisdom) of those who stand upright in the sight of God. The third specification of the turning emphasizes John's role in preparing Israel for the coming of the lord: He is "to make ready a people prepared for the Lord".

### **9. The Bible and the Belief in Reincarnation**

There is no proof of reincarnation in the Bible. Reincarnation is neither mentioned nor directly discussed in the Bible. In one NT passage, in Jn 3:1-15, where Jesus



was explaining to Nicodemus the need for rebirth, Nicodemus queried whether that should be understood in a reincarnational sense: “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” (Jn 3:4). But Jesus corrected him straightaway. The rebirth he meant was a spiritual one effected by water and the Holy Spirit.

The Bible does not espouse the doctrine of reincarnation. Nowhere does the Bible suggest that a dead person has a second chance back to life in this earthly life as the reincarnationists claim. Rather it states quite categorically that “it is appointed for mortals to die once, and after that the judgment” (Heb 9:27). In this we see the incompatibility of the biblical conceptions of the afterlife with the doctrine of reincarnation. Ezeogu (1995) distinguishes three levels of rebirth: (a) Rebirth of physical features. This, according to him, occurs when the newborn is seen to be “a perfect physical resemblance of a deceased person, same sex, same face, same stature, same complexion, and even same natural distinguishing marks, wounds or deformity”; (b) Rebirth of nature and character. A child, as it grows up, could be seen to be an exact replica of a deceased, not so much in physical resemblance as in nature and character, i.e., similar behavioral traits; (c) Rebirth of the essential person. Here the spiritual entity that survives the death of a human person is supposed to return to this world in a new body of a baby.” While the first and the second cases are consistent with the Igbo view on *īlọ ụwa*, it is doubtful if the third is in harmony with the Igbo concept of reincarnation. Ezeogu’s view further raises two questions. The first is the question of identity and the second question concerns the degree that reincarnation takes place. Is there such a thing as partial reincarnation? If the ancestor can reincarnate in a child and still retain his personality in the ancestral world, then reincarnation in such a sense is no more than something partial or apparent. A partial reincarnation does not address the question of the nature of afterlife. Either it is or is not. Perhaps, we may say that the second case fits the Elijah/John the Baptist In the case of John the Baptist identification theory. John is a type of Elijah, not in physical resemblance but in trait and character.

## **10. Conclusion**

The declaration in Mal 4:5 that Elijah would first come “before the great and terrible Day of the Lord” (*lipnê bô’ yôm yhw̄h haggādōl wəhannōrā’*) has given vent to debates among scholars. Is Malachi’s statement to be taken literally or figuratively? In Mal 3:1 and 4:5, Elijah is presented as the forerunner of the Messiah; this fact is also suggested in Mk 9:12. Mark’s Jesus identifies John the Baptist with Elijah of the Malachi prophecy (Linden, 2001). Like Elijah, he is the restorer who is to “turn” the hearts of fathers to sons” (Sloyan, 1960). The “restoration” (*apokathistēmi*) which Elijah would come to bring about (Mk 9:12) coheres with John’s ministry of repentance, baptism, and forgiveness in 1:4-5, as well as with the work of making ready the people in 1:3. John is the forerunner of the Messiah. John/Elijah is the messenger that “goes before” (*pro prosōpou*) the Jesus/Messiah. Elijah comes before the Messiah to the same degree that John comes before Jesus. Like Elijah, John’s mission has to do with the revival of

Israel's faith. John's ministry resembles in many ways the ministry of Elijah. He acts in the Spirit and power of Elijah. This is the sense that John is identified with Elijah.

**Philip Igbo, CMF (PhD)**

Spiritans International School of Theology,  
Attakwu, Enugu State, Nigeria.

Emails: [philigbo@yahoo.com](mailto:philigbo@yahoo.com), philipigbocmf@gmail.com

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