

After a while however, Elijah had to leave the wadi and the ravens for there was no water as the drought worsened. So God sends Elijah, this speaker of truth, to the home of a widow. But that's another story.

Elijah departs, but does not die

When Elijah's ministry was coming to an end, God sent him to a younger man, Elisha, who would carry on this ministry of life. And, soon, it was time for Elijah to go. They made their way to the Jordan River. There, Elisha stood wide-eyed, staring at the river. He had heard the stories about Elijah. He had even dropped everything to follow the prophet. But nothing had prepared him for this. The water of the Jordan River had folded back on itself. Just like that. He wasn't sure how he'd describe it to someone else. The water had simply parted, as if Moses himself had been right next standing to them, lifting his staff to the heavens. But all Elijah had done was to take his mantle from his shoulders, roll it up, and strike the dry ground of the riverbank with it.

The journey to the river had also been puzzling for the prophet-in-training. Elijah had repeatedly tried to go on alone, forcing Elisha to tell the old man, "No, I will not leave you." They had gone to Bethel, just north of Jerusalem, where a bunch of prophet types had come out to meet them. They had told Elisha that this would be his last day with Elijah, for God was going to take him away. Oddly, Elisha somehow knew that they were correct. Indeed, he had known before they told him.

Elisha stared at a group of prophet types who had followed them. But Elisha snapped out of it when he realized that Elijah was striding across the now-dry river bed. Elisha hurriedly tried to keep up. Soon, they were on the far bank and the waters of the river closed in behind the two men.

At that moment, Elisha knew that Elijah was about to depart and, this time, Elisha couldn't follow. Perhaps, Elisha thought to himself, this is what Elijah had meant all along.

When Elijah asked the younger man what he could do for him before leaving, Elisha's response was quick and certain. He asked for a double portion of Elijah's prophetic spirit. Elisha wanted to be Elijah's "eldest son" and successor.

Elisha felt a bit hurt by Elijah's response. If Elisha sees the old man taken away, he'd get the double inheritance. But if he didn't see it, then nothing. Like everything else, it seemed to be in God's hands.

So Elisha waited, unsure of exactly what he was waiting for it. If he'd known, he wouldn't have believed it anyway. It would make the parting of the river seem as ordinary as milking the family goat.

As the two men chatted, a fiery apparition swept in. It could best be described as a chariot made of fire pulled by horses of fire. In a single moment, Elijah had been swept upward and disappeared into a whirlwind that raced towards the heavens.

Elijah had not died. He had simply gone . . . or, more accurately, he was taken away.

It is little wonder that Elijah grew and grew in the minds of God's people. Taken to heaven in a fiery chariot. Who was going to top that? Malachi, the last of the "writing prophets" closed his scroll with the announcement that the much awaited Day of the Lord would be announced by Elijah.

The announcement arrives

The prophets of Israel sometimes spoke words of anticipation, looking ahead to the glorious day when God would settle all accounts and put all things right, when all the nations would come streaming to God and live in peace. It is as if the prophets were saying "God will act!" – the future tense. The arrival of God's Messiah will change the world. God will abide with his people as he never had before and all will be right. Yes, the Lord's Day is coming.

With John the Baptist, we come to the present tense and a message of preparation and repentance. He called God's people to the Jordan River, plunging (baptizo in the Greek) them in the cleansing waters. John is the prophet who announces that the Day of the Lord is fast upon God's people and they must ready themselves for it. Centuries before another prophet had cried out: "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'" (Isaiah 40:3) And now John cries out that the time has come. The moment has arrived. What had been future would now be present.

John calls the people out to the Jordan river. Why there? More than 1200 years before John, Joshua had led the Israelites across the Jordan River and into the Promised Land. And it was there that Elijah had been taken up to the heavens. Ever since, the Jordan River had been a symbol of salvation and hope. In baptizing people in the Jordan River, John was symbolically reenacting the crossing of the river. People came to be washed in the river, to give up their old ways, to be cleansed of their past, to be part of the renewed people of the covenant. Yet . . . John pointed the people to

the one “more powerful than I who is coming after me” (v.7) who would baptize, not with water, but with the Holy Spirit (v. 8). In Jesus, entering God’s renewed people will be a crossing over from an old life to a new life.

It is difficult for us to grasp just how volatile and violent was the world across which John’s words drifted. The additional reading on Israel and Rome may help you see the danger that, at best, lay just beneath the surface. Too often, it came bursting forth spilling blood even within the sacred walls of Jerusalem’s Temple Mount.

But John stood out there in the Jordan, the boundary between civilization and the wilderness. He dressed the part: animal skins, living off locusts and honey. Some even mistook him for Elijah. Thus, John the baptizer, laying his eyes on Jesus pronounces that he, this modest man from Galilee, is the One, the long-awaited Lamb of God who had come to reconcile the world to God (John 1:29).

John’s message was one not only of immediacy but of anticipation. For he pronounced that Jesus would baptize not with water, not for mere repentance, but with the Holy Spirit, for rebirth. And this Spirit of God, whom the people of God would come to understand as the third person of the Trinitarian God, would be God present with his people, as God had once been, long before. But for a time, so short a time, God would now walk among his people in the flesh. He would teach and love and heal, calling God’s people to return to the way of God, for it was time for the whole world to be reconciled to God.

The Spirit of Christ is, in the wonderful words of Gordon Fee, “the evidence of the presence of the future.” Not only was the arrival of the Christ a fulfillment of God’s promises made to Abraham, Jesus was also the present-future, the one through whom God’s wondrous future came rushing to meet the present day. Another way to say this is simply to proclaim that Jesus ushered in the kingdom of God; i.e. God’s wondrous future.