

***Mark, Elijah, the Baptist and Matthew: The Success of the First
Intertextual Reading of Mark***

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Introduction

In a great deal of contemporary New Testament scholarship, there is a love affair going on with Mark alongside a polite and patient disdain for his first interpreter Matthew. For many, it is taken for granted that Matthew somehow dumbs down on Mark's glorious subtlety. In so far that Matthew can read and understand Mark's subtle and enigmatic plots, he crassly provides us with a straightforward, work-a-day interpretation of them. Not for Matthew is the Messianic Secret, the disciples' incomprehension or the dark, dramatic irony of Mark's Passion Narrative. Instead of parable, we have allegory. Instead of mystery, we have disclosure.

This kind of approach is exemplified in Robert Fowler's seminal reader-response work, *Let the Reader Understand*,¹ which characterises Matthew's reading of Mark as a "strong" reading, by which he means a reading that effectively amounts

¹ Robert Fowler, *Let the Reader Understand: Reader-Response Criticism and the Gospel of Mark* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991).

to a palimpsest of Mark. Matthew stands as “a creative and powerful misreading of Mark” which turns Mark into its precursor – it has “vanquished and supplanted Mark”.² In several ways, Fowler is clearly right – the reading grid Matthew imposes has caused countless readers to approach Mark in a certain way, missing and misreading key elements, altering their perception of Mark in all its distinctiveness. But now, with influential narrative-critical readings of Mark which treat the book in isolation from the other Gospels, alongside redaction-critical readings that rightly proceed on the assumption of Marcan Priority,³ there are fewer grounds for complaint that – in the reading community of critical New Testament scholarship at least – Matthew’s Gospel continues to exercise a negative influence on the interpretation of Mark.⁴ Indeed, what I would like to suggest in this paper is that it is time to re-think our negative outlook on Matthew’s interpretation of Mark and emphasise instead one of the key ways in which Matthew might be seen as a successful reading of Mark. By “successful”, I mean a reading that understands what Mark is doing but underlines it for his own readers by strengthening the stronger connections, deleting the weaker ones and clarifying the remainder.

² *Ibid.*, p. 237.

³ On Marcan Priority, see note 11 below.

⁴ For some useful reflections on the difficulties with Fowler’s approach, see Shawn Kelley, “Intertextuality and the Gospels: An Introduction”, paper read at the SBL Annual Meeting 2001 Synoptics Section, on-line at: <http://personall.stthomas.edu/dtlandry/intertextuality.htm> .

But in order to achieve a more sympathetic understanding of Matthew's reading of Mark, it is necessary to look in the right places, and here there is a difficulty. When Fowler discusses Matthew's reading of Mark, he focuses solely on elements where Matthew apparently intervenes to alter Mark, the secrecy theme, the portrait of the disciples, the parables, the resurrection. Places where the differences between Matthew and Mark are minor, subtle or non-existent do not have any part to play in the reading. This is problematic. It is a reading too indebted to the legacy of redaction-criticism, with its perennial stress on scrutinising the elements distinctive in each Gospel.⁵ A different and more sympathetic appreciation of Matthew's reading of Mark might pay much closer attention to places where Matthew correctly interprets and brings forward elements in Mark's narrative. In other words, one of the most potentially interesting facets of Matthew as a reading grid is getting ignored, the places where Matthew provides a successful reading of Mark.

One such area will be the focus of the remainder of this chapter, and it is an area that is not mentioned by Fowler in spite of the fact that it is clearly an area of enormous importance to Mark, and one that is corroborated and carried forward by Matthew, the equation of John the Baptist with Elijah. Here we might focus on

⁵ For additional reflections on these points, with special application to the characterization of Peter, see Mark Goodacre, "The Rock on Rocky Ground: Matthew, Mark and Peter as *skandalon*" in Philip McCosker (ed.), *What is it that the Scripture says?: Essays in Biblical Interpretation, Translation, and Reception in Honour of Henry Wansbrough Osb* (Library of New Testament Studies; London & New York: Continuum, 2006): 61-73.

Matthew as a successful intertextual reading of Mark, picking up on the subtleties of Mark's account, understanding their implications and flagging them up for his own readers in such a way that it then influences future readings of Mark, affirming those who also succeed in reading and understanding the role played there by John the Baptist.

John the Baptist and Elijah in Mark

Let us begin by reviewing the evidence. It is clear that Mark presents John the Baptist as Elijah returned.⁶ How does he do this? The identification becomes steadily clearer as the first half of Mark's narrative progresses. The link between John and Elijah is introduced in 1.6 (clothing), elaborated in 6.14-29 (a new Ahab and Jezebel) and confirmed in 9.11-13 (on the way down from the Transfiguration). The clothing gives us the first, famous link to Elijah, καὶ ἦν ὁ Ἰωάννης ἐνδεδυμένος τρίχας καμήλου καὶ ζώνην δερματίνην περὶ τὴν ὀσφὺν αὐτοῦ ("Now John was clothed with camel's hair and had a leather girdle around his waist", 1.6) in as clear an allusion to 2 Kings 1.8 as one could wish for.⁷ Just as in 2 Kings 1, the very description of his clothing is enough to signal

⁶ For a useful discussion of the evidence, see Christine E. Joynes, "A question of identity: 'Why do people say that I am?'. Elijah, John the Baptist and Jesus in Mark's Gospel" in Christopher Rowland and Crispin H. T. Fletcher-Louis, *Understanding, Studying and Reading. New Testament Essays in Honour of John Ashton* (JSNTSup, 153; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), pp. 15-29. Joynes suggests that the traditional term *redivivus* is inappropriate (see especially pp. 16-17).

⁷ LXX: καὶ εἶπον πρὸς αὐτὸν Ἄνὴρ δασύς καὶ ζώνην δερματίνην περιεζωσμένος τὴν ὀσφὺν αὐτοῦ. Καὶ εἶπεν Ἡλίου ὁ Θεοσβίτης οὗτός ἐστιν ("They answered him, "He wore a garment of haircloth, with a girdle of leather

to King Ahaziah that “It is Elijah the Tishbite”, so here the description of John’s clothing in Mark is enough to make clear to the reader that this is a new Elijah.

With this identification established, many astute readers cannot help hearing echoes of Elijah’s complex relationship with the weak king Ahab and his manipulative wife Jezebel as Mark narrates the story of John the Baptist’s relationship with the similarly weak Herod and the similarly scheming Herodias (Mark 6.14-29).⁸ While some remain unsure about the link between these two complexes, pointing out, for example, that the verbal echoes are limited,⁹ this might be seen as declining the invitation to read Mark intratextually as well as intertextually since both the broader context (1.6, 9.11-13) and the immediate context (6.14-16) draw the reader’s attention to Elijah.¹⁰ If the beheading of John the Baptist were all we had, we might well join with others in their scepticism. But as part of a developing discourse in which this theme is clearly important, it is difficult not to spot Jezebel’s haunting presence lurking in the shadows of Herod’s court.

about his loins.” And he said, “It is Elijah the Tishbite.”). J. A. T. Robinson is one of the few to resist the allusion, “Elijah, John and Jesus: An Essay in Detection”, in his *Twelve New Testament Studies* (London: SCM, 1962), p. 29.

⁸ On Mark 6.14-29 and the Elijah links with both John the Baptist and Jesus, see Christine E. Joynes, “Question”, pp. 20-23.

⁹ Most clearly in Robert H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1993), p. 313.

¹⁰ One of the narrative techniques so cleverly used by Mark here is the setting up of the mystery of Jesus’ identity in 6.14-16 and then only to hint at the answer in the narrative that follows.

But the most explicit link between John the Baptist and Elijah is the extraordinary conversation between Jesus and the inner group of disciples after the transfiguration (9.11-13). It is this passage, a passage that reveals much about Mark's narrative technique, which affirms that the earlier echoes of the Elijah narrative have indeed been correctly read by the astute reader. First there is an allusion and then there is the explicit link: the successful reading by the person familiar with the Hebrew Bible is affirmed.

Matt. 17.9-13	Mark 9.9-13
<p>17:9 Καὶ καταβαινόντων αὐτῶν ἐκ τοῦ ὄρους ἐνετείλατο αὐτοῖς ὁ Ἰησοῦς λέγων, Μηδενὶ εἶπητε τὸ ὄραμα ἕως οὗ ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ἐκ νεκρῶν ἐγερθῆ.</p> <p>10 καὶ ἐπηρώτησαν αὐτὸν οἱ μαθηταὶ λέγοντες, Τί οὖν οἱ γραμματεῖς λέγουσιν ὅτι Ἥλιαν δεῖ ἐλθεῖν πρῶτον; 11 ὁ δὲ ἀποκριθεὶς εἶπεν, Ἥλιος μὲν ἔρχεται καὶ ἀποκαταστήσει πάντα·</p> <p>12 λέγω δὲ ὑμῖν ὅτι Ἥλιος ἤδη ἦλθεν, καὶ οὐκ ἐπέγνωσαν αὐτὸν ἀλλὰ ἐποίησαν ἐν αὐτῷ ὅσα ἠθέλησαν· οὕτως καὶ ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου μέλλει πάσχειν ὑπ' αὐτῶν. 13 τότε συνῆκαν οἱ μαθηταὶ ὅτι περὶ Ἰωάννου τοῦ βαπτιστοῦ εἶπεν αὐτοῖς.</p>	<p>9:9 Καὶ καταβαινόντων αὐτῶν ἐκ τοῦ ὄρους διεστείλατο αὐτοῖς ἵνα μηδενὶ ἃ εἶδον διηγήσωνται, εἰ μὴ ὅταν ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ἐκ νεκρῶν ἀναστῆ. 10 καὶ τὸν λόγον ἐκράτησαν πρὸς ἑαυτοὺς συζητοῦντες τί ἐστὶν τὸ ἐκ νεκρῶν ἀναστῆναι. 11 καὶ ἐπηρώτων αὐτὸν λέγοντες, Ὅτι λέγουσιν οἱ γραμματεῖς ὅτι Ἥλιαν δεῖ ἐλθεῖν πρῶτον; 12 ὁ δὲ ἔφη αὐτοῖς, Ἥλιος μὲν ἐλθὼν πρῶτον ἀποκαθιστάνει πάντα, καὶ πῶς γέγραπται ἐπὶ τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ἵνα πολλὰ πάθη καὶ ἐξουδενηθῆ; 13 ἀλλὰ λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι καὶ Ἥλιος ἐλήλυθεν, καὶ ἐποίησαν αὐτῷ ὅσα ἠθέλον, καθὼς γέγραπται ἐπ' αὐτόν.</p>

Matt. 17.9-13	Mark 9.9-13
<p>9 And as they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, “Tell no one the vision, until the Son of man is raised from the dead.”</p> <p>10 And the disciples asked him, “Then why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?” 11 He replied, “Elijah does come, and he is to restore all things;</p> <p>12 but I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not know him, but did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of man will suffer at their hands.”</p> <p>13 Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them of John the Baptist.</p>	<p>9 And as they were coming down the mountain, he charged them to tell no one what they had seen, until the Son of man should have risen from the dead. 10 So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what the rising from the dead meant.</p> <p>11 And they asked him, “Why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?” 12 And he said to them, “Elijah does come first to restore all things; and how is it written of the Son of man, that he should suffer many things and be treated with contempt? 13 But I tell you that Elijah has come, and they did to him whatever they pleased, as it is written of him.”</p>

Here we see the import of what has gone before, and why it is that the Elijah identification is introduced by Mark. They will see that Elijah has indeed come, in John the Baptist, and that this confirms the Messianic identity of Jesus that the disciples are now beginning to perceive (8.30). Further – and this is the key element – the sharp reader is expected to see that Jesus will meet an end that is similar to that of John – “they did to him whatever they pleased, as it is written of him” and so too the Son of Man will “suffer many things”, also as “it is written”. The reader of this passage in Mark, who reads in the context of both the Gospel and the Hebrew Bible, is left reflecting on the relationship between John the

Baptist, the scriptures, Jesus' identity, suffering, messiahship and the disciples' perception.

But there is a potential difficulty with reading Mark. It is too complex, too subtle, its message much too easily missed, especially by the person reading or hearing Mark's Gospel for the first time. Take Mark 1.6. Even if one's eye or ear catches the quick sentence of reference to John the Baptist's clothing in an already tightly packed narrative prologue, deciphering the parallel with Elijah requires not a passing acquaintance with the Elijah-Elisha cycle but a detailed knowledge of it. And what reader will hear the echo on a first reading (or hearing) with so much else going on? Moreover, the Herod and Herodias // Ahab and Jezebel material is so subtly allusive that one cannot be absolutely certain that the link is even there. If Jesus' revelation in 9.13, "Elijah has come" is not to be a complete surprise, one has to be a skilled and erudite reader, one who combines a careful intratextual reading of Mark with a good knowledge of the Hebrew Bible and a sharp intertextual eye.

One of the things that is so startling and yet so rarely acknowledged¹¹ is that the first reading of Mark to which we have direct access¹² not only sees what

¹¹ One of the strengths of Austin Farrer's *St Matthew and St Mark* (The Edward Cadbury Lectures 1953-4; Westminster: Dacre, 1954) is that he attempts to use Matthew – and to a limited extent Luke – as aids in the interpretation of Mark.

¹² I do not simply take the Priority of Mark for granted but have attempted to provide my reasons for making this a key building block in Synoptic studies. See *The Case Against Q: Studies in Markan Priority and the Synoptic Problem* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2002), Chapter 2 and my earlier article, "Fatigue in the Synoptics", *NTS* 44 (1998), pp. 45-58, reproduced on *The Case Against Q* web site, <http://NTGateway.com/Q>.

Mark is doing but clarifies it, extends it, underlines it. Let us have a look at the evidence.

John the Baptist and Elijah in Matthew

If a reader of Mark were to seek help by reading Matthew, the problem of puzzling out the identity of John the Baptist is now solved in one of Matthew's characteristic explanatory narrative asides, the function of which appear to be to clarify to the reader that which might otherwise be opaque. It comes in his version of the dialogue between Jesus and the inner circle of Peter, James and John on the way down from the Mount of Transfiguration (see above).

The synopsis shows Matthew's redactional clarificatory addition τότε συνῆκαν οἱ μαθηταὶ ὅτι περὶ Ἰωάννου τοῦ βαπτιστοῦ εἶπεν αὐτοῖς ("Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them about John the Baptist", 17.13). The addition is typical of Matthew, not least in contexts where he is attempting to explain something the reader of Mark might miss. He does the same thing, using much of the same vocabulary in 16.12, just after the discussion about the leaven of the Pharisees (and Sadducees) in the boat, τότε συνῆκαν ὅτι οὐκ εἶπεν προσέχειν ἀπὸ τῆς ζύμης [τῶν ἄρτων] ἀλλὰ ἀπὸ τῆς διδαχῆς τῶν Φαρισαίων καὶ Σαδδουκαί ("Then they understood that he was warning them not about the leaven [of bread] but about the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees"). Yet by this stage in Matthew's narrative, the reader is not in the least surprised by the explicit identification made between Elijah and John the

Baptist. We have already heard, at a key point in the lengthy passage concerning John the Baptist (11.1-19):

11.13: πάντες γὰρ οἱ προφῆται καὶ ὁ νόμος ἕως Ἰωάννου
ἐπροφήτευσαν· 14 καὶ εἰ θέλετε δεῖξασθαι, αὐτός ἐστιν Ἠλίας ὁ
μέλλων ἔρχεσθαι.¹³

11.13-14: “For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John; 14 and if you are willing to receive it, he is Elijah, the one who is to come.”

The explicit statement shows Matthew’s success in penetrating Mark’s enigma as well as his desire to flag this identification up to his readers, drawing out the implications of the identification. The way his narrative works contrasts with Mark: here it is not a case of gradually fathoming out a mystery but of establishing a connection and then underlining it, once in 11.14 and again in 17.13.

One can gauge the importance of the theme for Matthew by noticing how early in the narrative it emerges. He brings forward the description of John the Baptist’s clothing (Matthew 3.4 // Mark 1.6),¹⁴ now appearing before the notice about those who came to John for baptism (Matthew 3.5-6 // Mark 1.5), the greater prominence not only giving the reader a moment to process the information but also linking it directly to the quotation from Isaiah 40 of the one crying in the

¹³ The key verse here, 11.14, is not present in the Lucan parallel 7.11-35. For Q theorists, this is usually taken as a characteristic Matthaean redactional intervention in Q; for those who think Luke knew Matthew, this is Luke characteristically omitting reference to the direct John the Baptist-Elijah link. On the latter, see further below.

¹⁴ On the link between John and Elijah here in Matthew, see Gundry, *Matthew*, p. 45.

wilderness. One might well see the link between John and Elijah further elaborated in the material Matthew adds at 3.7-10, John's "fiery" preaching, where many have heard echoes of Elijah.

Given the importance that the theme appears to have for Matthew, one piece of evidence stands out: it is surprising that it is so much more difficult to hear echoes of the Ahab-Jezebel complex in his version of the Herod-Herodias story than it is in Mark's (Matthew 14.1-12 // Mark 6.14-29). Matthew's much abbreviated version¹⁵ greatly plays down the role of Herodias in the drama and as soon as Herod takes the major role, he begins to look less like Ahab, and his wife less like Jezebel. It is probably no coincidence that accordingly Matthew, unlike Mark (6.15), does not introduce his version of the story with any mention of Elijah. Given Matthew's enthusiasm for the Elijah—John the Baptist parallel, so explicit in both 11.13-14 and 17.13, we can only speculate as to why he chooses to play it down here. After all, E. P. Sanders's useful corrective to the old idea that Matthew had an innate tendency to abbreviate the Markan narratives,¹⁶ encourages us to ask the question why, in a given instance, Matthew has abbreviated a Markan narrative. In this pericope, the answer may well be because the Markan account takes such a lot of space to hint so gently at the Elijah theme. In a text in which the identification between Elijah and John is explicit, there is no

¹⁵ For this pericope as a particularly clear example of Matthew's dependence on Mark, and the editorial fatigue involved in his version of it, see my "Fatigue in the Synoptics", pp. 46-47 and 52, and references there.

¹⁶ E. P. Sanders, *Tendencies of the Synoptic Tradition* (SNTSMS, 9; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

need for such a subtle (or should one say opaque?) piece of writing. After all, contemporary scholars still debate whether or not the Markan Herod-Herodias story evokes the Ahab and Jezebel story of 1 and 2 Kings, so it is scarcely surprising that one of Mark's first readers chose to play down potential links in this story.

An interesting pattern emerges here in Matthew's reading of Mark's John the Baptist narrative. Where he sees the link between Elijah and John, and where he expects his own readers to be able to see the link, it is accentuated and brought into greater prominence. Where he has the chance, he will intervene and use the narrator's voice to underline the link. And if he does not find his source conducive to forwarding that theme, he will play it down. Here we can see the way that one of the first readers of Mark reacted to his text: strongly affirming its direction (John the Baptist = Elijah) but modifying, re-reading, or omitting anything that failed to make this clear. This is a strong reading of Mark, but it is not "strong" in Fowler's sense of misreading, supplanting, vanquishing. It is, rather, a reading of bold affirmation, understanding, developing, underlining.

But why is this identification between John and Elijah important to Matthew? Why is it that he makes what he does of Mark's intertextuality? On one level, it is, no doubt, the very fact that Matthew has here read Mark, learned it and inwardly digested it. There is a certain thrill in reading intertextually, recognising allusions and teasing out their implications, and for no one more so than a reader

like Matthew, so sensitive to the expression of the gospel as a fulfilment of the Scriptures. It is worth noting that the first of the two explicit identifications of Elijah with John the Baptist (11.13-14) comes in 11.1-19, one of the richest Scripture-based pieces in the Gospel, where the roles of John and Jesus in salvation-history are clarified, and John is identified with the prophecy of Malachi 3 and subsequently directly with Elijah.

But to read Matthew as obsessed with the theme of fulfilment of the Scriptures at the expense of all else would be to read Matthew superficially. He engages with the Hebrew Bible, and works with Mark's intertextuality in the service of his broader literary and theological agenda. To see this, it is worth taking a closer look at his reading of Mark 9.9-13. The extra, clarificatory verse Matthew 17.13, stands out straight away, as we have seen. It is this that signals so clearly to the reader that the proper identification of John the Baptist is as the Elijah prophesied by Malachi. But a closer look at the rest of the passage shows Matthew intervening in the passage in some subtle but fascinating ways.

First, it is quite clear that for Matthew, as for Mark, the identification functions Christologically and soteriologically. The logic is straightforward. If "Elijah has already come" (Ἡλίας ἤδη ἦλθεν, Matt. 17.12), then clearly, to use a Matthaeanism, something greater than Elijah is here. If the reader is persuaded by the link between John and Elijah, how much more will s/he affirm that Jesus is the Christ. But Matthew, like Mark, believes in the gospel of the Messiah who suffers and he repeatedly affirms this clear element in Mark's agenda, and nowhere more

clearly than here. If Elijah has already come and he was mistreated, then surely this greater-than-Elijah will also suffer at their hands. This is at the heart of both Mark and Matthew, both Gospels of Christ crucified.

But as well as affirming this, Matthew needs to make some changes. To someone who knows his Hebrew Bible as well as Matthew, Mark's "as it is written of him" (καθὼς γέγραπται ἐπ' αὐτόν, Mark 9.13) is quite unfathomable. Where is it written that Elijah would be mistreated and suffer on his return?¹⁷ We know that Matthew knows and values the prophecy in Malachi 3.24 (4.6) concerning Elijah's return (quoted in 11.10)¹⁸ and there is no hint in that key verse about Elijah's suffering on his return. So, unsurprisingly, Matthew drops Mark's "as it is written of him". Given his fondness for using γέγραπται himself, and the fulfilment theme to which that usage witnesses, we can get some idea of how careful Matthew is being to take this identification between John and Elijah seriously.

¹⁷ It is sometimes suggested that Mark is thinking of 1 Kings 19.10, 14, "The children of Israel hunt after my life to take it away", for example Austin Farrer, *St Matthew and St Mark*, p. 5. This is far from an obvious reading, though, and the fact that contemporary readers disagree about whether or not one can read this here in Mark reinforces the point that one of Mark's ancient readers, Matthew, may also have been uncertain how to read Mark here, and as a result discourages his own readers from seeing Mark in that way.

¹⁸ Q sceptics might argue that Malachi 3.1 is especially important to Matthew since it is he who has apparently taken care to extract the Malachi 3.1 element from the composite quotation (of Isaiah 40.3 + Malachi 3.1) found in Mark 1.2-3, saving the Malachi element for elaboration here in Matthew 11.2-19. Q theorists have always struggled with the minor agreements / Mark-Q overlap in this complex, on which see especially Michael Goulder, 'On Putting Q to the Test', *NTS* 24 (1978), pp. 218-24 and E. P. Sanders & M. Davies, *Studying the Synoptic Gospels* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International; London: SCM, 1989).

But even with this omission, the difficulties with Mark's account are still not all resolved. One important thing remains. "Elijah does come first to restore all things", Jesus says in Mark 9.12, ἀποκαθιστάνει πάντα. This is, of course, a clear allusion to the Malachi 3.24 / 4.6 prophecy. But what sense does it make to say that Elijah comes first to restore all things if the very point of the passage is that he was mistreated and – what's more – that this points to the even greater mistreatment of his successor?¹⁹ Depending on one's perspective, this is Mark as his infuriating worst or his subtle best. It is so typical of his Gospel to pose the problem without providing adequate answers. While much recent New Testament scholarship has tended to celebrate Mark's opaqueness at such points, lauding the riddles he poses, Matthew's Gospel has none of that. His Gospel provides a strong reading that in many ways takes Mark so seriously that he is simply not going to be happy with such difficulties.

¹⁹ For a fine exposition of what Mark is attempting to do here, see Joel Marcus, *The Way of the Lord: Christological Exegesis of the Old Testament in the Gospel of Mark* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1992), pp. 94-110, which shows how the passage conforms to the "refutational form", by which Mark is able to achieve an exegetical reconciliation between these contradictory scriptures and scriptural expectations. The only thing missing from Marcus's brilliant analysis is the extent to which the prophecy (from Malachi) has been irredeemably modified by history: it is clear that John did not "restore all things" and this is going to be a major stumbling block to any claim that John the Baptist = Elijah, so Mark does his best to find a way around this difficulty. He does not, like Paul talking about circumcision in Galatians, simply ignore the troubling text (Genesis 17); rather, he has Jesus tackle it and "refute" it head-on. It is a bold move that we would not expect to be universally popular. And indeed it was not – Luke does not like this and omits Mark 9.11-13 altogether, in line with his weakening of the link between John & Elijah (on which see further below).

Matthew's strategy for overcoming the conundrum is clever. As Robert Gundry has shown,²⁰ when Mark's ἀποκαθιστάνει becomes in Matthew ἀποκαταστήσει, a simple shift has taken place that in one bold stroke not only conforms Matthew's text more closely to the LXX of Malachi 4.6 (3.24), but also removes the problem by pushing this "restoration" into the future. Now there is not only a past coming of Elijah but also a future one. Just as Elijah "comes first" before Jesus' first coming, so he will come again to restore all things before the parousia. Thus Mark's Christological and soteriological piece attains a typically Matthaean eschatological dimension.

Elijah and John the Baptist Before Mark

In our reflections so far, we have been focusing on Mark and on Matthew's reading of Mark. I have attempted to describe Matthew's reading of Mark's John the Baptist narrative as a "successful" intertextual reading, by which I mean that he understands what Mark is doing but wants to underline it for his own readers by strengthening the stronger connections, deleting the weaker ones and clarifying the remainder. Let us move our thoughts towards conclusion by indulging

²⁰ Robert Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church Under Persecution* (Second Edition; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), p. 347, "Far from raising and leaving unanswered a question, Matthew's Jesus *answers* the chronological question – i.e., gives further understanding to those who already have understanding (see 13.12) – by putting Elijah's coming and restoration of all things into the future. Cf. Matthew's making the prediction in 16.28 refer to the parousia. In this way the first evangelist avoids the incongruity in Mark that Elijah restores all things yet is maltreated. Now the maltreatment lies in the past – i.e. in the fate of John the Baptist as Elijah – and the restoration of all things in the future."

ourselves a little and asking some more speculative questions and suggesting some possible answers. I would like to focus on two areas we have not so far covered, either side chronologically of the writing of Mark and Matthew: first, the question of the pre-Markan tradition concerning Elijah and John the Baptist and second, the post-Matthaeian legacy of the connection. I would like to propose that the identification between John and Elijah had a much shorter history than is usually assumed, that it originates in Mark, finds full expression in Matthew and then, remarkably quickly, it dies.

Now it is usually assumed that the link between John and Elijah is pre-Markan, indeed it may even go back to John's consciousness itself,²¹ but there is an alternative to this view, the notion that Mark himself was responsible for the identification. The earliest evidence we have for the link is Mark's Gospel and Mark more than hints at a contrary view, perhaps the view he has taken over from his tradition. And this view is that it is not John but Jesus who is Elijah. Not only do Jesus' miracles often sound similar to those in the Elijah-Elisha cycle,²² but twice the identification of Jesus with Elijah is given as a view held by others that is in need of correction (6.15, 8.28). And then – strikingly – at the Mount of Transfiguration, Mark lays all the stress on Elijah: “And then there appeared to

²¹ For a recent example, see Joan E. Taylor, *The Immerser: John the Baptist within Second Temple Judaism* (Studying the Historical Jesus; Grand Rapids / Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1997), for example p. 321, “Jesus seems to have thought that John was Elijah”.

²² For a thorough exploration of the links between the Elijah-Elisha cycle and Mark, see Thomas L. Brodie, *The Crucial Bridge: The Elijah-Elisha Narrative as an Interpretive Synthesis of Genesis-Kings and a Literary Model for the Gospels* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2000), pp. 86-95.

them *Elijah* with Moses” (καὶ ὥφθη αὐτοῖς Ἡλίας σὺν Μωϋσεῖ).²³ Elijah’s presence on the mountain is getting stressed here, all the more so in that the disciples straight away ask about Elijah on the way down from the mountain, “Why do the scribes say that Elijah must come?” The disciples are surprised because if Elijah is there with Moses and Jesus on the mountain, then clearly Jesus cannot be Elijah.²⁴ Perhaps Mark is setting up this John-Elijah identification as a means of countering a dominant tradition and his reason, as so often, is Christological and soteriological. Rather than, as his tradition, having Jesus as Elijah heralding the great and terrible day of the Lord, he has John as the Elijah who heralds the embodiment of that day of the Lord, Jesus. And as Elijah came first and was mistreated, so now Jesus will likewise suffer.²⁵

²³ Contrast the parallels in Matt. 17.3 and Luke 9.30 which more naturally speak of “Moses and Elijah”.

²⁴ Cf. Michael Goulder, “Elijah With Moses, Or, A Rift in the Pre-Markan Lute” in David G. Horrell and Christopher M. Tuckett (eds.), *Christology, Controversy and Community: New Testament Essays in Honour of David R. Catchpole* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), pp. 193-208, especially p. 199, “Mark does not like this: to him John was Elijah all right, but Jesus is the Son of God. Only the stories he tells give the background Christology away”, but with many others, Goulder also thinks that “John the Baptist saw himself as the prophesied Elijah” (*ibid.*).

²⁵ One potential problem for this thesis might be the alleged Jewish expectation that Elijah would precede the coming of the Messiah. It is debated whether there was such an expectation – see M. M. Faierstein, “Why do the Scribes Say that Elijah Must Come First?”, *JBL* 100 (1981), pp. 75-86 and J. A. Fitzmyer, “More About Elijah Coming First”, *JBL* 104 (1985), pp. 295-6 (against) and D. C. Allison, “Elijah Must Come First”, *JBL* 103 (1984), pp. 256-8 and Joel Marcus, *The Way of the Lord*, p. 110 (in favour). The best evidence for the expectation is Mark itself, and what “the scribes say” in Mark 9.11, but that verse only witnesses to the notion that Elijah comes “first”, which only needs to mean before the day of the Lord, as in Malachi 3.24 (4.6), and not before the Messiah comes. Under this view, Elijah himself is expected to come as a Messiah figure who will restore all things. The reason that the disciples bring up this expectation in this context is the confusion that has been introduced by seeing Elijah and Jesus together at the

The Legacy of the Link: the Contributions of Luke and John

Matthew's success in reading the Elijah-John the Baptist story is even more striking if Mark was the first to make the identification. If this is the case, Matthew is not simply the next uninteresting acceptance of a pre-Markan tradition, but he is the first endorsement of Mark's bold piece of propaganda, a piece that actually goes against the grain of the earliest traditions.

But if the idea has little pre-Markan pedigree, what of its post-Matthaeian legacy? One can get some idea of just how bold Matthew's affirmation of Mark's identification of John with Elijah is by reflecting on the way this identification was subsequently treated. The identification in fact causes some real problems. One is the move Matthew made in 17.11-13 to work his way out of the problem that John the Baptist did not restore all things (see above). For all its brilliance as a means of overcoming the problems with Mark 9.11-13, in the end it can only create fresh problems. Was anyone in the early Church really going to buy the idea that Elijah would return again ahead of the Parousia? Who had ever heard of such a thing?

But a second, more serious problem is that the identification runs the risk of exalting the role of John the Baptist too much for Christians keen to demote him. This is most clearly and famously the case in the Fourth Gospel, where John issues his flat denial that he is Elijah (John 1.21, "Are you Elijah?" "I am not").

Transfiguration. If Jesus is not Elijah, who is? Just as Mark's narrator has left the discerning reader clues as to the true identity of Elijah, so now Mark's Jesus too reinforces the view that it is John who is Elijah and not himself.

Moreover, the link between Jesus and Elijah appears to have been too pervasive in the tradition to be supplanted as quickly as Mark and Matthew desire. Luke, no doubt fully aware of the tradition, greatly plays down the idea that John is Elijah, omitting altogether the key places where the identification is established, Mark 1.6 // Matthew 3.4 (John's clothing), Matthew 11.14 (the first of Matthew's explicit identifications), Mark 6.17-29 (Herod and Herodias) and Mark 9.9-13 // Matthew 17.9-13. But having omitted these sections, Luke typically attempts reconciliation between the different streams of tradition. On the one hand the Gospel early affirms that John the Baptist will come in the "spirit and power of Elijah" (Luke 1.17), but on the other hand, the notion that Jesus is Elijah is enhanced. In the synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus parallels his own destiny with that of Elijah and Elisha (Luke 4.25-27), he raises a widow's son to life (Luke 7.11-17)²⁶ and he has an invitation to call down fire from heaven (Luke 9.51-56).²⁷ This is a major departure from the Marcan-Matthaeian consensus that insists so strongly on the identification between John and Elijah.²⁸

²⁶ See 1 Kings 17.17-24 and cf. 2 Kings 4.18-37. The people appear to recognise the links, "A great prophet has arisen among us", Luke 7.16.

²⁷ See 2 Kings 1.10-14.

²⁸ Note also how Luke 9.7-9 differs from Mark 6.14-16. The same options are provided – Jesus could be John the Baptist, Elijah or one of the prophets. Herod rules out the first one of these, that Jesus is John the Baptist, but whereas in Mark the idea that he is Elijah is compromised by the Herod-Herodias story that follows, in which John is aligned with Elijah, the lack of that story in Luke leaves open the possibility that Jesus is indeed Elijah or one of the prophets.

Conclusion

If the reading here is on the right lines, Gospel origins, and the role played by Elijah could be mapped out as follows. In the pre-Markan tradition, many were making the equation between Jesus and Elijah. But Mark sees the potential of identifying John with Elijah as much more conducive to his key Christological and soteriological agenda. Matthew, who in large part shares that agenda, and who enjoys the thrill of untangling the message that for him is presented all too subtly, carries forward the identification, underlines it and develops it, clarifying some of Mark's idiosyncrasies and in the process adding his eschatological touch, drawing Elijah into involvement in the Parousia.

But Matthew's move was bold. By affirming the Marcan view so strongly, he only causes his successors to see the problems with the new identification all the more clearly. The Fourth Evangelist has John deny it even more explicitly than Matthew has his narrator affirm it. And Luke typically nods in the direction of his Marcan and Matthaean tradition with his "spirit and power of Elijah" in 1.17, but he wants to affirm more strongly the still pervasive earlier tradition that Jesus was Elijah. In the end the irony is that where Matthew strongly affirms the direction of Mark, he has done him the disservice of making the identification so clear as to deter many future readers. Far from vanquishing or supplanting Mark, he stands as a powerful and belligerent partner with Mark, alone in the canon in stressing this identification.