

## **The Mantle of Elijah**

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The mantle of Elijah's prophetic ministry first fell to Elisha with "a double portion" of Elijah's spirit (II Kings 2:9f). Elisha directed the anointing of King Jehu, who was commissioned to destroy the house of Ahab to "avenge the blood of my servants the prophets . . . at the hand of Jezebel" (II Kings 9:7). Prophets, who were often Nazarites (Numbers 6:2-8), continued to proclaim God's law to a rebellious people. They refused to repent and even "gave the Nazarites wine to drink; and commanded the prophets, saying, Prophecy not" (Amos 2:12). So, God punished them with famines, plagues, invasion and captivity (II Kings 17:6-23). Finally, for some four centuries He punished His people with the most dreadful famine; "not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD" (Amos 8:11).

This awful famine was broken with the fiery, inspired preaching of John the Baptist as prophesied by Malachi (4:5-6). John, a Nazarite from his mother's womb (Luke 1:15), came in "the spirit and power of Elias [Elijah], to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children . . . to make ready a people prepared for the Lord" (Luke 1:17). All they in Judah and Jerusalem came out to hear John preach, "and were all baptized of him in the river of Jordan, confessing their sins" (Mark 1:5). "The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God" (Isaiah 40:3).

Yes, the power of Elijah's prophetic mantle was exhibited in John's preaching but without any miraculous signs. Since Elijah snatched defeat from the jaws of victory at Mt. Carmel, wannabe reformers and their audiences have stumbled over signs. James and John stumbled badly as they sought permission to "command fire to come down from heaven, and consume" an inhospitable Samaritan village and earned a rebuke from Jesus (Luke 9:54-56). Christ's ministry was accompanied by some miracles. But, unbelieving Jews demanded more signs. Jesus denounced them, saying, "An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas" (Matthew 12:39).

These self-justifying "seekers," like the rich man in hell, falsely implied that a sign, such as raising the beggar Lazarus, was ultimately a prerequisite to repentance (Luke 16:30). Such a rationale was at odds with revealed reality of man's perversity (Romans 1:18-22). It was as implausible as a *deus ex machina*, e.g. a magic sword, used in ancient Greek drama to extricate a hero or demigod from an impossible situation. Therefore, as Father Abraham declared, "If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead" (Luke 16:31). Abraham's dictum was confirmed by the Jewish leaders' concocted story explaining away the empty tomb after the resurrection of Jesus (Matthew 28:11-13).

Accordingly, faithful preaching is only part of a revival or "people movement" (Luke 8:5-15). As Paul reminded schismatic saints, he had but "planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase" (I Corinthians 3:6). Jesus, sensing great receptivity to His preaching, noted that "The harvest truly is great, but the labourers are few: pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he would send forth labourers into his harvest" (Luke 10:2). Jesus further declared that "there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist: but he that is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he." (Luke 7:28). John was seen as the "messenger" to whom Elijah's mantle had passed (Matthew 11:10,14). Thus, Elijah's mantle, now minus distracting signs, has fallen to the most humble preacher who accepts Christ's commission to go teaching all nations "to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:20).