

CHRIST AS A NORTHERN PROPHET IN ST JOHN

'And they asked him (John the Baptist), "What, then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not"' (Jn. 1:21). At first the reply may take us by surprise, standing as it seems in direct contradiction to Matt. 17:11-13: "'I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not know him, but did to him whatever they pleased . . ."' Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them of John the Baptist' (cf. Matt. 11:10, 14; Mk. 9:12, 13). It is emphasised by the synoptists (Matt. 3:4; Mk. 1:6) that John deliberately dressed like Elijah in haircloth and with a leather girdle (cf. 2 Kings 1:8: 'He wore a garment of haircloth, with a girdle of leather about his loins'). Moreover, all three synoptists apply to John Malachi's prophecy of the return of Elijah: 'Behold I send my messenger to prepare the way before me . . . Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children, and the hearts of children to their fathers' (Mal. 3:1, 4-6; Matt. 11:10; Mk. 1:2; Lk. 1:17, 76; 7:27). It is scarcely conceivable that the fourth evangelist did not know of the tradition, represented in all three synoptists, of regarding the Baptist as an Elijah figure and as the fulfilment of the words of Malachi, yet not only does he fail to point out this significance of John, but he deliberately sets it aside, in the words quoted at the beginning. Why? Whether the Baptist in fact, historically, admitted or denied being an Elijah figure (if he said anything about it at all) is of no concern to the evangelist. He puts, historically or not, the denial of this rôle on the lips of the Baptist because he wishes to represent Christ himself as an Elijah figure (or rather, an Elijah-Elisha figure).¹ This view of Christ is worth following up throughout the fourth Gospel.²

But before we attempt to trace the occurrences of this idea in the gospel, it will be well to remind ourselves of the distinctive nature of

¹ A vestige of the idea of John as an Elijah (perhaps allowed to remain because actual words of Christ are being quoted?) occurs in the reference to John as 'the lamp that is kindled and burns' (5:35), in which we catch a clear echo of the expression applied to Elijah by Ben Sira (Sir 48:): 'Then there arose a prophet like fire, and his word was kindled like a lamp'. (So the Greek. The Hebrew is different: '. . . and his words were like a burning furnace.')

² Prof. David Daube has shown very clearly, in *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism*, 1956, that the idea of Jesus himself as a second Elijah is found in the Synoptists too, implicitly. For instance, the Palm Sunday cry 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord' implies an identification of Christ as a new Elijah under the established title for Elijah of 'He who comes'; again, the words in the Ascension story 'He was parted from them and carried up to heaven' (Lk. 24:51) is a reminiscence of 2 Kings 2:11: 'A chariot of fire and horses of fire parted the two of them, and Elijah went up by whirlwind into heaven'.

Biblical historiography. It has become a commonplace, that whereas the Greek view of history, which is our own too, is best thought of as linear, the Jews viewed history as a cyclic process: they tended always to see it not as a succession of separate incidents, but as a repetition, with numerous variations, of a few basic themes. In a word, the Hebrew way of writing history is *midrashic*. The Hebrew word 'midrash' has a wide range of meanings: for instance, it can refer to the way in which many of the historical parts of the Old Testament were retold later with embellishments. Chronicles, for example, is one long midrashic retelling of Samuel and Kings, and much of Wisdom and Ben Sirach is a midrashic re-working of various earlier historical narratives. Often the 'embellishments' are of homiletic rather than historical significance, and they can be rather far-fetched: one of the most fanciful pieces of midrash occurs at Wisd. 16:20-21, which relates that the Manna given to the Israelite people in the wilderness assumed whatever delicious taste the eater wished! But in this article I shall use the word 'midrash' to indicate the way in which later events were seen as a heightened repetition of earlier ones: thus in second-Isaiah and elsewhere the return from the Babylonian captivity is presented as a repetition of the Exodus, in which the ideas of ransoming, of passing through the desert, of drinking water given by God in the wilderness, of being accompanied by a pillar of fire, of singing the song of Miriam and of receiving the Covenant are repeated. (e.g. Is. 41:17-20; 43:1-3, 14-21; 48:20 and 21; 49:8-12; 51:9-11 and 12; 55:3, 12 and 13; Hos. 2:14; Baruch 2:24-35; 5:6-9). The New Testament in its turn takes up many of these ideas and applies them to the action of God in Christ, whereby He rescues us from sin and brings us, sustained by sacramental food, through the desert of this world to the promised land which is Himself. Right at the beginning of the gospel story, in all four evangelists, we hear the echo of the words with which second-Isaiah proclaimed a new Exodus: 'A voice of one crying, "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord"' (Is. 40:3-5).

Such use of midrash, then is common in both the Old and the New Testament. Take the Elijah motif. If in Christ St John saw the recurrence of the Elijah theme, Elijah was himself thought of in the Old Testament as a recurrence of the Moses theme, for Elijah is presented to us in *Kings* in distinctly Mosaic terms: he comes after forty days in the desert to Horeb/Sinai and there witnesses a theophany that induces him, like Moses, to wrap his face in his mantle (1 Kings 19:13). If the story of Elijah is partly modelled on that of Moses, it had in its turn a profound effect upon the story of Elisha, who is unmistakably delineated as an Elijah figure: this is brought out by the fact that both raised a woman's son in exactly the same way (1 Kings 17:17-24;

2 Kings 4, 8-37), and both performed the same miracle over a cruse of oil (1 Kings 17:8-16; 2 Kings 4:1-7). Moreover, Elisha like Elijah is a Moses figure, as his parting of the waters of the Jordan shows. The close similarity of Elijah and Elisha, and the significant fact that Elisha received the mantle and spirit of Elijah after the latter's death, invites one to treat them together as a type for the Northern prophet. It is for that reason that in this article we are attempting to look at the Christ of the fourth Gospel as a 'northern prophet' rather than separately as an Elijah or Elisha figure.

The first occurrence we find in John of the idea of Jesus as the fulfilment of the type of the northern prophet is in the account of the wedding feast at Cana. Each time that Cana is mentioned (2:1-11; 4:46; 21:2) the words 'of Galilee' are added. I hope it will not appear fanciful, in the light of the cumulative considerations to be advanced, to suggest that the chief point of this is not to distinguish this Cana from Kanah of Asher (Josh. 19:28), but to place Jesus in the tradition of the *northern* prophets. It is not without significance, I would urge, that although the fourth gospel recounts in general the Jerusalem ministry of Jesus, a number of his signs are performed in the north, in Galilee, and I think that the 'sign' at Cana is *inter alia* intended to remind us how Elisha began *his* ministry by sweetening the water supply (2 Kings 2:19-22).

John 7 and 8 are devoted to an account of the manifestation of Jesus at the feast of Tabernacles. We are told how at first he gave the impression that he was not going up for the feast¹, and then appeared unexpectedly half-way through, and how 'the Jews sought for him at the feast' (Jn. 7:11), in which Prof. C. H. Dodd² is surely right to find an echo of Mal. 3:1: 'Behold I send my messenger to prepare my way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple'. The messenger spoken of here by Malachi is Elijah (see Mal. 4:5).³ Unlike the Synoptists, John finds this Elijah *redivivus* not in the Baptist but in Christ himself; it is he who is the Messenger, 'the Lord whom you seek' (*ha-Adon*, not Yahweh. I take 'the Lord' to be the Messenger, not God). The Jews were searching for Jesus,

¹ Jesus' hesitation about going up, and the private nature of the visit when he did go remind us of his apparent reluctance to work a 'sign' at Cana. The chief point is in both episodes the same, that is, to stress that his 'hour' had not yet come (Jn. 2:4; 7:6), the hour of his *definitive* self-revelation. All the 'signs' were merely foretastes of the real manifestation of himself when his hour did arrive (Jn. 13:1; 17:1), sc. in the lifting up of the Crucifixion-Resurrection-Ascension.

² *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, 1953, p. 351.

³ Some think this verse is an editorial addition, and therefore that as the text originally stood the Messenger was not identified with Elijah. This may be so, but it does not affect the position adopted above, for undoubtedly the New Testament writers would accept the identification.

and suddenly he is there in their midst revealing himself as the fulfilment of the prophecy.¹ He comes to take possession of God's house, suddenly, unexpectedly ('half-way through the Feast'), and at the same time intimates that that house, a mere 'Temple made with hands' is obsolete in so far as he is now himself the Temple of God; this he indicates by speaking (7:38) of streams of living water which would flow from him: the water to issue from his side on Calvary would bring to pass the vision of Ezekiel (Chap. 47) and second Zechariah (Zech. 14) of water flowing forth from the Temple to give life to the world.

If the contention in the last paragraph is true, then we can see great point in the repeated references to Galilee in Chapter 7: 'He walked about in Galilee . . . Some said, "Is the Christ to come from Galilee? Search and you will see that no prophet arises in Galilee".' This incredulity of the Jews (which is surely strange in the light of the fact that the prophet Jonah was a Galilean: cf. 2 Kings 14:25 with Josh. 19:13) belongs to a regular Johannine theme of the *ignorance* of the Jews, for instance of their own Scriptures (cf. 5:39, 45-7. "' . . . It is Moses who accuses you. If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote of me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?'"). They were confident that they understood the Torah, but they missed much that it had to say; in the same way they thought they knew all about Jesus and his background ("We know where this man comes from", Jn. 7:27)—yet did not know that he was born at Bethlehem (7:42). They objected to Jesus for not having been born at Bethlehem, and they objected to him because they could not believe in a Galilean that is a Northern prophet. In both respects they displayed deep ignorance: Jesus had been born in Bethlehem, and there was precedent for a Galilean prophet in Jonah, but John is thinking rather, I think, of Jesus as standing in the tradition of the Elijah-Elisha type of Northern prophet.

The least controvertible instance of Jesus being portrayed as an Elijah-Elisha figure by John is in the story of the multiplication of loaves, in Chapter 6. In 2 Kings 4:42-44 Elisha multiplies *barley* loaves (hence the mention in Jn. 6:9 that the loaves used were of barley) and grain, and, as in John 6, 'they ate and had some left, according to the word of the Lord'. A glance at the Old Testament story also explains the reason why John mentions only men as being present ("Make the men sit down" . . . So the men sat down', Jn. 6:10)², although

¹ In Matt. 11:3 and Lk. 7:20 the Baptist invites Jesus to apply to himself these words of Malachi ("Art thou *he that comes*, or are we to *look for another?*"). Jesus, however, replies by appropriating to himself instead some words of Isaiah.

² J. A. Grassi ('The five loaves of the High Priest', *Novum Testamentum*, Vol. VII, 2, 1964, pp. 119-122) thinks that the mention of men only shows the influence of 1 Sam. 21—the story of David's eating the *five* (cf. Jn. 6:9) loaves of shew-bread on

no doubt there were women there too : Elisha says "Give them to the men" (2 Kings 4:43), because the miracle was wrought for the community of the sons of the prophets, which of course was all male.

Later in Chapter 6 we find what looks very like another reference to Elijah : "What if you were to see the Son of Man ascending where he was before?" (6:62). This strongly suggests that the evangelist saw the Ascension of Christ in the light of the ascension of Elijah (2 Kings 2). He also, I think, views the Crucifixion in the light of the ascension of Elijah : just as Elijah at his departure left his spirit with Elisha (2 Kings 2:15), so we read in John (unlike the Synoptists) that at his death Christ did not 'give up' the spirit (Matt. 27:50 : 'he sent forth the spirit' ; Mk. 15:37, Lk. 23:46 : 'he expired'), but he *handed on* the spirit (*Paredoke*. Jn. 19:30. The word is cognate with *paradosis*, the word used for the tradition of doctrine). Just as Elijah handed on his spirit to Elisha, so did Christ hand on his spirit to the Church.

The theme of Jesus as a Northern prophet in the tradition of Elijah and Elisha needs more investigation than has here been attempted, and I hope it will one day receive it ; however, one must be on one's guard against over-emphasising its importance. It is only one theme among many, and bulks much less large than, say, the theme of Jesus in the rôle of a new Moses ; thus if Jesus is an Elisha figure in Jn. 2 and 6, he is also, and more significantly, a Joseph figure in the former chapter¹ and a Moses figure in the latter. Midrash casts its net wider in the New Testament than it does in the Old, and one event in the life of Christ is usually modelled upon a number of Old Testament precedents, which it thus fulfils : 'fulfils' not in the crude sense of acting out the circumstantial details of a photographically clear prophecy, but in the sense of repeating in a fuller, more meaningful sense the characteristics of an earlier event.

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condition that the men in his army had had no relations with women during the campaign (21:4) : thus the bread given to the crowd in Jn. 6 would be a sort of *viaticum* for a campaign—the picture is that of a purified messianic army'. Grassi refers to H. W. Montefiore ('Revolt in the Desert', *New Testament Studies*, 8 (1962), pp. 135-141), who identifies the John 6 episode with the feeding of the five thousand in the Synoptists, and says 'Five thousand men do not follow their leader into the wilderness without good cause. It is hard to see a sufficient reason other than that they wished to initiate a revolt' (p. 138). He mentions a suggestion of Prof. C. H. Dodd's that in Matt. 14:12 we should translate 'without any admixture of women and children' rather than 'apart from women and children'. According to this view, then, men only are mentioned in Jn. 6 because men only were present, five thousand men intent upon an insurrection which they hoped to be able to persuade Jesus to lead, and the evangelist, though eliminating the idea of a literal revolt from the passage, sees the episode as symbolising the warfare of the Christian life. In criticism of this view, it should be said that such a conception consorts ill with the general tenor of the Jn. 6 narrative.

¹ See A. Guilding, *The Fourth Gospel and Jewish Worship*, 1960.