WAS JOHN THE BAPTIST ELIJAH?

Was John the Baptist really the prophet Elijah? Believing that the Bible indicates John to have been Elijah, some people have contended that the Bible supports the idea of reincarnation. Others, noting that John specifically denied being Elijah (John 1:21), have argued that the Bible contradicts itself. Thus this question merits attention for more than one reason.

In Malachi 4:5-6, God announced that He would send "Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the LORD." In Luke 1:17, we learn that the angel Gabriel told Zacharias, John's father, that John would fulfill Malachi 4:6, stating that he would go before the Lord "in the spirit and power of Elijah." Jesus also identif ied John as Elijah (Matthew 11:14;17:10-13; Mark 9:11-13). However, when asked by the priests and Levites if he were Elijah, John denied it (John 1:21). How should this denial be understood?

First of all, it is noteworthy that John did not apply Malachi 4:6 to himself, but instead quoted Isaiah 40:3 to explain his purpose. Some have concluded from this fact that John did not realize he was Elijah. However, this is extremely unlikely, since Zacharias would surely have told John of Gabriel's reference to Malachi 4:5-6. It is also noteworthy that Isaiah 40:3 is parallel in thought to Malachi 3:1 (which is closely related to Malachi 4:5 -6). In Mark 1:2-3, Mark quotes Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3 together to explain John's ministry, introducing the quotatio ns with the words, "As it is written in Isaiah the prophet." These facts indicate that John saw the "voice" in Isaiah 40:3 as a humbler way of expressing the same functional role as described in Malachi, and that he realized he was to function in that role "in the spirit and power of Elijah."

The actual reason for John's denial that he was "Elijah," then, is that John was avoiding being acclaimed as Elijah resurrected in the flesh. Apparently the Jews in Jesus' day expected Elijah himself to come, based on an overly literal interpretation of Malachi. (This would not prove that the Jews believed in reincarnation, rather, they expected Elijah to be raised bodily from the dead by God.) In this sense, John denied that he was "Elijah"; he had come merely "in the spirit and power of Elijah" (Luke 1:17). Because the Jews had misunderstood the Elijah prophecy in Malachi, John instead applied to himself the parallel prophecy in Isaiah 40:3 (John 1:23). When Jesus said that John was "Elijah," He meant the same t hing, namely, that John was to fulfill the same role in his day that Elijah had, as specified in Malachi 4:5 -6. That role, specifically, was to call the nation of Israel to repentance.

That John's coming "in the spirit and power of Elijah" did not mean t hat he was a reincarnation of Elijah can be seen from the example of Elisha. Just before Elijah was taken up into heaven in a flaming chariot, Elisha requested that he be given a double portion of Elijah's spirit, which was granted to him (II Kings 2:9 -15). Obviously, Elisha did not thereby become a reincarnation of Elijah, since they had both lived at the same time, and since Elijah was clearly taken from the earth once and for all in bodily form. (The fact that Elijah did not die but was taken up bodil y into heaven also rules out his being reincarnated in John.) However, Elisha received in his prophetic ministry the spiritual power that characterized Elijah's ministry. Indeed, Elisha's request for a "double portion" of Elijah's spirit makes it impossi ble that he was requesting to incarnate Elijah's personal spirit, for one's individual spirit surely cannot be "doubled." Neither in the case of Elisha, nor in the case of John, then, do we find evidence of a reincarnation of the personal spirit of Elijah. Nor is there any reason to regard John's statement in John 1:21 as a contradiction of Gabriel's promise and Jesus' statements regarding John's ministry as a kind of second Elijah.