

The Role of Elijah From January 2 to Epiphany Sts. Basil the Great and Gregory Nazianzen, bishops and Doctors of the Church Tuesday, January 2, 2018 8:15 AM 1 Jn 2:22-28; **Jn 1:19-28** (We have to play with terms. Interpreting Scripture is not a very simple, literal thing.)

“And he said, ‘I am not.’”

Today the Gospel according to John is a lesson in interpretation. **John the Baptist clearly denied that he was Elijah or the prophet, but Jesus said he was Elijah.** He makes that very clear. Jesus says to his disciples, “Indeed Elijah has come and they did with them as they pleased.” And the evangelist adds, “He was speaking of John the Baptist.” This should clue us in to the fact that **we have to play with terms**, words, phrases, titles, that **interpreting Scripture is not a very simple, literal thing**, work. It’s actually more a playful experience that should be light and perhaps even fun.

What is this idea of Elijah anyway? Well Elijah was an ancient prophet, and according to a very strange story found in the Book of Kings Elijah did not die but, rather, was transported into the sky by a fiery chariot. Now some people think that refers to a flying saucer, but that was not the intention of the biblical authors. What all that was about actually no one knows, but it is a tradition, and it was preserved by the Jewish people, **the idea of Elijah going up to heaven in a chariot.** Now the prophets later on said the reason for this was his work isn’t over; **he has to come back before the Messiah to announce him.** So that’s the idea, well “Are you Elijah?” In other words, are you here to announce the coming of the Messiah? And he says, well, “I’m not Elijah.” “Well are you the prophet?” What prophet do they mean? There were lots of prophets, but there was one final prophet that they expected, again, right before the Messiah. “Well, are you the prophet, the last prophet before the Messiah comes?” “No, I am not.”

Well in fact **he was both of those things because he preceded Christ, he preceded Jesus, he pointed him out, he knew who he was, and he paved the way for him.** So in one way he is saying oh I am none of those exalted, I don't have any such exalted role to play, but indeed **he was playing those exact roles**, and in fact says, "There is one among you," so he is pointing him out, "There is one among you that you don't recognize, and I'm not even worthy to untie his sandal strap."

So why did he deny then that he was Elijah? Maybe because if he had said he was Elijah, then they would have said, well then who is the Messiah? And at this point he is not ready to say. At any rate this is not a matter of black-and-white but, rather, **a matter of trying to understand meaning and purpose. Elijah had a purpose**, an important mission, **and John the Baptist indeed fulfilled it**, perhaps without even realizing. **The Pharisees** were all hung up on ideas they had and expectations and very definite beliefs that weren't quite correct. They didn't correspond to God's actual plan. So **when God's plan started to unfold they couldn't see. This is a possible trap for everyone.**