

Elijah

The prophesied return of the ancient prophet Elijah is perhaps the most intriguing and mystifying aspect of Passover. No one really knows exactly when or where the expectation that Elijah would return on Passover began, but it has nonetheless been a long-standing tradition to set an extra place at the table in anticipation of his return. Even the wine is poured for him as the celebrants fill their own cups for the third cup of wine. Jews the world over believe that Elijah will come on the eve of Passover as a forerunner to the Messiah and that he will answer all questions and resolve all debates over the Torah.

It is a popular custom to have the young children present to open the door for Elijah while everyone eagerly and carefully watches his cup of wine to see if it diminishes in the least bit as a sign that he has come and partaken. Some families even go so far as to have one of the adults sip from, or completely drink, his cup of wine. Then when the children return, they show them the empty goblet. Of course, the children are only fooled once and sometimes the slightly older and infinitely wiser children spoil the surprise for their younger siblings!

As noted above, no one really knows how or when this expectation of Elijah's return on Passover got started, but the following Hasidic story may shed some light on the subject.

A certain Rabbi Mendel was celebrating Passover with a Marano in a cave in Spain. A sudden light filled the cave, and the cup of wine which, according to custom, had been left standing upon the table for Elijah, rose high into the air as though someone were putting it to his lips, and then sank back on to the table empty. As the result of this experience Rabbi Mendel taught that Elijah would return as the herald of redemption on the same night in which Israel was liberated from Egypt.¹

This story illuminates two important ideas – 1) Elijah will return on Passover; and 2) He will herald the redemption offered by the Messiah. Additionally, the reading on the “Great Sabbath,” the Sabbath preceding Passover, is Malachi's final words.² As promised by God through His prophet Malachi, “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord. And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse.”³

However, not all Jews believe Elijah will actually return on Passover. Some Jews believe that Elijah will return immediately before the apocalyptic day to repeat the scene on Carmel and bring about a national repentance. An interesting phenomenon since World War II has been the increasing denial that such a national repentance is even needed. This denial has stemmed from rejection of the idea that the Holocaust could have been a means of God calling His people to repentance.

¹ Goodenough, Erwin R. *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period* (New York : Pantheon Books, 1953-1968) vol. 6

² Wiener, Aharon. *The Prophet Elijah in the Development of Judaism: A Depth-Psychological Study* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978) 133

³ Malachi 4:6

As may be deduced from the folk tradition just recounted, many legends of Elijah returning have arisen. Mostly, he is spoken of as appearing in the guise of a venerable old man who offers wise counsel or offers a helping hand and then mysteriously disappears. Latter-day Saints may identify with these legends similar folktales in their own culture about the Three Nephites.

While most Elijah stories conform to the Aggadic view,⁴ there is a less known story that is in accordance with the Hasidic view that Elijah has not actually appeared in person, but that his role and essence may be felt:

A pious and wealthy Jew asked his rabbi, “For about forty years I have opened the door for Elijah every Seder night waiting for him to come, but he never does. What is the reason?” The rabbi answered, “In your neighborhood there lives a very poor family with many children. Call on the man and propose to him that you and your family celebrate the next Passover in his house, and for this purpose provide him and his whole family with everything necessary for the eight Passover days. Then on the Seder night Elijah will certainly come.” The man did as the rabbi told him, but after Passover he came to the rabbi and claimed that again he had waited in vain to see Elijah. The rabbi answered, “I know very well that Elijah came on the Seder night to the house of your poor neighbor. But of course you could not see him.” And the rabbi held a mirror before the face of the man and said, “Look, this was Elijah’s face that night.”⁵

This story draws an interesting parallel to a famous character in Jewish folklore, Sarah bat Asher. According to Jewish legend, Serah was the daughter of Asher, one of the twelve sons of Jacob. When she was seven, her father and uncles decided to have her break the news to Jacob that Joseph was still alive and desired the family to go to Egypt for relief from the famine. Jacob was so overjoyed when she assured him that his most favored son yet lived, that he gave Serah a special blessing that caused her to live for many centuries. Hence, she went up to Egypt with Jacob’s family, experienced the oppression of Egyptian slavery, and the Israelites’ liberation. She was finally taken up to heaven in a fiery chariot in a similar fashion as Elijah, likewise not tasting death.

The intriguing thing about the legend associated with Serah bat Asher is her description of what the walls of the Red Sea looked like when they were parted for the children of Israel. According to Serah, “they resembled shining mirrors, mirrors in which every man, woman, and child was reflected, so that it seemed like an even greater multitude crossed there, not only those of the present, but also those of the past and future as well.”⁶ In relation to the Passover, this gives further import to the mandate contained in the text of the Haggadah, “In every generation each individual is bound to regard himself as if he personally had gone forth from Egypt.”

⁴ Aggadic view means they refer to an actual though mysterious appearance of Elijah.

⁵ Wiener, Aharon. *The Prophet Elijah in the Development of Judaism: A Depth-Psychological Study* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978) 139

⁶ Schwartz, Howard, ed. “[The Chronicle of Serah Bat Asher](#)” *Gabriel’s Palace: Jewish Mystical Tales* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) 49

For Latter-day Saints, this legend and the similarity between Serah bat Asher and the prophet Elijah has even greater implications and significance. When Latter-day Saints are married in their temples, the ceremony is performed in a special and sacred place called a *sealing room*. The term *sealing* is used to denote their belief that when such a marriage takes place, the authority used has the power to seal, or bind together the generations of mankind, past, present, and future. Joseph Smith, the first prophet of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints taught that “they [our ancestors] without us cannot be made perfect – neither can we without our dead be made perfect.”⁷ To represent this belief, a mirror is placed on facing walls of the room between which is the altar where the couple kneels. Thus, as the bride and groom gaze at each other across the altar, they can see in the background their infinite reflection that stretches backward and forward through all generations of mankind. In this way, the mirrors of the Latter-day Saint sealing room carry a similar allusion as the perceived mirrored walls of the Red Sea. Additionally, for Latter-day Saints, the covenant that a man and woman enter into with God when married in the sealing room is the most sacred covenant that they can make. It is called the new and everlasting covenant. This everlasting ordinance and its associated covenant are comparable to the Passover, which is “an ordinance to thee and to thy sons for ever”⁸ and its associated covenant between the Israelites and God at Mount Sinai.⁹

The analogy goes further though. Latter-day Saints believe that the great Israelite patriarchs and prophets possessed this sealing power, but that with the end of the prophets came an end to this power’s presence on the earth for a time. However, Joseph Smith recorded the following pertaining to an experience that he had in the temple at Kirtland, Ohio, April 3, 1836, which was during Passover of that year:

The veil was taken from our minds, and the eyes of our understanding were opened. We saw the Lord standing upon the breastwork of the pulpit, before us; and under his feet was a paved work of pure gold, in color like amber. His eyes were as a flame of fire; the hair of his head was white like the pure snow; his countenance shone above the brightness of the sun; and his voice was as the sound of the rushing of great waters. After this vision closed, the heavens were again opened unto us; and Moses appeared before us, and committed unto us the keys of the gathering of Israel from the four parts of the earth, and the leading of the ten tribes from the land of the north. After this, Elias appeared, and committed the dispensation of the gospel of Abraham, saying that in us and our seed all generations after us should be blessed. After this vision had closed, another great and glorious vision burst upon us; for Elijah the prophet, who was taken to heaven without tasting death, stood before us, and said: Behold, the time has fully come, which was spoken of by the mouth of Malachi... Therefore, the keys

⁷ D&C 128: 15, 18. *The Doctrine and Covenants of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981)

⁸ Exodus 12:24

⁹ Exodus 19:16-20; Deuteronomy 4:10-14

of this dispensation are committed into your hands; and by this ye may know that the great and dreadful day of the Lord is near, even at the doors.¹⁰

Several parallels may be drawn between this experience and what we have discussed already concerning Elijah and Passover. First, the keys spoken of by Elijah are the keys, or power to seal together a man and woman as husband and wife, and children to their parents for time and eternity so that these relationships may be perpetuated beyond the grave. Latter-day Saints believe that by acting as proxy for their deceased ancestors, the whole human family may one day be linked together by this power. Thus are the hearts of the fathers turned to their children and the children to their fathers.

In addition, April 3 of 1836 was Passover. Therefore, Latter-day Saints believe, in contrast to the Jews, that Elijah has in fact returned, that he did it on Passover, and that the coming of the Messiah is imminent, although they do not make pretensions to predict when that day will be. They also believe that the appearance of the Lord as described came as fulfillment of Malachi's previous promise that "the Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple."¹¹

It is further interesting to note the appearance of Moses. It seems appropriate that Moses would appear at the same time as Elijah to restore the necessary power and blessings for God to remember His covenant and gather Israel one last time to the land of their inheritance. It is perhaps no small coincidence that the vast majority of "gathering" to Israel has taken place since April 3, 1836. It is even more appropriate that Moses be the one chosen to do this and that he do it on the night when Jews the world over commemorate the redemption of their ancestors from slavery under the leadership of Moses and the power of God. In essence, you might say that Moses was repeating again what he had done once before while he was living.

Thus, Latter-day Saints see the remarkable visions of April 3, 1836 as the fulfillment of three ancient promises – 1) Malachi 3:1; "The Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple." 2) Malachi 4:5-6; "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord: And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse." 3) Deuteronomy 30:3; "The Lord thy God will turn thy captivity, and have compassion upon thee, and will return and gather thee from all the nations, whither the Lord thy God hath scattered thee."¹²

¹⁰ D&C 110:1-3, 11-14, 16

¹¹ Malachi 3:1

¹² See also Jeremiah 29:14; 32:37; Ezekial 20:41; 36:24