

Matthew 17:13

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Then the disciples understood that he spake unto them of John the Baptist.

Analysis

Then the disciples understood that he spake unto them of John the Baptist.

The Greek verb συνῆκαν (synēkan, "understood") marks a crucial moment of comprehension after Jesus's transfiguration discourse. When Jesus spoke of Elijah's return (v. 11-12), declaring "**Elias is come already, and they knew him not, but have done unto him whatsoever they listed**" (v. 12), the disciples grasped the typological connection: John the Baptist fulfilled the prophesied Elijah role (Malachi 4:5-6; Luke 1:17).

John came "in the spirit and power of Elias" (Luke 1:17), preparing the way for Messiah through preaching repentance. Yet Israel's leadership rejected him, culminating in Herod's execution (Matthew 14:1-12). Jesus's statement "**Likewise shall also the Son of man suffer of them**" (v. 12) draws the parallel: as John suffered, so would Jesus. This understanding deepens the disciples' grasp of Messiah's suffering path—not immediate triumph but rejection, suffering, then glorification (Luke 24:26).

The moment of understanding follows the transfiguration where Moses and Elijah appeared, discussing Jesus's upcoming "exodus" at Jerusalem (Luke 9:31). Peter's voice from heaven declared "**This is my beloved Son... hear ye him**" (v. 5). Now understanding John's role as the new Elijah, the disciples begin comprehending the prophetic pattern: forerunner suffers, Messiah suffers, then glory comes. True discipleship requires grasping this sequence—cross before crown (Mark 8:34-35).

Historical Context

First-century Judaism expected literal Elijah's return before Messiah's advent, based on Malachi 4:5. The disciples' question (v. 10) reflected this expectation. Jesus clarifies that while Elijah "truly shall first come, and restore all things" (v. 11), John the Baptist fulfilled this typologically in his first advent role. Gabriel announced John would come "in the spirit and power of Elias" (Luke 1:17)—not reincarnation but prophetic succession.

John's ministry embodied Elijah's character: desert dwelling, prophetic boldness, call to repentance, confrontation with corrupt rulers. His rejection mirrored Israel's pattern of killing prophets (Matthew 23:37; Acts 7:52). The disciples' retrospective understanding of John's Elijah role prepared them for later comprehension of Jesus's messianic mission after His resurrection (John 2:22, 12:16). The church recognizes this interpretive principle: Old Testament prophecies often have typological and eschatological fulfillments.

Related Passages

1 Corinthians 13:4 — Characteristics of love

John 15:13 — Greatest form of love

Study Questions

1. How does John the Baptist's rejection foreshadow Christ's suffering, and what does this teach about the cost of prophetic ministry?
2. What does Jesus mean by saying Elijah "truly shall first come, and restore all things" if John already fulfilled this role?
3. How does the disciples' gradual understanding model the process of spiritual comprehension for modern believers?

Interlinear Text

τότε συνῆκαν οἱ μαθηταὶ ὅτι περὶ Ἰωάννου τοῦ
Then understood the disciples that of John G3588
G5119 G4920 G3101 G3754 G4012 G2491 G3588

βαπτιστοῦ εἶπεν αὐτοῖς
the Baptist he spake unto them
G910 G2036 G846

Additional Cross-References

Matthew 11:14 (Parallel theme): And if ye will receive it, this is Elias, which was for to come.

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