

Notes on Malachi

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Introduction

TITLE AND WRITER

The name of the writer is the title of this book. "Malachi" means "My Messenger." We know nothing of the prophet's parentage, ancestral or tribal roots, geographical origin, or other possible vocation. The name Malachi occurs nowhere else in the Old Testament, which is also true of the name Habakkuk. All we know is that Malachi received and communicated the word of Yahweh to the Jews of his day.

Some scholars have tried to prove that "Malachi" was not the name of a prophet but the title of an anonymous prophet. None of the references to this book in the New Testament mention Malachi by name (cf. Matt. 11:10; Mark 1:2; Luke 7:27). The arguments for anonymity rest on four points:¹ First, "Malachi" is a title, rather than a name, in its form. The Septuagint translators rendered it "my messenger" in 1:1.² However, Malachi could be a short form of a name such as *Malachiyyah*, "Messenger of Yahweh." There are several other shortened forms of names similar to this in the Old Testament (e.g., *'abi* in 2 Kings 18:2, cf. *'abiyyah* in 2 Chron. 29:1; and *'uri* in 1 Kings 4:19, cf. *'uriyyah* in 1 Chron. 11:41).

Second, the Targum did not consider Malachi the writer but ascribed this book to Ezra. The Targum is an ancient Aramaic translation and paraphrase of the Old Testament. The Talmud credited Mordecai with writing it. The Talmud is a Jewish interpretation of the Old Testament compiled between 450 B.C. and 500 A.D. But there is little other support for Ezra or Mordecai's authorship of this book.

¹Craig A. Blaising, "Malachi," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, p. 1573. See also Douglas Stuart, "Malachi," in *The Minor Prophets*, pp. 1246-47.

²The Septuagint is the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible (our Old Testament) that was made in the third century B.C.

Third, "Malachi" appears in 3:1 as an anonymous designation meaning "My messenger," so it may mean the same thing in 1:1. However, the Malachi in 3:1 seems clearly to be wordplay on the name of the prophet in 1:1.

Fourth, this book was the third of three oracles (divine pronouncements, Heb. *massa'*, 1:1) in the postexilic books, the other two being in Zechariah 9—11 and 12—14 (cf. Zech. 9:1; 11:1). Yet Malachi introduced his oracle differently from the way that Zechariah introduced his.¹ Furthermore, other prophets introduced their books by calling them oracles (cf. Nah. 1:1; Hab. 1:1).

If Malachi is not the prophet's name, this would be the only prophetic book in the Old Testament that is anonymous, which seems very unlikely.²

DATE

"Haggai and Zechariah ... are noteworthy for the chronological precision with which they related their lives and ministries to their historical milieu [environment]. This is not the case at all with Malachi. In fact, one of the major problems in a study of this book is that of locating it within a narrow enough chronological framework to provide a *Sitz im Leben* [situation in life] sufficient to account for its peculiar themes and emphases."³

Malachi referred to no datable persons or events in his prophecy, so we must draw our conclusions about its historical setting from implications in the text and traditional understandings of it. Malachi's place at the end of the twelve Minor Prophets in the Hebrew Bible, and in modern translations, argues for a late date. The Talmud grouped Malachi with Haggai and Zechariah as postexilic prophets.⁴

Malachi's reference to "your governor" (1:8) indicates that he wrote after 538 B.C., when Cyrus the Persian allowed the Jews to return to their land, which was under Persian control. The word translated "governor" is *pehah*,

¹See Brevard Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, pp. 489-92.

²See Pieter A. Verhoef, *The Books of Haggai and Malachi*, pp. 154-56, for further arguments and discussion of this problem.

³Eugene H. Merrill, *An Exegetical Commentary: Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi*, p. 371.

⁴*Yoma* 9b; *Sukkah* 44a; *Rosh Hashannah* 19b; *Megillah* 3a, 15a, et al.

which is a Persian title (cf. Ezra 5:3, 6, 14; 6:6-7, 13; Dan. 3:2-3, 27; 6:7). Zerubbabel bore this title (Hag. 1:1, 14; 2:2, 21), as did Nehemiah (Neh. 5:14; 12:26). Malachi must have written after the temple had been rebuilt, since he referred to worship there (1:6-14; 2:7-9, 13; 3:7-10). This would force a date after 515 B.C., when temple restoration was complete.

Since Malachi addressed many of the same matters that Nehemiah tried to reform, it is tempting to date Malachi during Nehemiah's governorship.¹ Both Malachi and Nehemiah dealt with priestly laxity (Mal. 1:6; Neh. 13:4-9), neglect of tithes (Mal. 3:7-12; Neh. 13:10-13), and intermarriage between Israelites and foreigners (Mal. 2:10-16; Neh. 13:23-28). Some have conjectured that Malachi ministered while Nehemiah was away from Jerusalem.² In the twelfth year of his governorship, Nehemiah returned to Persia for an unknown period of time (Neh. 5:14; 13:6). Malachi probably wrote during the years that Nehemiah served (445-420 B.C.), and perhaps between 432 and 431 B.C., the years when Nehemiah was away from Jerusalem.

Commentators have suggested a wide range of dates. For example, Craig Blaising suggested a date between 450 and 430 B.C.³ Eugene Merrill preferred a date between 480 and 470 B.C.⁴ Douglas Stuart believed Malachi wrote about 460 B.C.⁵ R. K. Harrison and John Bright estimated a date close to 450 B.C.⁶ Gleason Archer Jr. and Ray Clendenen concluded that Malachi wrote about 435 B.C.⁷ Ralph Smith dated the writing of Malachi to the first half of the fifth century, before Ezra's and Nehemiah's ministries.⁸ Hobart Freeman and Pieter Verhoef were more specific: shortly after 433 B.C.⁹ Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown dated Malachi after this:

¹E. B. Pusey, *The Minor Prophets*, 2:462.

²E.g., Robert L. Alden, "Malachi," in *Daniel-Minor Prophets*, vol. 7 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, pp. 701-2; Verhoef, p. 158.

³Blaising, p. 1573.

⁴Merrill, p. 378.

⁵Stuart, p. 1252

⁶R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, p. 961, and John Bright, *A History of Israel*, p. 356.

⁷Gleason L. Archer Jr., *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, p. 431; and Richard A. Taylor and E. Ray Clendenen, *Haggai, Malachi*, p. 207. Clendenen wrote the commentary on Malachi.

⁸Ralph L. Smith, *Micah-Malachi*, pp. 298, 325.

⁹Hobart E. Freeman, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophets*, pp. 349-50; Verhoef, pp. 156-60.

"about 420 B.C., or later."¹ Leon Wood was quite general: during the last half of the fifth century B.C., though contemporaneously with Nehemiah.² J. Sidlow Baxter believed that Malachi ended his ministry in 397 B.C., which he calculated was the end of Daniel's first seven weeks (Dan. 9:25).³

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Malachi was one of the three postexilic writing prophets along with Haggai and Zechariah, and he was quite certainly the last one chronologically, even though we cannot be dogmatic about an exact date for his writing.

The first group of almost 50,000 Jewish exiles returned from Babylonian captivity under Sheshbazzar's and Zerubbabel's leadership in 537 B.C. Ezra 1—6 records their experiences. Haggai and Zechariah ministered to these returnees in 520 B.C. and urged them to rebuild the temple. Zechariah's ministry may have continued beyond that year. The events recorded in the Book of Esther took place in Persia between 482 and 473 B.C. A second group of about 5,000 Jews returned in 458 B.C. under Ezra's leadership.

Ezra sought to beautify the temple and institute reforms that would purify Israel's worship (Ezra 7—10). Nehemiah led a third group of about 42,000 Jews back in 444 B.C., and the events recorded in his book describe what happened between 445 and 420 B.C., including the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls. Malachi probably ministered in Jerusalem during that period.

"... Malachi's concerns are much different from those of either Ezra or Nehemiah, for he was almost wholly transfixed by concerns about the cult [formal worship].⁴

¹Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *Commentary Practical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*, p. 868.

²Leon J. Wood, *The Prophets of Israel*, pp. 374, 377.

³J. Sidlow Baxter, *Explore the Book*, 4:262.

⁴Merrill, p. 378.

(Persian) sovereignty even though they were back in their own land. Harvests were poor, and locust plagues were a recurring problem (3:11). Even after Ezra's reforms and Nehemiah's amazing success in motivating the Jews to rebuild Jerusalem's wall, most of the people remained cold-hearted toward Yahweh. Priests and people were still not observing the Mosaic Law as commanded, as is clear from references in this book to sacrifices, tithes, and offerings (e.g., 1:6; 3:5). Foreign cultures had made deep inroads into the values and practices of God's people. The Israelites still intermarried with Gentiles (2:11), and divorces were quite common (2:16). The spiritual, ethical, and moral tone of the nation was low.

"... Malachi and his contemporaries were living in an uneventful waiting period, when God seemed to have forgotten His people enduring poverty and foreign domination in the little province of Judah ... True the Temple had been completed, but nothing momentous had occurred to indicate that God's presence had returned to fill it with glory, as Ezekiel had indicated would happen (Ezk. 43:4)... Generations were dying without receiving the promises (*cf.* Heb. 11:13) and many were losing their faith."¹

PLACE OF COMPOSITION

Malachi evidently ministered in Jerusalem, as seems clear from his numerous references to practices that were current in that city and throughout Judah.

AUDIENCE AND PURPOSE

The prophet addressed the restoration community of Israelites that had returned to the land from Babylonian captivity. His purpose was to confront them with their sins and to encourage them to pursue holiness.

"Malachi's prophecy indicts the religious leadership of the day and chides God's people for their spiritual apathy and their skepticism and cynicism concerning God's plan for their future. It also calls the people to correct their wrong attitudes of

¹Joyce G. Baldwin, *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi: An Introduction and Commentary*, p. 211.

worship by trusting God with genuine faith as living Lord. Furthermore, it warns the people of their immoral behavior toward one another and calls for their repentance lest they be terrorized at the coming of the Lord."¹

"The task of a prophet is not to smooth things over but to make things right."²

THEOLOGICAL EMPHASES

Like all the writing prophets, Malachi's chief revelation was the person and work of Yahweh. He presented Israel's God as sovereign over Israel, and the whole world, and as very patient with His wayward people.

Malachi also used the Mosaic Covenant as the standard by which he measured Israel's conduct. He pointed out instances of covenant unfaithfulness and urged return to the covenant. He also reminded the Israelites of Yahweh's faithfulness to His covenant promises—including promises of future blessing. Thus he sought to motivate his hearers to return to the LORD (Yahweh) by convicting them of their sins and challenging them to love their Savior.

"... Israel's ethics grew out of (1) the nature of *God* and their relationship to him, (2) their identity as a *people* and their relationships and responsibilities to one another, and (3) their relationship to the *land*, which represented their material environment and possessions. The parallel with Malachi is that these are the exact themes found in the three discourses [in this book] and in the same order—God, people, and land."³

Malachi's notable messianic prophecy deals with Messiah's forerunner (3:1; 4:5). He would be like Elijah and would call the Israelites to repentance (cf. Matt. 11:14; 17:12-13; Mark 9:11-13; Luke 1:17).

¹Clendenen, p. 231.

²Eugene Peterson, *Run with the Horses*, p 69.

³Clendenen, p. 232.

"This final book of the Old Testament is about the error of forgetting the love of God."¹

LITERARY FORM AND CHARACTERISTICS

Malachi's style is quite different from that of any other writing prophet.² Instead of delivering messages to his audience, he charged them with various sins—six times in all. He employed a very confrontational style of address. After each charge, he proceeded to back it up with evidence. Malachi's rhetorical disputation speech form contains four components: assertion, questioning, response, and implication.³

"Even a casual reading shows Malachi's use of rhetorical questions. Seven times he put them into the mouths of his audience (1:2, 6, 7; 2:17; 3:7, 8, 13, and perhaps 2:14). In addition he asked the people several rhetorical questions (e.g., 1:6, 8, 9; 2:10, 15; 3:2)."⁴

"Malachi's literary method was that of the scribes, putting and answering questions. ... He was the Hebrew Socrates."⁵

"His book may be fairly classed as the most argumentative of all Old Testament prophecies."⁶

"The format of 1:2 is typical of Malachi's style. First there is God's statement: 'I have loved you.' Then follows the popular objection that questions the truth of God's statement—viz., 'How have you loved us?' Finally there is the justification for God's statement."⁷

¹ *The Nelson Study Bible*, p. 1555.

² See Verhoef, pp. 164-68, for a good discussion of Malachi's style.

³ Stuart, p. 1248.

⁴ Alden, p. 704.

⁵ George L. Robinson, *The Twelve Minor Prophets*, pp. 160-61.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

⁷ Alden, p. 704.

"The most striking and creative aspect of Malachi's style is its disputational form ..."¹

Malachi used the question and answer method extensively. This method became increasingly popular, and in the time of Christ the rabbis and scribes used it frequently, as did the Lord Jesus. They also used rhetorical questions as a teaching device (cf. Matt. 3:7; 11:7-9; 12:26-27; Luke 14:5; John 18:38; Rom. 3:1-4; 4:1-3; 6:21; 7:7; 1 Cor. 9:7-13; Gal. 3:21; Heb. 1:5, 13-14). Other Old Testament prophets also used the disputation style, but to a lesser degree (e.g., Jer. 2:23-25, 29-32; 28:1-11; 29:24-32; Mic. 2:6-11).

This book consists of several short paragraphs on various themes. There are no long oracles against foreign nations (cf. 1:2-5), or any extended burden against Israel. There are no personal experiences to which the prophet referred, yet his style is straightforward, easy to understand, and beautifully designed.

"Debate has centered on whether Malachi is a prosaic or poetic composition (compare W. Kaiser [*Malachi: God's Unchanging Love*] and B. Glazier-McDonald [*Malachi: The Divine Messenger*]). The most commonly used Hebrew Bible (BHS [Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia]) puts it in poetic format, while the most commonly used English versions of the Bible consider the book to be in prose. That such a discussion even takes place is testimony to the difficulty of defining what constitutes poetry in biblical Hebrew and also to the close connection between these two modes of discourse ..."²

At least one commentator believed that Malachi constructed his work as a chiasmus that can be diagrammed as follows:³

A Superscription (1:1): Yahweh has a message for Israel.

¹Tremper Longman III and Raymond B. Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, p. 500.

²Ibid.

³Stuart, p. 1250. A chiasmus is a rhetorical or literary figure in which words, grammatical constructions, or concepts are repeated in reverse order, in the same or a modified form. See also G. B. Hugenberger, *Marriage as Covenant*, p. 25.

- B First Disputation (1:2-5): God distinguishes between the good and the wicked. The proof of His love is His sparing the righteous and condemning the wicked.
- C Second Disputation (1:6—2:9): Condemnation of improper, begrudging offerings, promise of reversal of blessing, and the greatness of Yahweh's name among the nations.
- D Third Disputation (2:10-16): The LORD is witness to marital fidelity, and Judah is unfaithful.
- D' Fourth Disputation (2:17—3:6): The LORD is witness to marital fidelity, and Judah is unfaithful.
- C' Fifth Disputation (3:7-12): Condemnation of improper, begrudging offerings, promise of reversal of blessing, and the greatness of Yahweh's name among the nations.
- B' Sixth Disputation (3:13—4:3): God distinguishes between the good and the wicked. The proof of His love is His sparing the righteous and condemning the wicked.
- A' Summary challenge (4:4-6): Yahweh has a message for Israel.

Essentially, the Israelites disputed God's love, His name, and His will concerning: marriage and divorce, His justice, His demands regarding stewardship, and His service.

Ray Clendenen challenged the view that Malachi is a series of "disputation speeches," a term coined by Herman Gunkel and applied to Malachi by E. Pfeiffer in 1959. Many commentators adopted Pfeiffer's view. Clendenen analyzed Malachi as monologue interspersed with exchanges between the LORD and His audience, and he believed that Malachi is a prophecy composed of three hortatory addresses. Hortatory addresses (exhortations) in ancient Near Eastern literature contain three elements: situation, change, and motivation, and all of these are present in the speeches that Clendenen identified in Malachi.¹

"Identifying paragraphs or subparagraphs as expressing either situation, command, or motivation (on the basis of the

¹See Clendenen, pp. 218-26, for a full discussion of Malachi's literary style.

grammatical structure of the paragraph) uncovers a pattern of inverted repetition or chiasm. Whereas such chiasms are often identified on the basis of repeated words, here the chiasm appears in the semantic structure. There are three such chiasms in the book, identifying three divisions, addresses, or embedded discourses."¹

UNITY, CANONICITY, AND TEXT

Most scholars view the book as the product of one writer, and there is no textual support for viewing some verses as later additions. The general structure and dialogue pattern that appear throughout the book argue for its unity. Malachi's canonicity has never been challenged, because it appears in all the authoritative lists of canonical books, and it is also quoted in the New Testament. The text is well preserved.

OUTLINE

I have provided two outlines of the book below. The first represents the popular "disputation speech" approach represented well by Stuart and others.

- I. Heading 1:1
- II. Oracle one: Yahweh's love for Israel 1:2-5
- III. Oracle two: The priests' illicit practices and indifferent attitudes 1:6—2:9
 - A. The priests' sins 1:6-14
 1. Disrespectful service 1:6-7
 2. Disqualified sacrifices 1:8-10
 3. Disdainful attitudes 1:11-14
 - B. The priests' warning 2:1-9
- IV. Oracle three: The people's mixed marriages and divorces 2:10-16
- V. Oracle four: The problem of God's justice 2:17—3:6

¹Ibid., p. 230. See the outline of the book below.

- VI. Oracle five: The people's sin of robbing God 3:7-12
- VII. Oracle six: The arrogant and the humble 3:13—4:3
 - A. The people's arrogance 3:13-15
 - B. The remnant's humility 3:16
 - C. The coming judgment of Israel 3:17—4:3
- VIII. A concluding promise and warning 4:4-6

The second outline expresses the "hortatory discourse" approach to Malachi advocated by Clendenen. In the notes that follow, I have followed this second outline of the book.¹

- I. Introduction 1:1
- II. The priests exhorted not to dishonor the LORD (the theological angle) 1:2—2:9
 - A. Positive motivation: the LORD's love 1:2-5
 - B. Situation: the priests' failure to honor the LORD 1:6-9
 - C. Command: stop the pointless offerings 1:10
 - D. Situation: the priests' worship profaning the LORD's name 1:11-14
 - E. Negative motivation: the results of disobedience 2:1-9
- III. Judah exhorted to faithfulness (the social angle) 2:10—3:6
 - A. Positive motivation: spiritual kinship among Israel 2:10a
 - B. Situation: faithlessness against a covenant member 2:10b-15a
 - C. Command: stop acting faithlessly 2:15b-16
 - D. Situation: complaints of the LORD's injustice 2:17
 - E. Negative motivation: the coming messenger of judgment 3:1-6
- IV. Judah exhorted to return and remember (the economic angle) 3:7—4:6
 - A. First command: return to the LORD with tithes 3:7-10a
 - B. Positive motivation: future blessing 3:10b-12
 - C. Situation: complacency toward serving the LORD 3:13-15

¹Bruce K. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, pp. 846-47, divided the body of the book into three parts differently: God's faithful covenant love for Israel affirmed (1:2-5), Israel's unfaithfulness rebuked (1:6—2:16), and *I AM*s coming announced (2:17—4:16).

- D. Motivation: the coming day 3:16—4:3
- E. Second command: remember the Law 4:4-6

MESSAGE

Malachi prophesied during the times of Nehemiah. The dates of Nehemiah's ministry were about 445-420 B.C. Possibly Malachi ministered during the time when Nehemiah returned to Babylon following the completion of Jerusalem's walls and Nehemiah's term as governor of Judah (432-431 B.C.). This is only a guess, but it seems likely that God might have moved this prophet to minister when godly Nehemiah was absent from them. I think Malachi probably wrote about 432 B.C. He was the only fifth-century B.C. writing prophet.

The conditions described in this last prophetic book are the same as those described in the last historical book of the Old Testament. Chronicles may have been written shortly before or after Nehemiah. Nehemiah deplored the defiled and corrupt priesthood, and Malachi's central charge was that the priesthood had corrupted the covenant (cf. Neh. 13:29 and Mal. 2:8). Nehemiah dealt with the mixed marriages and the evil that resulted from that condition, and Malachi spoke against the same evil (cf. Neh. 13:23-25 and Mal. 2:11-12). Nehemiah charged the people with neglecting the support of the priests, which forced the priests to turn to farming in order to support themselves. Malachi addressed the same condition and its underlying spiritual cause (cf. Neh. 13:10-11 and Mal. 3:8-10).

Ezra and Nehemiah had sought to correct certain external conditions, as well as certain internal conditions, that characterized the Jews who returned from the Babylonian Captivity. The external conditions that needed correcting were the rebuilding of the altar of sacrifice, the temple, and the walls of Jerusalem. They were successful in changing these external conditions, but they were less successful in changing the internal conditions of the people. It is these conditions that Malachi addressed.

Malachi charged the Jews with seven specific sins. In each case, his contemporaries responded by challenging his criticism. They said, How have we done that? (cf. 1:2, 6; 2:14, 17; 3:7, 8, 13). Their response indicated hardness of heart: a resistance to deal with the internal conditions in their hearts that needed correcting. Malachi revealed the sensitivity of Yahweh to their condition and the insensitivity of the people to it. They believed

that since they were serving God as He had directed, then He must be pleased with them. Malachi said that their hearts were not right with God, and He was not pleased with them. The people had a form of godliness, but they were devoid of the power of godliness (cf. 2 Tim. 3:5).

Malachi is different from Haggai and Zechariah, the other two postexilic prophets. Haggai's mission was to stimulate the returnees to finish the temple reconstruction. Zechariah's mission was the same, but also to reveal the future in order to give them hope that would inspire them to work. Malachi's mission was to motivate the returnees to get back into fellowship with their God. To oversimplify, Haggai focused on the material, Zechariah on the material and the spiritual, and Malachi on the spiritual.

Specifically, Malachi revealed three things to the physically restored Jews in order to motivate them to spiritual restoration: the unfailing love of Yahweh, their failures, and the secrets of strength in an age of failure.

First, Malachi revealed the unfailing love of Yahweh for His people. This is the master theme that recurs throughout the book. It is like the main theme that keeps coming back in a great piece of music. We find this theme introduced at the very beginning of the book (1:2a). We could render it: I have loved you in the past, I love you in the present, and I will love you in the future. In other words, this is a revelation of the continual, unfailing love of Yahweh for His people.

God's love for His chosen people was constant. This is a wonderful declaration, especially when we remember that it came to the Jews when they had no king, no high priest, and no spiritual power—only an outward form of worship in which the people trusted. Bear in mind, too, that this is the last prophetic message that came to the Jews before 400 years of silence from heaven, followed at long last by the provision of their Messiah.

God still loved His people as He always had, and as He always would. The dominant theme in this book is God's "I love you." As we hear the sub-themes of Israel's sevenfold spiritual failures, this major theme constantly keeps coming back and reminding us of God's love, in spite of His people's many sins. The mixing of these themes reveals that God was conscious of His people's sins and loved them anyway. So the book is not only a revelation of the constancy of God's love, but it is also a revelation of the constancy of His love in spite of His consciousness of their sins. The worst

aspect of formal worship without heartfelt sincerity is that it hurts the heart of God, because it expresses a heartless response to God's love.

Second, Malachi reveals human failure. This book clarifies that no motive other than love for God can sustain a proper spiritual relationship with Him (cf. John 21:15-17). It is possible to attend the place of worship, to go through the motions of worship, and even to make sacrifices of worship, and still not worship God—to have no real fellowship with God. When these Jews lost their love for Yahweh, all their religious observances became like a noisy gong and as a clanging cymbal, noise but not music (cf. 1 Cor. 13:1).

When true love departs, callousness sets in. We see this in the people's response to the LORD's reminder of His love for them. They replied: "How have You loved us?" (1:2).¹ The attitude expressed in that question is the root of all sin (cf. Gen. 3). Since this is how these Jews felt, it is no wonder that, as Malachi pointed out, they failed God in so many other specific ways. The hour in which we begin to cease to love God is the hour in which we begin to wonder whether God really loves us. Then our worship of God, if we continue it, becomes only formal, not genuine. Then there is no real power in our lives, only a form of godliness.

Third, Malachi reveals the secrets of strength in an age of failure. We hear this theme clearly in 3:16. There was a smaller remnant among the remnant who returned from Babylon. This faithful remnant listened to and responded positively to the prophet's words. Notice what they did that led God to take note of them and honor them in a special way:

They feared the LORD. Fear is the term that throughout the Old Testament refers to someone's reverence for the LORD that arises from awareness of His love, on the one hand, and of His wrath, on the other. Some of Malachi's hearers, reminded of His constant love for them, feared Him. And they esteemed His name. That is, they gave some thought to the wealth of goodness that had flowed, was flowing, and would flow from Him. God's names reveal aspects of His character, for instance: "Yahweh Jireh" ("The LORD Provides"); "Yahweh Nissi" ("The LORD Is My Banner"); "Yahweh Shalom" ("The LORD Is Peace"); "Yahweh Tsidkenu" ("The LORD Is Our Righteousness"); "Yahweh Shammah" ("The LORD Is There"), et al.

¹Quotations from the English Bible in these notes are from the *New American Standard Bible* (NASB), 2020 edition, unless otherwise indicated.

As these people meditated on their God, as He had revealed Himself, they remembered how rich they were. Proverbs 18:10 says, "The name of the LORD is a strong tower; the righteous runs into it and is safe." These Jews had nowhere else to run. Their nation was no longer grand and glorious, their priests had corrupted the covenant, and the kings had passed away. All they had left was the name of their God, so some of them thought about that and remembered their spiritual wealth in the midst of their material poverty.

Notice that these remnant Jews who feared the LORD "spoke to one another" (3:16). Not only did they think on the name of the LORD individually, but they also shared their common thoughts with one another. That is the essence of fellowship. So a second resource for times when people fail to have fellowship with God, because of lack of love for Him, is fellowship with like-minded believers who do appreciate His name.

The result of this activity—fearing the LORD and having fellowship with the faithful—was that "the LORD listened attentively and heard" (3:16). The word translated "to listen attentively" means "to pay careful attention" — like when a dog picks up its ears when it hears its master's voice. What these people did caught the LORD's attention. He paid attention to them, and He listened attentively to what they said. God always listens carefully to the conversation of those who bind themselves together with other believers who genuinely fear Him, and who reflect on His great name (cf. Matt. 18:20).

The fourth secret of strength is hope (4:1-2). Malachi revealed that "the sun of righteousness will rise" (4:2). That is, righteousness will dawn on the earth like the rising sun. This will happen when Jesus Christ appears, bringing righteousness to the earth.

Then two things will happen: He will burn up, like the sun, what is dead and dry. This refers to His judging "all the arrogant and every evildoer" (4:1). But He will also provide healing for those who fear (revere) His name (4:2). Thus, the same sun will burn some and heal others. This happened initially when Jesus came the first time, but it will happen also when He comes the second time.

The last word of the Old Testament is a reminder of the coming of this day of the LORD. So is the last word of the New Testament: the Book of Revelation. Therefore it must be very important that all people remember

that this day is coming and live in the light of it. Let us Christians, too, live by meditating on God and fearing Him, maintaining fellowship with others who do the same, with our eyes on the horizon of history, waiting for "the blessed hope and the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus" (Titus 2:13).

I would summarize the message of this book this way: Appreciating God's constant love is the key to revitalizing present spiritual life and assuring future divine blessing. The Lord's Supper helps Christians to appreciate God's great love by reminding us of it.¹

¹Adapted from G. Campbell Morgan, *Living Messages of the Books of the Bible*, 1:2:335-49.

Exposition

I. INTRODUCTION 1:1

This title verse explains what follows as the pronouncement (oracle) of Yahweh's word that He sent to Israel through Malachi. The Hebrew word *massa'*, translated "pronouncement," occurs 27 times in the Prophets (e.g., Isa. 13:1; 14:28; Nah. 1:1; Hab. 1:1; Zech. 9:1; 12:1; et al.). It refers to a threatening message, a burden that lay heavy on the heart of God and His prophet. "Utterance" is a good synonym.

"The word of Yahweh" refers to a message that comes from Him with His full authority. "Yahweh" is the name that God used in relationship to Israel as the covenant-making and covenant-keeping God. What follows is evidence that Israel was in trouble with Yahweh, because the Jews had not kept the Mosaic Covenant. Yahweh, of course, was completely faithful to His part of the covenant.

"Malachi" means "My Messenger." The prophet's name was appropriate since God had commanded him to bear this "word" to the people of Israel. The prophet was not the source of the revelation that follows; he was only a messenger whose job it was to communicate a message from Yahweh (cf. 2:7; 2 Tim. 4:2; 2 Pet. 1:20-21). As many as 47 of the 55 verses in Malachi are personal addresses of the LORD.¹

II. THE PRIESTS EXHORTED NOT TO DISHONOR THE LORD (THE THEOLOGICAL ANGLE) 1:2—2:9

"Malachi's first address is governed by the ironic exhortation in 1:10, 'Oh, that one of you would shut the temple doors.' It is directed against the priests of the postexilic temple. Despite their responsibility under the covenant of Levi (cf. 2:4, 8) to be the Lord's messengers of Torah (2:7), they were dishonoring the Lord (1:6), particularly in their careless attitude toward the offerings (1:8). Failing to take their responsibilities to the Lord seriously, they had become political pawns of the influential in Israel who used religion to maintain

¹Clendenen, p. 205.

respectability (2:9). The priests are here exhorted to stop the empty worship and to begin honoring the Lord with pure offerings and faithful service. As motivation the Lord declares his love for them (and for all the people; 1:2-5) and threatens them with humiliation and removal from his service (cf. 2:1-3, 9)."¹

One's attitude toward, and his or her relationship with God, determine that person's spiritual health and wholeness as a child of God. They also determined the nation of Israel's spiritual health and wholeness. This first address deals with this subject particularly: the theological issue of attitude toward and relationship with God.

A. POSITIVE MOTIVATION: THE LORD'S LOVE 1:2-5

"The first pericope [section of verses] of Malachi's prophecy resembles the preamble of the Decalogue [Ten Commandments] and presupposes God's covenant relationship with his people. It may be considered a general introduction to the prophecy, in which attention is being drawn to the fact that the Lord has loved his people."²

1:2a The LORD's first word to His people was short and sweet: He had loved them. He had told His people of His love for them repeatedly throughout their history (cf. Deut. 4:32-40; 7:7-11; 10:12-22; 15:16; 23:5; 33:2-5; Isa. 43:4; Hos. 11:1, 3-4, 8-9). Yet they were now questioning His love and implying that there was no evidence of it in their present situation in life. This is the first of seven such dialogues in Malachi (cf. vv. 6, 7; 2:14, 17; 3:7b-8, 13b-14).

Yahweh had promised the Israelites a golden age of blessing, but they still struggled under Gentile oppression and generally hard times (cf. v. 8; 2:2; 3:9, 11). Their question revealed distrust of Him and hostility toward Him, as well as lack of appreciation for Him. Israel should have responded to Yahweh's

¹Ibid., p. 244.

²Verhoef, pp. 194-95.

love by loving Him and keeping His commandments (Deut. 6:4-9).

"I'm not sure but what there are a great many today in the church who would raise that same question and say, 'Look at the things that are happening to us today. How can you say that God loves us?'"¹

Do we Christians demand fresh proof of God's love for us today, like the Israelites did in Malachi's day?

1:2b-3 In replying to the people's charge, the LORD asked them if Esau was not Jacob's brother. Yet God had loved Jacob, the younger, and hated Esau, the older. The evidence of God's hatred for Esau was that He had made his mountains of Seir, which was the inheritance that God gave Esau and his descendants, a desolate wilderness. Unstated is the fact that God had given Jacob a land flowing with milk and honey for his inheritance, which proved His love for that brother. Some interpreters understand that God simply loved Jacob more than He loved Esau.

"The Lord is speaking here not of absolute love embracing only one nation and of absolute hatred directed against another nation. The word hate is used in the sense of less love [cf. Gen. 29:31; Deut. 21:15-17; 1 Sam. 1:2, 5; Luke 14:26]."²

Other interpreters believe that God predestined Jacob for salvation and Esau for reprobation (damnation).³

"The verbs *'hb*, to love, and *sn'*, to hate, must not be weakened down into loving more and loving less, to avoid the danger of falling into the doctrine of predestination. ... The complete

¹J. Vernon McGee, *Thru the Bible with J. Vernon McGee*, 3:992.

²Theodore Laetsch, *The Minor Prophets*, p. 512. Cf. Verhoef, p. 200; Edmond Jacob, *Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 109.

³E.g., John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3:21:6.

desolation of the Edomitic territory is quoted as a proof of this hatred."¹

Not all theologians who believe in predestination also believe in double predestination, however, which teaches that God predestines some to heaven and He predestines others to hell.

"It was not a question of selecting Jacob for heaven and reprobating Esau to hell."²

It is remarkable that God loved Jacob in view of the person that Jacob was, and it is equally remarkable that God hated Esau, because in many ways he was a more likeable individual than his brother.

"Someone said to Dr. Arno C. Gaebelin, the gifted Hebrew Christian leader of a generation ago, 'I have a serious problem with Malachi 1:3, where God says, "Esau I have hated." Dr. Gaebelin replied, 'I have a greater problem with Malachi 1:2, where God says, "Jacob, I have loved."'"³

Normally in the ancient Near East a father favored his eldest son, but God did what was abnormal in choosing to bless Jacob over Esau. God's regard for individuals does not depend ultimately on their behavior or characters. It rests on His sovereign choice to bless some more than others (cf. Rom. 9:13). This is a problem involving His justice, since it seems unfair that God would bless some more than others. However, since God is sovereign, He can do whatever He chooses to do (cf. Rom. 9).

Another problem is that these verses raise concerns about God's love. Does God not love the whole world and everyone in it (John 3:16)? Yes, He does, but this statement deals with God's choices regarding Jacob and Esau, not His love for all people. When He said here that He hated Esau, He meant that He did not choose to bestow His favor on Esau to the extent

¹C. F. Keil, "Malachi," in *The Twelve Minor Prophets*, 2:430.

²Harry A. Ironside, *Notes on the Minor Prophets*, p. 187.

³Warren W. Wiersbe, "Malachi," in *The Bible Exposition Commentary/Prophets*, p. 479.

that He did on Jacob (cf. Ps. 139:21), but He chose to give Esau a wilderness for his inheritance. God made this choice even before Esau and Jacob were born (Gen. 25:21-34; Rom. 9:10-13).

In order to contrast His dealings with the twins, God expressed His actions toward them in this polar opposite love-hate statement (cf. Luke 14:26). God loved Jacob in that He sovereignly elected him and his descendants for a covenant relationship with Himself (Gen. 29:31-35; Deut. 21:15-17), as His special possession (cf. Deut. 4:37; 5:10; 7:6-9). Often in Scripture to love someone means to choose to bless that person. Not to love someone means not to bless him or her (cf. Gen. 29:30-31).

"Modern studies of covenant language have shown that the word 'love' (... *'ahab*, or any of its forms) is a technical term in both the biblical and ancient Near Eastern treaty and covenant texts to speak of choice or election to covenant relationship, especially in the so-called suzerainty documents."¹

"The love of God for Israel is sovereign and unconditional. In a sense it is synonymous with election (*bahar*) and redemption (*yasa'*). This love-election relationship between God and Israel is classically expressed in Deut. 7:6-8 ..."²

"God's 'love' was in no way conditioned by the moral qualities of its object, but emanated from his sovereign will and mercy."³

The fact that God gave Mt. Seir to Esau as his inheritance shows that He did love him to that extent. But He did not

¹Merrill, p. 391. See also Stuart, p. 1284; Smith, p. 305; William L. Moran, "The Ancient Near Eastern Background of the Love of God in Deuteronomy," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 25 (1963):77-87; and J. A. Thompson, "Israel's Haters," *Vetus Testamentum* 29 (1979):200-205.

²Verhoef, pp. 196-97.

³Ibid., pp. 200-1.

choose to bless Esau as He chose to bless Jacob, namely, with a covenant relationship with Himself. Similarly, a man might love several women, including his mother, sisters, daughters, and aunts. But when he enters into the covenant of marriage and sets his love on his wife, his love for her might make it seem like he hated the others, relatively speaking. Eternal destiny is not in view here. God was speaking of His acts in history toward Jacob and Esau and their descendants.

Did not God choose to bless Jacob because Jacob valued the promises that God had given his forefathers, whereas Esau did not (cf. Gen. 27)? Clearly Jacob did value these promises and Esau did not, but here God presented the outcome of their lives as the consequences of His sovereign choice rather than their choices. Their choices were important, but the choice of God before and behind their choices, that resulted in the outcome of their lives, was more important (cf. Eph. 1; Rom. 9).

Some of God's choices, the really important ones—what theologians call His "decree"—determine all that takes place to bring those choices to pass. If this were not so, God would not be all-powerful. Man could override the power of God with his choices. Some of God's choices are stronger than others, as reflected, for example, in the words "will," "counsel," or "purpose" (Gr. *boule*); and "desire," "wish," or "inclination" (Gr. *thelema*).

In some matters, God allows people to influence His actions, even to cause Him to relent or change His mind from a previous course of action to a different one. Even so, in the really important things that He has determined, no one can alter His will.¹ Yet God's choices do not mean that man's choices are only apparently real. Human beings have a measure of freedom, and it is genuine freedom. We know this is true because a just God holds human beings responsible for their choices. How humans can be genuinely free, to the extent that

¹See Thomas L. Constable, "What Prayer Will and Will Not Change," in *Essays in Honor of J. Dwight Pentecost*, pp. 99-113.

we are free, and how God can still maintain control is probably impossible for humankind to comprehend fully.

The bottom line is that God chose to bless Jacob to an extent that He did not choose to bless Esau. This decision lay behind all the decisions that these twin brothers made. They were responsible for their decisions and actions, but God had predetermined their destinies (cf. Eph. 1:3-5; Rom. 8:28-30).

Most interpreters believe that God made Esau's mountains a desolation, and appointed his inheritance for the jackals of the wilderness, when the Babylonians destroyed Judah and Edom, or at some other time in the more recent history of Edom.¹ This seems more probable than that this desolation describes Edom during Esau's lifetime and thereafter.

1:4 Even though the Edomites, Esau's descendants, determined to rebuild their nation after it had suffered destruction by the Babylonians, they would not be able to do so. They could not because Almighty Yahweh would not permit it. He would tear down whatever they rebuilt, so much so that other people would view their land as a wicked land (cf. the holy land, Zech. 2:12), and them as the objects of Yahweh's perpetual indignation. The holy land was holy—sanctified—because God had set it apart for special blessing, as He had the nation of Israel. Edom, on the other hand, was called wicked, because God had not set it apart for special blessing.

"Israel needed to consider what her lot would have been if she, like Edom, had not been elected to a covenant relationship with Yahweh. Both Israel and Edom received judgment from God at the hands of the Babylonians in the sixth century (Jer. 27:2-8). Yet God repeatedly promised to restore Israel (because of His covenant promises, Deut. 4:29-31; 30:1-10), but He condemned Edom to

¹E.g., Keil, 2:431; Smith, p. 306; Stuart, pp. 1287-88; Merrill, pp. 391-92; Clendennen, pp. 250-51; Alden, p. 709; Verhoef, pp. 204-6.

complete destruction, never to be restored (Jer. 49:7-22; Ezek. 35)."¹

"The Judeans had Persian permission and support in their rebuilding campaign (Ezra 1:1-11; 4:3; 6:1-15; 7:11-28; Neh. 2:7-9; 13:6). That was God's doing. The Edomites had no such help, which was also God's doing and which sealed Edom's fate as a people forever."²

1:5 Observing Yahweh's dealings with Edom, the Israelites would learn of His love for Israel and His greatness that extended beyond Israel (cf. vv. 11, 14; 3:12; 4:6). They would eventually call on other people to appreciate Him, too.

"While Edom does not have the most space devoted to prophecies against it in total number of verses (Egypt has that honor, thanks to Ezekiel), it has the widest distribution among the prophetic books. From Isaiah 34 in particular it is clear that Edom can be used by the prophets to stand as a synecdoche for 'all the nations' (Isa. 34:2)."³

The point of this section was to get the Jews of the restoration community, who were thinking that God had abandoned them and forgotten His promises to them, to think again. Even though they seemed to be experiencing the same fate as their ancient enemy, the Edomites, God would restore them, because He had entered into covenant relationship with them. He would keep His promises, both to the Israelites and to the Edomites, for better and for worse respectively. This reminder of the LORD's love provided positive motivation for the priests to return to the LORD, and it should have the same effect on all God's people who read these verses.

¹Blaising, p. 1576.

²Stuart, p. 1289.

³*ibid.*, pp. 1281-82. For a list of oracles against foreign nations in the Prophets, see *ibid.*, p. 1281. Synecdoche is a figure of speech in which a part is used to represent the whole, or the whole is used to represent a part.

B. SITUATION: THE PRIESTS' FAILURE TO HONOR THE LORD 1:6-9

The preceding section ended with a statement of Yahweh's greatness. The second one opens with a question about why Israel's priests did not honor Him. The theme of honoring or fearing the LORD appears several times in Malachi, making it one of the major themes in this book (cf. 1:11, 14; 2:2, 5; 3:5, 16; 4:2). The first disputation (1:2-5) is the simplest, and this one (1:6—2:9) is the most complex.

"This entire pericope deals with the proper attitude or response to authority: son-father, servant-lord, vassal-governor."¹

"... God inspired Malachi to produce an exhortation [severe criticism] of the priests, in the same overall disputation format that governs all the passages of the book, but incorporating terminology and themes from a famous blessing closely associated in everyone's mind with the priests [i.e., Num. 6:23-27]."²

1:6 This pericope begins like the first one: with a statement by Yahweh and a challenging response (cf. Isa. 1:2-3). The priests were responsible to teach the other Israelites the Mosaic Law, to mediate between Yahweh and His people, and to judge the people.

Almighty Yahweh asked the priests of Israel why they did not honor Him, since sons normally honor their fathers (Exod. 20:12; Deut. 5:16), and He was their Father (Exod. 4:22; Isa. 1:2; 63:16; 64:8; Hos. 11:1). Since servants respect their masters, why did they not fear Him, since He was their Master (Isa. 44:1-2)? Even though they were blind to His love, they should at least have given Him respect.

"We must notice that the Israelites only rarely give to Yahweh the title father when they address him and that only rarely do they call themselves

¹Smith, p. 312.

²Stuart, p. 1297. On this page, Stuart also showed the similarities between the two passages in a side-by-side chart. On page 1316, he did the same, comparing Num. 25:11-13 and Deut. 33:8-11 with Mal. 1:6—2:9.

sons of Yahweh. It is rather God who designates himself as father by calling the Israelites his sons. That prevented any mysticism based upon a bond of physical parentage between God and man."¹

Speaking for the priests, Malachi gave the response of the people: They denied having despised His name.

"Before, it was ignorance of God's love: now it is ignorance of self and of sin."²

The name of Yahweh was a common substitute for the person of Yahweh from earliest biblical times (cf. Exod. 23:21; Deut. 12:5, 11, 21; 16:2, 6; et al.). It became a virtual title for Yahweh by the end of the biblical period, and increasingly so after that.³ By asking how they had despised His name, rather than saying, We have not despised your name, the priests were claiming ignorance as to how they were doing this. However, their question also carried a challenge: They resented the suggestion that they had despised His name.

"Intimate familiarity with holy matters conduces [leads] to treating them with indifference."⁴

1:7 The LORD responded through Malachi that the priests had despised the LORD by presenting defiled sacrifices to Him (cf. Lev. 22:2, 17-30, 32). Defiled sacrifices were sacrifices that were not ritually clean or acceptable, as the Law specified. By offering these, they defiled (made unclean) both the altar of burnt offerings and the Lord Himself.

The Law referred to the offerings as the food of Yahweh (Lev. 21:6), though obviously He did not eat the offerings. The use of the word "food" for "sacrifice" and "table" for "altar" continues the human analogies already begun in verse 6. Moreover, these terms also connote covenant relationships, because covenants were usually ratified when the

¹Jacob, p. 62.

²Pusey, 2:468.

³See Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 2:40-45.

⁴Alden, p. 711.

participants—typically a king and his subjects—ate a meal together.¹

"What does this say to professed Christians who spend hundreds of dollars annually, perhaps thousands, on gifts for themselves, their family, and their friends, but give God a dollar a week when the offering plate is passed?"²

Do we offer God our best in worship today, or do we just go through the motions?

1:8 Furthermore, the priests were offering blind, lame, and sick animals as sacrifices. These were unacceptable according to the Law (Lev. 22:18-25; Deut. 15:21). The LORD asked them if this was not evil. Of course it was. They would not dare to offer such bad animals to their governor, for fear of displeasing him, but they did dare to offer them to their King. The governor in view would have been one of the Persian officials who ruled over the Israelites. Nehemiah held this position for a while, but others preceded and followed him in it.

The Book of Malachi seems to date from Nehemiah's leadership of Israel, but Nehemiah refused to receive offerings from the people (Neh. 5:14, 18). So the governor in view here was probably not Nehemiah. Elnathan, Yeho'ezer, and Ahzai were evidently the governors of Judah between Zerubbabel and Nehemiah.³

Anything second-rate that we offer to God is inappropriate in view of who He is. This includes our worship, our ministries, our studies, physical objects—anything. The LORD is worthy of our very best offerings to Him, and we should give Him nothing less. To give Him less than our best is to despise Him. Shoddiness is an insult to God. Shoddy holy is still shoddy.

¹See Paul Kalluveettil, *Declaration and Covenant*, pp. 10-15, 120-21; and Dennis J. McCarthy, *Treaty and Covenant*, pp. 163-64.

²Wiersbe, p. 480.

³N. Avigad, "Bullae and Seals from a Post-exilic Judean Archive," *Qedem* 4, p. 34.

1:9 How foolish it was to pray for God to bestow His favor on the priests when they were despising Him in these ways.

"This is irony. God will not hear the prayers of those who dishonor him."¹

"God despises not the widow's mite, but he does despise the miser's mite ..."²

"Over the years, I've participated in many ordination examinations, and I've looked for four characteristics in each candidate: a personal experience of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ; a sense of calling from the Lord; a love for and knowledge of the Word of God; and a high respect for the work of the ministry. Whenever we've examined a candidate who was flippant about ministry, who saw it as a job and not a divine calling, he didn't get my vote. Whether as a pastor, missionary, teacher, choir member, or usher, being a servant of God is a serious thing, and it deserves the very best that we can give."³

C. COMMAND: STOP THE POINTLESS OFFERINGS 1:10

The LORD ironically wished the priests would shut the temple gates, and stop offering sacrifices, since they had so little regard for Him. He was displeased with them and would not accept any offerings from them. They might continue to offer them, but He would have no regard for them. Obviously the LORD had ordained the offering of sacrifices under the Law, but He preferred that the priests not offer them, rather than offer meaningless sacrifices, simply as an obligation. I am not pleased with you is the opposite of "Well done, good and faithful slave" (Matt. 25:21).

This verse is the chiasmic center and the heart of the first hortatory discourse dealing with the importance of the priests honoring the LORD (1:2—2:9).

¹Burton L. Goddard, "Malachi," in *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, p. 915.

²Jamieson, et al., p. 870.

³Wiersbe, p. 481.

D. SITUATION: THE PRIESTS' WORSHIP PROFANING THE LORD'S NAME 1:11-14

This is the second section that describes how the priests were dishonoring the LORD's name (cf. 1:6-9). It is one of the bookends that flanks the central command to stop the pointless sacrifices (1:10).

1:11 It was particularly inappropriate for Israel's priests to despise Yahweh, because the time would come when people from all over the world would honor His name (i.e., His person; cf. Isa. 45:22-25; 49:5-7; 59:19). Incense accompanied prayers (cf. Rev. 5:8), and grain offerings were offerings of praise and worship (cf. Lev. 2; Heb. 13:15-16). In that future day, people from many places will offer pure offerings. This refers to worship in the Millennium (the 1,000-year rule of Jesus Christ on the earth; cf. 3:1-4; Isa. 11:3-4, 9; Dan. 7:13-14, 27-28; Zeph. 2:11; 3:8-11; Zech. 14:9, 16).

"Never have we had in prophecy, even the most far-seeing and evangelical, a statement so generous and so catholic [all-embracing] as this."¹

"Others argue that this verse legitimizes sincere pagan worship as really being directed to the one true God. However, such a notion is antithetical to the militant monotheism that permeates Israel's Yahwistic theology."²

1:12 The priests of Malachi's day were treating Yahweh's reputation as common. The proof of this was their statements that the altar was defiled, and the offerings on it were despised. Their attitude and their actions were wrong.

"Whenever we disregard or circumvent the Lord's instructions and requirements, such as his requirements for elders and deacons, we profane his name and desecrate his worship."³

¹George Adam Smith, *The Book of the Twelve Prophets Commonly Called the Minor*, 2:359.

²Robert B. Chisholm Jr., *Handbook on the Prophets*, p. 478. See also Baldwin, pp. 227-28.

³Clendenen, p. 281.

Normally the Old Testament refers to the altar of burnt offerings as an altar. Here the LORD said that the people were regarding this altar as a mere table on which they were presenting food (sacrifices) to Him. The Israelites had apparently adopted the pagan idea that sacrifices were food for their gods (cf. Ezek. 44:7).

1:13 They were also saying that it was tiresome and distasteful to worship the LORD. Their worship should have been passionate and joyful instead of boring and burdensome (cf. Col. 3:16-17). They would disdainfully sniff at it as something they despised, and they were bringing as offerings what they had stolen, as well as lame and sick animals (cf. 2 Sam. 24:24). Did they expect Him to receive such sacrifices from them? How could He?

"Today there are people who will sit on bleachers for three hours out in the hot sun to watch a baseball game. There are folk who will sit out in the cold to watch a football game. And there are those who will sit for three hours listening to an opera, or for two hours watching a movie, or for four hours to see *Hamlet*. ... My friend, why are you weary when your preacher speaks for one hour?"¹

"God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him."²

1:14 The people also were playing the old bait and switch game; they were swindling God. They vowed to offer an acceptable animal as a sacrifice, but when it came time to present the offering, they substituted one of inferior quality. How totally inappropriate this was, since Yahweh was a great King, the greatest in the universe—truly the ultimate royal suzerain. His name would be feared among all the nations, yet His own

¹McGee, 3:998.

²John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad! The Supremacy of God in Missions*, p. 26.

people, and their spiritual leaders, were treating it with contempt.

"Missions is not the ultimate goal of the church. Worship is. Missions exists because worship doesn't. Worship is ultimate, not missions, because God is ultimate, not man. When this age is over, and the countless millions of the redeemed fall on their faces before the throne of God, missions will be no more. It is a temporary necessity. But worship abides forever."¹

"All of history is moving toward one great goal, the white-hot worship of God and his Son among all the peoples of the earth. Missions is not that goal. It is the means. And for that reason it is the second greatest human activity in the world."²

Lack of true heart for the LORD and His service marked these leaders of God's people. They evidently thought that He did not notice their actions and attitudes, but Malachi confronted them with their hypocrisy. The prophet's words should also challenge modern servants of God, and the leaders of His people, to examine their hearts.

"At the time that I was ordained into the ministry, the man who gave me the charge of entering the ministry said that there are three great sins of the ministry that I should avoid. ... The number one sin of the ministry is laziness. ... Then the *second* great sin of the ministry is an overweening ambition. ... The *third* great sin of the ministry is to be dull and boring, to be tedious and wearisome. ... Any preacher who goes into the pulpit unprepared despises the name of the Lord, and he is causing people to say, 'Boy, the Bible is boring!'"³

¹Ibid., p. 11.

²Ibid., p. 15.

³McGee, 3:999-1000. Paragraph divisions omitted.

E. NEGATIVE MOTIVATION: THE RESULTS OF DISOBEDIENCE 2:1-9

Whereas the emphasis in Malachi's argument shifts at this point somewhat from the sins of the priests (cf. 1:6; 2:1) to their possible fate, there is a continuing emphasis on their sins. In the preceding sections (1:6-14), the cultic activity of the priests (i.e., offering sacrifices) was prominent, but in this one (2:1-9), their teaching ministry is. As with the second hortatory discourse (2:10—3:6), this first one begins with positive motivation (1:2-5) and ends with negative motivation (2:1-9).

2:1-2 Malachi announced an admonition to the priests from the LORD. If they did not pay attention to His rebuke and sincerely desire to honor Yahweh's name, the LORD would curse them (cf. Deut. 27:15-26; 28:15-68). He would cut off their blessings, and troubles would plague their lives. Blessing was their business, and by cursing their blessings the LORD would render their pronounced blessings useless. This curtailment of blessing may also include their income from the people, in addition to spiritual blessings. In fact, the LORD had already begun to do so.

"The inevitable result of covenant unfaithfulness was the imposition of the curses that were always spelled out in covenant texts (cf. Lev. 26:14-39; Deut. 27:11-26; 28:15-57)."¹

"No single prophetic book contains all twenty-seven types of curses or all ten types of restoration blessings. The shorter books normally contain few of either. Malachi, on the other hand, contains a fairly high proportion of both types relative to its length, confirming what readers of the book have long noticed: the Book of Malachi is closely concerned with fidelity to the covenant and the consequences (thus curses and blessings) of keeping or breaking the law of Moses."²

¹Merrill, p. 405.

²Stuart, pp. 1260-61.

"The very essence of 'this command' is the duty and the privilege of the priests to honor the name of the Lord (v. 2). Instead of being a mere introduction to vv. 2 and 3, it is the focus of the whole passage [vv. 2-9]."¹

Notice the importance of the priests taking to heart what the LORD was saying, which is repeated twice in verse 2 for emphasis.

"The word 'heart' (*leb/lebab*) denotes in Hebrew what may be called the command center of a person's life, where knowledge is collected and considered and where decisions and plans are made that determine the direction of one's life. In view of the 814 occurrences of the word in the Old Testament in reference to the human 'heart' ('the commonest of all anthropological terms') and the common usage of 'heart' in English of emotions, it is important to differentiate the Hebrew meaning from the English and so to 'guard against the false impression that biblical man is determined more by feeling than by reason.'"²

2:3 Part of this curse involved rebuking (cutting off) the priests' offspring (Heb. *zera'*, seed, physical descendants, or perhaps, seed for sowing), and spreading refuse (Heb. *zarah*, dung) from their feasts on their faces (cf. Zech. 3:3-4). The disgusting picture is of God taking the internal waste of the sacrificial animals and smearing it on the priests' faces. He would rub their noses in it. Consequently, both sacrifices and priests, having become defiled, would have to be taken outside (taken away, thrown out with the garbage, picturing excommunication) for disposal.

This play on words actually communicates a double curse (cf. v. 2): The priests' descendants would not continue, because

¹Verhoef, p. 238.

²Clendenen, p. 288. His quotations are from H. W. Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament*, p. 40, n. 173, and p. 47, n. 174.

the priests would cease to bear any or many children, and their inferior sacrifices would render them unclean. They would not, then, be able to continue to function in their office.

- 2:4 When these things happened, the priests would know that this warning had indeed come from the LORD. Its intent was to purify the priests so that God's covenant with Levi could continue (cf. 3:3). This is the first of six explicit references to "covenant" in Malachi. The covenants in view are God's covenant with Levi (vv. 4-5, 8), the Mosaic Covenant (v. 10), the marriage covenant (v. 14), and the New Covenant (3:1). God had promised a continuing line of priests from Levi's branch of the Chosen People (Deut. 33:8-11; cf. Exod. 32:25-29; Num. 3:12; 25:10-13; Neh. 13:29; Jer. 33:21-22).¹
- 2:5 The LORD's covenant with Levi was a covenant of grant. In this type of covenant, one individual, and perhaps his descendants, received a promise of continuing blessing for a special service rendered. The special service that Levi and his descendants rendered to God involved serving as His priests. The covenant that God made with Levi and his descendants resulted in life and peace for them. God had given the Levites these blessings because they had respected Yahweh and feared His name in the past (Num. 18:7-8, 19-21; cf. Num. 25:10-13).
- 2:6 Also in contrast to the present priests, Levi and his descendants had given the Israelites true instruction rather than perverted teaching (cf. Heb. 13:17; James 3:1). Levi, who here represents his faithful descendants, walked with the Lord in peace (Heb. *shalom*) and uprightness, and he turned many away from iniquity.
- 2:7 Priests should speak true knowledge, and should be reliable sources of instruction (Heb. *torah*), because they are messengers of Yahweh. Levi contrasts with the priests of Malachi's day, and Malachi ("My Messenger") also contrasts with the priests of his day. Ezra was the great example of a

¹For an excursus on the Levitical Covenant, see *ibid.*, pp. 296-306.

faithful priest in postexilic Judaism (cf. Ezra 7:10, 25; Neh. 8:9).

"As the life of a community depends upon the keeper of its water supply to guard that supply from loss or contamination, so the life of Israel depended upon its priests to preserve God's written word and effectively to dispense it when 'men should seek' it."¹

This is also true today, and this is why pastors should concentrate on preparing and teaching the Word of God to their people.

"... I believe that studying the Word and teaching it is the pastor's business."²

2:8 The priests of Malachi's day had deviated from the straight path of truth, and had caused many people who followed them to stumble through their instruction (Heb. *torah*).

"The definite article on ... (*tora*), 'instruction,' suggests that here it is not just any teaching in general but indeed *the* instruction, namely, the Torah, the law of Moses. The defection of the priests is all the more serious, then, for they are actually creating obstacles to the people's access to the Word of God itself. To cause the people to 'stumble in the Torah' is to so mislead them in its meaning that they fail to understand and keep its requirements. There can be no more serious indictment against the man of God."³

The unfaithful priests had corrupted the LORDS covenant with Levi, in the sense that they had put its continuance in jeopardy by their evil conduct.

¹Ibid., p. 314.

²McGee, 3:1003.

³Merrill, p. 410.

"To have an ill-prepared minister, an incompetent pastor, a hireling for a shepherd was bad enough; much worse was it to have a deceiver, a schemer, a wolf in sheep's clothing for a leader."¹

Malachi referred to three covenants in this chapter: this covenant with Levi, the covenant of the fathers (2:10), and the covenant of marriage (2:14).

2:9 Since the priests had despised the LORD, the LORD had made them despised in the eyes of all the people. They did not obey His will, but instead had told the people what they wanted to hear. Their penalty should have been death (Num. 18:32).

Thus ends the first hortatory discourse in Malachi. This one, addressed specifically to Israel's unfaithful priests, should challenge all God's servants to serve Him with heartfelt gratitude for His grace and with the awareness that He will punish unfaithful workmen.

III. JUDAH EXHORTED TO FAITHFULNESS (THE SOCIAL ANGLE) 2:10— 3:6

The LORD addressed the entire nation of Israel in this address, not specifically the priests, as He had in the former one. His concern, as expressed through His messenger Malachi, was the peoples' indifference toward His will. They were blaming their social and economic troubles on the LORD's supposed injustice and indifference to them (2:17). Furthermore, they were being unfaithful to one another, especially to their wives, whom the husbands were apparently abandoning for foreign women. These conditions profaned (showed disrespect for) the temple and the Mosaic Covenant (2:10b-15a).

The LORD's command, which lies in the center of the section (as is true in the first and third exhortations), was for the people to stop their treachery toward one another (2:15b-16). Thus the major emphasis of this second main section of Malachi is social responsibility (love for and relationship with people), whereas the major emphasis of the first major section was theological (love for and relationship with God). First positive and, later,

¹Alden, p. 715.

negative motivations act as bookends surrounding the LORD's command (cf. 1:2-5; 2:1-9; and 3:10b-12; 3:16—4:3).

"The style of the third oracle [according to the "disputation speeches" division of Malachi] differs from the others. Instead of an initial statement or charge followed by a question of feigned innocence, this oracle begins with three questions asked by the prophet. However, as at the beginning of each of the other oracles, the point is presented at the outset."¹

A. POSITIVE MOTIVATION: SPIRITUAL KINSHIP AMONG ISRAEL 2:10A

This message deals with the same social evils that Ezra and Nehemiah faced: intermarriage with unbelievers (vv. 10-12), and divorce (vv. 14-16; cf. Ezra 9:2; Neh. 13:23-28), plus hypocritical worship (vv. 12-13).

Malachi said, by asking rhetorical questions, that God was the "father" of all the Israelites (cf. 1:2, 6; Exod. 4:22; Hos. 11:1).² Another view is that Malachi was referring to Abraham or Jacob as the father of the Israelites.³ Others believe that Adam is in view. Malachi was not saying that God is the father of all human beings in the modern universal fatherhood of God sense. One true God had created all of them. Israel belonged to God because He had created the nation and had adopted it as His son. Therefore the Israelites needed to honor the LORD. Since God is the creator and redeemer of His people, we have an obligation to honor, love, fear, worship, and obey Him.

B. SITUATION: FAITHLESSNESS AGAINST A COVENANT MEMBER 2:10B-15A

2:10b In view of their common brotherhood in the family of God, it was inappropriate for the Israelites to treat each other as enemies and deal treacherously with each other. They should have treated each other as brothers and supported one another (Lev. 19:18). By dealing treacherously with each other, they had made the covenant that God had made with

¹Blaising, p. 1580.

²Verhoef, p. 265; Charles Lee Feinberg, *Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, and Malachi*, p. 112; McGee, 3:1003..

³Baldwin, p. 237.

their ancestors virtually worthless; they could not enjoy the blessings of the Mosaic Covenant.

"... the Mosaic covenant was by Malachi's time understood as a quaint, archaic document too restrictive to be taken seriously and inapplicable to a 'modern' age—virtually the same way that most people in modern Western societies view the Bible today."¹

2:11 The evidence of Judah's treachery was that the Israelites were profaning (making common) Yahweh's beloved sanctuary. This sanctuary may refer to the temple or His people. They did this by practicing idolatry. They had married pagan women who worshipped other gods (cf. 2 Cor. 6:14-16). Yahweh's "son" (Israel, v. 10) had married foreign women that worshipped other gods, and, like Solomon, had become unfaithful to Yahweh (cf. Exod. 34:11-16; Deut. 7:3-4; Josh. 23:12-13; Ezra 9:1-2, 10-12; Neh. 13:23-27).

"Israel was forbidden to marry the sons or daughters of the Canaanites (Exod. 34:16; Deut. 7:3), but it is evident from the reason which was explicitly stated that all marriages with people still adhering to an idolatrous religion were contrary to God's intentions with his covenant people."²

"The question of intermarriage in ancient Israel was not racial or ethnic but spiritual: lack of faithfulness to God Himself."³

2:12 In a curse formula, Malachi pronounced judgment on any Israelite who married such a woman. The judgment would be that he would die or that his line would die out (be cut off). The difficult idiom translated "who is awake and answers" (NASB) evidently means "whoever he may be" (NIV).⁴ This curse would befall him, even if he brought offerings to

¹Stuart, p. 1332.

²Verhoef, p. 270.

³*The Nelson ...*, p. 1560.

⁴See Verhoef, pp. 270-71. NIV refers to *The Holy Bible: New International Version*.

Almighty Yahweh at the temple. Keil interpreted this verse a bit differently:

"The meaning of the whole verse is the following: 'May God not only cut off every descendant of such a sinner out of the houses of Israel, but any one who might offer a sacrifice for him in expiation of his sin.'"¹

Both people and priests are evidently in view. Worshipping God did not insulate covenant violators from divine punishment then, and it does not now.

2:13-14 The people evidently could not figure out why God was withholding blessing from them, so Malachi gave them the reasons. Another of their sins involved weeping profusely over the LORD's altar—because He did not answer their prayers—while at the same time dealing treacherously with their wives (cf. 1 Pet. 3:7). Weeping over the altar must be a figurative way of describing weeping as they worshipped Yahweh (hypocritically).

The marriage relationship is a covenant relationship (cf. Prov. 2:17; Ezek. 16:8, 59-62; Hos. 2:16-20), and those who break their vows should not expect God to bless them. God Himself acted as a witness when the couple made their covenant of marriage in their youth.

"In the ancient Near East the marriage was contracted at an early age. According to the Talmud a young man was cursed if he was not married by the age of twenty (cf. Isa. 54:6; Prov. 2:17; 5:18; Joel 1:8)."²

This sin may have in view particularly the Israelite men who were divorcing their Jewish wives to marry pagan women (cf. v. 12). Or divorce in general may be all that is in view.

¹Keil, 2:451.

²Verhoef, p. 274.

"The wife is to be looked upon, not as a servant, but as a companion to the husband."¹

"Although the designation of a wife as a 'partner' [NIV] does not negate the subjection of her marital role to that of her husband [cf. Gen. 3:16], it certainly counters the concept that she was to be viewed as a mere possession to be disposed of at will. Though more than a friend or companion, she was not to be regarded as less than that."²

2:15a No individual Israelite, who benefited from even a small amount of the Holy Spirit's influence, would break such a covenant as the marriage contract. Another view is that Malachi meant that no one who had even a little of the proper human spirit (attitude) toward marriage, a sense of right and wrong, would break it.³ God Himself would not break His covenant with Israel. In both cases, godly offspring were a major reason for not breaking the respective covenants. The person who wanted godly offspring should not violate his or her marriage covenant. The welfare of the children is still a common and legitimate reason for keeping a marriage intact.

"Too often do contemporary married couples think of children as an option; they regard their own personal happiness or fulfillment as the primary goal in marriage. This was never to be the case according to the biblical revelation. The first divine command given to the first human couple [and later repeated to Noah; Gen. 9:7] was to 'be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it' (Gen 1:28). God intended that a man's purpose in departing from his father and mother and in joining himself to a wife by covenant, thus becoming one with her in flesh (Gen 2:24), should be fruitfulness. By that means were God's people

¹Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, p. 1197.

²Clendenen, p. 347.

³Keil, 2:452-53. See Gleason L. Archer, *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties*, pp. 305-6, for discussion of this difficult verse.

to spread his rule throughout the whole earth, producing and discipling children who would manifest the divine glory in their obedient lives and continue the process until the earth was full of his glory (Gen 22:17). Although sin interfered with the process, the purpose has not been superseded. Although couples can no longer be assured of bearing children (as the theme of barrenness in Genesis makes clear), they are still to 'seek' them and can reproduce themselves in other ways if necessary, through adoption and/or spiritual discipleship."¹

C. COMMAND: STOP ACTING FAITHLESSLY 2:15B-16

This command section begins and ends with commands not to break faith. Instruction to take heed to one's spirit immediately precedes each of these commands. Two quotations from Yahweh lie within this envelope structure. These commands from Yahweh constitute the turning point in this second chiasmic hortatory discourse (cf. 1:10).

2:15b The Israelites needed to be careful, therefore, that not one of them dealt treacherously with the wife that he had married in his youth—by breaking his marriage covenant and divorcing her. The man is the responsible party in the text, because in Israel only husbands could conveniently divorce their wives, as the context implies. Wives divorcing their husbands was less common in Jewish patriarchal society.

2:16 The Israelites were not to break their marriage covenants, because a person who divorces his mate to marry an unbeliever brings disgrace upon himself. Divorcing for this reason constitutes covenant unfaithfulness: breaking a covenant entered into that God Himself witnessed (v. 14). As such, it is an ungodly (not God-like) thing to do, since Yahweh is a covenant-keeping God. He keeps His promises. To break a covenant (a formal promise) is to do something that God Himself does not do.

¹Clendenen, p. 356.

Divorcing for this reason constitutes covering oneself with violence. This is a play on a Hebrew euphemism for marriage, namely, covering oneself with a garment (cf. Ruth 3:9; Ezek. 16:8). One covers himself with violence when he divorces his wife, whom he has previously covered with his garment (i.e., married). For these Jews, divorce was similar to wearing soiled garments; it was a disgrace. For emphasis, the LORD repeated His warning to be careful about one's "spirit, so he or she does not deal treacherously with his covenant partner (cf. v. 15).

"To the Lord, attitudes of indifference to marriage vows and duties are the actions of a traitor."¹

"No higher word on marriage was spoken except by Christ Himself."²

There is some dispute among English translators whether the rendering, "I {Yahweh] hate divorce," is correct. It is possible, and most English translators have so rendered it. Possible "I" was accidentally dropped from the Hebrew text.³ But this translation requires emending (changing) the Masoretic text, which is the most generally accepted version of the Hebrew Bible.⁴ The normal way of translating the Hebrew literally would be: "He [the man who deals treacherously with his wife] hates divorce." But this hardly makes sense. It is clear from the context of this verse, and the teaching of Scripture elsewhere, that God does not want people to divorce their spouses.

One paraphrase that captures the literal meaning well is: "For the man who hates and divorces, says the LORD, the God of Israel, covers his garment with violence, says the LORD of hosts" (English Standard Version). Another good paraphrase is, "'If he hates and divorces [his wife],' says the LORD God of Israel, 'he covers his garment with injustice,' say the LORD of Hosts" (Holman Christian Standard Bible). One writer

¹ *The Nelson ...*, p. 1561.

² G. A. Smith, 2:363.

³ *The NET2 Bible* note on v. 16. *The NET2 Bible* refers to *The NET2 (New English Translation) Bible*, 2019 ed.

⁴ See Joe M. Sprinkle, "Old Testament Perspectives on Divorce and Remarriage," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 40 (1997):539.

expressed the spirit of the LORD's statement by paraphrasing it, "Divorce is hateful."¹

"The hatred of God is also expressed against the one who covers his garment with violence. The reference is to the old custom of putting a garment over a woman to claim her as wife. Note particularly Deuteronomy 22:30; Ruth 3:9; and Ezekiel 16:8. Instead of spreading their garments to protect their wives, they covered their garment with violence toward their wives. The garment symbolized wedded trust and protection."²

"The passage [2:10-16] does not deal with the case of a man divorcing a wife who has already broken her marriage vows, so it also does not apply to the case of a woman divorcing her husband who has already broken his marriage vows. This is another reason the passage should not be understood as an absolute condemnation of divorce under any circumstances. In fact, according to Jer 3:8 the Lord himself had divorced the Northern Kingdom of Israel because of her adulteries (cf. Hos 2:2)."³

The fact that Ezra commanded divorce (Ezra 10) may appear to contradict God's condemnation of divorce here. (Nehemiah neither advocated divorce nor spoke out against it; Neh. 13:23-29.) The solution seems to be that Malachi was addressing the specific situation of Jewish men divorcing their Jewish wives in order to marry pagan women. Ezra faced Jewish men who had already married pagan women. Does this mean that it is all right to divorce an unbelieving spouse but not a believer? Paul made it clear that the Christian is to divorce neither (1 Cor. 7:10-20). Evidently it was the

¹D. L. Petersen, *Zechariah 9—14 and Malachi*, pp.204-5.

²Feinberg, p. 116.

³Clendenen, p. 359.

illegitimacy of a Jew marrying a pagan that led Ezra to advocate divorce in that type of case.

Even though God typically opposes divorce, and in that sense hates it, He permitted it (Deut. 24:1-4). He did so to achieve the larger goals of maintaining Israel's distinctiveness, so she could fulfill His purposes for her in the world (Exod. 19:3-6). His purposes for the church are not exactly the same as His purposes for Israel. Furthermore, the church is not subject to the Mosaic Law. Therefore, it is inappropriate to appeal to the Jews' action in Ezra as a precedent for Christians who are married to unbelievers to follow (cf. 1 Cor. 7:12-13).

In none of the other passages in which divorce appears to be required (Gen. 21:8-14; Exod. 21:10-11; Deut. 21:10-14), does God present divorce as a good thing. He only permitted it under certain circumstances created by sin (Matt. 19:9).

"The prophet's concluding exhortation, 'So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith' is a strong warning to every husband that he must be constantly on his guard against developing a negative attitude toward his wife."¹

D. SITUATION: COMPLAINTS OF THE LORD'S INJUSTICE 2:17

Malachi recorded complaints—that the people were voicing—that gave further proof that they were acting faithlessly and needed to change (cf. 2:10b-15a). That another disputation is in view is clear from the question and answer format that begins this pericope, as it does the others. Verse 17 contains the question and answer, and the discussion follows in 3:1-6. The Israelites' changeability (2:17) contrasts with Yahweh's constancy (3:6).

"The reader is introduced here for the first time in Malachi to three themes, all of which may be expressed, for convenience,

¹Ibid., p. 368. Cf. Col. 3:19. See also Dennis Rainey, *Ministering to Twenty-First Century Families*, ch. 21: "Declaring War on Divorce," pp. 239-60.

as needs: the need for messianic intervention, the need for a day of judgment, and the need for social justice."¹

Malachi announced to his hearers that they had wearied Yahweh with their words; He was tired of hearing them repeat certain phrases. Their response was again hypocritical incredulity (the state of being unwilling or unable to believe something). They thought that He could hardly be tired of listening to them, since He had committed Himself to them as their covenant Lord (Master; cf. Isa. 40:28).

This is another place where Scripture seems to contradict itself. On the one hand, God said He does not grow weary (Isa. 40:28), but on the other hand, He said He was weary (here). The solution, I think, is that in the first case, He was speaking about His essential character: He does not tire out like human beings do. In the second case, He meant that He was tired of the Israelites speaking as they did. In this second case, He used anthropomorphic language to describe how He felt—as though He were a human being, which, of course, He is not.²

The prophet explained that Yahweh was tired of the Israelites saying that He delighted in them, all the while saying that everyone who did evil was acceptable to Him. They seem to have lost their conscience for right and wrong, and assumed that because God did not intervene, He therefore approved of their sin. In fact, their question amounted to a challenge of God's justice. If they were breaking His law and He was just, He surely must punish them. Their return to the land indicated to them that He was blessing them, and He promised to bless the godly in the Mosaic Covenant (Deut. 28:1-14).

Contemporary people say the same thing: "If there is a just God, why doesn't He do something about all the suffering in the world?" "If God is just, why do the wicked prosper?" Scripture reveals that God blesses the wicked as well as the righteous—because He is good (Matt. 5:45; Acts 14:17); and the righteous suffer as well as the wicked—because of the Fall and sin (Gen. 3:16-19; Eccles. 2:17-23).

Moreover, God allows Satan to afflict the righteous as well as the wicked (Job 1—2). God will eventually punish the wicked and bless the righteous,

¹Stuart, p. 1346.

²For extended discussion, see Clendenen, pp. 372-82.

but not necessarily in this life (cf. Job 21:7-26; 24:1-17; Ps. 73:1-14; Eccles. 8:14; Jer. 12:1-4; Hab. 1). Malachi's audience had forgotten part of what God had revealed on this subject, and, of course, they had not yet received New Testament revelation about it.

"Disillusionment had followed the rebuilding of the Temple because, though decade followed decade, no supernatural event marked the return of the Lord to Zion."¹

E. _____ NEGATIVE MOTIVATION: THE COMING MESSENGER OF JUDGMENT 3:1-6

Like the first address (1:2—2:9), this one ends with more motivation. Unpleasant things would happen if the people failed to change in their dealings with one another. The warning centers around the coming of another messenger whose arrival would bring judgment in the future. This section contains four predictions (vv. 1a, 1b, 3, 5).

3:1 The LORD's response to the cynical Israelites was to point them to the future. He predicted the coming of His messenger (cf. Isa. 40:3-5). There is no question about who this was, because Jesus identified him as John the Baptist (Matt. 11:10; cf. Mark 1:2; Luke 7:27). This future messenger would clear the way in preparation for Yahweh (cf. Isa. 40:3; John 1:23). Clearly, Jesus Christ is Yahweh, since John the Baptist prepared the way for Jesus.

"Perhaps most intriguing of all the issues raised by the fourth disputation is its implicit identification of the 'messenger of the covenant' as Yahweh himself. No other passage in the Old Testament so clearly assigns divine prerogatives and nomenclature to the figure of the Messiah (though the term *masiah* is not itself employed by Malachi). When one examines how this disputation describes the identity and actions of the 'messenger of the covenant,' one can only conclude that he is divine."²

¹Baldwin, p. 242.

²Stuart, p. 1347.

"He Who speaks, is He Who should come, God the Son."¹

Then "the Lord (Adonai, Master)," whom the Israelites were seeking, would suddenly come to His temple (cf. Ezek. 43:1-5; Zech. 8:3). Though Jesus entered the temple in Jerusalem many times during His earthly ministry, this sudden coming was not fulfilled then (cf. vv. 2-5). It will occur when He returns to the earth to set up His messianic kingdom.

"The fact that he will come *suddenly* is ominous, for suddenness was usually associated with a calamitous event (*e.g.* Is. 47:11; 48:3; Je. 4:20, *etc.*)."²

"We know that Malachi refers to the second coming of Christ because it is judgment that is in view here."³

"The messenger of the covenant" is another name for the Lord who would come following the appearance of the first messenger promised in this verse.⁴ He would be the divine Messiah. "Messenger" means "angel," and the angel of the LORD is in view here.

"We dare not miss the three undeniable proofs of the deity of the Messiah given here: (1) he is identified with the Lord: 'he shall prepare the way before me ... saith the Lord of hosts'; (2) he is indicated as the owner of the temple: 'to his temple'; and (3) he is called 'the Lord' whom they sought."⁵

The "covenant" is probably the New Covenant that God promised to make with the Jews in the future (cf. Jer. 31:31-

¹Pusey, 2:485.

²Baldwin, p. 243. Cf. Rev. 1:1; 22:6.

³McGee, 3:1017.

⁴See E. Ray Clendenen, "'Messenger of the Covenant' in Malachi 3:1 Once Again," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 62:1 (March 2019):81-102.

⁵Feinberg, p. 121.

34; Ezek. 36:22-36; 37:26). Another view is that the covenant in view is the Mosaic Covenant and, behind it, the Abrahamic Covenant.¹ The Jews delighted in this Messenger, because His coming had been a subject of messianic prophecy and an object of eager anticipation from early in Israel's history (Gen. 3:15; et al.). Sovereign Yahweh promised His coming again here. The Jews had been expressing disbelief that God would intervene and establish justice in the world (2:17), but God promised that He would.

3:2-3 When the LORD came suddenly to His temple, no one would be able to stand before Him. Elsewhere the prophets foretold that this time would be a day of judgment on the whole world marked by disaster and death (4:1; Isa. 2:12; Joel 3:11-16; Amos 5:18-21; Zech. 1:14-17). Here, Malachi said that no one would be able to endure His coming, because He would purify the priesthood ("the sons of Levi"), the people who stood closest to Him. Like a refiner's fire purifies gold and silver, so He would burn up the impurities of the priests, and like a laundryman's soap, He would wash them clean (cf. Deut. 4:29; Isa. 1:25; Jer. 6:29-30; Ezek. 22:17-22; Zech. 3:5).

The Levitical priests would then be able to offer sacrifices to Yahweh in a righteous condition, rather than a defiled one, as they were in Malachi's day (cf. 1:6—2:9; Isa. 56:7; 66:20-23; Jer. 33:18; Ezek. 40:38-43; 43:13-27; 45:9-25; Zech. 14:16-21). The multiple figures of cleansing, and the repetition of terms for cleansing, stress the thoroughness of the change that the Yahweh's Messenger would produce.

"Christ's atoning death meant that the entire sacrifice-based system could be brought to an end, its assigned purposes having been fulfilled."²

Pusey's comment on this verse is typical of the non-literal, spiritual (or mystical) interpretation of most amillennialists

¹Clendenen, *Haggai, Malachi*, p. 386; Feinberg, p. 121; Keil, 2:458-59; McGee, 3:1016.

²Stuart, p. 1354.

(those who deny that Jesus will reign on earth for 1,000 years):

"... as Zion and Jerusalem are the titles for the Christian Church, and Israel who believed was the true Israel, so the sons of Levi are the true Levites, the Apostles and their successors in the Christian priesthood. It was through three centuries of persecution that the Church was purified by fire."¹

- 3:4 After this cleansing of the priests, Judah and Jerusalem (i.e., all Israel) would be able to offer sacrifices that would please the LORD, in contrast to the present ones that did not (cf. 1:13-14). They would be acceptable, like the offerings the priests offered earlier in Israel's history, before the priesthood had become corrupt.
- 3:5 At that future time, the LORD assured His people that He would draw near to them, but it would be for judgment. He would quickly judge all types of sin that they practiced, whereas in Malachi's day, and now, He waits to judge (cf. 2 Pet. 3:9-10). The Levites would not be the only Jews that He judged; all the Israelites living then would come under His judgment (cf. Ezek. 20:34-38). He would judge them for all types of activity that were forbidden for His people: sorcery; adultery; lying; the oppression of employees, widows, and orphans; mistreatment of aliens; even all forms of irreverence for, and unbelief in, Him. This was His answer to their claim that He was unjust (2:17).
- 3:6 The LORD concluded by reminding His people of one of His character qualities that should have made them fear Him and have hope. He does not change, and that is why they would not be consumed totally. He was faithful to His covenant promises in the Abrahamic and Mosaic Covenants; He would never destroy them completely but would chasten them and finally bless them.

¹Pusey, 2:488.

"... God is absolutely immutable in his essence and attributes. He can neither increase nor decrease. He is subject to no process of development, or of self-evolution. His knowledge and power can never be greater or less. He can never be wiser or holier, or more righteous or more merciful than He ever has been and ever must be. He is no less immutable in his plans and purposes. Infinite in wisdom, there can be no error in their conception; infinite in wisdom, there can be no failure in their accomplishment [cf. Num. 23:19; Ps. 33:11; Prov. 19:21; Isa. 14:24; 44:9-10; James 1:17]."¹

By calling the Jews sons of Jacob, the LORD was connecting their behavior with that of their notorious patriarch. Promises are only as good as the person who makes them, so the fact that Yahweh does not change strengthens the certainty of their fulfillment (cf. Deut. 4:31; Ezek. 36:22-32). The Apostle Paul gave the same reason for expecting Israel to have a future (Rom. 3:3-4; 9:6; 11:1-5, 25-29).

The statement that Yahweh does not change (cf. 1 Sam. 15:29; Heb. 13:8) may seem to contradict other statements in Scripture that the LORD changed His mind (e.g., Exod. 32:14). This statement that He does not change refers to the essential character of God. He is always holy, loving, just, faithful, gracious, merciful, etc. The other statements, that He changes, refer to His changing from one course of action to another. They involve His choices, not His character. If He did not change His choices, He would be unresponsive; if He changed His character, He would be unreliable.²

"Because the Lord had not changed in his love for his people (1:2-5), the descendants of Jacob are not *destroyed* (cf. Jer. 30:11)."³

¹Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 1:390.

²See Thomas L. Constable, *Talking to God: What the Bible Teaches about Prayer*, pp. 145-46; Robert B. Chisholm Jr., "Does God 'Change His Mind'?" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152:608 (October-December 1995):387-99; and Clendenen, *Haggai, Malachi*, pp. 404-8.

³Verhoef, p. 300.

IV. JUDAH EXHORTED TO RETURN AND REMEMBER (THE ECONOMIC ANGLE) 3:7—4:6

The LORD had said that Israel's earlier history was a time when the priests and the people of Israel pleased Him (v. 4). Now He said that those early days were short-lived (cf. Exod. 32:7-9). In contrast to His faithfulness (v. 6), the Israelites had been unfaithful.

This third and last hortatory speech in Malachi differs from the previous two in its construction. Whereas the former two both began with positive motivation and ended with negative motivation, this one begins and ends with commands. Whereas the central section in each of them was a command surrounded by evidence for needed change, this one centers on the evidence that is flanked by motivations. Thus this speech, and the entire book, ends with a climactic command to remember the Law (4:4-6).

The focus of the first speech was on the people's relationship to God (spiritual responsibility), the focus of the second one was on their relationship to one another (social responsibility), and the third one is on their relationship to their possessions (economic responsibility).

A. FIRST COMMAND: RETURN TO THE LORD WITH TITHES 3:7-10A

3:7 From Israel's early history, the people had deviated from the straight path that Yahweh had prescribed for them to walk—in the Mosaic Covenant. They had disobeyed covenant requirements and conditions. The LORD of armies called His people to return" to Him, with the promise that if they did, He would return to them (cf. Deut. 4:30-31; 30:1-10). A command to return to the LORD, in 3:7, occurs at the beginning of this speech, and a promise that the LORD would return to them, in 4:6, ends the speech.

The response of the people was that they did not know how to return. The Mosaic Covenant specified how they were to return—by trusting and obeying Yahweh—so their question indicated a reluctance to change their ways.

"How should we return?" is not an earnest entreaty for information but a self-serving declaration of innocence. The people, in effect,

are saying, 'What need do we have to return since we never turned away to begin with?'"¹

"They were like the stereotypical husband who has failed to recognize that his relationship with his wife has deteriorated."²

When we are confronted with our sins today, do we make excuses?

"I would say that this is pretty much the picture of a great many folk in the church today. Ritualism has been substituted for reality. Pageantry has been substituted for power. The aesthetic has been substituted for the spiritual, and form for feeling. Even in the orthodox, conservative, and evangelical circles, they know the vocabulary, but the power of God is gone. They are satisfied with a tasteless morality, they follow a few little shibboleths, and they feel that everything is all right."³

3:8 The LORD proceeded to give some examples of repentance that the Israelites needed to apply. How absurd it is for human beings to rob God. To rob Him one would have to be stronger and smarter than He. Yet that is what the Israelites were doing. They were thieves of the worst kind: robbers of God. They brazenly asked how they had robbed Him. They had withheld the tithes (Lev. 27:30, 32; Deut. 12:5-18; 14:22-29) and offerings (Num. 18:21-32) that the Law commanded them to bring to God.

"There were several kinds of tithes: (1) the tenth of the remainder after the first-fruits were taken, this amount going to Levites for their livelihood (Leviticus 27:30-33); (2) the tenth paid by Levites to the priests (Numbers 18:26-28); (3) the second tenth paid by the congregation for the

¹Merrill, p. 437.

²Clendenen, *Haggai, Malachi*, p. 413.

³McGee, 3:1019.

needs of the Levites and their own families at the tabernacle (Deuteronomy 12:18); and (4) another tithe every third year for the poor (Deuteronomy 14:28, 29)."¹

It may be that what Feinberg distinguished as the third and fourth tithes, above, were really one tithe.²

Standing beside "tithes" as it does here, "offerings" may refer to the tithe of the tithe that went to the priests (cf. Exod. 29:27-28; Lev. 7:32; Num. 5:9). The Levites were to receive a tenth from the people and then give a tenth of that to the priests. But the widows, orphans, and sojourners also benefited from the tithes (Deut. 14:28-29), so withholding it hurt them as well. Another possibility is that Malachi was distinguishing the required tithes from the voluntary offerings that the Israelites brought. Or perhaps any other offerings beside the tithes are in view. In any case, tithes and offerings constitute a merism representing all their economic responsibilities to God.³

Since God owned the land and its produce in the first place (cf. 1:12-14; Lev. 25:23), withholding tithes when He commanded the Israelites to give them amounted to robbing Him. Earlier, the LORD criticized the priests for offering an inferior quality of sacrifices (1:7-14), and now He criticized the people for offering an insufficient quantity of sacrifices (cf. v. 10). Failure to adequately support the priests and Levites resulted in the breakdown of priestly service during Nehemiah's absence from Palestine (cf. Neh. 10:32-39; 13:10).

Do we gladly give to the Lord God today?

3:9 All the people were guilty of this offense. That is, it was widespread in the whole nation, not that every individual Israelite was guilty necessarily. Robbing the priests and Levites of what was due them was actually robbing God, since they

¹Feinberg, pp. 123-24.

²See also *The New Bible Dictionary*, s.v. "Tithes," by J. G. S. S. Thomson, p. 1284.

³A merism is a figure of speech in which two contrasting or opposite parts are used to represent the whole.

were His servants and representatives, and they maintained His house, the temple. The people would receive a curse from the LORD for this covenant violation (v. 11; cf. 4:6).

3:10a The people needed to bring the whole tithe, not just part of what they owed, into the storehouse, in the temple. There were special rooms in the temple devoted to storing the gifts that the Israelites brought (cf. 1 Kings 7:51; Neh. 10:38; 13:12). Then there would be food in the LORD's house—for the priests and for Himself. The sacrifices were, in a figurative sense, food for the LORD (cf. 1:7). The LORD urged His people to put Him to a test by doing this.

There are several references to people tempting God in the New Testament that discourage this practice (e.g., Acts 5:9; 15:10; 1 Cor. 10:9; Heb. 3:9). It is always wrong to test God's patience by sinning and presuming on His grace. It is another thing to hold Him accountable to His promises, and so test His faithfulness, which God asked His people to do here.

B. POSITIVE MOTIVATION: FUTURE BLESSING 3:10B-12

Both motivational sections of this speech have a future orientation (cf. 3:16—4:6).

3:10b The LORD had promised to bless the Israelites for obedience, so their obedience in bringing the full amount of tithes that the Law required would test (i.e., prove, demonstrate) His faithfulness to His promise. He promised to reward their full obedience with rain and harvests abundant enough to satisfy their needs. His storehouse of blessings for them was full.

This verse has often been used to urge Christians to tithe. However, the New Covenant, under which Christians live, never specified the amount or percentage that we should give back to God out of what He has given to us. Rather it teaches that we should give regularly, sacrificially, as the LORD has prospered us, and joyfully (cf. 1 Cor. 16:2; 2 Cor. 8:1-4, 9-14; 2 Cor. 9:2, 7, 12; Phil. 4:10-19). In harmony with the principle of grace that marks the present dispensation, the LORD leaves the amount that we give back to Him unspecified and up to us.

Christians who sit under a steady diet of preaching that majors on God's grace often give far more than 10 percent, because they appreciate all that God has given them in Christ.

Since tithing preceded the giving of the Mosaic Covenant (Gen. 14:20; 28:22), many Christians regard giving 10 percent as our minimal responsibility. However, the examples of tithing that appear before the Mosaic Law are just that: examples, not commands. Examples are not binding on believers, but precepts (commands) are. Another example of this is the early Jerusalem Christians practicing communal living (Acts 2:44). Few people would say that this practice is binding on all Christians today.

"In connection with 'tithing' it must be clear that it belonged, in conjunction with the whole system of giving and offering, to the dispensation of shadows, and that it therefore has lost its significance as an obligation of giving under the new dispensation. The continuity consists in the principle of giving, in the continued obligation to be worthy stewards of our possessions, but the discontinuity in the manner in which we fulfill our obligations."¹

This verse has also been used to teach "storehouse giving." Those who do so view the church building, or the church congregation, or a denomination, as the storehouse into which Christians should bring their gifts to God. Some go so far as to say that it is wrong for Christians to give to the Lord in ways that bypass the local church or their denomination, for example, by giving directly to a missionary.

This viewpoint fails to appreciate the difference between Israel's temple and Christian churches. Israel's temple was a depository for the gifts that the Israelites brought to sustain the servants and work of the LORD throughout their nation. The Christian church, however, is different in that we have no central sanctuary, as Israel did, nor does the church have a

¹Verhoef, p. 311.

national homeland. Christians live and serve throughout the world, in contrast to the Israelites, who were to fulfill their mission by serving God within their land.

God told the Israelites to stay in the land and let their light shine from there (Exod. 19:5-6), but He has told Christians to go into all the world and let our light shine there (Matt. 28:19-20). Some Christians believe that each local church is a microcosm of Israel, so we should regard our church as Israel regarded its temple. Most Christians believe the church is not limited to a collection of local churches but includes the whole universal body of Christ (Eph. 1; 4). The whole is greater than any of its parts, or even all its parts combined.

3:11-12 Not only would God provide adequate harvests (v. 10), but He would also preserve the harvested crops from animals and diseases, which might otherwise destroy them. The Israelites' grapes would also develop fully on their vines rather than dropping off prematurely. All other nations will acknowledge divine blessing on the Israelites, because their land will be such a delightful place in the future.

The Mosaic Covenant, with its promises of material blessing for obedience, is no longer in force (Rom. 10:4; Heb. 8:13). Obedience to God's will does not necessarily result in material prosperity now (Phil 1:29; 4:11-13). However, we do have promises that God will reward those who trust and obey Him in the next stage of our lives, after death, if not before (Acts 4:31-35; 1 Cor. 3:11-15; 2 Cor. 5:10; 9:6-12; Gal. 6:6-9; Phil. 4:14-19). And we enjoy many spiritual blessings now (cf. Rom. 5:1-11; Eph. 1:3-14).

"The issue in Mal 3:7-12 is not tithing but apostasy. Judah is charged here with abandoning the God who had chosen and blessed them and turning away from the statutes he had given them to test their loyalty and to mark the path of life he would bless. By retaining for themselves the tithes and other offerings they owed to God, the people showed their idolatrous hearts in placing themselves before God, and they showed

their callous hearts in leaving the Levites and landless poor to fend for themselves."¹

C. SITUATION: COMPLACENCY TOWARD SERVING THE LORD 3:13-15

Now the LORD identified the sinful attitude that lay behind the Israelites' failure to tithe. This is the longest complaint speech by the Judahites in the book, and it shows the hardness of the peoples' hearts.

- 3:13 The people had spoken arrogantly against the LORD, yet when faced with their disrespect, they asked for proof: "What have we spoken against You?"
- 3:14 The LORD obliged them. They had said that serving Him and obeying Him did not benefit them, that it did not pay to serve Yahweh. When they mourned over their sins, their physical conditions did not improve.

"Some of the people who made the complaint (3:14) were guilty of the myopic legalism that eventually led to Jewish pharisaism [*sic*] in the first century A.D. This legalism concentrated on performing certain rigorous activities and not doing other things as the means of vindicating themselves before God. But this actually stifled the full expression of inner righteousness required by God (Matt. 5:20-48; 23:1-36)."²

"So-called good works that do not arise from genuine faith and gratitude to God are simply 'hot checks' drawn on an empty bank account. They may provide a temporary sense of self-satisfaction, but God recognizes their true value—zero, and he will eventually bring to justice anyone who tries to live on them."³

¹Clendenen, *Haggai, Malachi*, p. 429. See also his excursus on tithing in the church, pp. 429-33.

²Blaising, p. 1586.

³Clendenen, *Haggai, Malachi*, p. 437.

"I hear this complaint from some believers about their churches. 'We're not getting anything out of it!' But a church is like a bank or a home: you don't get anything out of it unless you put something into it."¹

"There are a great many people who say that the church they attend is cold. Are you sure that the church is cold, or is it maybe you who are cold? It might be well to check up, because the problem here was with the people—it was not with God at all."²

3:15 It seemed better for the Israelites to become self-assertive, because then some good things would come their way. It was those who practiced wickedness who got ahead and grew stronger materially (cf. 2:17). For them life was all about material prosperity, so it seemed better to be wicked than righteous. Even though they tested the LORD's patience, and tried to provoke a reaction from Him by behaving as they did, they escaped His punishment only temporarily.

Do we wholeheartedly serve the Lord our God today?

D. MOTIVATION: THE COMING DAY 3:16—4:3

In the first two hortatory speeches, the first motivation sections are positive and the second ones are negative. In this last speech, the first is mainly positive, but the second is a mixture of positive and negative, though mainly negative.

3:16 Upon hearing the LORD's rebuke through His prophet, some of Malachi's hearers who genuinely feared the LORD got together. Evidently they discussed Malachi's message and agreed among themselves that they needed to repent. They even wrote down their commitment on a scroll ("a book of remembrance"; cf. Esth. 6:1; Ps. 56:8; Dan. 7:10).

¹Wiersbe, p. 487.

²McGee, 3:1025.

"Almost surely this was a scroll that contained their names as signatories to some sort of statement of their commitment to Yahweh in faith that they were disassociating themselves from the prevailing sins, that his promises were reliable, and that his covenant was to be kept. In other words, it was a covenant renewal document."¹

Yahweh paid attention to their heart attitude and heard what they said.

"How can an individual remain faithful to God in a faithless world? Malachi gave three tips for developing a lifestyle of faithfulness.

- Vow to be faithful to God, even if those around you are not. Consider writing your own 'scroll of remembrance.'
- Surround yourself with a group of likeminded individuals for encouragement. This group 'talked with each other' (Mal. 3:16) as they encouraged each other to remain faithful (see Heb. 10:25).
- Remember that God's day of reckoning will come someday. Keep a long-range perspective (1 Cor. 3:12-15)."²

3:17 Almighty Yahweh announced that, on the day that He prepares His "own possession," He will honor those who fear Him as His own. This day probably refers to "the day of the LORD " (cf. v. 2; 4:1, 3), when He will resurrect Old Testament saints and judge them (cf. Dan. 12:2). This will be when Jesus Christ returns to rule and reign on the earth. The faithful will receive a reward in His kingdom for their submission (Dan. 12:3).

He also promised to have compassion on them as a man has compassion on his own son. When Jesus Christ judges Old

¹Stuart, p. 1382.

²Charles H. Dyer, in *The Old Testament Explorer*, p. 841.

Testament saints, He will separate the sheep from the goats (Matt. 25:31-46). Here God described the sheep as His sons. He will spare them the humiliation and punishment that will be the lot of those who did not honor Him (vv. 14-15).

3:18 In that day, it will be clear who behaved righteously and who behaved wickedly, because Jesus Christ will reward the righteous and not reward the wicked among the Israelites. Then the true and the false servants of the LORD will be clearly known. In Malachi's day, and in ours, the true motives of God's people are not obvious, but in the future they will become clear for many to see.

4:1 The LORD now elaborated on the day to which He had just referred (3:17). There is no chapter division in the Hebrew Bible; all of chapter 4 appears as the end of chapter 3. This day of the LORD would be a day of judgment. The LORD compared it to a fiery furnace, in which all the arrogant and every evildoer—a hendiadys meaning every arrogant evildoer—will burn like chaff (or stubble; cf. 3:2-3, 15).¹

Fire language is common in connection with divine judgment and anger (e.g., Gen. 19:24-28; Ps. 2:12; 89:46; Isa. 30:27; Jer. 4:4; 21:12; Amos 1:4, 7, 10, 12, 14; 2:2, 5). That day will set the wicked ablaze in the sense that the LORD Himself will set them ablaze in that day. That is, He will so thoroughly purge them that they will be entirely consumed, like a shrub thrown into a hot fire is totally burned up: from root to branch (a merism indicating totality). The judgment of wicked unbelievers is in view (cf. Matt. 25:46).

Later revelation clarifies the time of this judgment, namely, the end of the Millennium (Rev. 20:11-15). Because God will deal with the unsaved wicked so severely, His people needed to repent—remembering that He will deal with all sinful unbelievers severely.

"This verse gives no basis for the error of annihilationism. It describes physical death, not

¹A hendiadys is a figure of speech in which a single complex idea is expressed by joining two substantives with "and" rather than by using an adjective and a substantive.

the state of the soul after death. The unsaved are in conscious eternal woe (Rev. 14:10-11; 20:11-15), as the saved are in conscious eternal bliss (Rev. 21:1-7)."¹

4:2 In contrast to the bleak fate of the wicked, the Israelites who feared Yahweh (1:14; 3:5, 16-17) will experience a reign of righteousness, compared here to sunshine (cf. Isa. 60:1-3). The sun can blister, but it can also bless, and its blessing effect is in view here. The prophet evidently visualized the sunrays like the wings of a bird stretching over the earth. This righteous day would have a healing effect on the inhabitants of the earth, restoring them, and the planet, from the harmful effects of past millennia of sin (cf. Isa. 53:5).

"We prefer the point of view according to which *righteousness* must be regarded as the key word, and *sun* to be its nearer definition. On the Day of the Lord righteousness will become apparent just like the shining sun in all its brightness and blessedness [cf. Ps. 37:6; Isa. 58:8]."²

Many expositors have understood "the sun of righteousness" to be a messianic title.³

"By the sun of righteousness the fathers, from Justin downwards, and nearly all the earlier commentators understand *Christ*, who is supposed to be described as the rising sun, like Jehovah in Ps. lxxiv. 12 [*sic* 11] and Isa. lx. 19; and this view is founded upon a truth, vis. that the coming of Christ brings justice and salvation. But in the verse before us the context does not

¹ *The New Scofield Reference Bible*, p. 982. Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh-Day Adventists believe in the annihilation of the wicked. See Jan Karel Van Baalen, *The Chaos of Cults*, pp. 204-69; John H. Gerstner, *The Theology of the Major Sects*, pp. 19-39

² Verhoef, p. 328.

³ E.g., Calvin, 2:9:1; 2:10:20; 3:25:1; Henry, p. 1200; Arno C. Gaebelein, *The Annotated Bible*, 2:3:331; H. A. Ironside, *Notes on the Minor Prophets*, p. 458; Feinberg, pp. 133-34; McGee, 3:1029; Mark Bailey, "The Tribulation," in *The Road to Armageddon*, p. 63.

sustain the personal view, but simply the idea that righteousness itself is regarded as a sun."¹

It seems best to view "the sun of righteousness" as a description of the blessing that Messiah will bring in the Millennium. The New Testament never referred to Jesus Christ as "the sun of righteousness." However, "the sun of righteousness" may be a metonym (a word or phrase used as a substitute for something else with which it is associated) for Messiah. The "wings" of the sun are probably its rays that surround it. The figure of vigorous calves cavorting in open pasture, after having been cooped up in a stall, pictures the joy and freedom that the righteous will enjoy in that day (cf. Isa. 65:17-25; Hos. 14:4-7; Amos 9:13-15; Zeph. 3:19-20).

4:3 The righteous will also appreciate their victory over the wicked in that day, the opposite of the situation in Malachi's day. The wicked will be like ashes (from the burning, v. 1) under their (the calves') feet, in that the wicked will suffer judgment and offer no resistance (cf. Isa. 66:24; Matt. 3:12; Mark 9:48). Almighty Yahweh is preparing that day, so it will inevitably come.

E. SECOND COMMAND: REMEMBER THE LAW 4:4-6

"Malachi began with an illustration from Genesis (Jacob and Esau) and spent most of the first half of the book reminding priests and people of the need to keep the Mosaic Law. Now, close to the end of his book, he gives another terse reminder of their continuing obligation to those laws."²

"As the motivation provided in 1:2-5 extends beyond the first address to the whole book ... this concluding section provides the book's climactic command ... Malachi begins by pointing to the past and ends by pointing to the future (4:5-6 ...), thus

¹Keil, 2:468.

²Alden, p. 724.

appropriately grounding the ethical impact of the book in both redemption and eschatology."¹

This concluding section of Malachi contains two warnings and a promise, which appear as a chiasm:

A Warning 4:4

B Promise 4:5-6a

A' Warning 4:6b

4:4 Moses' last words to the Israelites in Deuteronomy contain about 14 exhortations to remember the Law that God had given them. Malachi closed his book, and God closed the Old Testament, with the same exhortation. One writer identified nine connections between Malachi and the Book of Deuteronomy.² Although the Hebrew Bible ends with Chronicles rather than Malachi, Malachi concludes the Prophets section of the Hebrew Bible. The Jews regarded "the Law and the Prophets" as comprising their entire Scriptures (cf. Matt. 5:17; 7:12; 11:13; 22:40; Luke 16:16; John 1:45; Acts 13:15; 24:14; 28:23; Rom. 3:21).

The Israelites had forgotten and disregarded God's law, and Malachi had pointed out many specific instances of that. Now he urged the people to recall and obey their Law. By calling Moses "My servant," the LORD was reminding Malachi's audience of how faithful Moses had carried out God's will. He was to be their model of obedience. The "Law of Moses" (i.e., the Pentateuch) was still God's Word to His people, after all that had happened to them. Every revival that had taken place in the history of Israel had been the result of returning to the Law of Moses (cf. 2 Chron. 29—31).³

4:5 The LORD promised to send His people Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the LORD arrived. An angel later told John the Baptist's parents that their son would minister in

¹Clendenen, *Haggai, Malachi*, p. 454.

²Hugenberger, pp. 48-50.

³Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, p. 117.

the spirit and power of Elijah (Luke 1:17). Yet John denied that he was Elijah (John 1:21-23). Jesus said that John would have been the Elijah who was to come if the people of his day had accepted Jesus as their Messiah (Matt. 11:14). Since they did not, John did not fulfill this prophecy about Elijah coming, though he did fulfill the prophecy about Messiah's forerunner (3:1).

This interpretation has in its favor Jesus' words following the Transfiguration, which occurred after John the Baptist's death. Jesus said that Elijah would come and restore all things (Matt. 17:11). Whether the original Elijah will appear before the day of the LORD,¹ or if an Elijah-like figure, similar to John the Baptist, will appear, remains to be seen. Since Jesus went on to say that Elijah had come, and that the Jews had failed to recognize him—speaking about John (Matt. 17:12-13)—I prefer the view that an Elijah-like person will come.²

"Just as in those passages [i.e., Hos. 3:5; Ezek. 34:23; 37:24; Jer. 30:9, where the sending of David the king as the true shepherd of Israel is promised] we cannot think of the return or resurrection of the David who had long been dead; but a king is meant who will reign over the nation of God in the mind and spirit of David; so the Elijah to be sent can only be a prophet with the spirit or power of Elijah the Tishbite."³

What John did for Jesus at His first coming, preparing the hearts of people to receive Him, this latter-day Elijah will do for Him at His second coming. Evidently the two witnesses in the Tribulation will carry out this ministry (Rev. 11:1-13). Who the witnesses will be is a mystery. Evidently one of them will be an Elijah-like person. These men will do miracles, like Elijah and Elisha did.

¹Feinberg, p. 136.

²Cf. Verhoef, p. 341.

³Keil, 2:471.

4:6 Malachi revealed only one future forerunner of Messiah before "the day of the LORD " in view, perhaps the more prominent of the two. Elijah was a very significant person in Israel's history, because he turned the Israelites back to God at the time of their worst apostasy: when Ahab and Jezebel had made Baal worship the official religion of Israel. Moses established the theocracy on earth, but Elijah restored it when it almost passed out of existence. Similarly, the eschatological (end times) Elijah will unite the hearts of the Jews to turn back and worship Yahweh.

At His first coming, Jesus said that because of Him, families would experience division. Some fathers would believe on Him but their sons would not, and daughters would disagree with their mothers over Him (Matt. 10:35-36; Luke 12:49-53; cf. Mic. 7:6). When this "Elijah" comes, he will cause the Jews to believe on their Messiah, as many did in Elijah's day. They will unite over belief in Him.

If the LORD will not send this "Elijah," and if he did not turn the hearts of the Jews back to God, the LORD would have to come (in the person of Messiah) and strike the earth with a curse (cf. 1 Cor. 16:22). Because the Jews will turn to Jesus Christ in faith (Zech. 12:10), blessing will come to the earth, not a curse (vv. 2-3; cf. Zech. 14:11; Rom. 11:26). This is another reference to millennial conditions.

The Jews of Malachi's day needed to remember their Law, and practice it, in order to prepare for the coming day of the LORD. As Jesus said, Moses wrote about Him (John 5:46). Had Malachi's audience and subsequent generations of Jews paid attention to the Law of Moses, they would have recognized Jesus for who He was at His first coming. This was the last revelation that God gave His people before the forerunner of Messiah, whom He promised in 3:1, appeared some 400 years later. They had plenty of time to get ready.

In Malachi's day, the people needed to return to the LORD, or He would strike the land with complete destruction. This in fact happened, because they did not return to Him. The Israelites' problems in occupying the land that God gave them—ever since the Babylonian Captivity—is evidence of their failure.

Fortunately for them, and for the whole world, God did not cast off His people Israel because they rejected His Son (Rom. 11:1). He will send another powerful prophet, like Moses, to His people in the end times. They will believe the message of that "Elijah," and will turn to Jesus Christ in faith when He returns to the earth (Zech. 12:10; Rom. 11:26). Then Messiah will initiate a righteous worldwide rule that will last 1,000 years (Rev. 20:1-6), rather than smiting the land with complete destruction.

"Genesis reveals the entrance of the curse into the human family (Gen. 3); the last word of the O.T. shows the curse still persisting (Mal. 4:6); Matthew begins (1:1) with Him who came to remove the curse (Gal. 3:13; Rev. 21:3-5; 22:3)."¹

Our Lord's first word in the Sermon on the Mount was "Blessed" (Matt. 5:3).

"The Old Testament closes here in Malachi with God directing man to look toward the heavens, and it is well that man looks up. ... This is a promise of a sunrise."²

"The warning that ends the Old Testament is not absent at the end of the New (Rev. 22:10-15), but the difference is that there grace has the last word (verse 21)."³

¹ *The New Scofield ...*, p. 982.

² McGee, 3:1029.

³ Baldwin, p. 253.

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