

# Notes on Malachi

2002 Edition  
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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 vocation. All we know is that he 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.<sup>1</sup> First, "Malachi" is a title rather than a name in its form. The Septuagint translators rendered it "my messenger" in 1:1. However, it 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.<sup>2</sup> The Talmud credited Mordecai with writing it.<sup>3</sup> But there is little other support for Ezra or Mordecai's authorship of this book. 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 a wordplay on the name of the prophet in 1:1. Fourth, this book was the third of three oracles (Heb. *massa'*, 1:1) 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 Zechariah introduced his.<sup>4</sup> 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.

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<sup>1</sup>Craig A. Blaising, "Malachi," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, p. 1573.

<sup>2</sup>The Targum is an ancient Aramaic translation and paraphrase of the Old Testament.

<sup>3</sup>The Talmud is a Jewish interpretation of the Old Testament compiled between 450 B.C. and 500 A.D.

<sup>4</sup>See Brevard Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, pp. 489-92.

**DATE**

"Haggai and Zechariah . . . are noteworthy for the chronological precision with which they related their lives and ministries to their historical milieu. 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."<sup>5</sup>

Malachi referred to no datable persons or events in his prophecy, so we must draw our conclusions 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 modern translations argues for a late date. The Talmud grouped Malachi with Haggai and Zechariah as postexilic prophets.<sup>6</sup>

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*, a Persian title (cf. Ezra 5:3, 6, 14; 6:6-7, 13; Dan. 3:2-3, 27; 6:7). Zerubbabel had this title (Hab. 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. 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.<sup>7</sup> 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 Nehemiah ministered (445-420 B.C.), and perhaps between 432 and 431 B.C., the years when Nehemiah was away from Jerusalem.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Eugene H. Merrill, *An Exegetical Commentary: Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi*, p. 371.

<sup>6</sup>*Yoma* 9b; *Sukkah* 44a; *Rosh Hashannah* 19b; *Megillah* 3a, 15a, et al.

<sup>7</sup>E.g., Robert L. Alden, "Malachi," in *Daniel-Minor Prophets*, vol. 7 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, pp. 701-2.

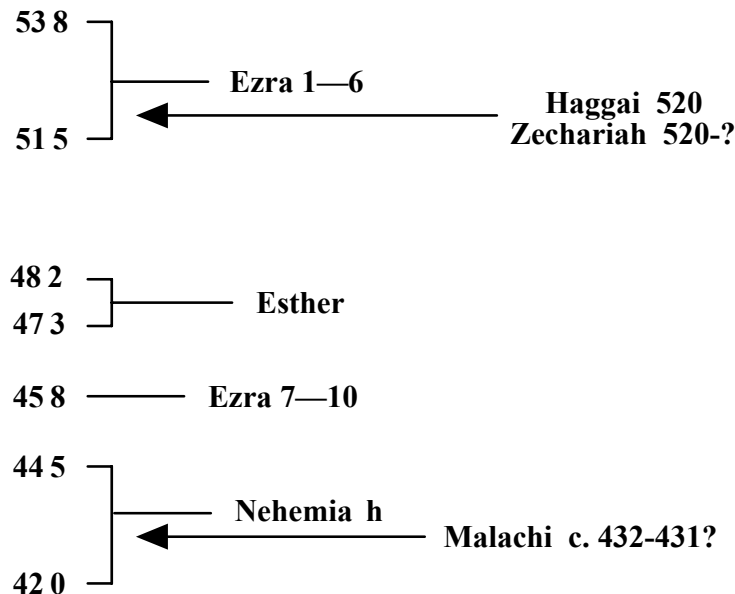
<sup>8</sup>Blaising, p. 1573, suggested a range of dates for writing between 450 and 430 B.C. Merrill, p. 378, suggested between 480 and 470 B.C. R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, p. 961, and John Bright, *A History of Israel*, p. 356, preferred a date close to 450 B.C. Gleason L. Archer Jr., *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, p. 431, believed Malachi wrote about 435 B.C. Hobart E. Freeman, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophets*, pp. 349-50, was more specific: shortly after 433 B.C., and Leon J. Wood, *The Prophets of Israel*, p. 374, was quite general: during the last half of the fifth century B.C.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

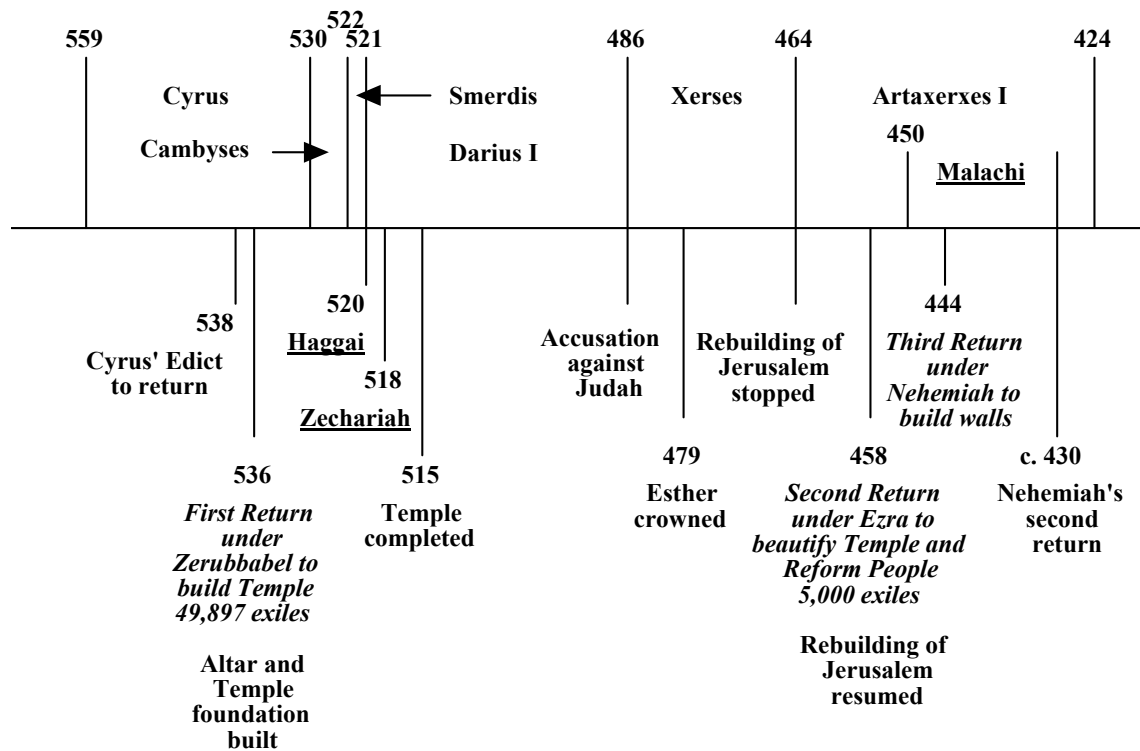
Malachi was one of the three post-exilic writing prophets along with Haggai and Zechariah, and he was quite certainly the last one chronologically, even though we cannot be dogmatic about a date for his writing.

The first group of almost 50,000 Jewish exiles returned from Babylonian captivity under 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 back of about 42,000 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 wall. Malachi evidently ministered in Jerusalem during that period.

### Chronology of the Restoration Period



### The Restoration 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].<sup>9</sup>

Life was not easy for the returnees during the ministry of the fifth-century restoration prophets. The people continued to live under Gentile (Persian) sovereignty even though they were back in their own land. Harvests were poor, and locust plagues were a 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 the 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.

### PLACE OF COMPOSITION

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

<sup>9</sup>Merrill, p. 378.

### **AUDIENCE AND PURPOSE**

The prophet addressed the restoration community of Israelites who had returned to the land not many years earlier from Babylonian captivity. His purpose was to confront them with their sins and to encourage them to pursue holiness.

### **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 ruler 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 by convicting them of their sins and converting them to love for their Savior.

His notable messianic prophecy deals with His 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).

### **LITERARY FORM AND CHARACTERISTICS**

Malachi's style is quite different from that of any other writing prophet. Instead of delivering messages to his audience, he charged them with various sins, six times in all. His was a very confrontational style of address. After each charge, he proceeded to back it up with evidence.

"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).

"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."<sup>10</sup>

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. 1:14).

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<sup>10</sup>Alden, p. 704.

This book consists of several short paragraphs on various themes. There are no oracles against foreign nations nor 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.

### **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 dialog pattern that appears throughout the book argues for its unity. Its canonicity has never been challenged because it appears in all the authoritative lists of canonical books and is quoted in the New Testament. The text is well preserved.

### **OUTLINE**

- 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
- 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

## Exposition

### I. HEADING 1:1

This title verse explains what follows as the oracle of Yahweh's word that He sent to Israel through Malachi. The Hebrew word *massa'*, translated "oracle," occurs 27 times in the Prophets (e.g., Isa. 13:1 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.

"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).

### II. ORACLE ONE: YAHWEH'S LOVE FOR ISRAEL 1:2-5

The revelation that Yahweh gave Malachi for Israel consisted of six "heavy" messages. The first one reminded God's people of His love for them and of their ungratefulness.

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.<sup>11</sup> Yahweh had promised them 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 love by loving Him and keeping His commandments (Deut. 6:4-9).

1:2b-3       In replying to the people's charge, the Lord asked them if Esau was not Jacob's brother. The implication of the question is that these twins were both the objects of God's elective love. 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 the mountains of Seir, the inheritance that God gave Esau and his descendants, a desolate wilderness. Unstated is the fact that

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<sup>11</sup>This is the first of seven such dialogues in Malachi (cf. vv. 6, 7; 2:14, 17; 3:7b-8, 13b-14).

God had given Jacob a land flowing with milk and honey for his inheritance, which proved His love for that brother.

It is remarkable that God loved Jacob in view of the person Jacob was, and it is equally remarkable that God hated Esau, because in many ways he was a more admirable individual than his brother. Normally in the ancient Near East the father favored the 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 of 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.

Another problem that these verses raise concerns God's love. Does not God 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 affection 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 that He did on Jacob (cf. Ps. 139:21). He made this choice even before they were born (Gen. 25:21-34; Rom. 9:10-13). To contrast His dealings with the twins, God polarized His actions toward them in this love hate statement. 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; Luke 14:26), 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 them.

"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."<sup>12</sup>

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 choose to bless Esau as He chose to bless Jacob, namely, with a covenant relationship with Himself.<sup>13</sup> Eternal destiny is not in view here; God was speaking of His acts in history toward Jacob and Esau and their descendants.

<sup>12</sup>Merrill, p. 391. See also William L. Moran, "The Ancient Near Eastern Background of the Love of God in Deuteronomy," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 25 (1963):77-87.

<sup>13</sup>Similarly a man might love several different women but choose to set his love on only one of them and enter into the covenant of marriage with her alone. His special love for the one might make it look like he hated the others.

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 more important was the choice of God before and behind their choices that resulted in the outcome of their lives (cf. Eph. 1; Rom. 9).

Some of God's choices, the really important ones (His decree), determine all that takes place to bring those choices to reality. If this were not so, God would not be all powerful; man could override the power of God with his choices.<sup>14</sup> 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 we are free, and how God can still maintain control is probably impossible for us to comprehend fully. No one yet has been able to explain this mystery to the satisfaction of most people.

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.

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 them as a wicked land (cf. the holy land, Zech. 2:12) and the objects of Yahweh's perpetual indignation.<sup>15</sup>

"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.

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<sup>14</sup>Some of God's choices are stronger than others, as reflected, for example, in the words "will," "counsel," or "purpose" (Gr. *boule*) and "wish," "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. Yet in the really important things that He has determined, no one can alter His will. See Thomas L. Constable, "What Prayer Will and Will Not Change," in *Essays in Honor of J. Dwight Pentecost*, pp. 99-113.

<sup>15</sup>The "holy" land was holy, sanctified, because God set it apart for special blessing, as He had the nation of Israel. Edom, on the other hand, was wicked because God had not set it apart for special blessing.

4:29-31; 30:1-10), but He condemned Edom to complete destruction, never to be restored (Jer. 49:7-22; Ezek. 35)."<sup>16</sup>

1:5 Observing Yahweh's dealings with Edom, the Israelites would learn of His love for her 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.

The point of this message 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.

### **III. ORACLE TWO: THE PRIESTS' ILLICIT PRACTICES AND INDIFFERENT ATTITUDES 1:6—2:9**

The first oracle ended with a statement of Yahweh's greatness. The second one opens with a question about why Israel's priests did not honor Him.

#### **A. THE PRIESTS' SINS 1:6-14**

##### **1. Disrespectful service 1:6-7**

1:6 This second oracle begins like the first one, with a statement by Yahweh and a challenging response (cf. Isa. 1:2-3). The first oracle appealed to the Israelites generally, but this one is addressed to the priests. The priests were responsible to teach the other Israelites the 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 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)?

Speaking for the priests, Malachi gave their response. They denied having despised His name.<sup>17</sup> 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

<sup>16</sup>Blaising, p. 1576.

<sup>17</sup>The "name" of Yahweh was a common substitute for the person of Yahweh from early 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. See Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 2:40-45.

carried a challenge; they resented the suggestion that they had despised His name.

"Intimate familiarity with holy matters conduces to treating them with indifference."<sup>18</sup>

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 doing this they defiled (made unclean) the altar of burnt offerings and the Lord. The Law referred to the offerings as food for God (Lev. 21:6), though obviously He did not eat them. The use of "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 participants, typically a king and his vassals, ate a meal together.<sup>19</sup>

## **2. Disqualified sacrifices 1:8-10**

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 offer such bad animals to their governor because they would not please him, but they dared offer them to their King. The governor in view would have been one of the Persian officials who ruled over the territory occupied by Judah. Nehemiah held this position for a while, but others preceded and followed him in it. It is impossible to tell whether the governor in view in this verse was Nehemiah, though the book seems to date from his leadership of Israel.

Anything second rate that we offer to God is inappropriate in view of who He is. This includes 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.

1:9-10 How foolish it was to pray for God to bestow His favor on the priests when they were despising Him in these ways. The Lord 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.

<sup>18</sup>Alden, p. 711.

<sup>19</sup>See Paul Kalluveettil, *Declaration and Covenant*, pp. 10-15, 120-21; Dennis J. McCarthy, *Treaty and Covenant*, pp. 163-64.

### **3. Disdainful attitudes 1:12-14**

- 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 (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. Heb. 13:15-16). In that day people from many places would offer pure offerings. This refers to worship in the Millennium (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).
- 1:12 Yet 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 as well as their actions were wrong.
- 1:13 They were also saying that it was tiresome to worship the Lord. Their worship should have been passionate and joyful instead of boring and burdensome (cf. James 4:17). They were sniffing at it as something they despised and 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?
- 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. His name would be feared among all the nations, yet His own people and their spiritual leaders were treating it with contempt.

Lack of true heart for the Lord and His service marked these leaders of God's people. They evidently thought that their actions and attitudes went unnoticed by Him, but Malachi confronted them with their hypocrisy. The prophet's words should also challenge modern servants of the Lord and leaders of His people to examine our hearts.

### **B. THE PRIESTS' WARNING 2:1-9**

Whereas the emphasis in Malachi's argument shifts at this point somewhat from the sins of the priests to their possible fate, there is a continuing emphasis on their sins. In the preceding section (1:6-14) the cultic activity of the priests was prominent, but in this one (2:1-9) their teaching ministry is.

- 2:1-2 Malachi announced an admonition to the priests from the Lord. If they did not pay attention to the prophet's rebuke and sincerely desired to honor

Yahweh's name, the Lord would curse them (cf. Deut. 27:15-26; 28:15-68). He would cut off their blessings. This may include their income from the people as well as spiritual blessings. In fact, He 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)."<sup>20</sup>

- 2:3 Part of this curse involved rebuking the priests' offspring (Heb. *zera'*, physical descendants) and spreading (Heb. *zarah*) refuse from their feasts on their faces (cf. Zech. 3:3-4).<sup>21</sup> This play on words communicates a double curse (cf. v. 2). Their descendants would not continue because 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 God's covenant with Levi could continue (cf. 3:3).<sup>22</sup> 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. 25:10-13; Jer. 33:21-22).
- 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 (Num. 18:7-8, 19-21; cf. Num. 25:10-13). 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 gave them these blessings because they respected Yahweh and feared His name.
- 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.

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<sup>20</sup>Merrill, p. 405.

<sup>21</sup>The disgusting picture is of God taking the internal waste of the animal sacrifices and smearing it on the priests' faces. Consequently both sacrifices and priests would have to be taken outside for disposal.

<sup>22</sup>This is the first of six 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).

- 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 faithful priest in post-exilic Judaism (cf. Ezra 7:10, 25; Neh. 8:9).
- 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."<sup>23</sup>

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

"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."<sup>24</sup>

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

#### **IV. ORACLE THREE: THE PEOPLE'S MIXED MARRIAGES AND DIVORCES**

##### **2:10-16**

"The style of the third oracle 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."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>Merrill, p. 410.

<sup>24</sup>Alden, p. 715.

<sup>25</sup>Blaising, p. 1580.

This message deals with the same social evils that Ezra and Nehemiah faced: intermarriage with unbelievers, and divorce (cf. Ezra 9:2; Neh. 14:23-28).

- 2:10 Malachi said, by asking rhetorical questions, that God was the father of all the Israelites (cf. Exod. 4:22; Hos. 11:1).<sup>26</sup> That 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 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 their ancestors virtually worthless; they could not enjoy the blessings of the Mosaic Covenant.
- 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 (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).
- 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 ("cut off"). The difficult idiom "who awakes and answers" (NASB) evidently means "whoever he may be" (NIV). This curse would befall him even though he brought offerings to almighty Yahweh at the temple. 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 sin 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).<sup>27</sup> The marriage relationship is a covenant relationship, 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. This sin may have in view particularly the Israelite men who were divorcing their Jewish wives and then marrying pagan women (cf. v. 12), or divorce in general may be all that is in view.
- 2:15 No individual Israelite who benefited from even a small amount of the Holy Spirit's influence would break such a covenant as the marriage

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<sup>26</sup>He was not saying that God is the father of all human beings in the modern "universal fatherhood of God" sense.

<sup>27</sup>Weeping over the altar must be a figurative way of describing weeping as they worshipped Yahweh.

contract. 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 welfare of the children is still a common and legitimate reason for keeping a marriage intact. The Israelites needed to be careful, therefore, that no one of them dealt treacherously with the wife he married in his youth by breaking his marriage covenant and divorcing her.<sup>28</sup>

2:16 The Israelites were not to break their marriage covenants because Yahweh, Israel's God (sovereign Law-giver and Judge), hates (Heb. *sane'*, detests) divorce (cf. Matt. 19:6; Mark 10:9).<sup>29</sup> He hates it because it constitutes covenant unfaithfulness, breaking a covenant entered into that God Himself witnessed (v. 14). Furthermore, He hates it because He 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; it is ungodly.

God also hates someone who covers himself with wrong. 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 wrong when he divorces his wife whom he has previously married (i.e., covered with his garment). For these Jews divorce was similar to wearing soiled garments; it was a disgrace. For emphasis, the Lord repeated His warning to take heed to one's spirit so one would not deal treacherously with his covenant partner (cf. v. 15).

The fact that Ezra commanded divorce (Ezra 10) may appear to contradict God's prohibition of divorce here. (Nehemiah neither advocated divorce nor spoke out against it; Neh. 13:23-29.) The solution seems to be that Malachi addressed the situation of Jewish men divorcing their Jewish wives, perhaps 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 illegitimacy of a Jew marrying a pagan that led Ezra to advocate divorce in that type of case.

Even though God hates divorce He permitted it (Deut. 24) to achieve the larger goals of maintaining Israel's distinctiveness so she could fulfill His purposes for her in the world (Exod. 19). His purposes for the church are not 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 that Christians who are married to unbelievers should follow (cf. 1 Cor. 7:12-13).

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<sup>28</sup>The man is the responsible party in the text because in Israel husbands could divorce their wives but wives could not divorce their husbands.

<sup>29</sup>A different Hebrew word for "hate" occurs in 1:3.

### **V. ORACLE FOUR: THE PROBLEM OF GOD'S JUSTICE 2:17—3:6**

That another oracle 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).

2:17 Malachi announced to his hearers that they had wearied God with their words; He was tired of hearing them say something. Their response was again hypocritical incredulity. They believed He could hardly be tired of listening to them since He had committed Himself to them as their covenant lord (cf. Isa. 40:28).<sup>30</sup> The prophet explained that Yahweh was tired of them saying that He delighted in them even though they said 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 approved of their sin. Really their question amounted to a challenge to 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).

Modern 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 (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, but perhaps not 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.

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).

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<sup>30</sup>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.

Clearly Jesus Christ is Yahweh since John the Baptist prepared the way for Jesus.

Then the Lord, 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 set up His messianic kingdom. "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. He would be the divine Messiah. "Messenger" means "angel," and the Angel of the Lord is in view here. The "covenant" is the New Covenant that God promised to make with the Jews in the future (cf. Jer. 31:31-34; Ezek. 37:26). 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; *pass.*). 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 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. 1:14-18). Here Malachi said no one would be able to endure His coming because He would purify the priesthood, the people who stood closest to Him. As a fire He would burn up the impurities of the priests, and as a laundryman's soap He would wash them clean (cf. 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 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 Lord's Messenger would affect.
- 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 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 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 forbidden for His

people: sorcery, adultery, lying, oppression of employees, widows, orphans, mistreatment of aliens, even all forms of irreverence for 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. 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).<sup>31</sup>

The statement that Yahweh does not change (cf. 1 Sam. 15:29; Heb. 13:8) may seem to contradict other statements 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 not be responsive; if He changed His character, He would be unreliable.<sup>32</sup>

#### **VI. ORACLE FIVE: THE PEOPLE'S SIN OF ROBBING GOD 3:7-12**

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), they had been unfaithful.

- 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 stipulations. The almighty Lord 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). The response of the people, however, 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.

<sup>31</sup>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).

<sup>32</sup>See 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.

The people, in effect, are saying, 'What need do we have to return since we never turned away to begin with?'"<sup>33</sup>

- 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 because God was allowing it. 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.<sup>34</sup> Earlier the Lord criticized the priests for offering inferior quality 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 (cf. Neh. 10:32-39; 13:10).
- 3:9 All the people were guilty of this offense. That is, it was widespread in the nation, not that every individual Israelite was guilty necessarily. Robbing the priests and Levites of what was due them was really robbing God since they were His servants and they maintained His house, the temple. They would receive a curse from the Lord for this covenant violation (v. 11; cf. 4:6).
- 3:10 The people needed to bring the whole tithe, not just part of what they owed, into the storehouse, the temple. There were special rooms in the temple devoted to storing the gifts 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.<sup>35</sup> He had promised to bless them for obedience, so their obedience in bringing the full amount of tithes that the Law required would test 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 we live never specified the amount or percentage that we should give back to God of what He has given to us.

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<sup>33</sup>Merrill, p. 437.

<sup>34</sup>Standing beside "tithes" as it does here, "offerings" probably refers to the tithe of the tithe that went to the priests. The Levites were to receive a tenth from the people and then give a tenth of that to the priests. Another possibility is that "tithes" were mandatory but "offerings" were voluntary contributions that the Israelites brought.

<sup>35</sup>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.

Rather it teaches that we should give regularly, sacrificially, as the Lord has prospered us, and joyfully (cf. 1 Cor. 16:1-2; 2 Cor. 8—9; Phil. 4). In harmony with the principle of grace that marks this dispensation, the Lord leaves the amount we give back to Him unspecified and up to us.<sup>36</sup>

This verse has also been used to teach "storehouse giving." Those who do so view the church building, or the church congregation, as the storehouse into which Christians should bring their gifts to the Lord. 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, for example, 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 national homeland. Christians live and serve throughout the world in contrast to the Israelites who fulfilled 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 and even all its parts.

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

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; Phil. 4:14-19).

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<sup>36</sup>People who sit under a steady diet of preaching that majors on God's grace often end up giving far more than 10 percent.

## **VII. ORACLE SIX: THE ARROGANT AND THE HUMBLE 3:13—4:3**

### **A. THE PEOPLE'S ARROGANCE 3:13-15**

3:13 The people had spoken arrogantly against the Lord, yet when faced with their disrespect they asked for proof.

3:14 The Lord obliged them. They had said that serving the Lord 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 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)."<sup>37</sup>

3:15 It seemed better for them 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). Even though they tested the Lord's patience by behaving as they did, they escaped His punishment temporarily.

### **B. THE REMNANT'S HUMILITY 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. Yahweh paid attention to their heart attitude and heard what they said. In His heavenly throne room angelic assistants wrote a permanent record that these individuals feared and respected Yahweh (cf. Exod. 32:32; Ps. 69:28; Isa. 4:3; Dan. 12:1; Luke 10:20; Phil. 4:3; Heb. 12:23; Rev. 3:5; 13:8; 17:8; 20:12, 15; 21:27).<sup>38</sup> When God deals with those individuals, He will remember their submission to Him.

"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.'

<sup>37</sup>Blaising, p. 1586.

<sup>38</sup>This is an anthropomorphic description. Obviously God does not need books to record things lest He forget them. He has omniscient recall.

- 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).<sup>39</sup>

### **C. THE COMING JUDGMENT OF ISRAEL 3:17—4:3**

- 3:17 Almighty Yahweh announced that He would honor those who feared Him as His own on the day He prepared His own possessions. This probably refers to the day of the Lord (cf. v. 2; 4:1, 3) when He will resurrect Old Testament saints and judge them. 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. He also promised to spare them as a man spares his own son. When Jesus Christ judges Old 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 manifest. 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).<sup>40</sup> This day of the Lord would be a day of judgment, which He compared to a fiery furnace in which all the arrogant and every evildoer would burn like chaff (or stubble; cf. 3:2-3, 15). That day would set them ablaze in that the Lord would set them ablaze in that day. He would so thoroughly purge them that they would be entirely consumed, like a shrub thrown into a hot fire is totally burned up, from root to branch (a merism of totality). The judgment of wicked unbelievers is in view (cf. Matt. 25:46). Later revelation clarified the time of this judgment, namely, the end of the Millennium (Rev. 20:11-15).
- 4:2 In contrast, the Israelites who feared Yahweh (1:14; 3:5, 16-17) would 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

<sup>39</sup>Charles H. Dyer, in *The Old Testament Explorer*, p. 841.

<sup>40</sup>There is no chapter division in the Hebrew Bible; all of chapter 4 appears as the end of chapter 3.

healing effect on the inhabitants of the earth, healing them, and the planet, from the harmful effects of past millennia of sin.

Some expositors have understood "the sun of righteousness" to be a messianic title, but it seems best to view it as a description of the day of blessing that Messiah will bring, the Millennium.<sup>41</sup> 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 would also enjoy superiority over the wicked in that day, the opposite of the situation in Malachi's day. The wicked would be as ashes under their feet in that the wicked would suffer judgment and offer no resistance (cf. Isa. 66:24; Matt. 3:12; Mark 9:48). Almighty Yahweh was preparing that day, so it would inevitably come.

#### **VIII. A CONCLUDING PROMISE AND WARNING 4:4-6**

The final three verses of the book, which are also the final message in the Old Testament, are sufficiently different from what immediately precedes to indicate another message from Malachi. Essentially Malachi said, Be prepared for God's coming.

"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."<sup>42</sup>

- 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. 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.
- 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 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).

<sup>41</sup>The New Testament never referred to Jesus Christ as "the sun of righteousness."

<sup>42</sup>Alden, p. 724.

This interpretation has in its favor Jesus' words following the Transfiguration (and 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 or whether 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 the Jews failed to recognize him, speaking of John (Matt. 17:12-13), I prefer the view that an Elijah-like person will come.

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 Elisha-like person. These men will do miracles as Elijah and Elisha did.

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 Elisha restored it when it almost passed out of existence. Similarly the eschatological 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 they did in the past. They will unite over belief in Him.

If the Lord would 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. Because the Jews will turn to Jesus Christ in faith, blessing will come to the earth, not a curse (vv. 2-3). This is another reference to millennial conditions.

The Jews of Malachi's day needed to remember their Law and practice it as preparation for the coming day of the Lord. As Jesus said, Moses wrote of 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 smite the land with a curse. This is really what happened since they did not return to Him. The Israelites' problems occupying the land God gave them 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). Then Messiah will initiate a righteous worldwide rule that will last 1,000 years (Rev. 20:1-6) rather than smiting the land with a curse.

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