

THE BOOK OF MALACHI

Message:

Covenant relationship with God requires respect for and obedience to the covenant's stipulations. The term covenant (בְּרִית) occurs seven times in the book. References are made to "my covenant" (2:5), "the covenant with Levi" (2:8), "the covenant of our fathers" (2:10), "the marriage covenant" (2:14), and the "messenger of the covenant" (3:1). The respect and obedience to the stipulations of these covenants is most evident in the six disputations that make up the bulk of the book.

Author:

According to the superscription (1:1), the author of the book is Malachi. The name means "my messenger" (מְלֶאכִי). There is some debate whether "Malachi" should be understood as a proper name or as a title. The fact that Malachi as a name does not appear elsewhere in the Old Testament and that 3:1 uses "my messenger" as a title is used by some as proof that Malachi is not a proper name. If this conclusion is correct, then the book is anonymous.¹ However, it should be noted that the names Jonah and Habakkuk also do not appear outside their respective books. Furthermore, names ending in "i" do appear elsewhere in the Old Testament (e.g., Beeri [Gen 26:34; Zichri [1 Chr 8:19]]).²

Recipients:

The original recipients of Malachi's messages were clearly the remnant who had returned from Babylon and now constitute post-exilic Israel (1:1). More specifically, Malachi addressed some of this material to the priests (1:6; 2:1) although the bulk of the material is aimed at the people in general.

Dating:

The Book of Malachi is the least datable of the post-exilic prophets. However, although no precise dates are given, several internal clues aid in dating the book. First, the reference to a governor points to the Persian period (1:8; cf. Hag 1:1, 14; 2:2, 21; Neh 5:14). Second, the content of the book seems to suggest that the temple is already built and functioning (1:7–10; 3:8). Since the second temple was completed in 516 B.C., Malachi must have been written after 516. Third, the concerns of Malachi parallel the concerns of Nehemiah. These similarities include, references

¹ Some would take this anonymity one step further by speculating that Malachi should be linked to Zechariah 9–14 which they also consider to be anonymous. However, see the discussion on authorship in the notes on Zechariah.

² Andrew E. Hill and John H. Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), 425.

to foreign intermarriage (Mal 2:11; Neh 13:23–27; cf. Ezra 9–10), failure to pay tithes (Mal 3:8–10; Neh 13:10–14), a corrupt priesthood (Mal 1:6–2:9; Neh 13:1–9), and social injustice (Mal 3:5; Neh 5:1–13). Since Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem in 444, Malachi would likely have been written after this date. Furthermore, since the governor mentioned in Malachi 1:8 is probably not Nehemiah, this may point to a date between 432 and 425 when Nehemiah was absent from Judah. During Nehemiah's absence, Judah apparently declined spiritually. In light of these internal clues a date around 430 B.C. appears reasonable.

Historical Setting:

As noted above, the historical setting of Malachi is the Persian period (539–333 B.C.). If our suggested dating of around 430 is correct then a Jewish remnant had been back in the land for about one hundred years. The temple had been completed for about eighty-five years. The wall around Jerusalem had been completed for around ten years. Nonetheless, the picture that one gets from the post-exilic prophets and Ezra/Nehemiah is one of a discouraged and spiritually distracted people. These spiritual distractions were characterized by a failure to keep the covenant stipulations and that failure led to the withholding of blessing, which in turn led to further discouragement. Into this vicious circle will step the prophet of Malachi.

Purpose:

The purposes of Malachi appear to be at least fourfold. First, Malachi wanted to affirm the Israelites that Yahweh's love for them and their covenant relationship with Him was still intact (1:2–5). Second, because this relationship was still intact, Malachi wants to call the Israelites into account for their violations of this relationship. Third, Malachi's calling to account was intended to elicit repentance and obedience. Fourth, Malachi sought to remind the people that their repentance and obedience were prerequisites to divine blessing and preparation for the coming of a divine messenger.

Contribution:

The Book of Malachi is arguably the most relational of the Minor Prophets. As the last of the Old Testament writing prophets and the last book of Old Testament Scripture, Malachi provides an important point of transition between the end of the Old Testament era and the New Testament era. Eugene Merrill summarizes Malachi well: "As the last of Israel's kerygmatic heralds, Malachi reached back to the beginning of her covenant election and forward to the promise of covenant fulfillment, bridging the two with his urgent insistence that the theocratic people be worthy of their calling, for the King of all the earth was at hand."³

³ Eugene H. Merrill, *An Exegetical Commentary; Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 385.

Malachi in the New Testament:

The Book of Malachi is quoted four times in the New Testament. Malachi 1:2–3 is quoted in Romans 9:13 and Malachi 3:1 is quoted in Matthew 12:10; Mark 1:2 (although attributed to Isaiah) and Luke 7:27. The book is also alluded to a number of times in the New Testament (Mal 1:6/Luke 6:46; Mal 1:7/1 Cor 10:21; Mal 1:11/2 Thess 1:12; Rev 15:4; Mal 2:7–8/Matt 23:3; Mal 2:10/1 Cor 8:6; Mal 3:1/Matt 11:3; Luke 1:17, 76; 7:19; John 3:28; Mal 3:2/Rev 6:17; Mal 3:3/1 Pet 1:7; Mal 3:5/Jam 5:4; Mal 3:7/Jam 4:8; Mal 4:2/Luke 1:78; Mal 4:5/Matt 11:14; Mal 4:5–6/Matt 17:10–11; Mark 9:11–12; Luke 1:17).

But perhaps the greatest contribution of Malachi to the New Testament is its prophecy of a messianic forerunner (3:1; 4:5). This forerunner is associated in the Gospels with John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus Christ (Matt 11:14; 17:12–13; cf. Mark 9:11–13; Luke 1:17).

Literary Issues:

There is some debate as to whether Malachi is poetry or prose. The absence of parallelism has led many, including most major English translations, to conclude that Malachi is prose.⁴ “Yet, it does not lack poetical quality, as the many examples of rhythmical pattern (1:11; 3:1; 3:6; 3:7), figures of speech (1:6, 9; 2:3, 6, 7; 3:2; 3:19–20) [EB 4:1–2]), and chiasmus (1:2–3; 2:7a-b; 2:17 a-b; 3:1c-d; 3:11; 3:24a [EB 4:6a]) make clear. In addition there are such devices as antithesis 1:6–11), emphatic utterances (47 occurrences of YHWH in the first person out of 55 verses in all), graphic diction (2:3), verbal shifts (3:9; 4:4), and closure (1:6).”⁵

Many have noted that Malachi follows a dialectical or disputational style. As J. M. O’Brien notes, the style is “argumentative” and “Often in rapid-fire dialogue, God and people accuse one another of neglect and disregard of their mutual covenant obligations.”⁶ This dialogue or disputation usually follows a threefold pattern:

1. Yahweh accuses the people or priests
2. The people or priests challenge the accusation
3. Yahweh cites evidence to support His accusation

Although Malachi is neither the first or only prophet to use this style (see Mic 2:6–11; cf. Jer 2:23–25, 29–32; 28:1–11; 29:24–32) it is used most extensively by Malachi. The six disputations can be seen in the table below

Structure:

The specific structure of Malachi is disputed, although it is generally acknowledged that Malachi consists of a superscription (1:1); six disputations between Malachi/Yahweh and the addressees (1:2–4:3); and two appendices (4:4; 4:5–6).

⁴ Robert L. Alden, "Malachi," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Walter C. Kaiser Jr. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), 704-5.

⁵ Merrill, *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi*, 380.

⁶ Julia M. O'Brien, *Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi*, ed. Patrick D. Miller, Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries (Nashville: Abingdon, 2004), 285.

Six Disputations	Two Appendices
1. A dispute about God's love (1:2–5)	Admonition to remember the law of Moses (4:4)
2. A dispute about God's honor (1:6–2:9)	
3. A dispute about faithlessness (2:10–16)	
4. A dispute about God's justice (2:17–3:6) ⁷	Announcement regarding Elijah (4:5–6)
5. A dispute about repentance (3:7–12)	
6. A dispute about speaking against God (3:13–4:3)	

As noted earlier, the recognition of these disputations and appendices is generally accepted, but how this material is structured is debated.⁸ We will follow a slightly modified form of E. R. Clendenen's hortatory discourse structure.

Outline

- I. Superscription (1:1)
- II. Covenant Relationship Entails Honor (1:2–2:9)
 - A. The Positive Motivation: God's Love (1:2–5)
 - B. The Problematic Situation: Dishonoring God's Offerings (1:6–9)
 - C. The Proposed Solution: Stop Dishonoring Offerings (1:10)
 - B'. The Problematic Situation: Dishonoring God's Name (1:11–14)
 - A'. The Punitive Motivation: The Results of Failing to Honor God (2:1–9)
- III. Covenant Relationship Entails Faithfulness (2:10–3:6)
 - A. The Positive Motivation: Spiritual Unity (2:10ab)
 - B. The Problematic Situation: Faithlessness Against a Covenant Member (2:10c–15a)
 - C. The Proposed Solution: Be Faithful (2:15b–16)
 - B'. The Problematic Situation: Hypocrisy and Injustice (2:17)
 - A'. The Punitive Motivation: Coming Messiah (3:1–6)
- IV. Covenant Relationship Entails Repentance and Obedience (3:7–4:6)
 - A. The Proposed Solution: Return to the Lord With Tithes (3:7–10a)
 - B. The Positive Motivation: Future Blessing (3:10b–12)
 - C. The Problematic Situation: Spiritual Complacency (3:13–15)
 - B'. The Positive Motivation: The Coming Day (3:16–4:3)
 - A'. The Proposed Solution: Remember the Law (4:4–6)

⁷ Many end this section with v. 5 but see Clendenen, *Malachi*, 227, 399–401.

⁸ For a helpful discussion of the suggested proposals for the structure of Malachi see Richard A. Taylor and E. Ray Clendenen, *Haggai, Malachi*, ed. E. Ray Clendenen, New American Commentary, vol. 21a (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2004), 227–31.

Chart

Superscription (1:1)	Covenant Relationship Entails Honor			Covenant Relationship Entails Faithfulness			Covenant Relationship Entails Repentance and Obedience							
	1:2-2:9			2:10-3:6			3:7-4:6							
Positive Motivation: God's Love (1:2-5)	Problematic Situation: Dishonoring God's Offerings (1:6-9)	Proposed Solution: Stop Dishonoring Offerings (1:10)	Problematic Situation: Dishonoring God's Name (1:11-14)	Punitive Motivation: The Results of Failing to Honor God (2:1-9)	Positive Motivation: Spiritual Unity (2:10ab)	Problematic Situation: Faithlessness Against a Covenant Member (2:10c-15a)	Proposed Solution: Be Faithful (2:15b-16)	Problematic Situation: Hypocrisy and Injustice (2:17)	Punitive Motivation: Coming Messiah (3:1-6)	Proposed Solution: Return to the Lord With Tithes (3:7-10b)	Positive Motivation: Future Blessing (3:10c-12)	Problematic Situation: Spiritual Complacency (3:13-15)	Positive Motivation: The Coming Day (3:16-4:3)	Proposed Solution: Remember the Law (4:4-6)
Six Disputations														

Expositional Outline of Malachi:

I. SUPERSCRPTION (1:1)

The superscription of Malachi is comparable to other prophetic books (Hab 1:1; Zech 9:1; 12:1; Nah 1:1; Isa 13:1; 17:1; 19:1). It begins by describing the work as an “oracle” (אָרַקֵּל) and by identifying the source as “the word of YHWH.” This word was intended for Israel and given through Malachi (lit. “my messenger”).

II. COVENANT RELATIONSHIP ENTAILS HONOR (1:2-2:9)

Malachi first major message concerns the failure of the priests to ensure that Yahweh was properly honored by the people in a way befitting the covenant relationship which they shared.

A. The Positive Motivation: God’s Love (1:2-5)

1. The assertion (1:2a) – Yahweh begins by stating “I have loved you.” This statement is more than modern usage would typically imply. This is a covenantal affirmation (cf. Deut 7:9-15). As Merrill notes, “Modern studies of covenant language have shown that the word ‘love’ (אָהַב, *āhēb*, 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.”⁹

2. The questioning of the assertion (1:2b) – Israel’s response to Yahweh’s statement (“How have you loved us”) is rhetorical (cf. 1:6–7; 2:17; 3:7–8, 13). The point is that Israel was calling into question if not refuting the Yahweh’s claim. Since we have noted the covenantal overtones of this claim, it is in fact a questioning of the covenantal relationship. That this is how this question should be understood is suggested by Yahweh’s response.
3. The response (1:2c–5) – Yahweh’s response is basically threefold. The background of this response goes back to Genesis and the story of the twins Jacob and Esau (Gen 25–36). First, He notes He has chosen Jacob (1:2c–3a). Second, that Yahweh’s judgment of Esau (1:3a–4). Third, the response to Yahweh’s judgment (1:5).
 - a. Yahweh’s election of Jacob (1:2c–3a) – Yahweh’s response to the questioning of His love begins with another question: “Was not Esau Jacob’s brother?” The mentioning of these two names would bring instant recall to the Israelite of the relationship that they shared with Yahweh. This special relationship is even noted by the phrasing. God does not say, “was not Jacob Esau’s brother,” which might be expected since Esau was the firstborn. Rather, Esau is called Jacob’s brother. This preference in terms of election is made explicit in the statement “Yet I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated (שנא).” The language here is probably metaphorical and covenantal. As R.L. Smith states, “It is best to take Malachi’s use of the terms “love” and “hate” in vv 2 and 3 as covenant language. When Yahweh says, “I have loved Jacob,” he means, “I chose Jacob,” and when he says, “I hated Esau,” he means, “I did not choose Esau.”¹⁰
 - b. Yahweh judgment of Esau (1:3a–5) – Further indication of the elect love of Yahweh for Jacob is seen in the judgment of Edom, Israel’s perennial foes. Thus Yahweh states that He has turned Edom’s mountains into a wasteland (שְׁמִינִיָּה) and left his inheritance to the desert jackals” (v. 3b). There is some uncertainty regarding the historical referent here. Blaising relates it to the fifth century invasion of Edom by the Nabateans.¹¹ Merrill on the other hand

⁹ Merrill, *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi*, 391.

¹⁰ Ralph L. Smith, *Micah - Malachi*, ed. John D. W. Watts, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 32 (Waco: Word Books, Publisher, 1984), 305.

¹¹ Craig A. Blaising, "Malachi," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Scripture Press Publications, Victor Books, 1985), 1576.

suggest that the reference is to the Babylonian incursions into Palestine and the Transjordan (605–540 B.C).¹² In any case, the desolation of Edom was a common message in the prophets (e.g., Isa 34:5–17; Jer 49:7–22; Lam 4:21; Ezek 25:12–14; 35:1–15; Amos 1:11–12; Obad 1–21). Even though Edom may resolve to rebuild its ruins (v. 4a), Yahweh will thwart their plan by destroying it again (v. 4b). Hence, “They will be called the Wicked Land (as opposed to the Holy Land), a people always under the wrath (אַזַּר) of the LORD” (v. 4c).

- c. The response to Yahweh’s judgment (1:5) – As a result, Yahweh assures Israel that they will see this judgment with their own eyes and say, “Great is the LORD—even beyond the borders of Israel” (cf. 1:11, 14; 3:12)! Thus, the destruction of Israel’s Edom Israel will be a lasting testimony of Yahweh’s love for Israel, the universal scope of Yahweh’s sovereignty, and a motivation for Israel’s praise for Yahweh.

B. The Problematic Situation: Dishonoring God’s Offerings (1:6–9)

In the previous section Yahweh has given evidence of His love for Israel. Unfortunately, they could not reciprocate. Indeed, the evidence suggested that the Israelite’s had not loved God in kind. Their lack of devotion led to dishonor. As Merrill aptly remarks: “How could the priests, who ought to epitomize the spirit of grateful compliance to the will of YHWH, reciprocate by being so professional and routine? So jaded had they become that they could no longer recognize the elective grace of their God even when it stared them in the face.”¹³

1. The accusation against the priests (1:6a-e) – Yahweh’s accusation against the priests begins rhetorically with a well-understood cultural analogy regarding giving proper honor. The point is simple, if earthly fathers and masters receive the appropriate honor, how much more so should God the Father and Master (v. 6).¹⁴ Thus, it is appropriate that Yahweh should question the fact that He is calling into question the lack of honor shown to Him. Indeed, the very ones who should be at the forefront in guarding God’s honor, the priests, have rather shown contempt (בְּזִיָּה).

¹² Merrill, *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi*, 392.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 395.

¹⁴ Note that the singular of אָדָם is used of earthly fathers whereas the plural is used of God.

2. The denial of the priests (1:6f) – Rather than admission and repentance the response is a self-serving denial framed in a rhetorical question: “How have we shown contempt for your name?”
 3. The evidence against the priests (1:7–9) – Although the question of the priest was a denial in sorts, Yahweh treats it as a straightforward question. He answers that the priests were guilty of placing defiled food (לֶחֶם מְנַאֵל) on His altar (v. 7a). This dishonoring act is indicated by the term “defiled” and by the reference to “food.” The term “food” is not the typical word for sacrifice in the Old Testament although it can be used that way.¹⁵ Yahweh’s answer to the priest’s question draws a further question (“How have we defiled you?”) which again presupposes some doubt concerning Yahweh’s assertion (v. 7b).
Once again Yahweh treats the question as genuine and offers an answer framed as rhetorical questions (vv. 7c–8). He notes that the priests are saying by their actions that the Yahweh’s table was contemptible (v. 7c). The actions in question are offering unsuitable animals for sacrifice. The Old Testament law was quite clear that blind, crippled, and diseased animals could not be offered (Lev 22:18–25; Deut 15:21). This failure is further highlighted by the fact that such actions are not even acceptable in relation to human authorities (i.e. the governor). Such actions would neither be pleasing or acceptable.
Although some see v. 9 as a call to repentance, it seems better to see it a continuation of the rebuke. Yahweh points to the discontinuity of calling upon God’s grace on the one hand and yet offering dishonoring sacrifices on the other.
- C. The Proposed Solution: Stop Dishonoring Offerings (1:10)
- The seriousness of the actions of the priests is now stated in hyperbolic terms: “Oh, that one of you would shut the temple doors, so that you would not light useless fires on my altar!” (v. 10a). Smith suggests that, “‘Doors’ probably do not refer to the doors of the temple proper, but to the doors between the court of the priests and the great court (2 Chr 4:9). If these doors were closed no offerings could be made.”¹⁶ But whether the doors are closed, Yahweh’s assessment is clear “I am not pleased with you,” and consequently, “I will accept no offering from your hands.”
- B’. The Problematic Situation: Dishonoring God’s Name (1:11–14)

¹⁵ For used in reference to sacrifices see Lev 3:11; 21:6, 8, 21; 22:25; Num 28:2; Ezek 44:7.

¹⁶ Smith, *Micah - Malachi*, 312.

There are at least three reasons (כִּי) that Israel's failures were problematic. First, their dishonoring of Yahweh is inconsistent with the honor that He deserves ("My name will be great").¹⁷ Second, not even the Gentile nations will ultimately have such a cavalier attitude towards Yahweh. The nations will offer "Pure offerings." The inability to find historical correspondence to Malachi's day¹⁸ suggests that this probably points to a future time, perhaps in the Millennial Kingdom. Third, the Israelite priests were guilty of neglect by recognizing but not addressing the profaning of the Lord's table (v. 12). Indeed, the task of ensuring proper reverence for the worship of Yahweh has become a tiresome exercise (מִתְקַצֵּר). As J. M. P. Smith states, "They [the priests] no longer do it out of gratitude and devotion, but as a matter of hard necessity from which they would escape if they could."¹⁹ Thus, contrary to the law, injured, crippled, or diseased animals were being offered as sacrifices. But what was a matter of indifference to the priests was a matter of importance to God. He will not accept such sacrifices, indeed He will curse (note the divine passive) the one who offers such deficient sacrifices (v. 14a). The reason (כִּי) for this Yahweh is "a great King" and His name should be revered among the nations (v. 14b). This latter point suggests that Israel's failure to show proper reverence toward Yahweh hinders universal recognition of Yahweh's standing as a great King." The overall thrust of vv. 11–14 indicate that failure to maintain the covenant relationship through obedience to its stipulations is problematic both for Israel and by extension the nations.

A'. The Punitive Motivation: The Results of Failing to Honor God (2:1–9)

1. The curse upon the priests (2:1–3) – Not only is the failure to properly honor Yahweh problematic, but it is also dangerous. Thus, Yahweh now (עַתָּה) gives a commandment (מִצְוָה)²⁰ to the priests directly (v. 1). This admonishment takes form of a negative conditional clause (אם) "If you do not listen, and if you do not set your heart to honor my name" (the protasis). The term listen (שָׁמַעַתְּ) and the phrase "set your heart" (עַל-לִבְךָ לְהִתֵּן)²¹ suggest the idea of careful consideration regarding their failure to honor Yahweh (v. 2a). The implication is that the priests have failed to properly consider their

¹⁷ Note the inclusion formed by the phrase "My name will be great" in v. 12 and the parallel "my name is to be feared" in v. 14.

¹⁸ See Pieter A. Verhoef, *The Books of Haggai and Malachi*, ed. R. K. Harrison, *New International Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 226-31.

¹⁹ Hinckley G. Mitchell, John Merlin Powis Smith, and Julius A. Bewer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi and Jonah*, ed. Samuel Rolles Driver, Alfred Plummer, and Charles Augustus Briggs, *International Critical Commentary* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1912), 33.

²⁰ Note the covenantal overtones of מִצְוָה.

²¹ Hill suggests that it is possible that this idiomatic phrase would "evoke thoughts of covenant responsibility in his audience" (Deut 11:18). See Andrew E. Hill, *Malachi: A New Translation and Commentary*, ed. William Foxwell Albright and David Noel Freedman, *Anchor Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 198.

failure to honor Yahweh. This failure if uncorrected will have consequences as indicated by the “then, I will send . . .” (apodosis). The consequences are divine curses. The term curse (אָרַר) occurs two times in v. 2. The sobering extent of these curses can be seen in that even the priests “blessings,” probably to be related to v. 3 (their offspring), will be turned to curses (cf. Deut. 28:18, 32, 41, 53, 55, 57). Indeed, the process of cursing has begun because (כִּי) of the failure of the priests to honor Yahweh (v. 2c). This is further underscored (הִנֵּה) with a graphic illustration in v. 3. The cursing will not merely be future: “I will spread (זָרַה)²² on your faces the offal from your festival sacrifices, and you will be carried off with it.” The offal (פְּרֹשֶׁת) consisted of waste products not utilized in the sacrificial offering. The offal was considered unclean and was to be burned outside the camp (Exod 29:14; Lev 4:11–12; 8:17; Num 19:5). Similarly, the priests will be taken away. In effect then, by spreading the offal on the priests they would be rendered unclean and thus dishonored in the eyes of the people. Such punishment was appropriate since the priests had dishonored Yahweh.

2. The contrasting of the priests (2:4–6) – The “commandment” (מִצְוָה) to the priests in 2:1–3 was punitive but also meant to be restorative. Yahweh’s cursing of the priests was ironically a means to ensure that Yahweh’s covenantal relationship with Levi might continue. Verse 5 both describes the character of the covenant (“a covenant of life and peace”) and gives the historical circumstances behind the establishing of the covenant (“he revered me and stood in awe of my name”). Verse 6 provides an implied contrast between faithful Levi and his unfaithful descendants. Although the covenant of Levi is not as well known as other covenants in Scripture (e.g., Abrahamic, Davidic, New, etc.) and its origins are less than opaque, it nonetheless has a fairly strong basis in Scripture. At its base level it relates to an individual named Levi (the third son of Jacob and Leah), the tribe related to him (the Levites), and the priestly functions associated with that tribe (the Levitical priesthood). By form it appears to be a covenant of grant. The specific origins of the covenant are debated.²³ References are often made to Deuteronomy 25:10–13. This passage is associated with Phinehas but seems to have been extended to the whole tribe of Levi (Deut 33:8–11). But other passages such as Exodus 32:25–29 and Exodus chapters 28–29 also might form part of the background of the covenant. In any case, this covenant is referred to Jeremiah 33:17–22 and Nehemiah 13:29.
3. The condemnation of the priests (2:7–9) – The covenant in 2:4–6 carried with it certain expectations. Like Levi, “the lips of a priest ought to preserve knowledge, and from his mouth men should seek instruction.” This expectation is valid because the priest is a messenger of the Yahweh (v. 7).

²² Note the wordplay between this term (זָרַה) and the term descendant (זָרַע).

²³ For a helpful discussion see Clendenen’s excursus in his commentary (*Malachi*, 296–306).

Unfortunately, the priests have fallen considerably short of the expectation and thus had violated the covenant of Levi (v. 8). This violation resulted in God's discipline (v. 9). Since the priests had not honored God by following His ways and His laws, they would be dishonored. Thus, this entire section from 1:6–2:9 underscores the message of the book, namely, that to be in covenant relationship with God requires respect for and obedience to the covenant's stipulations. Failure to do so dishonors God and brings severe consequences.

III. COVENANT RELATIONSHIP ENTAILS FAITHFULNESS (2:10–3:6)

In this section, Yahweh will remind the people of their need to maintain covenant faithfulness. This section differs from the previous section in that the addressees are the people instead of just the priests and that the concerns are ethical rather than cultic.²⁴

A. The Positive Motivation: Spiritual Unity (2:10ab)

The beginning of this section bears similarity to 1:2–2:9. Not only are there familial references (cf. Jacob and Esau; 1:2–5) but rhetorical questions are used to convey the point (e.g., 1:6). The emphasis here is the spiritual unity shared by the people of God.²⁵ In this sense, they have one Father (i.e., Yahweh)²⁶ and one Creator. There are strong covenantal overtones here.²⁷

B. The Problematic Situation: Faithlessness Against a Covenant Member (2:10c–15a)

The fact that there is unity logically leads to an accusation framed in terms of another rhetorical question. That is, why the Israelites deal faithlessly (בגד) with one another, actions which profane (חלל) the covenant of the fathers. The reality of this violation (“Judah has broken faith”) and the identification of this covenant (i.e. the marriage covenant)²⁸ follow in v. 11. Strong language is used for the violation of this covenant including “abomination” (תועבה) and “profane” (חלל). The violation is defined in terms of marrying pagan women (“the daughter of a foreign god”). Although it is not raised here, the argument that follows indicates that these

²⁴ It is possible that the reference to marriage has a dual meaning, one literal and one spiritual, *ala* Hosea.

²⁵ The word אָחֵךְ occurs four times in 2:10–16.

²⁶ Although some suggest Abraham is the “father” here.

²⁷ Merrill, *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi*, 413-14.

²⁸ See G. P. Hugenberger's extensive study examination and defense of marriage as a covenant. Gordon B. Hugenberger, *Marriage as a Covenant: Biblical Law and Ethics as Developed from Malachi*, Biblical Studies Library (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994).

mixed-marriages also included divorcing their Israelite wives. Laying aside the issue of divorce for a moment, such marriages of course, were strictly violations of the law (Exod 34:11–16; Deut 7:3–4; Josh. 23:12–13). Unfortunately, this prohibition was forgotten during the exilic and post-exilic period and corrective measures were taken (see Ezra 9:1–2, 10–12; Neh 13:23–27). The seriousness of this violation of covenant can be seen in v. 12. The violator would be “cut off from the tents of Jacob.” J. Milgrom has noted that the Hebrew term for “cut off” (כָּרַח) has been understood in seven different ways: (1) childlessness and premature death, (2) death before the age of sixty, (3) death before the age of fifty-two, (4) the cutting off of one’s line of descent, (5) loss of enjoyment of the spiritual life in the hereafter, (6) excommunication, (7) execution.²⁹ It is hard to know which sense is involved here. Further difficulty arises in understanding the phrase “him who is awake and him who answers.” This phrase is probably an idiomatic, a figure of speech expressing totality (e.g., everyone).³⁰ If this is correct then it suggests that no violators escape, even those who bring offerings to Yahweh. That the reference to sacrifices refers to those who violated the marriage covenant is made clear in vv. 13–14. In v. 13 the picture is of the violator weeping at the altar because God no longer accepts his sacrifices. The reason that the violator’s sacrifices go unaccepted is that he has broken faith with his wife and violated the marriage covenant (v. 14). Verse 15 is notoriously difficult. But the idea and imagery seem to be rooted in Genesis 1–2. The basic idea is the God-created unity in the marriage bond, with its resultant offspring should not be violated.

C. The Proposed Solution: Be Faithful (2:15b–16)

Husbands should take great care not break faith with the wife of their younger days. The sanctity of the marriage relationship is further underscored by the assertion that Yahweh hates divorce (v. 16).³¹ The remainder of v. 16 is parallel to the assertion in that “covering” is a metaphor for marriage (Ruth 3:9; Ezek 16:8) and the “violence” is done to the marriage in divorce. Therefore, the man considering divorce needs to guard himself lest he break faith with both his wife and by extension his God.

B'. The Problematic Situation: Hypocrisy and Injustice (2:17)

Another way that the covenant relationship with Yahweh was violated was through a lack of faith in the goodness and motives of God. This lack of

²⁹ Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible, vol. 3 (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 457.

³⁰ Merrill, *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi*, 418-19.

³¹ Almost all major English translations render v. 16a as “I hate divorce.” But such a translation is not without difficulty. See for example Clendenen (*Malachi*, 359-62).

faith is presented in terms of wearisome accusations against God. In effect the people were accusing God of favoring the evil and ignoring justice. Such accusations of course are wholly inappropriate.

A'. The Punitive Motivation: Coming Messiah (3:1–6)

This section is obviously a response to the accusations of 2:17. But there is some debate concerning the personages in 3:1. Two options seem most likely. First, it is possible that there are two personages here. This is, God = the Lord you are seeking = the messenger of the covenant = whom you desire = the one who will come, and the forerunner/messenger “who will prepare the way before me.” To this end, Clendenen suggests that “this is one of those enigmatic Old Testament passages in which God and his unique angel/messenger (‘the angel of the LORD’) are spoken of as if they are one and the same (Gen 16:7–14; 18:1–19:1; 22:12; Exod 3:1–6).”³² Second, it is possible that three personages are in view. (1) The speaker is God the Father. (2) The sent messenger is the forerunner (Elijah, cf. 4:5; Isa 40:3–5; Matt 11:7–10). (3) The rest of the verse would apply to the Lord/Messenger of the covenant.³³ The problem with this second view is the “I/me” in the first part of the verse. But this ambiguity is not really explained by the first view either. It merely acknowledges the ambiguity. Overall, it seems better to maintain distinctions between the three personages and explain the ambiguity along Trinitarian lines. The New Testament will make it clear that the Lord to come is Jesus Christ and the forerunner, at least in the first advent, was John the Baptist. But in any case, the coming of the Lord (i.e. the Day of the Lord) is in judgment/purification. Two rhetorical questions frame the issue in v. 2: “Who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears?” The answer is only the righteous for God will remove the wicked “like a refiner’s fire or a launderer’s soap” cf. Isa. 1:25; Jer. 6:29-30; Ezek. 22:17-22). This cleansing flashes back to the first major section in noting the purification of the Levites and the restoration of God-honoring sacrifices (vv. 3–4). The judgment aspect of the purification process is made more explicit in v. 5. Israel will be purged of sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers, and those who defraud take act unjustly towards the laborers widows and the fatherless, and aliens of justice. All of these sins were prohibited by the Mosaic Law. Not only have the standards for covenant relationship not changed, but God Himself has not changed (v. 6a). Because God does not change His covenantal relationship with Israel is maintained (v. 6b). The relationship has suffered but it has not been severed.

IV. COVENANT RELATIONSHIP ENTAILS REPENTANCE AND OBEDIENCE (3:7–4:6)

³² Ibid., 385.

³³ Walter Kaiser, *Mastering the Old Testament: Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi*, ed. Lloyd J. Ogilvie, The Communicator's Commentary Series Old Testament, vol. 21 (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1992), 473.

The last section of Malachi is framed by the key term “return” (שוב) which occurs in both 3:7 and 4:6. Thus the key concept is repentance and return. The general pattern observed chiastically up to this point is altered with the commands forming the first and final elements (A and A’).

A. The Proposed Solution: Return to the Lord with Tithes (3:7–10a)

1. The call (3:7a) – Before the Israelites can “return” to the Lord, they have to accept that they have turned away. Thus in v. 7, God confronts them with their perennial disobedience: “Ever since the time of your forefathers you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them.” Thus, God exhorts Israel “Return to me, and I will return to you.” Indeed, this invitation to return is built into the covenant relationship (e.g., Deut 4:30–31; 30:1–10).
2. The contradiction (3:7b) – The Israelites respond once again with a question: “How are we to return?” There is a certain ambiguity in the question. It is possible that the question could be taken as a sincere question. On the other hand, such questions in Malachi have usually expressed doubt about a previous assertion. Thus the latter interpretation appears more likely. “In either case, the question prepares for the next argument, either to refute the objection of the people or to demonstrate to them what they must do.”³⁴
3. The condemnation (vv. 8–9) – Following the familiar dialogical style, God accuses Israel of “robbing” Him by failing to give “tithes and offerings” required by the law. As might be expected this lack of obedience to the law resulted in the nation being placed under a divine curse (v. 9).
4. The correction (v. 10a) – The discussion began with a call to return, that is to return covenantally, in obedience (3:7) and now the Israelites told how they are to return. They are to return by resuming the giving of whole tithe into the storehouse. The storehouse” (אוצר) was special room or chamber in the temple for storing tithed grain, spices, wine, utensils and such (cf. Neh 10:38; 13:4–5, 12; 1 Kings 7:51). Such stores would then be used for sacrificial purposes, to provide sustenance for the Levites, and to meet certain charitable needs.

B. The Positive Motivation: Future Blessing (3:10b–12)

God challenges the Israelites to test (בִּחֵן) Him in the matter of giving. By honoring Him through their covenantal obedience He would “throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not

³⁴ Marvin A. Sweeney, *The Twelve Prophets: Volume Two*, ed. David W. Cotter, Berit Olam (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 742.

have room enough for it.” The reason for the abundance is that God would protect the crops so that they would be healthy and fruitful (v. 11). This agricultural prosperity would be so great that even other nations would recognize it (v. 12). In sum, if God’s people would ensure that His storehouse were full, their He would ensure that their storehouses would be full. It is the counterpart to “Return to me, and I will return to you” (3:7).

C. The Problematic Situation: Spiritual Complacency (3:13–15)

In some ways, this discussion relates to the previous one and the idea of giving. Here a spiritual complacency has apparently set in. The Israelites had concluded that there was no benefit in serving the Lord. However, this conclusion appears to be based on two faulty assumptions. First, it assumes that they had been serving the Lord properly (v. 14). Malachi has cast much doubt on that assumption. Second, the Israelites had assumed that the relative prosperity of the wicked was sanctioned by God (v. 15).

B'. The Positive Motivation: The Coming Day (3:16–4:3)

1. The righteous speak (3:16) – There is some debate concerning the identity of those who fear the Lord here. Are they people who have responded appropriately to the call to return? Or does this group consist of righteous remnants that were not guilty of the sins highlighted throughout the book? On a practical level the answer to these questions make little difference. What matters is that they talked with one another in what must have been a spiritually appropriate way and Yahweh consequently listened and heard them. The fact that Yahweh was pleased with what he heard is reflected in the introduction of a scroll of remembrance. The idea that God keeps a written record of the righteous is found in both Testaments (Exod 32:32; Ps 49:16; 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). Those who have honored the covenant relationship will in turn be honored by God.
2. The righteous spared (3:17–4:3) – In v. 16 God records the righteous in a scroll and now He lays claim to them (v. 17). God’s claim is framed in eschatological terms “They **will be mine**” and “**in the day** when I make them my special treasure.” This eschatological dimension can also be seen in the fact that they are spared from judgment (v. 17b) which will show that God draws a distinction between the wicked and righteous (v. 18). The time for making that

distinction is further delineated in 4:1–3.³⁵ The wicked will be burned completely up like stubble (4:1) whereas the righteous will “rise with healing in its rays (lit. “wings”). The righteous will leap like calves while the wicked will be trampled by the righteous.

A'. The Proposed Solution: Remember the Law (4:4–6)

Many commentators believe that the last three verses should be viewed as appendices.³⁶ While this is certainly possible, it seems better to treat it as integral part of the final argument as it relates to the need of Israel to return to Yahweh. This final section consists of an exhortation (v. 4) and an explanation (vv. 5–6).

1. The exhortation (4:4) – We have attempted to argue that the message of Malachi is that covenant relationship with God requires respect for and obedience to the covenant’s stipulations. The final exhortation of Malachi would seem to bear this out. The Israelites are exhorted to “remember” (זָכַר) the law of Moses. This is covenantal language (cf. Deut 8:18). Indeed, as Blaising notes, “The verb **remember** (*zā ar*) is used 14 times in Deuteronomy as an exhortation to Israel concerning this covenant **Law**.”³⁷ The idea of remembrance is of course, more than recall, but assumes obedience to the law. Other interesting details include the calling of Moses as “my servant,” highlighting his faithfulness as perhaps a model to follow. The reference to Horeb as the place of the giving of the law (Mt. Sinai; Exod 3:1; Deut 1:2,6, 9; 5:2; Ps 106:19) has strong associations with the Sinaitic Covenant.
2. The explanation (4:5–6) – The reason that the Israelites needed to return to Yahweh was the coming of Elijah the prophet³⁸ and the subsequent Day of the LORD. Although it is not stated explicitly here, Malachi 3:1 and various New Testament texts would associate this passage with the Messiah’s coming. This would then refer to Jesus Christ’s First Advent and His forerunner would be John the Baptist (Matt 11:14; 17:12, Mark 9:11–13; Luke 1:17; cf. Isa 40:3). However, the issue is more complicated than that since John denied that he was Elijah (John 1:21–23). Furthermore, in Matthew 11:14, Jesus seems to qualify John’s role. He states that John would be the Elijah if the Jews were willing to

³⁵ English translations begin a new chapter with 4:1, but the Hebrew versification continues on with chapter 3. Thus the Hebrew has 3:19–24 and no chapter 4.

³⁶ The common explanation is that these verses were added later by the author or perhaps a redactor. For a comprehensive and helpful discussion of these issues see Hill, *Malachi: A New Translation and Commentary*, 363–66.

³⁷ Blaising, “Malachi,” 1587.

³⁸ Note that the reference to the Law in v. 4 and Elijah representing the prophets in v. 5 in a sense represents the entire Old Testament (Matt 5:17; 7:12; 11:13; 22:40; 23:29; Luke 16:16; 24:44; John 1:45, etc.).

accept Him. But the fact of the matter is, the Jews did not accept their Messiah, but rather rejected Him. This rejection seems to negate John's fulfillment of the Elijah role. Such a possibility seems to be confirmed by Jesus' statement in Matthew 17:10–13. Here Jesus refers both John the Baptist as a type of Elijah but also states in v. 11 that Elijah will come and restore all things. Thus, John the Baptist came in the spirit and power of Elijah (Luke 1:17), but ultimately did not fulfill the prophecy of Elijah's return. This awaits the Second Coming.³⁹ At this coming a restoration takes place: "He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers." The meaning of this event is debated. There are at least four options. (1) Some see the fathers and children as symbols of a general restoration.⁴⁰ (2) Others suggest the description should be taken literally in terms of familial strife that characterized post-exilic Israel. (3) Another suggestion involves Jesus' statements predicting familial divisions among those who believe in Him (Matt 10: 21–22; 19:29; Luke 15:23; 21:16–17). Such relationships will be healed in the future. (4) A better approach is to understand the term "return" (שׁוּב) covenantally. In this case the "fathers" would refer to the faithful patriarchs and the "children" would refer to their unfaithful descendants.⁴¹ This would also seem to harmonize with Luke 1:17. Unless this spiritual restoration takes place, only a curse (חֲרָם) awaits. "Because Malachi ends with a curse, and particularly because his is the last book of the Prophets, there is a Jewish tradition to reread v. 5 (3:23 MT) at the close of the book so that the entire corpus ends on a slightly more positive note"⁴²

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³⁹ Some tie the fulfillment to the two witnesses in Rev 11:1–13. However, this is far from certain. Equally uncertain is whether Elijah will literally return or another Elijah-like character.

⁴⁰ See Sweeney, *Twelve Prophets*, 749-50.

⁴¹ See Verhoef, *Malachi*, 342–43 and Herbert M. Wolf, *Haggai and Malachi: Rededication and Renewal*, Everyman's Bible Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1976), 125.

⁴² Alden, "Malachi," 725.

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