

INTRODUCTION AND MALACHI

By Ashby L. Camp

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Introduction

I. The Minor Prophets

A. Malachi, as you know, is the last of the twelve Bible books that are known to us collectively as the "Minor Prophets." They are called "minor" because they are shorter not because they are less important.

B. As Christians, we need to study *all* of Scripture. It is *all*, from Genesis to Revelation, God's word to us. Paul says in 2 Tim. 3:16-17, "All Scripture is God-breathed and profitable for teaching, for rebuke, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷so that the man of God may be proficient, having been equipped for every good work." He says in 1 Cor. 10:11 that certain events involving the Israelites in the wilderness "happened to those men as examples and were written down as a warning for us, on whom the ends of the ages have come." He says in Rom. 15:4 that whatever "was written beforehand was written for our instruction, in order that through endurance and through the encouragement of the scriptures we might hold hope securely."

C. Regarding Malachi specifically, Allen Ross writes:

The book of Malachi is one biblical book that receives very little attention apart from the occasional use of a line or two exhorting tithing. This is a pity because if the original audience needed to hear these messages from God as they waited for the coming of the Messiah, the modern professing churches need to hear them all the more because the warnings have been ignored and the failures and violations have continued in spite of the fulfillment of Malachi's prophecy of the coming of John the Baptist and Jesus the Messiah. It is a book that should be studied regularly by Christians, or, better yet, preached often in the churches with all the passionate intensity of the prophet.¹

II. The Prophet

A. We know nothing about Malachi except that he was the prophet who delivered the word of the Lord to Israel as recorded in the book that is named for him. The Hebrew that is translated in 1:1 as the name "Malachi" (*mal'ākī*) can also be translated as the phrase "my messenger." Based on that possibility, some have argued the book is anonymous, but most scholars and all the standard English translations understand it to be the work of a prophet named Malachi. Douglas Stuart's assessment of the issue is common: "In the final analysis, the absence of compelling reasons to overturn or doubt the validity of the traditional reading of 1:1 requires

¹ Allen P. Ross, *Malachi Then and Now* (Wooster, OH: Weaver Book Company, 2016), vii.

the acceptance of the likelihood that a prophet named Malachi, otherwise unknown from the Old Testament, authored the book that now occupies the final position among the Minor Prophets."²

C. Malachi is probably a shortened form of a longer name. One possibility is "Malichijah," meaning "Yahweh is my messenger."³

III. General Background

A. As you know, after the death of King Solomon in 931/930 B.C., the kingdom of Israel divided: Israel was the northern kingdom and Judah was the southern kingdom. The Assyrians completed their conquest of the northern kingdom of Israel in 722/721 B.C. with the capture of capital city of Samaria. After that time, the only kingdom remaining was Judah.

B. The Babylonians replaced the Assyrians as the dominant power in the ancient Near East, and in 605 B.C. some of the Judean elite were taken into captivity in Babylonia. This included Daniel and his companions. In 597 B.C. the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar conquered Jerusalem and took more residents into captivity, including Ezekiel. In 587/586 B.C. he returned to destroy the city and to take even more captives.

C. In 539 B.C., in keeping with the prophecy given well over a century earlier and recorded in Isaiah 44 and 45, the Persian Cyrus entered Babylon and established himself as the king of a new world empire. He promptly authorized the Jews to return to Palestine and to rebuild their temple. He even returned the sacred vessels that had been seized from the temple by Nebuchadnezzar and agreed to finance partially the reconstruction from the royal treasury.

D. In 538/37 B.C. the first group of Jewish exiles returned to Jerusalem under the leadership of Sheshbazzar, Zerubbabel, and Jeshua (alternate form of Joshua). They promptly set up the altar in its former place and resumed the offering of sacrifices amid the temple ruins.

E. In 536 B.C. they laid the foundation for a new temple, but then opposition from the local residents and neighboring communities, especially the Samaritans, caused the work to grind to a halt. The temple was still in ruins sixteen years later (520 B.C.) when the prophets Haggai and Zechariah motivated the people to resume the work. They completed the new temple in 516/515 B.C.

F. Ezra led a group back to Jerusalem in 458 B.C., some 58 years after the dedication of the new temple. Nehemiah led the third wave of exiles back to Jerusalem in 445 B.C. He served as governor there for 12 years and then returned to the Persian king Artaxerxes in 433 B.C. presumably because his leave of absence was up.

G. Nehemiah stayed in Babylon for some time and then returned to Jerusalem again for a governorship of unknown length. His second term is mentioned in Nehemiah 13. He returned to

² Douglas Stuart, "Malachi" in Thomas Edward McComiskey, ed., *The Minor Prophets: An Exegetical and Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 3:1247.

³ Eugene H. Merrill, "Malachi" in Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland, eds., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 8:845.

find that sin and corruption continued to infect the Jews in Jerusalem: the tithes were ignored, the Sabbath was broken, the people had married foreigners, and the priesthood had become corrupt. This is the end of the inspired Old Testament history of Israel.

IV. Date and Circumstances

A. Malachi prophesied after the Second Temple was completed in 516/515 B.C., but it is unclear how long after. The latest possible date is around 200 B.C. because a writing dating to around 180 B.C. (Sir. 49:10) refers to the "Twelve Prophets," meaning Malachi had been recognized by that time as part of the Jewish Scriptures.

B. Malachi addresses some of the same concerns addressed by Ezra and Nehemiah, which, with other factors, leads a vast majority of scholars to date the work to sometime in the 5th century B.C. Many scholars date Malachi to the first half of the 5th century B.C., *before* Ezra and Nehemiah. Some in that group date it early in the 5th century B.C. (around 500 B.C.) and others decades later to shortly before Ezra's arrival.⁴ Many other scholars date the book to different times during the ministries of Ezra and/or Nehemiah.⁵

C. Regarding the circumstances, Ross states:

Malachi came on the scene to assist in bringing about the needed reforms permanently. But he found a spirit that would later be expressed in Pharisaism and Sadduceeism, a spirit of outward perfunctory service with little inward repentance or devotion. Not only that, there was widespread skepticism and resignation. The people complained that the earlier prophetic promises had not been fulfilled, and they were impatient for God to judge their enemies, especially the Gentiles, as well as those Jews whom they believed had rebelled against the LORD. And so Malachi had serious issues to address, but he was exactly the right man for the job.⁶

V. Structure

A. The book is comprised of a superscription (1:1) followed by six prophetic disputation speeches (1:2-4:3). It ends with a brief appendix exhorting them to obey Moses and announcing Elijah's reappearance (4:4-6).

B. The disputation speeches involve an assertion by God, the questioning or contradiction of that assertion by his people, and a conclusion. For example,

- 1:2 states, "I have loved you," says the LORD. But you say, "How have you loved us?"

⁴ For example, Andrew E. Hill, *Malachi*, Anchor Bible, (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 83, thinks a "round figure of 500 B.C./E." is most reasonable. Stuart concludes (p. 1252) "that a date of approximately 460 B.C." is probable.

⁵ See the catalog of positions by biblical scholars in Hill, 393-395.

⁶ Ross, 34.

- 1:6c-d states, "And if I am a master, where is my fear? says the LORD of hosts to you, O priests, who despise my name. But you say, 'How have we despised your name?'"
- 2:17 states, "You have wearied the LORD with your words. But you say, 'How have we wearied him?'"

C. The six disputation speeches are 1:2-5, 1:6-2:9, 2:10-16, 2:17-3:5, 3:6-12, and 3:13-4:3. As you can see, the chapter divisions are most unhelpful. Stuart remarks: "The chapter divisions in English translations are notoriously inept. The book is obviously structured by the disputations, and the chapter divisions so abuse this that the reader of the book must learn to pay little attention to them."⁷ Of course, the chapter divisions were not part of the original inspired text. They were made in the early 13th century by a scholar named Robert Langton.⁸

The Text

I. Superscription (1:1)

An oracle: The word of the LORD to Israel by Malachi.

A. The opening verse announces that God is delivering a divine message, giving his word to "Israel" through the prophet Malachi. Though the addressees were in the Persian administrative district named Judah (Yehud), territory that had been known as Judah since the division of the united kingdom following Solomon's death, the message is to "Israel" in the sense of God's people. It is a religious reference not a political one.

B. Ross declares, "[Malachi] is the word of God, true and trustworthy in all it says, and timelessly relevant in its admonitions and warnings."⁹ As Peter Adam points out:

To fail to respond to the word of a prophet is to fail to respond to God:

¹¹ Zedekiah was twenty-one years old when he began to reign; he reigned eleven years in Jerusalem. ¹² He did what was evil in the sight of the LORD his God. He did not humble himself before the prophet Jeremiah who spoke from the mouth of the LORD. [2 Chr. 36:11-12 NRS]¹⁰

C. Adam later states:

It is not enough for some people in the church to be committed to reading the Bible, and not enough for the preacher to be committed to preaching the Scriptures. Will the people of God welcome the words of God today? Will they love God by loving his words? Will they follow the ancient advice of King

⁷ Stuart, 1249-1250.

⁸ See, e.g., Roger Pearse, [Stephen Langton and the modern chapter divisions of the bible](#) (posted June 21, 2013).

⁹ Ross, vii.

¹⁰ Peter Adam, *The Message of Malachi*, BST (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 26.

Jehoshaphat: 'Listen to me, Judah and people of Jerusalem! Have faith in the LORD your God and you will be upheld; have faith in his prophets and you will be successful.'¹¹

II. First Disputation (1:2-5)

"I have loved you," says the LORD. But you say, "How have you loved us?" "Is not Esau Jacob's brother?" declares the LORD. "Yet I have loved Jacob³ but Esau I have hated. I have laid waste his hill country and left his heritage to jackals of the desert."⁴ If Edom says, "We are shattered but we will rebuild the ruins," the LORD of hosts says, "They may build, but I will tear down, and they will be called 'the wicked country,' and 'the people with whom the LORD is angry forever.'"⁵ Your own eyes shall see this, and you shall say, "Great is the LORD beyond the border of Israel!"

A. Israel doubts God's love (1:2-3a)

1. God declares that he has loved Israel and then gives voice to their skepticism about the claim. In view of the exile and the difficult and discouraging situation after their return (weak, poor, and under Persian domination), they doubt his professed love, his commitment to them, and demand that he provide specifics about how he has loved them.

a. "Love" and "hate" are used here not in the sense of personal attraction and affection but regarding "national election and alliance within the history of redemption." Stuart states:

In the diplomacy of the ancient Near East, the language of "love" and "hate" was employed not to indicate personal emotion or affection, but routinely to convey the concepts of alliance or enmity among nations. Kings spoke about "loving" one another as a way of describing their networks of alliances and coalitions. A king's claim to "hate" another had no reference to personal attraction or lack thereof, but described instead a state of hostility between their respective lands. The Old Testament, in both the Law and the Prophets, also employs the terms *'āhēb* (love) and *śānē'* (hate) in this way, as part of the normal semantic field of the two words (see Moran, "Love of God"; Thompson, "Israel's Haters").¹²

b. We are prone to doubt that God is "for us," is committed to blessing us, when things happen contrary to our expectations of what God's love looks like. Our suffering and hardship readily eclipse our sense of his commitment to our welfare.

2. God says that despite the fact the Edomites were (largely) descendants of Jacob's twin brother Esau, and thus presumably would be at no disadvantage in terms of divine favor, he loved the descendants of Jacob, meaning he chose them as his special people in his plan

¹¹ Adam, 33.

¹² Stuart, 1284.

of redemption (Gen. 25:23). That election of Israel translates into enmity against all who oppose Israel, and there was no greater opponent of Israel than Edom.¹³ Stuart writes:

A bitter, consistent, and permanent blood feud between Israelites and Edomites characterized all their relationships. If there was one nation that could always, immediately, be identified as Israel's enemy, it was Edom. There was, in fact, never a time when the two nations were allies (2 Kings 3 describes a time when Edom was a vassal state to Israel), and in spite of the fact that the nations bordered one another, there was never a time when they were not hostile, either via "hot" or "cold" war. . . . In the Old Testament, Edom, with its very long and remarkably consistent history of enmity to Israel, is treated virtually as the paradigm of all enemy nations.¹⁴

3. So God's rejection or "hatred" of Edom was a function of his election or love of Israel and Edom's hostility toward them. The election was unconditional, but the rejection was not. And God's enmity toward the nation of Edom does not mean that individual descendants of Esau are outside the scope of redemption. God's plan is that through Abraham all the families of the earth shall be blessed (Gen. 12:3).

B. Love of Israel and rejection of Edom expressed in Edom being vanquished (1:3b-5)

1. God's love for Israel is evident not only in the fact he had brought Israel back to its land to continue its national existence but also in the fact he had vanquished Edom, its ancient and implacable foe. He had, hyperbolically speaking, turned Edom into a wasteland, a haunt for jackals, and would not allow it to be permanently reconstituted. God's plans for Israel, on the other hand, are ongoing; he has not abandoned them.

2. It is possible Edom's condition refers to the continuing effects of the conquest by the Babylonian king Nabonidus in 552 B.C., during the time of the exile. The Persians simply may have maintained the status quo regarding Edom when taking over from the Babylonians. It is also possible Edom was diminished further by tolerance of local populations exploiting its vulnerability.

3. God's vow not to allow Edom to recover as a comparable political entity will play out in history. At some point, it will be "seen," will be unmistakable to his people, that Edom will in fact never rise again. Indeed, the Nabateans, Arab Bedouin tribes, infiltrated the area from the 5th-century B.C. onward and eventually drove the remaining Edomites westward from their land. "They settled more to the south of Israel, in the region later called Idumaea in the Negev desert, and they became known as the Idumeans."¹⁵ That recognition will trigger praise for God as the God of all the earth not only Israel.

¹³ Ross states (p. 41), "The Edomites, mostly descendants of Esau but also a number of aboriginal tribes (see Gen. 36), lived in the region to the south and east of Israel, across the great rift of the Jordan Valley, and south of the Dead Sea. This was called Edom."

¹⁴ Stuart, 1284.

¹⁵ Ross, 42; Eileen M. Schuller, "The Book of Malachi" in Leander E. Keck, ed., *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 7:855.

III. Second Disputation (1:6-2:9)

A. Priests dishonor God (1:6-10)

⁶ "A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If then I am a father, where is my honor? And if I am a master, where is my fear? says the LORD of hosts to you, O priests, who despise my name. But you say, 'How have we despised your name?' ⁷ By offering polluted food upon my altar. But you say, 'How have we polluted you?' By saying that the LORD's table may be despised. ⁸ When you offer blind animals in sacrifice, is that not evil? And when you offer those that are lame or sick, is that not evil? Present that to your governor; will he accept you or show you favor? says the LORD of hosts. ⁹ And now entreat the favor of God, that he may be gracious to us. With such a gift from your hand, will he show favor to any of you? says the LORD of hosts. ¹⁰ Oh that there were one among you who would shut the doors, that you might not kindle fire on my altar in vain! I have no pleasure in you, says the LORD of hosts, and I will not accept an offering from your hand.

1. God in v. 6 makes the point to the priests that as a father deserves honor from his son and a master deserves honor from his servant, then he, as a *divine* father and master, deserves even greater honor and respect. And yet, instead of honoring and respecting him, they despise his name. Stuart states, "The charge that they have 'despised my name' is not merely a statement of an insult to God's reputation or the like, but is equivalent to saying 'they have defied my authority and disobeyed my will.'"¹⁶

2. God gives voice to the priests' denial – "How have we despised your name?" – and then he tells them in v. 7, "By offering polluted (or defiled) food on my altar?" God imputes to them a further response of denial, "How have we polluted you?" to which he answers, "By saying that the LORD's table may be despised." In other words, they sanctioned and authorized the offering of the polluted food on his altar.

3. Verse 8 specifies that he is referring to their offering blind, lame, and sick animals as a sacrifice to him. God deserved and required the very best of their herd or flock. Stuart states:

The Old Testament sacrificial laws clearly prohibit offering animals that are faulty physically (Exod. 12:5; 29:1; Lev. 1:3; 22:18-25; Num. 6:14; Deut. 15:21; 17:1). In these laws one or two types of physical deficiencies, such as blindness and lameness, are typically mentioned in the manner of a synecdoche, but the clear implication is that imperfections of whatever sort cannot be tolerated. This would include sick animals (*hōleh*), even though that specific adjective is not used of prohibited sacrifices in the Pentateuch. Leviticus 22:20 is the most broad in

¹⁶ Stuart, 1298.

stating that any sort of imperfection (*mûm*) in an animal was something Yahweh could not accept (*ršh*, as here in v. 8).¹⁷

4. One can understand why the Israelites bringing the sacrifices would be tempted to substitute a less valuable animal for the very best of their herd or flock, which is what God deserved and required, but it is less clear why the priests would accept those animals as sacrifices. Perhaps the offerors bribed the priests to accept their inferior animals. Or perhaps lowering the threshold of acceptability increased the volume of animals offered, which meant more for the priests to eat. Remember that the priests received a portion of most sacrificial offerings as food; and blind, lame, and even some sick animals tasted the same as the healthy ones and were routinely eaten by farmers.

5. Offering the less valuable animals in sacrifice was evil precisely because God deserves and requires the best. As Stuart notes, "An offering is more than just a meal. It is a symbol of one's dedication to God, a constantly repeated lesson in the nature of his holiness, and a means of atonement for sin."¹⁸ The wrong of it is evident in the fact they knew very well that even their Persian governor would not accept as a gift the kind of animals they were offering to God. "The governor would regard the imperfect offering as an insult and would thus not accept or show favor to those bringing it."¹⁹

6. God calls on the priests through Malachi to entreat his favor that he may be gracious to "us," meaning the people of Israel among whom Malachi is included. In other words, he is calling them to repent of the disobedient and insulting behavior and to offer proper sacrifices to him.

7. The situation is so dire, their sacrifices so insulting, that God longs for someone to shut the doors of the temple so they can no longer be offered. He declares flatly in v. 10b that he is not pleased with them and will not accept the polluted offerings being brought to him.

B. The offense is magnified by God's greatness (1:11-14)

¹¹ For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name will be great among the nations, and in every place incense will be offered to my name, and a pure offering. For my name will be great among the nations, says the LORD of hosts. ¹² But you profane it when you say that the Lord's table is polluted, and its fruit, that is, its food may be despised. ¹³ But you say, 'What a weariness this is,' and you snort at it, says the LORD of hosts. You bring what has been taken by violence or is lame or sick, and this you bring as your offering! Shall I accept that from your hand? says the LORD. ¹⁴ Cursed be the cheat who has a male in his flock, and vows it, and yet sacrifices to the Lord what is blemished. For I am a great King, says the LORD of hosts, and my name will be feared among the nations.

¹⁷ Stuart, 1301.

¹⁸ Stuart, 1300.

¹⁹ Stuart, 1301.

1. God drives home the gravity of their dishonoring him with polluted sacrifices by painting a picture of his greatness and glory. He points ahead to the end time, a time of universal honor. Douglas Stuart explains:

God here proclaims to the priests that their inadequate and thus insulting worship is completely inconsistent with what will one day be the case: he will be worshiped reverently – and properly – the world over. His name [*šēm*] will be great everywhere, as the priests should have been making it among the Israelites (Num. 6:27). . . .

[W]e must appreciate here the presence of eschatological messianic universalism, that is, the common Old Testament doctrine that the true God would one *future* day reign over all peoples, who would have no choice but to acknowledge his sovereignty. Such a view is the consistent outlook of the prophets (Isa. 2:2-4; 11:10-12; 42:1-9; 45:1-3, 15, 22-23; Jer. 3:17; Mic. 4:1-2; Zeph. 3:8-9; Hag. 2:7; Zech. 8:20-23; 14:16; compare the oracles against foreign nations throughout the prophetic books) and is also widely represented elsewhere in Scripture (e.g., Exod. 9:16; Pss. 22:28 [27]; 95-99). . . . [T]here is every reason to regard the verse as a prediction rather than as a description of current events, as a future contrast to a present reality. Three times in the verse the greatness of God's name is mentioned. This reprises the emphasis of v. 6, that his name [reputation, honor, authority] was being insulted by the self-serving, improper worship conducted by the priests. The eventual greatness of God's name, universal recognition thereof, is a theme often associated with predictions of the future in Scripture (Isa. 29:23; 48:11; 52:6; Jer. 44:26; Amos 9:12; Acts 9:15; 15:17; Rom. 9:17; Phil. 2:10).

2. Yet, the priests were profaning his name, insulting him, by allowing cheap and prohibited offerings as sacrifices (saying his altar "may be" polluted and the sacrifices "may be" despised). They had lost any sense of the grandeur and glory of the offering of sacrifices such that it was just a tiresome task to them. With that attitude, it is no wonder they brought as offerings what had been taken by violence or was lame or sick. The answer to the LORD's rhetorical question, "Shall I accept that from your hand?" is a resounding No!

3. And it is not only the priests who are guilty in this matter. The worshipers themselves are complicit. The one who vows an acceptable animal for sacrifice and then tries to shortchange God by offering a flawed animal, contrary to Lev. 27:9-12, is cursed. And, of course, the priests are also guilty because they were accepting the unfit sacrifices when they were brought.

4. God again highlights the outrage of such disrespect: For I am a great King, says the LORD of hosts, and my name will be feared among the nations. How dare anyone act with such impudence toward him? Ross comments, "Worship of the holy and sovereign God must never be treated as profane, worthless, or a drudgery; if that happens, then worship has been defiled and God's nature despised."²⁰

²⁰ Ross, 67.

C. Call for repentance (2:1-9)

¹ "And now, O priests, this command is for you. ² If you will not listen, if you will not take it to heart to give honor to my name, says the LORD of hosts, then I will send the curse upon you and I will curse your blessings. Indeed, I have already cursed them, because you do not lay it to heart. ³ Behold, I will rebuke your offspring, and spread dung on your faces, the dung of your offerings, and you shall be taken away with it. ⁴ So shall you know that I have sent this command to you, that my covenant with Levi may stand, says the LORD of hosts. ⁵ My covenant with him was one of life and peace, and I gave them to him. It was a covenant of fear, and he feared me. He stood in awe of my name. ⁶ True instruction was in his mouth, and no wrong was found on his lips. He walked with me in peace and uprightness, and he turned many from iniquity. ⁷ For the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and people should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts. ⁸ But you have turned aside from the way. You have caused many to stumble by your instruction. You have corrupted the covenant of Levi, says the LORD of hosts, ⁹ and so I make you despised and abased before all the people, inasmuch as you do not keep my ways but show partiality in your instruction."

1. God tells the priests that he will pronounce a curse, a divine punishment, on them if they do not repent. He will send a curse on them and will "curse their blessings," probably meaning both the blessings they receive in material provision and the blessing they bestow on others in their role as priests. Regarding the latter, he is saying he will invalidate their role as priests, not accept them as intermediaries between himself and the people.

2. The statement that he has already cursed their blessings may mean that the curse has already begun. But it also may be a way of emphasizing the certainty of the curse, saying essentially that it is a "done deal," unless there is repentance.

3. When he tells them that if they do not repent he will "rebuke their offspring," he probably is threatening to extinguish their family line. Family line was a major concern of ancient Israelites and especially of priests because of the hereditary nature of their office of honor. If their line ceased, their name was no longer represented in the priesthood.

4. The waste that was removed from the sacrificial animals prior to roasting on the altar was "taken outside the camp (far from the temple) and burned as entirely unclean."²¹ In saying that he will spread the dung of their offerings on their faces, God is indicating that he will subject them to humiliation. And in saying they will be taken away with the dung, he is indicating their rejection. They will be excluded from his presence.

5. God calls the priests to repentance that they remain faithful so that his covenant with Levi may continue. God's covenant with the Levites is mentioned in Jer. 33:21 and Neh. 13:29, but its establishment is not directly reported. Andrew Hill comments:

²¹ Stuart, 1314.

The OT preserves allusions to such a covenant, including: Exodus 32:26-29 (in response to the purge by the sons of Levi after the golden calf episode at Sinai); Numbers 25:11-13 (in response to the heroic deed of Phinehas in staying the plague at Baal Peor); Deuteronomy 33:8-11 (Moses' poetic blessing of the tribe of Levi); and Jeremiah 33:20-21 (a reflection of a covenant with the Levites [i.e. the Mosaic covenant?]).²²

6. God provided blessings, life and well-being, to the priests who, for their part, served him with reverence and awe. And those blessings "extended to Israel through the priestly ministry of mediation and intercession."²³ The priests were to be and had been God's messengers, faithful teachers of his word to the people of Israel, and they had lived devout and righteous lives. But the priests of Malachi's day (and at times prior)²⁴ had abandoned their responsibility and thereby caused many to stumble by their false teaching and biased applications (rulings). Regarding the latter, Ross comments:

They applied the biblical instruction differently to different people, perhaps more leniently with the rich and powerful, the same kind of favoritism James decried in his epistle to the church (2:1-7). It is evil to approve of sin through such teaching, but this approval had a shrewd motive. To show favoritism through it means simply not applying the standard to some people, so they will sin under the false understanding they are free to do so. If there were powerful and influential people, the priests would wink at their sins, as often happened when a country was governed by a powerful aristocracy. They were privileged. But ordinary people were held accountable for their sins and crimes.²⁵

7. God declares that he publicly humiliates them, makes them despised and abased before all the people, presumably by exposing their unfaithfulness. They will be disgraced. Ross states, "Everyone would know that they were base and low; they would be without respect and placement, just living out their lives as failed ministers."²⁶

8. Though Israel, like the church, was a kingdom of priests (Ex. 19:6; 1 Pet. 2:9), there was a distinctive priesthood that had a unique, God-given spiritual responsibility to the people. In terms of their teaching role, they are analogous to those who function in that capacity in churches. Ross states:

The principles set forth here certainly apply directly to people who are fully active in ministry today – pastors, teachers, counselors, and the like. How they handle the Word is critical; they dare not make mistakes. James said that it was a dangerous thing to teach. Perhaps people rush into ministry too eagerly, or stand

²² Andrew E. Hill, *Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi*, TOTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 310.

²³ Hill (2012) 311.

²⁴ Stuart (p. 1324) points to Amos 7:10-17 and Hos. 4:6-9 after which the priesthood of Israel was ended in the fall of the northern kingdom (2 Kings 17). He also points to Jer. 20:1-6 after which the priesthood of Judah was ended in the fall of Judah and the exile.

²⁵ Ross, 89.

²⁶ Ross, 90.

up to preach too casually, not realizing how serious a matter it is to speak for God.²⁷

IV. Third Disputation (2:10-16)

A. Faithlessness in marrying daughter of a foreign god (2:10-12)

¹⁰ Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us? Why then are we faithless to one another, profaning the covenant of our fathers? ¹¹ Judah has been faithless, and abomination has been committed in Israel and in Jerusalem. For Judah has profaned the sanctuary of the LORD, which he loves, and has married the daughter of a foreign god. ¹² [May the LORD cut off from the tents of Jacob the man who does this, him who wakes and him who answers, though he brings an offering to the LORD of hosts].

1. Israelites were a family that had been created by God out of all the peoples of the earth. They were related to each other in that unique sense beyond the relationship they shared with all mankind as descendants of Adam and Eve. That family bond as God's unique people made their faithlessness to one another especially wrongful and amounted to a profaning, a dishonoring, of the holy covenant the people of Israel had entered into with God at Mount Sinai.

2. The people of Judah had been faithless to God and one another, having committed an abomination. Specifically, they profaned the temple God loves *by* (see NIV) marrying the daughter of a foreign god. What this most likely means is that many of them had married women from local communities of non-Israelites in which foreign gods were worshiped.

a. The Jews were expressly forbidden in Ex. 34:11-16 and Deut. 7:1-4 (see also Josh. 23:12-13) from marrying people *from the nations they were dispossessing* in Canaan, not from all foreign nations. Indeed, Deut. 21:10-14 provides for marrying foreign women who were taken in wars against distant enemies, so there was no absolute ban on having foreign wives. Presumably, the rationale was that foreign women with local communities that would anchor them to their idolatrous culture would pose a greater threat by being more resistant to conversion. When Israel returned to Palestine after the exile, the principle of not marrying *indigenous* foreigners applied to those of other nations who were *then* in the land. So marrying those women was in defiance of God.

b. The women in question here were practicing idolaters. The phrase "daughter of a foreign god" implies they were devoted to that god. And as so often happens (e.g., 1 Ki. 11:1-8), this led to a compromised worship of God and a profaning of his temple, perhaps including bringing their idolatrous wives to the temple.

c. There was probably a significant financial motive behind such marriages. As Stuart points out, Judah had taken the full hammer from the Babylonians, and

²⁷ Ross, 91.

those who returned from exile returned to an impoverished territory. The pagans who had remained in the region were relatively better off, so allying oneself with pagans via marriage was a way to get ahead.²⁸ Hill similarly comments: "Malachi's speech censuring divorce was likely prompted by the actions of men divorcing their wives and marrying foreign women in order to gain access to local commerce by marrying into the trade guilds and business cartels."²⁹

d. It is also possible that a Jew who was physically attracted to a woman other than his wife would find greater tolerance among pagans of marriage after a divorce that was motivated by a third party. Stuart states, "Pagan families would also tolerate marriages after divorce – marriages based on physical attraction rather than on arrangement while one was still in childhood – more easily than their Israelite counterparts."³⁰

3. Verse 12 says literally, "May the LORD cut off from the tents of Jacob the man who does this, him who wakes and him who answers, though he brings an offering to the LORD of hosts." (I have substituted this literal rendering for the ESV's v. 12, which is why it is in brackets.) The English versions disagree over how to understand and thus to render "him who wakes and him who answers." It is obscure, but with many I think the clause functions as a merism, an expression of totality, in that it refers to both the one who calls people to wake up and the one who answers.³¹ If that is correct, it yields something like "every last person who does this" (NET) or "the one who does this, whoever he may be" (NIV).

4. Whatever the obscurity, the point seems to be that whoever has engaged in such sinful marriages is under condemnation. Their being "cut off" from the people may refer to an unspecified punishment administered directly by God in his own way and in his own time, perhaps including the extinction of their lineage.

5. The fact he brings an offering to God will not benefit him because his heart is in rebellion as exemplified in his having married an idol-worshiper in defiance of the Lord's will. A surrendered heart is the indispensable predicate for all acceptable worship. One cannot play God for a sap, cannot live in rebellion and then attempt to appease him with tokens of devotion. One's worship must be the fruit of a consecrated life or it is a charade.

B. Faithlessness in divorcing their wives (2:13-16)

¹³ And this second thing you do. You cover the LORD's altar with tears, with weeping and groaning because he no longer regards the offering or accepts it with favor from your hand. ¹⁴ But you say, "Why does he not?" Because the LORD was witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. ¹⁵ Did he not make them one, with a portion of the Spirit in their union? And what was the one God seeking? Godly offspring. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and let none of you be faithless to the wife of your youth. ¹⁶ "For the man who does not love his

²⁸ Stuart, 1332-1333.

²⁹ Hill (2012), 322.

³⁰ Stuart, 1333.

³¹ E.g., Ross, 107.

wife but divorces her, says the LORD, the God of Israel, covers his garment with violence, says the LORD of hosts. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and do not be faithless."

1. In addition to marrying idolatrous wives which led to the abominable profaning of God's temple, the priests, on behalf of the people, were trying to induce God's favor by emotional displays in the face of his having rejected their sacrifices because of the people's sin. As with pagan gods, they hoped to manipulate God with tears, weeping, and groaning, as though that would counteract their unfaithfulness. God wants a surrendered heart; as I say, that is the indispensable predicate of all acceptable worship.

2. Feigning ignorance, they ask accusingly why God does not regard their offerings or accept them with favor. And the answer is that the LORD was witness to their original marriages to their Jewish wives, meaning that he was the enforcer or guarantor of their marriage covenant, and they were faithless to their wives in that they divorced them, presumably to marry their new pagan wives. They broke the covenant they had made with their wives before God! How dare they!

3. Verse 15 is famously difficult to translate and understand. Following the ESV, the idea seems to be that God created the institution of marriage as summarized in the phrase in Gen. 2:24 that the man and woman shall become one flesh. Having established that institution, there is a sense in which he approves and blesses the marriage union of a man and woman (there being a portion of his Spirit in it). His desire is that through the marital union children would be born who would be taught to revere him.

4. Given the foundational significance of marriage, even apart from the fact it serves as a model of Christ and the church (Eph. 5:31-32), he commands that they guard themselves in their spirit, meaning that they watch their hearts closely to keep them from rationalizing the sin of divorce. Thus, he commands in v. 15c, "Let none of you be faithless to the wife of your youth," meaning their first wives that some were dumping for what they thought were "greener pastures."

5. Despite its fame, Mal. 2:16 is another difficult text to translate. The first clause is often rendered, "For I hate divorce," but in the Masoretic text the verb "hates" is a third-person singular form ("he hates").

a. There are various ways to understand this, one of which is reflected in the ESV: "For the man who does not love [hates] his wife but divorces her, says the LORD." This is like several other modern versions:

- "The man who hates and divorces his wife," says the LORD (NIV)
- "If he hates and divorces his wife," says the LORD (HCSB)
- "If he hates and divorces his wife," says the Lord (CSB)

b. The phrasing is probably from Deut. 24:3 which speaks of a man's divorcing his wife as the man hating her and writing her a certificate of divorce. As reflected in

the ESV, "hating" is a Hebrew idiom for no longer loving, no longer being committed to, as manifested in the divorce. Malachi 2:16 is referring to a man who divorces his wife. God says that the one who does so "covers his garment with violence," meaning he has metaphorically assaulted her. The idea is like our "he has blood on his hands."³² He is guilty of a grave offense.

c. In context, God is not saying there are no grounds for divorce. Indeed, in Deut. 24:1 he permitted divorce on the grounds of "some indecency," and after the exile Ezra and Nehemiah mandated divorce in the case of the sinful marriages to pagan wives. God is here rebuking those who were breaking faith with their original Jewish wives, many of whom were no doubt "trading them in" for the more financially or physically attractive idolaters.

6. In v. 16b God renews the admonition from v. 15c. They are to guard their inner person, their hearts, that they not be led to divorcing their wives.

7. Disrespect of marriage is rampant in our culture and even in the church. Too many have accepted the notion that marriage can and should be dissolved on the grounds of unhappiness, and we for the most part have chosen to ignore the subject lest we offend someone or make them feel uncomfortable. In doing so, we are failing to be faithful and to speak the truth. Hill sums up this section of Malachi this way:

Malachi espoused a lofty view of marriage, equating it with a covenant relationship. He passionately preached a message of faithfulness and loyalty to one's marriage partner (v. 14), and warned his audience not to break faith in marriage (vv. 15, 16), because God has made marriage partners one (v. 15). Since divorce is an act of violence against a marriage partner, God hates divorce [implicitly if not explicitly] and the damage created by fractured marital relationships. The prophet recognized that loyalty to the marriage covenant both fulfilled God's creation mandate for the man-woman relationship and contributed to the stabilization of society. Later, Jesus affirms the Genesis ideal for marriage (cf. Gen. 2:24) and offers a strict interpretation of the Mosaic laws regarding divorce (Matt. 19:1-12; cf. Deut. 24:1-4).³³

V. Fourth Disputation (2:17-3:5)

A. God's justice challenged (2:17)

You have wearied the LORD with your words. But you say, "How have we wearied him?" By saying, "Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the LORD, and he delights in them." Or by asking, "Where is the God of justice?"

1. At least some of the people had wearied God with their claims that he approves of evil or is absent from the situation so as to allow injustice to continue. He did not want to hear

³² Stuart, 1343.

³³ Hill (2012), 327-328.

any more of it. Their charges were an expression of frustration and disillusionment over their circumstance, which they perceived as inconsistent with the notion that God is a God of justice.

2. This sense may have been fed in part by their continuing poverty and subjugation to Persian rule, which they felt was not consistent with good being rewarded and evil being punished. But it was probably fed most significantly by the ongoing corruption that Malachi described. In that regard, the complaint was like that the prophet Habakkuk issued a century or more earlier (Hab. 1:2-3): *O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear? Or cry to you "Violence!" and you will not save? Why do you make me see iniquity, and why do you idly look at wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise.*

3. Perhaps it was only the pious who had become discouraged by the corruption Malachi described, but it is possible the charge also was being leveled by those engaged in the corruption. Stuart comments:

Would the people of a nation as corrupt as Malachi has described it in the second and third disputations really be looking for justice in the fourth disputation? The answer is, absolutely! And that is because sinners are invariably inconsistent. The thief is always outraged when someone steals from *him*. The liar is deeply offended when someone lies to *her*. The cheater deeply resents finding that she has been defrauded, and the murderer wants *himself* and his family to live in peace. The expectations of sinners are characteristically hypocritical, as Paul so compellingly points out (Rom. 2:1-16). All people, not just the pious, want justice, at least for themselves.³⁴

B. The future coming of the Lord and his judgment (3:1-5)

"Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. ² But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap. ³ He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the LORD. ⁴ Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years. ⁵ "Then I will draw near to you for judgment. I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired worker in his wages, the widow and the fatherless, against those who thrust aside the sojourner, and do not fear me, says the LORD of hosts.

1. God answers with the declaration that he, the God of justice they seek, is going to come. And just as royal visits would have someone go in advance to prepare for the

³⁴ Stuart, 1348.

momentous event, so his coming will be heralded by a forerunner. This messenger who is sent by God in preparation for his visit is, of course, John the Baptist. Jesus identifies him as such in Mat. 11:10, Mk. 1:2, and Lk. 7:27.

2. The Lord whose presence they seek, whose coming will be preceded by his herald, is clearly a divine figure, and we know from the NT that he is Jesus the Messiah (e.g., Mat. 3:1-17, Jn. 1:15, 19-36). This Lord is also identified in 3:1 as "the messenger of the covenant in whom [they] delight," meaning the Messiah. He is the one for whom people had been longing. Robert Chisholm states, "At first one might think that 'my messenger' and 'the messenger of the covenant' refer to the same individual, but the parallel structure suggests otherwise. Rather, the titles 'the Lord' and 'the messenger of the covenant' appear to refer to the same individual, who is distinct from the forerunner."³⁵ This is how most scholars understand the relationship.³⁶ Stuart states:

[T]he simple fact [is] that the verse is overtly messianic in outlook, that it identifies the first messenger as the Lord (*ha'ādôn*). In other words, the verse says that God is going to send someone to prepare people for the sudden arrival of the individual whom people are seeking/wanting and that this second individual is both Lord and covenant messenger. Just who are these persons? Unless we wish arbitrarily to exclude the New Testament from our purview, the answer is not difficult: the messenger sent as forerunner is John the Baptist, and the Lord, the covenant messenger, is Christ.³⁷

3. Jesus, of course, did come physically to his temple, most notably in the repeat visits he made during the Passion week, but his entire ministry can be seen as a "coming to the temple" in a metaphorical sense in that his institution of the new covenant (prophesied in Isaiah 54, Jeremiah 31, and Ezekiel 36) changed the nature of worship and rendered the temple obsolete (Jn. 4:21-24). He is the "messenger of the covenant" in the sense he brings it to people as its initiator and mediator (Mat. 26:28; Lk. 22:20; 2 Cor. 3:6; Heb. 7:22, 9:15, 12:24).

4. Though the people are objecting to God's alleged absence and demanding his coming to intervene in judgment, the promise of his appearing raises the question of who can stand in the face of it, who can avoid being consumed. And here I think we have the prophetic fusion of Christ's coming and his coming again. His work is a unity that was seen as one piece in the prophetic vision. Ross writes:

They knew the facts about the Messiah, but they did not have the time sequence of the events of the Messiah. They did not know there was going to be a second coming of the Messiah; it appeared that there would be only one. When they spoke about the coming of the Messiah, they could not quite understand how he could be born into the family of David as the heir to the throne and also come in the clouds with power and glory. But Scripture said he would do both.

³⁵ Robert B. Chisholm, Jr., *Handbook on the Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 481.

³⁶ Merrill, 857.

³⁷ Stuart, 1351.

We, of course, can look back to the prophecies with the New Testament in hand and realize that what was promised was a first and second coming. But they did not know that. And this is what we must keep in mind in this little passage.³⁸

5. Christ will function as a refiner, a separator, at the final judgment, separating the sheep from the goats (Mat. 25:32). But he also functions as a refiner in a different sense with regard to his first coming. His call to faith in him as the Messiah purified the sons of Levi, and many others, by separating those with the faith of Abraham, those who believed God's testimony about his Son, from those who did not. With that was an embrace of the radical ethics of the kingdom of God, so there was an ancillary separation in terms of practical righteousness. Barnabas was a Levite (Acts 4:36), and as Luke reports in Acts 6:7, a great many of the priests (Levites) became obedient to the faith. Those who refused, the "dross," set themselves against him.

6. The Levites who became Christians brought offerings in righteousness to the Lord, as do all who are in Christ, offerings from a surrendered spirit and given in accordance with the worship of the new covenant, a worship based on the relationship secured by the perfect sacrifice of Christ in contrast to the abominable sacrifices the priests were now offering. As a holy priesthood, we offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 2:5). That is when the worship given by the Jews, the offering of Judah and Jerusalem, will be pleasing to God as it was under the old covenant when the priests were faithful. He is not saying that the worship under the old covenant was not, even at its best, suboptimal; he is saying that in its time it was pleasing when done as prescribed. Nor is he saying that the pleasing offerings of the Levites in the day of the Lord's coming will be the offerings under the old covenant.

7. As Eugene Merrill observes, "a more distant eschatological note is sounded in v. 5."³⁹ This verse focuses on the final judgment element of Christ's work, what will occur at his return. At that time, those who did not trust in God, as indicated by their living in rebellion to him, will be condemned. Ross states:

The judgment is not simply for these sins, but for those characterized by them because they are not believers. They do not fear the LORD. The expression "fear me" means to worship and obey the LORD. The judgment will fall on unbelievers, people who have no such reverential fear of the LORD, no matter who they are. That judgment will be for their sins.⁴⁰

8. The sins that illustrate the rejection of God include some that tend to be less noticed in both the ancient world and today: cheating on the pay of hired workers, oppressing widows and orphans, and mistreating sojourners. ("Sojourner" [*gēr*] refers to a resident alien who had abandoned his homeland and taken up a permanent or prolonged residence in another community with the permission of a host.) All of these were "dependent peoples who of

³⁸ Ross, 133.

³⁹ Merrill, 858.

⁴⁰ Ross, 143.

necessity rely on others for justice since they are not in a position to demand it, or mete it out, themselves."⁴¹

VI. Fifth Disputation (3:6-12)

A. Call to repentance (3:6-7)

⁶ "For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed. ⁷ From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts. But you say, 'How shall we return?'

1. It is only because God does not change, and hence has not changed in his commitment to and patience toward Israel, that they have not been destroyed. It is only his nature that has protected them. They have a long and sorry history of disobeying his commands.

2. Though their rebellion has estranged them from God, he has not consumed them as would be justified. Instead, he calls them to repentance. That is always the path to restoration – confessing, renouncing, and turning from one's sin.

3. Right on cue, their response is one of skepticism and denial. When they say, "How shall we return?" they are saying, essentially, "What are you talking about?" The implication is that they are unaware of or are not doing anything that requires repentance.

B. Robbing God (3:8-9)

⁸ Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. But you say, 'How have we robbed you?' In your tithes and contributions. ⁹ You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me, the whole nation of you.

1. God specifies for them a sin of which they need to repent. As outrageous as it would be for a man to rob God, to take for himself what was rightfully God's, he declares that they are robbing him. They again resist and take umbrage, asking how they have robbed him.

2. They were robbing God by not paying the tithes and offerings because the wealth given in the tithes and offerings was the Lord's to begin with, so in not giving him what was his they were robbing him. Stuart states:

[T]he biblical doctrine [is] that "the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof" (Ps. 24:1; see also Ps. 50:12) and that, covenantally, all wealth of any kind is God's in its entirety (Exod. 19:5, "all the earth is mine"; Lev. 20:26, "all Israel is mine"; Lev. 25:23, "all the land is mine"), and that his people never own it, but only possess it (or "handle" it) temporarily (this is particularly emphasized with the firstfruits and tithes: Exod. 13:2; 34:19; Lev. 27:30, 32; Num. 8:17). . . .

⁴¹ Stuart, 1358.

[O]fferings are being brought to their owner rather than given by their owners. . . . Thus, if God owns the tithe in the first place, and has clearly stated in his covenant law that he expects it to be given over to him at the appropriate times of the year, withholding it is robbery. Taking something and keeping it from its owner is robbery.⁴²

3. The "tithes" (or "tenth part") refers to the general tithe of their income or produce of the land as mandated by the Mosaic law (Lev. 27:30-32; Num. 18:21-32; Deut. 12:5-19, 14:22-28, 26:12). The "contributions" may refer specifically to the "tithe of the tithe" that the Levites were required to make (Num. 18:26), or it may be intended generally for all other offerings. The point is that they were not giving as required. Ross comments:

In the Old Testament economy all the giving covered the sanctuary offerings for God, the taxes for the nation, and charitable gifts all rolled together. Their failure to bring these to God, or to bring worthless gifts and offerings, was a clear sign of their ingratitude and disloyalty. Their unfaithfulness to God was evidenced, therefore, in their lack of giving, which for Israel was serious, because giving was the heart of the covenant in view of the fact they owed their lives and their possessions to God. Giving properly was a sign that they acknowledged this, and that they were demonstrating their dependence on him for everything they needed.⁴³

4. As a result of their widespread ("the whole nation") unfaithfulness in giving, their robbing of God, the entire nation was cursed, meaning God was withholding his blessings from them. Judging from the following verses, the specific blessings he has in mind were rain and protection of crops from pests and disease, both of which were part of God's provision of food, the most basic essential of physical life.

C. Prove the promises (3:10-12)

¹⁰ Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. And thereby put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need. ¹¹ I will rebuke the devourer for you, so that it will not destroy the fruits of your soil, and your vine in the field shall not fail to bear, says the LORD of hosts. ¹² Then all nations will call you blessed, for you will be a land of delight, says the LORD of hosts.

1. God tells them to put him to the test by repenting, as reflected in their ceasing to rob him by giving as required. He will reverse the curse, the withholding of his blessings, by pouring out abundant rain and protecting their crops that they may have a full harvest.

2. Part of God's arrangement with Israel under the old covenant was his promise to bless the nation in its faithfulness and to curse it in its rebellion. Crop failure from withholding

⁴² Stuart, 1367.

⁴³ Ross, 156.

rain and from pestilence and disease were among the curses for unfaithfulness (Deut. 28:22; Amos 4:6-9). It is in the context of that pact, that covenant, with Israel, which addressed their life as a nation in a specific geographical location, that he urges them to prove his promises.

3. As Ross states, "I don't think we can apply the passage directly to our circumstance because it was a message to a nation living in the land of Israel to whom God made promises of sending rain, producing crops, and giving prosperity in the land if the people faithfully tithed."⁴⁴ We must reason by analogy in a new-covenant context where God's people have no unique nation and no direct promises of agricultural provision as a blessing of faithfulness.

4. Christians are not under an obligation to tithe, but we are obligated to give generously of everything over which God has made us stewards. And God blesses faithful stewards (2 Cor. 9:6-10), but there is a danger of turning this into an absolute law and thinking that it refers exclusively to material things so that giving becomes a quid pro quo investment strategy. Ross writes:

It is best to say that believers, not the secular country we live in, must demonstrate faith by being faithful in their stewardship and other expressions of loyalty, trusting that God will provide all their needs, spiritually as well as materially.

But if we refuse to show our loyalty and faithfulness to God in even such a simple thing as stewardship of our time, our talents, and our income in gratitude to him, then he may very well prevent his greatest blessings from being given to us. And we must be careful not to treat stewardship as an investment for sure returns, for the blessing of God on his people today could be spiritual, and it could be heavenly. It may be material – but it may not.⁴⁵

5. When God blesses the land in response to the people's faithfulness, it will be a "land of delight." All the nations will acknowledge God's gracious provision upon Israel.

VII. The Sixth Disputation (3:13-4:3)

A. Claim it is useless to serve God (3:13-15)

¹³ "Your words have been hard against me, says the LORD. But you say, 'How have we spoken against you?' ¹⁴ You have said, 'It is vain to serve God. What is the profit of our keeping his charge or of walking as in mourning before the LORD of hosts?' ¹⁵ And now we call the arrogant blessed. Evil-doers not only prosper but they put God to the test and they escape.'"

⁴⁴ Ross, 159.

⁴⁵ Ross, 159.

1. God says their words have been hard against him, meaning they had criticized him sharply. He then gives voice to their belief that they had done no such thing: "How have we spoken against you?" It is pushback from the deluded or openly defiant.

2. God explains that they had dared to say it is useless to serve him. They saw the wicked prospering, going their merry way, whereas those who cared about doing his will did not seem to be reaping any reward. Their life was difficult.

a. The problem, of course, was that their experience did not fit with how they thought it ought to be (and how God says it *generally* will be). They expected blessings, wealth, and the "good life" to belong to the righteous, those who are loyal to God, and when that expectation was contradicted by their experience, they turned on God. Rather than going back to the theological drawing board, they, as many do today, concluded that God was undeserving of devotion

b. This same notion of strict or absolutist retributive justice, the idea that rewards and blessings accompany righteous living and suffering and punishment accompany sinful living, good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people, is central to the Book of Job and is rebuked elsewhere in Scripture. For example, Asaph in Psalm 73 was thrown into confusion by the prosperity of the wicked such that he almost lost his faith. But as Tremper Longman remarks, "[Asaph] came to understand that there are not perfect and immediate consequences for sin and righteousness in the present, but in the end everyone does get what they deserve."⁴⁶ Longman is, of course, not denying salvation by grace but saying only that those who are faithful to God and thus live righteously will one day be perfectly distinguished from those who are not faithful to God and thus live unrighteously.

B. Faithfulness to God vindicated (3:16-18)

¹⁶ Then those who feared the LORD spoke with one another. The LORD paid attention and heard them, and a book of remembrance was written before him of those who feared the LORD and esteemed his name. ¹⁷ "They shall be mine, says the LORD of hosts, in the day when I make up my treasured possession, and I will spare them as a man spares his son who serves him. ¹⁸ Then once more you shall see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve him.

1. In contrast to those skeptics and rebels, God on judgment day will remember and spare those who feared him and esteemed his name. Stuart comments:

It is not fruitless to keep Yahweh's covenant. It is not true that he never does anything. It is not correct that the arrogant are blessed and the evil prosper and those who test God get away with it – not forever, that is. While it may seem like God does not act swiftly (2 Peter 3:4), and though remaining faithful to him may

⁴⁶ Tremper Longman, *Job*, BCOT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012), 231.

seem to offer few rewards in this world, things will be very different when he chooses to act decisively. Then the reward of the righteous will come.⁴⁷

2. On that Day, the distinction between the righteous, the faithful, and those who are not, the distinction the skeptics complained God was not making, again will be evident to all. The "again" may refer to a past distinctiveness of God's people in the world, a time before Israel had lost its visible distinctiveness from the nations (Deut. 17:14; Ezek. 20:32). Merrill states:

At the last day, when wrath is about to be poured out on the earth, the Lord will recollect those whose names he knows and he will spare them from judgment (v. 17). They will be clearly identified as his own people, his special possession. . . . No longer will it be impossible to distinguish the righteous and the wicked, as the Lord's critics are presently charging, for then all hypocrisy will be stripped away and what has been interpreted as divine indifference will be seen as patient longsuffering (v.18).⁴⁸

C. Judgment Day (4:1-3 [MT 3:19-21])

For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the LORD of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. ² But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall. ³ And you shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet, on the day when I act, says the LORD of hosts.

1. A momentous day is coming when all the faithless, described as the arrogant and evildoers, will be burned by fire.

a. John the Baptist said of Jesus in Mat. 3:11-12:

¹¹ "I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹² His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

b. The final judgment at the return of Christ is pictured in Mat. 25:31-46:

³¹ "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. ³² Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³ And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. ³⁴ Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my

⁴⁷ Stuart, 1384.

⁴⁸ Merrill, 861.

*Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. . . .*⁴¹ *"Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. . . .*⁴⁶ *And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."*

2. Most scholars recognize that the fiery imagery of hell is metaphorical, as indicated by the fact conflicting language is used in the New Testament to describe it. William Crockett states, "How could hell be literal fire when it is also described as darkness (Matt. 8:12; 22:13; 25:30; 2 Peter 2:17; Jude 14)? Those who raise the question have a good point. Fire and darkness are mutually exclusive terms, but as we have seen, they are often juxtaposed in Jewish writings (Qumran, 1QS 2:8; 4:13; 1 Enoch 103:7; 2 Enoch 10:2; Jerusalem Talmud, Shekalim 6:1, 49d)."⁴⁹ Burning is one of the most painful things a human can experience, which is a way of saying hell must be avoided at all cost.

3. The effect of the judgment will be total, leaving neither root nor branch. Nothing will escape the condemnation, as though one could retain in hell anything of the old life that one valued. The fact natural fires of the present age consume what they burn does not mean the imagery of hell as an eternal fire is intended to teach the annihilation of its inhabitants. In the first place, even natural fires of the present age do not annihilate what they consume, extinguish its existence. Rather, they ruin it by transforming it into ashes, something of no use or value. But more importantly, the physics of earthly fires cannot be applied to the metaphorical fire of the age to come.

4. The faithful, on the other hand, those who revere God, will be blessed on that day. The "sun of righteousness," the metaphorical sun that on that day will shine on those who love God and therefore love righteousness, will rise and by its rays (wings) bring healing. Merrill comments, "This beautiful metaphor describes the reversal of the curse of sin and mortality by which the human race has been held in bondage."

5. The redeemed will rejoice, the emotion ascribed to calves that leap about when freed from the stall (or that frolic like stall-fed, meaning well fed, calves). Ross states, "Calves that have been penned up closely for winter months will skip in their running when they are set free from the stalls. So the point of the simile is that the righteous when they are finally set free from all the effects of the curse will leap for joy in great celebration."⁵⁰

6. On that Day, the relationship of the wicked and righteous, the faithless and faithful, will be reversed. Those who appeared in their day to be the victors, those who dismissed and mistreated the faithful of God, will be burned to ashes, whereas those who appeared to be the conquered will be blessed in the judgment of God. They will be vindicated and honored, and their enemies will be crushed and put to shame. This is the reversal that is pictured in the faithful walking on the ashes of the wicked.

⁴⁹ William Crockett, "The Metaphorical View" in William Crockett, ed., *Four Views on Hell* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 59.

⁵⁰ Ross, 179.

NOTE: We see in Scripture that God motivates us to faithfulness by the truth that he will bless the righteous, the faithful, and damn the unrighteous, the unfaithful. Hebrews 11:6 states: "And without faith it is impossible to please [him], for it is necessary for the one who approaches God to believe that he exists and is *a rewarder of those who seek him.*" See, e.g., Mat. 5:12; Lk. 6:35, 14:12-14. That raises the question of whether that is an ethically inferior motivation or incentive, a matter of base self-interest versus true love or self-sacrifice. In other words, is conduct that is motivated by such promises and incentives ethically tainted in some way? If we think that, we will kick against that motivation, but in doing so I fear we will turn away from the strength God intends us to draw from those promises. I suggest that conduct that is motivated by a longing for greater intimacy with God, a longing for the blessings of eternal life with him and avoidance of the horror of eternal separation, is actually nobler, purer, than conduct that is not so motivated. To be moved by the hope of knowing and enjoying Christ better is ethically superior to acting without that motivation because the former gives greater glory to God. See, e.g., John Piper, "[Is Love Fake If Motivated by Reward?](#)"

VIII. Appendix (4:4-6 [MT 3:22-24])

A. Obey the law of Moses (4:4)

⁴ *"Remember the law of my servant Moses, the statutes and rules that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel.*

1. The book ends first with a call for the people to "remember" the law of Moses. Horeb is an alternate name for Mount Sinai (cf. Ex. 33:6; 1 Ki. 19:8). This means more than to recall the requirements of the law; it means to act on what is remembered, to obey that law. Hill states, "To remember is more than memorializing the past by means of the intellectual activity of recalling YHWH's deeds in history. Rather, it is an exhortation to act upon that knowledge, by harnessing the will in obedience to God's commandments."⁵¹

2. Ross draws out the implication for us under the new covenant as we await the return of Christ:

The call is for them to obey the Law of Moses, which was the foundation of all Scripture. People could not willfully disobey the Law and claim to be righteous. We of course have much more Scripture. But Jesus said he did not come to annul or destroy the Law, but to fulfill it. So we interpret the Law through the fulfillment of Christ, and learn that the revelation in the Law is still profitable for instruction in righteousness, as the apostle says (2 Tim. 3:16).

The principle is that we who are looking for the second coming of Jesus the Messiah should be living soberly and righteously in obedience to Scripture. The apostle John says that whoever has this hope purifies himself (1 John 3:3). To

⁵¹ Hill, 362.

live daily in the expectancy of the second coming, watching and waiting, means that we will be found faithful.⁵²

B. Elijah and the Day of the Lord (4:5-6)

⁵ *"Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. ⁶ And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction."*

1. In 3:1 God declared that he was going to come and that his coming would be preceded by his messenger, a forerunner who would herald his arrival. As I pointed out, that messenger was John the Baptist. Jesus identifies him as such in Mat. 11:10, Mk. 1:2, and Lk. 7:27.

2. Here that messenger is referred to as Elijah the prophet, which is why the Jews expected Elijah to return in advance of the Messiah (Mat. 17:10; Mk. 9:11). The fact John's clothes were camel's hair and he wore a leather belt around his waist was a distinctive, symbolic identification with the prophet Elijah, who is described that way in 2 Ki. 1:8 (the literal "hairy man" is rightly understood in many translations to refer to a *garment* of hair, as such clothing was typical of prophets – see Zech. 13:4). The angel told Zechariah in Lk. 1:17 that John would go before the Lord "in the spirit and power of Elijah," and Jesus elsewhere expressly identifies John as the Elijah who was to come (Mk. 9:11-13; Mat. 11:14, 17:10-13).

3. John himself denied he was Elijah in Jn. 1:21, probably because he was not *literally* Elijah, which is how most Jews understood the prophecy.⁵³ He was, however, the *prophesied Elijah*, meaning the one who came in the spirit and power of Elijah as the forerunner to the Messiah. J. H. Bernard states:

In a sense, John the Baptist was the Elijah of Jewish expectation, and so Jesus declares (Matt. 11:14; cf. Luke 1:17), but in the sense in which the Jewish emissaries put the question, '*Art though Elijah?*' the true answer was *No*; for, while the Baptist fulfilled the preliminary ministry of which Malachi had spoken, he was not Elijah returned to earth in bodily form.⁵⁴

4. The reference to Moses and Elijah together brings to mind their appearance on the mountain when Jesus was transfigured. These figures represent the Law (the Pentateuch) and "the Prophets," both the Former (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings) and Latter prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, the Twelve) of the Hebrew Bible.

5. This Elijah figure "will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers," probably meaning he will call the present generation, the rebellious children (descendants), to repentance, the effect of which will be to heal the figurative breach

⁵² Ross, 180.

⁵³ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 118-119.

⁵⁴ Quoted in Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 76.

between the faithful "fathers" of old and the present generation.⁵⁵ That is the message of repentance that John preached (Mat. 3:1-12). Stuart comments, "Malachi's preaching is not merely calling for some sort of generational or family closeness, but for unified obedience to the faith on the part of everyone. . . . Elijah was famous for his effectiveness in the process of converting the Israelites of his day back to faith in the true God, Yahweh (1 Kings 18:37). The new Elijah would be sent by God to do the same thing in the future."⁵⁶

6. Without repentance, a turning back to the Lord, the future holds only destruction. This is an image of the great final judgment. As Ross says, "when the Lord comes he will destroy the world, but will spare his faithful people."⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Peter A. Verhoef, *The Books of Haggai and Malachi*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 342-343.

⁵⁶ Stuart, 1395.

⁵⁷ Ross, 182.