

General Comments on Malachi

The book of Malachi, the last book in the Old Testament, is a broad indictment of the people at Jerusalem, including Priests, Levites and the general population of Judah, for pervasive religious corruption. The accusations Malachi levels at them are primarily focused at the Priests, who should be the religious elite, the educators who enforce the sanctity of the Temple proper.

We know nothing of the man Malachi himself, as there are no biographical details or comments made by him (verse 3:16 might be the only exception). The Hebrew name means "my messenger", which [appears in 3:1](#), suggesting perhaps the book is anonymous. The text is the documentation of the Lord's first-person complaint against Jerusalem in a legal exhibition, with Malachi acting as His prosecution in a series of legalistic accusations and judgement.

The arguments are well-ordered and presuppose an intimate knowledge of the Law and Psalms, which the Priests and Levites should be well-acquainted with. The defendant's rebuttals are weak, limited to simplistic contradictions without any real merit. Each pair of accusations is ended with a judgement, with the third and final judgement being an indictment of threat of complete destruction (cf. 4:1 and 4:5). The more one is familiar with the Law and Psalms, the more one will realize how blisteringly harsh the accusations and judgements are.

Historical Context

Malachi was contemporary with Nehemiah (cp. Mal. 2:8 with Neh. 13:15 and Mal. 2:10-16 with Neh. 13:23) giving the book a probable date of ~420 B.C.E. For historical context, a review of Neh. 13 follows, as it sheds considerable light on Malachi's comments:

1 ON that day they read in the book of Moses in the audience of the people; and therein was found written, that the Ammonite and the Moabite should not come into the congregation of God for ever; 2 Because they met not the children of Israel with bread and with water, but hired Balaam against them, that he should curse them: howbeit our God turned the curse into a blessing. 3 Now it came to pass, when they had heard the law, that they separated from Israel all the mixed multitude.

These verses address the problem of foreigners among Israel, as does v. 23-31.

4 And before this, Eliashib the priest, having the oversight of

the chamber of the house of our God, [was] allied unto Tobiah: 5 And he had prepared for him a great chamber, where aforetime they laid the meat offerings, the frankincense, and the vessels, and the tithes of the corn, the new wine, and the oil, which was commanded [to be given] to the Levites, and the singers, and the porters; and the offerings of the priests. 6 But in all this [time] was not I at Jerusalem: for in the two and thirtieth year of Artaxerxes king of Babylon came I unto the king, and after certain days obtained I leave of the king: 7 And I came to Jerusalem, and understood of the evil that Eliashib did for Tobiah, in preparing him a chamber in the courts of the house of God. 8 And it grieved me sore: therefore I cast forth all the household stuff of Tobiah out of the chamber. 9 Then I commanded, and they cleansed the chambers: and thither brought I again the vessels of the house of God, with the meat offering and the frankincense.

One of the priests took up residence inside the Temple and he appears to have usurped the Levite's portion for his personal use. His flagrant selfishness is overturned when Nehemiah learns of it. This explains Malachi's hostile comments towards corrupt priests in 1:6-2:9.

10 And I perceived that the portions of the Levites had not been given [them]: for the Levites and the singers, that did the work, were fled every one to his field. 11 Then contended I with the rulers, and said, why is the house of God forsaken? And I gathered them together, and set them in their place. 12 Then brought all Judah the tithe of the corn and the new wine and the oil unto the treasuries. 13 And I made treasurers over the treasuries, Shelemiah the priest, and Zadok the scribe, and of the Levites, Pedaiah: and next to them [was] Hanan the son of Zaccur, the son of Mattaniah: for they were counted faithful, and their office [was] to distribute unto their brethren. 14 Remember me, O my God, concerning this, and wipe not out my good deeds that I have done for the house of my God, and for the offices thereof.

The Levite's portion of the Temple offerings aren't making it to the Levites. It is unclear if this is because the leaders are diverting it to themselves, or if the people in general have become lax in making Temple offerings. Malachi's comments in 1:8 and 3:8-12 suggest it is a combination of both. It may have also been something of a natural reaction to the incident in v. 4-9 above, and the people became embittered by Eliashib's abuses, resulting in cynical complacency.

These Levites being referenced are those of the tribe of Levi but who are not acting as priests, they are staffing the Temple as operations and maintenance. Their lot was to care for the Temple, and not to till the land (cf. Num. 18:20-24). However, because the sacrifices were not going to the Temple as they ought, their portion was becoming so small they were forced to leave the Temple to otherwise provide for themselves.

15 In those days saw I in Judah [some] treading wine presses on the sabbath, and bringing in sheaves, and lading asses; as also wine, grapes, and figs, and all [manner of] burdens, which they brought into Jerusalem on the sabbath day: and I testified [against them] in the day wherein they sold victuals. 16 There dwelt men of Tyre also therein, which brought fish, and all manner of ware, and sold on the sabbath unto the children of Judah, and in Jerusalem. 17 Then I contended with the nobles of Judah, and said unto them, what evil thing [is] this that ye do, and profane the sabbath day? 18 Did not your fathers thus, and did not our God bring all this evil upon us, and upon this city? yet ye bring more wrath upon Israel by profaning the sabbath.

19 And it came to pass, that when the gates of Jerusalem began to be dark before the sabbath, I commanded that the gates should be shut, and charged that they should not be opened till after the sabbath: and [some] of my servants set I at the gates, [that] there should no burden be brought in on the sabbath day. 20 So the merchants and sellers of all kind of ware lodged without Jerusalem once or twice. 21 Then I testified against them, and said unto them, why lodge ye about the wall? if ye do [so] again, I will lay hands on you. From that time forth came they no [more] on the sabbath. 22 And I commanded the Levites that they should cleanse themselves, and [that] they should come [and] keep the gates, to sanctify the sabbath day. Remember me, O my God, [concerning] this also, and spare me according to the greatness of thy mercy.

Nehemiah indicates Sabbath observance was not as it should be, and he enforced its application. He initially has his own men shut the gates to prevent merchants from trafficking on the Sabbath, but ultimately has the Levites enforce it. Curiously enough, Malachi doesn't broach this subject at all. Perhaps the majority of the active offenders were Gentiles, or the problem was effectively dealt with so quickly that it did not merit attention from Malachi, or maybe it occurred before or after the time of Malachi's ministry.

23 In those days also saw I Jews [that] had married wives of Ashdod, of Ammon, [and] of Moab: 24 And their children spake half in the speech of Ashdod, and could not speak in the Jews' language, but according to the language of each people. 25 And I contended with them, and cursed them, and smote certain of them, and plucked off their hair, and made them swear by God, [saying], ye shall not give your daughters unto their sons, nor take their daughters unto your sons, or for yourselves. 26 Did not Solomon king of Israel sin by these things? yet among many nations was there no king like him, who was beloved of his God, and God made him king over all Israel: nevertheless even him did outlandish women cause to sin. 27 Shall we then hearken unto you to do all this great evil, to transgress against our God in marrying strange wives?

28 And [one] of the sons of Joiada, the son of Eliashib the high priest, [was] son in law to Sanballat the Horonite: therefore I chased him from me. 29 Remember them, O my God, because they have defiled the priesthood, and the covenant of the priesthood, and of the Levites. 30 Thus cleansed I them from all

strangers, and appointed the wards of the priests and the Levites, every one in his business; 31 And for the wood offering, at times appointed, and for the firstfruits. Remember me, O my God, for good.

As in v. 1-3 above, the people at Jerusalem are having problems with intermingling with foreigners. Here it is made plain the Israelites at Jerusalem are marrying foreign women and the Hebrew language and religion is not being taught to their children. The difficulty in getting the people to conform is epitomized by Malachi's conflict with even the Temple high priests, some of whom are allowing their sons to marry foreigners. This places Malachi's comments in ch. 2 in context, particularly 2:10-11.

Prophetic and Literary Style

The book is eminently prophetic in its style and rhetoric. It follows the lawsuit form of speech found in Micah and Isaiah by presenting the Lord as Judge with Malachi as His prosecutor and the Priests, Levites and people as defendants. He throws allegations at them, and they argue with Him while being in complete denial over their own faults. The result is He heaps curses upon them and threatens them with overthrow unless they repent, typical of the standard covenant curses of Lev. 16 and Deut. 28.

As the lawsuit develops, the case appears as three pairs of allegations by the Lord with denials by the Priests and Levites (the A's), interspersed with three corresponding threats of covenant curses intended to purge the wicked from the righteous (the B's).

Note each of the A's take the form of the Lord making the accusation and the defendants asking Him "How have we done this?", thereby even questioning the Lord's judgement in the process of denying. The accusations in the A sections follow a pattern of Aa, Ab, Ac, with the Aa representing the covenant with Jacob, the Ab representing the Priests, and the Ac representing the Levites. All accusations presented are related to Temple worship, and signal the complete corruption of the religious leadership of the Southern Kingdom, hence the imagery of Elijah being invoked in the third and final curse.

The legal argument ends with those who fear the Lord being inscribed in the book of life (the third and final Ba strophe below), and a concluding judgement of overthrow for the wicked priests and destruction for the wicked people. The text can be arranged as follows:

Aa - 1:2-5 Lord: "I have loved you." [Covenant with Israel]
 Israel: "How have you loved us?"

Ab - 1:6-14 Lord: "Where is My honor?" [Temple theme]
 Priests: "How have we defamed Your name?"

B - 2:1-9 Priests, I am going to curse and rebuke you

Ba - 2:1-3 Honor Me or I will throw you out like trash

Bb - 2:4-5b My covenant will continue with you

Bc - 2:5c-6 Priests walked with Me in justice

Bb - 2:7 Priests are supposed to be My messenger

Ba - 2:8-9 You turn people against Me, you are despised

Ab-2:10-15 Lord: "Have we not all one father?" [Temple theme]
 Priests: "Wherefore?"

Ac-2:16-17 Lord: "You have wearied the Lord" [contradicting Psalm 73]
 Israel: "Wherein have we wearied Him?"

B - 3:1-6 I will come to judge you, Levites and Israelites

Ba - 3:1 I send My messenger suddenly to My Temple

Bb - 3:2-3b Who can endure the Day, he will purify

Bc - 3:3c-4 Then the offering will be accepted

Bb - 3:5 I will judge you, all wicked among you

Ba - 3:6 I have not changed, you have not ceased to exist

Ab-3:7-12 Lord: "Will a man rob God?" [Temple theme]
 Israel: "Wherein have we robbed Thee?"

Ac-3:13-15 Lord: "Your words have been stout against Me" [cont. Ps 37]
 Israel: "What have we spoken against Thee?"

B - 3:16-4:6 I will send Elijah the prophet, before Day of Lord

Ba - 3:16-18 Believers logged in book, those who serve God

Bb - 4:1 Wicked consumed on Day of the Lord

Bc - 4:2 Salvation, delivery, Messiah

Bd - As calves treading in the stall

Bd - 4:3 As oxen treading under foot

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Bc - 4:4 Remember the law of Moses

Bb - 4:5 Messenger sent before Day of the Lord

Ba - 4:6 Turn hearts of children to fathers, lest cursed

This book brings an end to the Prophets versus Priests antagonism that started with Samuel. Malachi is the last prophet to castigate the priests, telling them their corruption has impeached them. They are at the point where the Lord will have to purge them of their wickedness the same way Elijah purged ancient Israel.

Theology: Israel and the Nations

One of the themes running through the book of Malachi is the tension between Judah and their surrounding non-Israelite neighbors. The Lord highlights their special relationship by contrasting them with Esau, who has been entirely rejected (cf. 1:2-4).

In choosing Israel, the Lord's intent was to make His name great among the nations (cf. 1:5, 1:11, 1:14, cp. Exod. 14:4-18) through their blessed and successful condition (cf. 3:12). The problem is Israel is instead acculturating with the Nations, profaning the Lord's Temple by offensive sacrifices (1:7-10, 1:12-14) and foreign intermarriage and idolatry (cf. 2:10-16). Instead of Israel setting a good example by worshipping the Lord, they are setting a bad example by offending Him. This theme is most prominent in the first set of accusations (ch. 1) where the Lord explicitly states Israel's purpose is to magnify the Lord beyond the borders of Israel (cf. 1:5, 1:11, 1:14g), but they are not.

The result is He will punish them (cf. 2:1-9), to purify them (cf. 3:1-6), so He can restore the connection between the Patriarchs and their children (cf. 4:1-6), and they will be the good example He desires.

Theology: Present versus Future state of Temple Worship

In all three pairs of accusations the Lord accuses Priests, Levites and Judah in general of profaning the Temple: defiling sacrifices (cf. 1:7-10), contradicting everything the Law (cf. 2:5-6, 4:4) and Psalms (cf. 2:17, 3:13-15) teach, idolatrous adultery and divorce (cf. 2:11-16), and withholding tithes and offerings from the Temple (cf. 3:9-10).

These accusations are contrasted with the idealized Temple worship the Lord looks forward to them engaging in: the Lord will be magnified beyond the borders of Israel (cf. 1:5, 1:11), the sons of Levi will be His messengers who turn many away from sin (cf. 2:4-7) after they are purified (cf. 3:1-4), His people are those who honor His name and do His works (cf. 3:16-18).

How will this be brought about? The Lord will send His servant Elijah before the Day of the Lord to condemn the wicked and preserve the righteous (cf. 4:1-5), otherwise all will be for naught (cf. 4:6).

Bringing Elijah into the text necessarily brings along the context from 1 Kings 18, which is exceptionally hostile to the current set of Priests and Levites running the Temple. Elijah came out against the priests of Baal whom were employed by King Ahaz and Jezebel, won the duel, and had them slaughtered. The Lord saying He will bring a messenger of the covenant (cf. 3:1) like Elijah (cf. 4:5) to clean house on the Levites is effectively a lethal threat.

The primary context of Temple worship highlights it's importance with respect to the Lord's point of view. His criticisms of the corruption of the audience is pervasive, as it addresses the people of Judah bringing up the offerings (cf. 1:12-14, 2:11-16), the Priests making the offerings (cf. 1:8-10, 2:13), and the Levites operating the Temple (cf. 2:17. 3:14-15). There isn't anyone at Jerusalem not included in this scathing critique.

Rhetorical Style: Temple and Psalms

While the overarching style is that of a lawsuit form of speech, there are explicit reference to Temple worship as well as oblique references to the Psalms built into two of the arguments. The fourth argument (2:17) uses the theme of Psalm 73 and the sixth argument (3:13-15) uses the theme of Psalm 37 in their delivered rebukes. Psalms were commonly sung by Levites at the Temple as a means of welcoming and educating Regalim pilgrims. As such, these themes are woven into the arguments against the Levites, as the should be intimately familiar with them.

Comments on Malachi 1

Some of my comments on Malachi are inspired by or paraphrases of comments from Ebenezer Henderson's Commentary on the Minor Prophets, originally published in 1845 with subsequent reprints as late as 1983. The book is off copyright, so reproductions are readily [available on the Internet](#).

1 THE burden of the word of the LORD to Israel by Malachi.

v1 An ambiguous introduction, similar to Joel's, that leaves us guessing as to lineage and dating.

2 I have loved you, saith the LORD. Yet ye say, wherein hast thou loved us?

[Was] not Esau Jacob's brother? saith the LORD: yet I loved Jacob, 3 And I hated Esau, and laid his mountains and his heritage waste for the dragons of the wilderness. 4 whereas Edom saith, we are impoverished, but we will return and build the desolate places; thus saith the LORD of hosts, They shall build, but I will throw down; and they shall call them, The border of wickedness, and, The people against whom the LORD hath indignation for ever.

5 And your eyes shall see, and ye shall say, The LORD will be magnified from the border of Israel.

v2-5 The Lord's love and fidelity for Israel is contrasted with Israel contrariness. The Lord pronounces He has loved Israel, and they question Him on this point (v. 2). He points out Esau was Jacob's elder brother and yet Jacob was chosen over him, and Esau was cursed (v. 3). Regardless of what Edom, the land of the descendants of Esau, does the Lord will strike them down (v. 4). In seeing this, Israel must confess the Lord is the God of all the earth (v. 5).

The general intent is to display contemporary Judah's contrary nature when it comes to recognizing the hand of Providence. They are looking at their own present situation and finding it lacking. They do not consider the blessings of the Lord upon them, only the cursing. And even when they do that, they don't recognize the curses upon them are mild compared to those heaped upon Esau's descendants.

The underlying problem is Judah has forgotten their covenant relationship with the Lord. They don't see any difference between themselves and their brothers in Edom. If they understood the covenant relationship they enjoyed, they would realize the blessings of obedience and the Lord's mercy on

them.

The general idea presented in these verses is an echo of the book of Obadiah, where Esau's lineage is explicitly rejected for the harm they've done to Jacob's lineage.

v3 "dragons of the wilderness", the NAS renders this "jackals of the wilderness" as do most modern translations, and the JPS renders it "a home for beasts in the wilderness" noting the Hebrew is uncertain.

v4 "they shall call them...", two epithets are applied to the Edomites, "the border of wickedness" and "the people against whom the Lord indignation for ever". The JPS offers a plainer translation of "the region of wickedness" and "the people damned forever of the Lord". The text conveys the idea that the punishment upon Edom for her sins will be legendary.

v5 Israel's purpose is to show all nations that the Lord is God, not just the God of Israel, but the God of the entire earth and all people (cf. Gen. 18:18, Gen. 22:18, Gen. 26:4, Exod. 7:5, Exod. 14:18, Isa. 61:9). At present, the people at Jerusalem are profaning the Temple and dishonoring Him.

6 A son honoureth [his] father, and a servant his master: if then I [be] a father, where [is] mine honour? and if I [be] a master, where [is] my fear? saith the LORD of hosts unto you, O priests, that despise my name. And ye say, wherein have we despised thy name?

7 Ye offer polluted bread upon mine altar; and ye say, wherein have we polluted thee? In that ye say, The table of the LORD [is] contemptible. 8 And if ye offer the blind for sacrifice, [is it] not evil? and if ye offer the lame and sick, [is it] not evil? offer it now unto thy governor; will he be pleased with thee, or accept thy person? saith the LORD of hosts. 9 And now, I pray you, beseech God that he will be gracious unto us: this hath been by your means: will he regard your persons?

saith the LORD of hosts. 10 who [is there] even among you that would shut the doors [for nought]? neither do ye kindle [fire] on mine altar for nought. I have no pleasure in you, saith the LORD of hosts, neither will I accept an offering at your hand. 11 For from the rising of the sun even unto the going down of the same my name [shall be] great among the Gentiles; and in every place incense [shall be] offered unto my name, and a pure offering: for my name [shall be] great among the heathen, saith the LORD of hosts. 12 But ye have profaned it, in that ye say, The table of the LORD [is] polluted; and the fruit thereof, [even] his meat, [is] contemptible. 13 Ye said also, Behold,

what a weariness [is it]! and ye have snuffed at it, saith the LORD of hosts; and ye brought [that which was] torn, and the lame, and the sick; thus ye brought an offering: should I accept this of your hand? saith the LORD. 14 But cursed [be] the deceiver, which hath in his flock a male, and voweth, and sacrificeth unto the Lord a corrupt thing: for I [am] a great King, saith the LORD of hosts, and my name [is] dreadful among the heathen.

v6-14 This section moves to a specific allegation against the priests. But, it also generally reflects the people's attitude towards sacrifice as well, as it is the people who bring the offerings to the priests.

The is a general accusation of dishonor and denial in v. 6, with the specific accusation of profane sacrifices, and again a denial in v. 7. The priests offer prohibited inferior sacrifices (cf. Lev. 22:17-25) to the Lord while offering the best of the flock to their political leaders (v. 8). They then hypocritically request the Lord's favor (v. 9). The priests refuse to do anything without pay (v. 10). The Lord then predicts the replacement of the priests with Gentiles who will worship in purity (v. 11). Why is He replacing them with Gentiles? Because these priests profane the table of the Lord (v. 12), they disdain their sacred calling (v. 13), and offer forbidden sacrifices (v. 13-14). As a result, He will curse them and make His name great among the nations (v. 14).

The text can be arranged structurally to emphasize the failure of the Priests to perform their roles as mediators between the people and the Lord, as follows:

- A - (v. 6-7) Where is my honor? You despise Me
- B - (v. 8-10) Lame and sick offerings, no good priests
- C - (v. 11) My name will be great among nations
- A - (v. 12) You profane and despise the table of the Lord
- B - (v. 13-14c) Whiners offer the stolen, lame & sick
- C - (v. 14d-e) My name is feared among nations

The Priest's failure to enforce the requirements of the Law is resulting in them enabling the people's bad behavior, and their lack of zeal (v. 10) and grumbling (v. 13) is an affront to Him. They are supposed to be the good examples and enforcers of religious ritual (cf. 2:6-7), and are failing miserably.

v7 "the table of the Lord is contemptible", here the priests are complaining about their duty to serve in the Temple. They don't

want to be bothered with their responsibilities, they just want to reap the benefits.

v8 The priests are working diligently to curry the favor of the physical political rulers, but not their spiritual religious ruler. The Lord asks them rhetorically, "How much would your political ruler like this gift?" If not, then you wouldn't give it to him. Then why do you give Me the same thing he would refuse?

v9 While they offer inferior prohibited sacrifices, they ask the Lord for favor. Talk is cheap so they offer that willingly, while keeping the best animals for themselves.

v10 A mercenary spirit has infected the priests such that they won't even open the door or light a fire on the altar without being paid for it.

v11 An obscure verse. The intent is to predict the overthrow of the priests and their subsequent replacement with Gentiles from all nations around the world who will make pure sacrifices. Compare Isa. 56 where the priests are condemned in favor of righteous Gentiles. Note the last lines in v. 14 indicate the name of the Lord will be renowned among the Gentiles, which parallels a similar statement in v. 5 which is aimed at Israel. Thus, the "Times of the Gentiles" is not in fact a NT novelty, but an OT prediction, cf. Luke 21:24, D&C 45:28.

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