

# OpenTheo

## Malachi: Chapter-by-Chapter Commentary

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## Transcript

Malachi is the final of the prophets of the Book of the Twelve, and the last of the post-exilic prophets. In contrast to the two books that precede it, Haggai and Zechariah, it is undated, and we need to pick up on other clues in order to get a sense of the setting into which Malachi prophesied. Most of the Book of Malachi contains disputes between the Lord and his people on a series of matters, six disputes in total.

Commentators have noted the similarities between the issues raised by Malachi and some of the problems that were dealt with by Nehemiah. Corruption in sacrificial practice, unfaithfulness in marriage practices, failure to pay tithes, and injustice in the

society were all issues in Nehemiah's day, although Nehemiah seemed to have some success in dealing with them, slightly raising the likelihood that Malachi came either before or after Nehemiah. The fact that he isn't mentioned in the Book of Nehemiah is another thing to consider.

This said, sins such as those tackled by Malachi were prominent at many points in Israel's history. The reference to the governor in verse 8 and to the house of the Lord suggests that, at the least, this was after the rebuilding of the temple and during the Persian period. The name Malachi means, My messenger.

Malachi refers to the priest as a messenger in chapter 2 verse 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. He also speaks of a coming messenger in chapter 3 verse 1. 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.

Considering these references, some commentators have wondered whether Malachi was the prophet's actual name, but there is no compelling reason to believe that it wasn't. The disputes of the Book of Malachi have a question and answer format. The first chapter contains the first dispute in verses 1 to 5, and the start of the second which runs from verse 6 of this chapter to verse 9 of the next.

As James Jordan observes, such a disputation approach is not exclusive to Malachi. Paul uses a similar rhetorical technique in the Book of Romans. Anthony Patterson observes the manner in which the opening verses of the book are a series of three successive small A-B-B-A chiasms.

For instance, I have loved you is juxtaposed with, how have you loved us? And says the Lord is juxtaposed with, but you say. In this and other disputations, the Lord gives voice to the unfaithful hearts of his people, and then answers their sentiments. The oracle or burden of Malachi opens with the Lord's declaration of his love for his people, a love manifested in his choosing of Jacob over his older twin brother Esau.

Israel was the bride of the Lord, chosen by him from among all of the peoples in love, not on account of anything on Israel's part that would set them apart from any other. As Moses taught in Deuteronomy chapter 7 verses 6 to 8. The love that the Lord showed for Jacob is contrasted with his hatred of Esau, the brother of Jacob. The contrast here is principally one between choice and rejection, using the same verb for hating that is used of Jacob's attitude towards Leah in Genesis chapter 29 verses 31 and 33.

The hatred there probably doesn't bear quite the same strong sense with which we are accustomed to using the term. As in verse 30 of that chapter, Jacob is described as loving Rachel more than Leah. In its use here in Malachi, the term probably has a

stronger sense than it does in those verses in Genesis.

Here hatred probably refers to the Lord's determined rejection of Esau and his posterity. He doesn't merely love them less. Esau and his land also suffer condemnation and judgement from the Lord.

The Lord's love for Jacob becomes more apparent when seen in contrast to Esau, who is judged by the Lord. The Edomites had taken advantage of their brother Jacob's weakness at the time of the destruction of Jerusalem to plunder and to join in the cruelty. In several prophecies, perhaps especially Obadiah, Edom is condemned for its behaviour and judgement is declared over it.

Our records of the relevant history are limited. Many scholars argue that the Babylonian Nabonidus was the one who brought Edom down in 553 BC. This would have fulfilled the prophecy of Ezekiel chapter 35 verses 7 to 15.

This is the prophecy of Ezekiel chapter 35 verses 7 to 15. The Babylonian Nabonidus is also mentioned in the mountains of Israel saying Although the Edomites would seek to return to their land and rebuild, as Israel had done, the Lord would doom such efforts to futility, demonstrating his sovereignty over nations beyond Israel's borders. The Edomites were removed from their former territory, which was now occupied by the Nabatean Arabs, with old Edomite cities and fortresses falling into ruins.

Verse 6 begins the second disputation and the longest of all of the six. The Lord is in various points in the prophets and elsewhere compared to the father of his people and also to their master. But yet fathers and masters receive honour and reverence, but no reverence seems to be accorded to the Lord, and most particularly by the priests, who should lead the people in such a matter.

Indeed the Lord goes so far to accuse them of despising his name. Naturally their response would be to claim innocence, so the Lord declares why it is that he is judging them in such a manner. Whatever they might say, their judgments speak loudly about the true contents of their hearts.

Even though they would never say with their lips that they despised the Lord, there was little doubting from their actions that they did so. They treated the altar, the Lord's table, with scant respect for its holiness, offering sacrifices which were not fitting upon it. Deuteronomy chapter 15 verse 21 is one of the verses that speaks about unfitting sacrifices.

But if it has any blemish, if it is lame or blind or has any serious blemish whatever, you shall not sacrifice it to the Lord your God. They are seeking to pass off second class animals as if they were proper gifts to the Lord. In fact they seem to be using their sacrifices as a means of bribing the Lord, and if that weren't enough of a perversion of

sacrifice by itself, the bribes that they are offering are very much of a lower quality.

The Lord sarcastically suggests that they offer these sacrifices to their governor, knowing that the people are well aware that a governor would be offended by such substandard gifts. The people are naive and foolish if they believe that they are going to be heard by the Lord when they despise him in such a manner. They bear the name of the Lord, particularly the priests and the high priest, and yet they are acting with hypocrisy, acting in a manner that undermines their identity as the people of God.

As Samuel said to Saul, The sacrifices of the Lord's people are contrasted in verse 11 to the sacrifices that will one day be offered by the Gentiles, people of all nations offering a pure sacrifice and acceptable incense to the name of the Lord. The name of the Lord that was dishonoured among and by his people would be held in high esteem among the nations, made great among them. The Jews had treated the table of the Lord as a common thing, suggesting that things of lesser quality could be offered upon it.

They regarded the worship of the Lord and his sacrifices as onerous and a drudgery, and yet despite their posture of heart, they presumptuously expected that the Lord would be pleased with and would accept their sacrifices. He would, of course, do nothing of the kind. It is not only the priests that are condemned.

In verse 14, the individual sacrificer is condemned, the person who would not perform his proper vow, a man who had vowed a fine ram of his flock, when he was delivered from trouble or some other thing that had occasioned his vow was completed, he sacrificed to the Lord what was blemished, lying to the Lord and breaking the vow that he had made. The Lord declares that he is a great king. He is the Lord of hosts, an expression that is used in about 40% of the verses of this book.

The nations would come to fear the name of the Lord, and yet the Lord's own people were dishonouring his name by their practice. A question to consider, what can we learn from the fact that the altar is here called the Lord's table? The book of Malachi has a series of six disputes between the Lord and his people, in which he puts into words their beliefs and their negative attitudes towards him. The first concern their doubting of his love, the second which began in verse 6 of chapter 1, continues to the end of chapter 2 verse 9. It especially focuses on the priests and the ways in which they are dishonouring the Lord by their disregard for his sacrifices.

As a consequence, the Lord says that they would be better off if someone just closed down the temple and its sacrifices, rather than continuing to bring offerings that manifest their lack of respect for him. The priests are held the most culpable for the situation, as they are the ones who are responsible to teach the people and to guard the house and its holiness, and they are clearly failing in both. The Lord gives a command to the priests, the content of which is debated by commentators, as it isn't entirely clear to what it refers.

The command should most likely be understood as one to listen to the Lord and to honour his name, with the command being presented in the conditional form of a curse or judgement. If they will fail, or rather continue to fail in this respect, they will continue to know the Lord's judgement upon them. Anthony Pettison mentions Michael Fishbane's intriguing argument that, in saying that the Lord would curse their blessings, the Lord is saying that the blessing that the priests would deliver over the people would carry the force of a curse.

That blessing is given in Numbers chapter 6 verses 22 to 27. The Lord spoke to Moses saying, Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, Thus you shall bless the people of Israel. You shall say to them, The Lord bless you and keep you.

The Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace. So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them.

Fishbane suggests that in puns, inversions and reversals, the Lord is giving the priests measure for measure. Now their blessings, far from leading to the face of the Lord shining and the lifting up of his countenance upon them, would instead lead to their faces being covered with the filthy refuse of their unworthy sacrifices to him and their being removed with it from his presence. The purpose of the command that the Lord gives to the priests is to sustain the covenant with Levi, the character of which is described in verses 5 to 7. There aren't many references to a covenant with Levi in the scriptures.

The tribe of Levi was initially cursed with scattering among Israel by Jacob in his blessing of the tribes in Genesis chapter 49. However, that curse had later been transformed into a blessing. The violent zeal of Levi displayed in Exodus chapter 32 when they executed the Lord's wrath upon their Israelite brethren following the sin with the golden calf led to their being set apart for the priesthood and the service of the house of the Lord.

Their uncompromising zeal and their fear of the Lord made them fitting people for the task. As Moses said in his blessing of Levi in Deuteronomy chapter 33 verses 8 to 11 and whole burnt offerings on your altar. Bless, O Lord, his substance and accept the work of his hands.

Crush the loins of his adversaries, of those who hate him, that they rise not again. As a result of their faithfulness, whilst still scattered among the tribes, they were scattered as those whose inheritance was the service of the Lord himself. A further historical event that confirmed the setting apart of the tribe of Levi and of a more particular line of it for the high priesthood was Phinehas' zealous action that stopped the plague where in Numbers chapter 25 he thrust a spear through a leading Israelite and the Midianite woman with whom he was having relations.

They were part of Israel's idolatrous and sexually debauched yoking of themselves to Baal of Peor. By this action, Phinehas maintained the Lord's fear among the people and upheld his honour. He thereby protected the whole company of the people who otherwise would have suffered the full wrath of the Lord himself.

The Lord's response to the action of Phinehas is described in verses 10-13 of that chapter. And the Lord said to Moses, Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest, has turned back my wrath from the people of Israel, in that he was jealous with my jealousy among them, so that I did not consume the people of Israel in my jealousy. Therefore say, Behold, I give to him my covenant of peace, and it shall be to him and to his descendants after him the covenant of a perpetual priesthood, because he was jealous for his God and made atonement for the people of Israel.

The event is also recalled in Psalm 106 verses 28-31. Then they yoked themselves to the Baal of Peor and ate sacrifices offered to the dead. They provoked the Lord to anger with their deeds and a plague broke out among them.

Then Phinehas stood up and intervened and the plague was stayed and that was counted to him as righteousness from generation to generation forever. As Ray Clendenin observes, Deuteronomy 10 verses 8-9 seems to connect the action of Phinehas with the setting apart of Levi, which in the context occurs after such events as the death of Aaron. At that time the Lord set apart the tribe of Levi to carry the ark of the covenant of the Lord, to stand before the Lord to minister to him and to bless in his name to this day.

Therefore Levi has no portion or inheritance with his brothers. The Lord is his inheritance as the Lord your God said to him. Presumably we should see the actions of Phinehas as confirming the prior setting apart of Levi.

Phinehas typifies the zeal and fear of the Lord that animated the Levites when they were living up to their divine charge. He was jealous for the Lord's honour, concerned to prevent any assault upon it. For this reason his line would be appointed to the high priesthood.

A priesthood characterised by the traits that Phinehas exemplified would carefully instruct the people in the truth of the Lord. They would take the people's sins seriously and powerfully model in their own behaviour the fear of the Lord. Such a priesthood would be effective in turning the people away from sin.

However a priesthood that had become dull to the Lord's holiness would have a destructive effect upon the entire people, leading many astray by their example. The Lord here condemns the priests for corrupting the covenant of Levi when so many of their faithful ancestors had once been so jealous for his honour. For their dishonouring of the Lord they will themselves be despised and abased before the people.

Apart from anything else, where the servants of the Lord dishonour him they should not be surprised if they themselves are dishonoured. By teaching the people to dishonour their master the priests ironically denigrated their own office. By describing the ideal priest as the messenger of the Lord of hosts in addition to reminding us of Malachi's own name which means my messenger the Lord is also preparing us for the figure of the purifying messenger at the beginning of the next chapter.

The third dispute starts in verse 10 and runs until verse 16. This is an especially difficult section to translate and interpret especially in verses 15 and 16 which have provoked no end of different readings. The section opens with three questions the first two setting up the third.

The unity of the people is known in the oneness of God since there is one God his people must also be one. The apostle Paul seems to use a similar logic to make his case in Galatians chapter 3. The reference to having one father could conceivably concern Abrahamic fatherhood which was often a matter of dispute in the gospels and the Pauline epistles. However, without a thicker concept of what it means to be the sons and daughters of Abraham such as Paul develops in the book of Romans such a claim to common fatherhood in this context might be vulnerable to the challenge that Esau and hence the nation of Edom are sons of Abraham too.

That said, considering that Abrahamic fatherhood is so often appealed to in scripture in a manner that seems to presume a more stipulated sense that would exclude such people as the Edomites I don't think that this possibility can be so lightly dismissed. Nevertheless, it is more likely that this is a reference to the Lord's fatherhood in terms of which Israel could be spoken of as his first born son. The Lord had also created them not merely in the more general sense shared by the entire creation although maybe that's primarily what is in view here but also more particularly as a people that have been fashioned for his own purposes.

Given the unity of the people as brothers and sisters relative to the fatherhood of the Lord and fellow creatures of the Almighty relative to his creative work their unfaithfulness to each other to the Lord and to their wives is especially egregious a violation of covenant expectations to act against your brother is also indirectly an affront to your common father. The marriage to the daughter of a foreign god is a second charge of unfaithfulness levelled against the people. The identity of this daughter of a foreign god is debated by commentators some argue that it might be a reference to a pagan deity but commentators far more typically understand it to concern a woman among a people that worships a foreign god the concern is much less that the woman is a foreigner than that she is a worshipper of a god other than the Lord.

Intermarriage was long an issue in Israel and most notably was a prominent issue for Ezra and Nehemiah who were likely living near to the time of Malachi's prophecy.

Intermarriage and idolatry were closely associated issues as marriage to pagan women led to the worship of foreign gods and also vice versa. As the Lord warned Israel in Exodus chapter 34 verses 12-16 Intermarriage with idolatrous women famously led to the failure of King Solomon whom Nehemiah presented to the people as a cautionary example.

In Solomon's case love for foreign women led to idolatry. One of the effects of such intermarriage was the syncretistic intermarriage of the worship of the Lord with the worship of idols or the rise of polytheistic practices. In verse 12 Malachi calls upon the Lord to condemn all who were unfaithful in such a manner.

The next charge of unfaithfulness begins with the people's mourning over the Lord's failure to heed their offerings presumably manifested in his covenant curses afflicting them despite their sacrifices. The reason for the Lord's disregard for their offerings is given in the verses that follow. They had been unfaithful to their wives dishonoring the marriage covenant between them and their wives even though it was a covenant witnessed by the Lord in which they had presumably made vows to each other before him and even in his name.

Sins against the Lord and sins against our neighbours are intertwined in many ways and in few more so than in the breaking of the marital covenant. The wife is described as the man's companion, someone joined to him in the closest affinity and also as his wife by covenant someone bound to him in the most solemn union. Perhaps the other description of the wife as the wife of your youth serves to highlight the betrayal that such unfaithfulness involves.

Verses 15 and 16 are fiendishly difficult to translate and interpret even if we can get a general gist of what the section is saying from verse 14. Many commentators throw up their hands and declare the verses to be completely unintelligible. Doubtless they are some of the toughest verses in the whole Old Testament to translate which any cursory examination of different translations of them will support.

Clendenin lists some of the questions that must be answered concerning the interpretation of verse 15 alone. He writes for verse 14, perhaps alluding to Genesis chapter 2 verse 24 or to the one guilty of unfaithfulness noting similarities to the curse in verse 12, especially to the man who does it. Or is it pronominal with not, with the sense no one.

If one is the object, who is the understood subject of the verb? After raising about a couple of dozen further questions that are raised by verse 15 alone Clendenin concludes from the various combinations of answers to these many questions, even more interpretations result from various proposals for amending the verse. This doesn't mean that we are without considerations that could provide a limited degree of assistance. Some of the factors that might help us to weigh the likelihood of different readings are



connections within the immediate context for instance back to the logic of the one in verse 10.

We might also see some allusion back to the story of Genesis chapter 2 and the creation of mankind. A more direct control upon our reading is provided by the immediately surrounding verses and the importance of retaining the integrity of the argument. As Clendenin remarks, whatever we come up with in our interpretation of these verses it must naturally lead to the conclusion so guard yourselves in your spirit and do not be faithless.

His rendering of the first half of the verse is very attractive. Don't you know that God made you one with your wives and despite of your treachery in divorcing your wives there is still a remnant of that spiritual bond and what is the purpose of that oneness? It is to produce godly offspring with God's help. Bearing children and raising them in the fear and the admonition of the Lord is a primary purpose of marriage.

It is also something that manifests the unity of the couple as the children that they bear are living expressions of their one flesh union. The Lord's great desire for godly offspring might also make us think of a verse like Genesis chapter 18 verse 19 as the Lord speaks concerning his choice of Abraham primarily from a careless disregard and inattention to the dangerous passions that lurk within their own hearts to pursue faithfulness they must learn to master their own spirits especially in older translations the first half of verse 16 is read as an expression of the Lord's own hatred for divorce. In the King James version for instance The result of this reading seems to be rather convoluted.

The reading of something like the ESV is probably much closer to the mark. The reference then is not to the Lord's hatred for divorce but rather to the man who hates his wife and as a result divorces her. Among other things this would help us to understand why it's the third person masculine singular verb that's used at this point.

If it were the Lord expressing his own hatred for divorce then we would expect a first person singular verb. The verse then talks about the full ramifications of the actions of the man who divorces his wife out of mere hatred for her. He covers his garment with violence.

He becomes clothed as it were with the cruelty of his actions towards her. The charge given at the end of verse 15 is nearly repeated at the end of verse 16. The chapter ends with the start of a fourth dispute.

Once again the Lord puts words in the mouths of his people expressing their attitudes and their beliefs concerning him. They doubt the Lord's justice. They see the wicked prospering and they believe that the Lord must be morally indifferent.

However such beliefs verge on a sort of atheism. A denial that God is a just God who acts

within the world according to his justice. This dispute will be continued in the verses that follow.

A question to consider. Why is zeal such an important trait in the priests? A fourth dispute in the book of Malachi was introduced at the end of chapter 2 in verse 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? This dispute continues here in chapter 3. In the preceding chapter the Lord rebuked and condemned the Levitical priests for their failure to maintain true worship. The task of a faithful priest was described in chapter 2 verse 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. The language of the messenger is taken up again at the beginning of this chapter as the Lord announces the coming of an eschatological messenger.

In the second half of the preceding chapter the people's faithlessness was also central. They were condemned for their unfaithfulness to their brethren, their unfaithfulness to the Lord in intermarriage with idolaters and their unfaithfulness to their wives. While there are distinct disputes, we should not think that they are simply detached from each other.

The issue of the people's faithlessness continues to be prominent in the opening verses of chapter 3 where the Lord's coming will purge the people and their worship. The people are warned in advance so that they will be prepared when he comes. A turn to faithfulness in the present should be motivated by the expected advent of the Lord in judgment and purification.

The challenge of the verse with which the chapter opens as Ray Clendenden observes is that of determining the identity of the different figures that are involved. There is the I who is speaking, the one of whom he speaks as my messenger, the Lord whom you seek, and then also the messenger of the covenant. How many figures are actually here? We should recognize, for instance, that the first occurrence of the word LORD within this verse is not a translation of the word Yahweh as it is at the end of the verse.

In many biblical translations this will be revealed in the fact that one has all caps and the other does not. However, the identity of this figure can be narrowed down by the fact that it says that he is coming to his temple. It would seem that this character is none other than the Lord himself.

Presumably there is at least a distinction here between the Lord who comes suddenly to his temple and the messenger who was sent to prepare the way. Is the messenger of the covenant the same figure as the messenger that's sent to prepare the way? It would seem more likely that the messenger of the covenant is associated with the Lord whom

you seek. The messenger of the covenant is described as one in whom they delight, which would naturally connect him with the Lord whom you seek.

We might also read the expression as and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple, yea the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight is another way of saying the Lord whom you seek. However, there seems to be a problem here.

The Lord is the one who's speaking, but he seems to speak of a different figure. The messenger of the covenant, who seems in the context to be paralleled with the Lord whom you seek, is the Lord speaking of himself in the third person and also describing himself as the messenger of the covenant? Or is something else going on here? There are other Old Testament verses that might give some clue. In Isaiah chapter 40 verse 3, a voice cries, in the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

In Exodus chapter 23 verses 20 to 21, the Lord speaks of his preparation of the way for his people to the promised land. Behold I send an angel before you to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared. Pay careful attention to him and obey his voice.

Do not rebel against him, for he will not pardon your transgression, for my name is in him. In the next chapter in Malachi verses 5 to 6, the Lord also speaks of the way that he's going to send a messenger in advance, Elijah the prophet. Behold I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes, 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 the decree of utter destruction.

These statements are taken up within the New Testament, where they are related to John the Baptist and to Jesus. Mark chapter 1 verses 2 to 3, as it is written in Isaiah the prophet, behold I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way. The voice of one crying in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make his path straight.

This takes Malachi chapter 3 verse 1, Isaiah chapter 40 verse 3, and Exodus chapter 23 verse 20, and remixes them into a single statement of the Lord's advent that is being announced by John the Baptist. That advent is coming in Jesus Christ. This reading is strengthened by other verses, Luke chapter 1 verse 76, and you child will be called the prophet of the most high, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways.

That's Zacharias speaking about his son John the Baptist. John speaks of himself in John chapter 3 verse 28, you yourselves bear me witness that I said I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him. Putting all of these pieces together we can perhaps come to a greater understanding of what this opening verse means.

John the Baptist is the messenger that's sent in advance to prepare the people. The Lord whom you seek, certainly taken by itself, might be a possible reference to a messianic figure. The fact that he comes to his temple suggests that he is divine.

He, I think, is identified with the messenger of the covenant in what follows. Understanding this figure as Christ helps us to put together the pieces. Christ is like the angel of the Lord who leads the people through the wilderness.

He is fully divine, but he is also the one sent by God. As the messenger of the covenant he is the archetypal prophet, the word of the Lord himself incarnate. In light of verse 7 of the preceding chapter we should also see him as the archetypal priest.

We shouldn't miss the element of sarcasm within this opening statement. This statement is, among other things, an answer to the people's charge. Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the Lord and he delights in them.

And their challenge, where is the God of justice? Both of which are mentioned in the preceding verse at the end of chapter 2. The Lord is saying in response So you really delight in justice? Well that justice that you are so seeking, that justice that you supposedly delight in, is about to come. But you're not going to be ready for it. When the Lord, the messenger of the covenant, comes to his temple, his holiness will be like a consuming fire and no one will be able to stand before him.

The unfaithfulness of the priest, challenged in the preceding chapter, would be dealt with by his presence. He would purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver. While the priest's blessings were currently being treated as if they were curses and their offerings were not being accepted, the purifying of the sons of Levi would lead to pure offerings being made.

Once more the sacrifices of the people would be accepted before the Lord. The once broken covenant relationship would be fully restored. These verses are also alluded to within the New Testament by John the Baptist who says in Matthew chapter 3 verses 11 to 12 The image of one coming with cleansing fire might be taken from these verses in Malachi.

We should note that the threshing floor was the site where the temple was built. The clearing of the threshing floor is paralleled with the cleansing of the house. The coming of the Lord would lead to swift judgment against the evil doers in the land.

Sorcerers, adulterers, those who swear falsely, those who oppress the poor and the weak and the vulnerable, those who do not show hospitality to the stranger and more generally, those who do not fear the Lord. The people have been complaining that the Lord's justice is not being enacted and yet they are not seeing the Lord's justice because they are being spared it. Were the Lord's justice to come at that moment, they would all

be consumed by it.

Their challenge, where is the God of justice, was a direct attack upon the nature of God, presenting the Lord as if he were fundamentally inconsistent or unreliable. Yet the truth of the matter is that it's God's unchangeable commitment to his people that has meant that they are not consumed, that his justice has not come near when its coming would mean their destruction. The Lord by his nature does not change, yet the only consistency in the people themselves is their fickleness.

They have been turning aside all the time since the days of their fathers. The dispute between the Lord and his people continues in the second half of verse 7. He calls them to return to him in repentance and yet they ask, what need they repent for? They have, he responds, been robbing him, a charge that they immediately question. Despite their denials, the charge has substance.

They have not been bringing their tithes and contributions, much as the blessings of the priests were turned into curses. So the people, for their failure to give to the Lord what was his due, were suffering under the covenant curse of futility. Until they remedied their failure to pay the tithes, they would not enter into the full enjoyment of the covenant blessing.

Yet if they paid the tithes as they ought to, the Lord promises them the most dramatic covenant blessing. I will open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need. All of the covenant blessings are there to be enjoyed, if only they will return to the Lord.

The Lord is not withholding the blessings from them out of some malicious desire that they not enjoy them. It is the Lord's will, indeed, it will be his purpose that they enjoy the blessings. But their grasping refusal to give back to the Lord tokens of the good gifts that he has given to them is preventing them from entering into the full enjoyment of the blessings that he has for them.

The people's questioning of the Lord's justice is brought up again in verse 13 and following. They had questioned whether it was worth living righteously at all, since evildoers seemed to prosper and be blessed by him. We might here recognise something of the struggle that the psalmist experienced in Psalm 73 verses 13 to 18.

All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence. For all the day long I have been stricken and rebuked every morning. If I had said I will speak thus, I would have betrayed the generation of your children.

But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task. Until I went into the sanctuary of God, then I discerned their end. Truly you set them in slippery places, you make them fall to ruin.

The psalmist, through his reflections in the house of the Lord, was able to discern the truth of the matter. However, the response of the people here was far more cynical. They fell into the trap that the psalmist narrowly avoided.

However, Malachi's message does not seem to have fallen upon entirely deaf ears. Some people did respond. In verse 16 we read of some who feared the Lord, the Lord paying attention and hearing them in response.

This can be seen as a natural fulfilment of his promise return to me and I will return to you. The book of remembrance that was written was probably not a book that was written by or for the Lord, so much as for the people to be placed before the Lord. Perhaps some sort of covenant renewal document.

Not a book of remembrance of them as many translations have it, but a book of remembrance for them. The Lord assures them that on the day of his visitation they would be honoured as his treasured possession. At that moment in time the difference between the righteous and the wicked may not be obvious, but those who live by faith would see clearly on that day the distinction between these two groups.

A question to consider. The word messenger is an important one within the book of Malachi. Malachi's own name means my messenger.

In chapter 2 verse 7 the faithful priest is described as the messenger of the Lord of hosts. And in verse 1 of this chapter, if our reading is correct, we have two messengers. The messenger who prepares the way and the messenger of the covenant who is the Lord who comes to his temple.

Taking these various references together, how might we come to a fuller understanding of what the figure of the messenger represents and what his task is? The book of Malachi and with it the book of the twelve ends with a prophecy announcing the coming day of the Lord. The day of the Lord has been a consistent theme of the entire collection. Although the immediate referent of the day varies, from the book of the twelve a broader picture of what the day of the Lord entails has emerged.

It seems fitting that it should conclude with a chapter within which the day of the Lord is front and center. Reading such treatments of the day of the Lord, we should not presume that they refer directly to the final judgment. The reference is rather to a judgment awaited in history at the end of the age.

We live after the end of the age to which Malachi and many other of the prophets looked forward. Nevertheless, as we've seen in the book of the twelve more generally, although there are several different immediate referents in view when the prophets speak of the coming of the day of the Lord, together they bear a more general witness to what this day of the Lord entails, one that ultimately will receive its fullest expression in the final

judgment. The prophecy of chapter four continues the sixth dispute of the book.

The people had questioned the value of serving the Lord, as evil doers were prospering, and God's justice was nowhere to be seen. The people's doubting of God was also expressed in an earlier dispute in chapter two, verse seventeen. 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? The Lord had responded to such unbelief with his promise of the coming of the messenger of the covenant at the beginning of the preceding chapter. When the messenger of the covenant came, he would expose the difference between the righteous and the wicked, as we see in the final verse of chapter three, which is also part of the sixth dispute. 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.

However, the Lord had warned the people that, despite the fact that they thought that such justice was what they desired, they were presumptuous in thinking that they would be prepared for it when it actually came. When the Lord came to his temple to purge it, the priesthood and his people of wickedness, the prophet doubted that any would stand in the consuming holiness of his presence. The description of the coming day of the Lord in verse one underlines the devastation that it would bring upon the arrogant and the evil doers.

The image of the consuming of the wicked like stubble or chaff is one that we encounter elsewhere in the prophets and the scriptures more generally. The husks of the grain are blown away and the bottoms of the stalks of the grain that remain in the ground, the stubble, is burnt up. John the Baptist uses a very similar image in speaking of the Christ's coming ministry in Matthew chapter 3 verse 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. The removal of the wicked is also described in terms of the removal of a tree, leaving behind neither root nor branch. As in the case of removing the chaff and stubble that remains after the harvest, the image of chopping down or uprooting a tree is familiar from the prophets.

At the end of the preceding chapter we heard of some people who responded well to the message of the Lord through Malachi. The Lord had promised them in verse 17 that on the day of his coming they would be set apart as his own. 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.

The expectation of the righteous is here immediately contrasted with that of the wicked. Those who fear the name of the Lord manifesting an appropriate posture of honour,

reverence and godly dread before his holiness would know healing, joy and liberty. The advent of the Lord's righteousness is compared to the rising of the sun, an image that is frequently employed within the New Testament, where Christ is compared to the dawn and the light that has broken through the darkness heralding a new day.

The wings of the sun of righteousness might be drawing upon representations of the sun within ancient Near Eastern imagery. We encounter similar imagery in the expression the wings of the dawn in Psalm 139 verse 9. In Scripture the wings of the Lord, typically connected with the wings of a garment or a tent dwelling, are places of protection and security, a place where people come for refuge. We see this for instance in Psalm 36 verse 7. How precious is your steadfast love O God, that children of mankind take refuge in the shadow of your wings.

Here it is with healing that the wings of the sun of righteousness are especially connected. Things broken, awry, diseased and wounded will be restored and made whole as the Lord's light dawns. As the sun of the Lord's righteousness rises upon them, the righteous will be like calves, loosed from the confinement of the stall, leaping with joy as they enjoy their liberty.

The darkness has ended and the new day has dawned. Part of the joy of the righteous will be in treading down the wicked. Perhaps at this point we might hear some resonance with the promise of the crushing of the head of the serpent.

The wicked will be reduced to dust and ashes beneath the feet of the righteous, experiencing the full measure of the curse of death. The two-sided character of the day of the Lord is clearly on display here. The day of the Lord is devastating for the wicked, but for the righteous it is a day of joy, liberty, life and healing.

At the heart of the entire Old Covenant was the Lord delivered through Moses, the mediator of the covenant at Sinai. He is spoken of as Horeb, with its various commands and practices. Several different commandments of the law have already been referenced in the Book of Malachi, including laws concerning sacrifice, tithing and the priesthood.

Moses the man stood for the covenant order that was established and communicated through him, which occurred in the Exodus and in the Lord's communication to his people at Sinai. He was the founding prophet and as the people went forward it would be all the more important to reground themselves in that covenant reality and revelation. Throughout the Pentateuch, one of the most prominent and pressing concerns is that the events of the Exodus are not consigned to past history, but that they remain a powerful, living and formative reality in the present, perpetuated in such things as the tabernacle and temple and their service, in meditation upon and living out of the law, and in retelling of the story of their deliverance.

This will be even more important when God's justice is not easy to see, and people are



tempted to despair or simply to abandon their faith. It will be those who remember and observe the law of Moses who will keep their bearings in spiritually disorienting times and who will endure through trial. Perhaps of all of the figures in the Old Testament, the one who was most like Moses was Elijah.

Elijah was another prophet who directly opposed a king who performed most of his ministry in the wilderness, through whom the Lord brought plagues and judgments, who met with the Lord at Mount Horeb, and who passed the baton on to his successor on the banks of the Jordan. Elijah was, like Moses, a man of zeal. He had ascended into heaven in 2 Kings 2, having prepared the way for a greater work and judgment of the Lord that would come after him.

He presented people with the great ultimatum of the Lord at Mount Carmel. He paved the way for the downfall of the Umayyad dynasty and the transformation of the kingdom of Israel. In the New Testament, this figure of the prophesied Elijah to come is connected with the figure of John the Baptist.

In Matthew chapter 11 verses 13 and 14, For all the prophets in the law prophesied and told John, and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. In Matthew chapter 17 verses 10 to 13, And the disciples asked him, Then why did the scribes say that first Elijah must come? He answered, Elijah does come, and he will restore all things. But I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they pleased.

So also the Son of Man will certainly suffer at their hands. Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them of John the Baptist. In Luke chapter 1 verses 16 and 17, the angel's declaration to Zachariah that John will be born to him in Elizabeth, and the ministry that John will perform also identifies him as the Elijah to come.

It clearly alludes back to Malachi chapter 4. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared. Zachariah's prophecy concerning his son John the Baptist also refers back to this passage in Malachi, also connecting it with the promise of the messenger in chapter 3 verse 1. Luke chapter 1 verses 76 to 79 ...