Malachi 1: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0:00] Malachi chapter 1. The oracle of the word of the Lord to Israel by Malachi. 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 Jacob, but Esau I have hated. I have laid waste his hill country, and left his heritage to jackals of the desert.
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.
Your own eyes shall see this, and you shall say, Great is the Lord beyond the border of Israel. 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? By offering polluted food upon my altar.
[1:04] But you say, How have we polluted you? By saying that the Lord's table may be despised.
When you offer blind animals and 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. 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.
O 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.
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. But you profane it when you say that the Lord's table is polluted, and its fruit, that is, its food may be despised.
[2:07] But you say, what a weariness this is, and you snorted 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? Cursed be the cheat who has a male in his flock and bows 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.
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.
[3:25] 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

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his mouth, for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts.
He also speaks of a coming messenger in chapter 3 verse 1. 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 ABBA chiasms.
[4:57] 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 an 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, For you are a people holy to the Lord your God.
The Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it is because the Lord loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the Lord brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.
[6:10] 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 judgment 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 behavior and judgment is declared over it.
[7:21] 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.

I will make Mount Seir a waste and a desolation, and I will cut off from it all who come and go, and I will fill its mountains with the slain. On your hills and in your valleys and in all your ravines those slain with the sword shall fall.
I will make you a perpetual desolation, and your city shall not be inhabited. Then you will know that I am the Lord. Because you said, These two nations and these two countries shall be mine, and we will take possession of them, although the Lord was there.
Therefore, as I live, declares the Lord God, I will deal with you according to the anger and envy that you showed because of your hatred against them. And I will make myself known among them when I judge you.
And you shall know that I am the Lord. I have heard all the revilings that you uttered against the mountains of Israel, saying, They are laid desolate. They are given us to devour. And you magnified yourselves against me with your mouth, and multiplied your words against me.
[8:33] I heard it. Thus says the Lord God, While the whole earth rejoices, I will make you desolate. As you rejoiced over the inheritance of the house of Israel, because it was desolate, so I will deal with you.

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You shall be desolate, Mount Seir, and all Edom, all of it. Then they will know that I am the Lord. 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 Nabataean 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.
[9:47] 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.
[10:56] 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 Lord goes so far as to suggest that they'd be better off if one of the priests would just shut the doors of the temple and render it inoperative.

That would, at the least, prevent them from performing pointless sacrifices, from offering offerings that the Lord would never accept. The unfaithful 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's sacrifice 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.
[12:42] The Lord declares that he is a great king. He is the Lord of hosts, an expression that's 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?

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