

Malachi 2: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Malachi chapter 2. And now, O priests, this command is for you. If you will not listen, if you will not take it to heart to give honour 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. 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. So shall you know that I have sent this command to you, that my covenant with Levi may stand, says the Lord of hosts. 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. 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. For the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and my people should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts. 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. 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. 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?

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. May the Lord cut off from the tents of Jacob any descendant of the man who does this, who brings an offering to the Lord of hosts. And the 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 favour from your hand. 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. 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. For the man who does not love his 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. 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 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.

[3 : 19] 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 judgment. If they will fail, or rather continue to fail in this respect, they will continue to know the Lord's judgment upon them. Anthony Petterson 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 priest 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. 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 of Levi he said, Give to Levi your Thummim, and your Urim to your godly one, whom you tested at Massah, with whom you quarrelled at the waters of Meribah, who said of his father and mother, I regard them not. He disowned his brothers and ignored his children, for they observed your word and kept your covenant. They shall teach Jacob your rules and Israel your law. They shall put incense before you, and hold 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.

[6 : 36] As a result of their faithfulness, while 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 Phineas's 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, Phineas 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 Phineas is described in verses 10 to 13 of that chapter. And the Lord said to Moses, Phineas, the son of Eliezer, 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 to 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 Phineas 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 chapter 10 verses 8 to 9 seems to connect the action of Phineas 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 Phineas as confirming the prior setting apart of Levi. Phineas 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 characterized by the traits that Phineas 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 dulled 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 had 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 firstborn 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.

[12:16] 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. Inter-marriage 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. Inter-marriage 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 to 16, Take care, lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land to which you go, lest it become a snare in your midst. You shall tear down their altars, and break their pillars, and cut down their asherim, for you shall worship no other god. For the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous god.

Lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, and when they whore after their gods, and sacrifice to their gods, and you are invited, you eat of his sacrifice, and you take of their daughters for your sons, and their daughters whore after their gods, and make your sons whore after their gods. 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,

Is one in the first clause the subject or object, or predicate adjective of did make? Does it refer back to one in verse 10? If it is the subject, what is the understood object? Perhaps it, her, or them?

Does one refer to God, or to Adam or Abraham, especially if one father in verse 10 refers to one of these? Or to the marital relationship of 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, The almost limitless multiplicity of interpretations of this verse result 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. For I have chosen him that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice, so that the Lord may bring to Abraham what he has promised him. The divine purpose in the marriage bond, and the enduring reality of the spirit-forged bond between husband and wife, gives rise to the Lord's warning to husbands to guard themselves in their spirit.

Faithlessness to the wives of their youth may arise 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, For the Lord, the God of Israel, saith that he hateth putting away. For one covereth violence with his garments, saith the Lord of hosts. Therefore take heed to your spirit, that ye deal not treacherously.

[18 : 46] The result of this reading seems to be rather convoluted. The reading of something like the ESV is probably much closer to the mark. For the man who does not love his 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. 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. So guard yourselves in your spirit and do not be faithless.

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?