

## Malachi: Does God always “Hate” Esau [the Edomites] and Divorce?

Like → Haggai and → Zachariah, Malachi evidently was a “central” prophet, allied with the Temple and working with the elite, not a peripheral prophet (→ Amos, Joel). Malachi denounces the failures of the Temple priests (1:6-2:9), but does so as someone identified with the Levites (2:4-6), and economically supported by the tithes (3:8-12). Although no consensus exists regarding the precise date of Malachi, scholars agree that the deplorable situation that Malachi confronts in Jerusalem must be *before* Ezra’s reforms. If Malachi (“my messenger”) prophesied ca. 480-460 B. C., it would be before the ministries of → Ezra (458) and → Nehemiah (444), according to the traditional dates. However, if Ezra came to Jerusalem *after* Nehemiah (398), as many modern Biblicists believe, then Malachi could be a little later (450-400), but always before Ezra.

In addition to his denunciations, Malachi proclaims the hope of the coming of another “messenger” (3:1) who would purify the nation for the Day of Yahweh, the Liberator God. Malachi concludes with a prophecy of the coming of the prophet Elijah (4:5), and Mark, (our earliest Gospel, ca. 69 A. D.) begins with the ministry of John the Baptist, whom the evangelist identifies with Elijah (Mark 1:1-8; 6:14-15; 9:13; cf. Mat 11:14).

**1. The Poor.** Although Malachi contains no explicit vocabulary for the poor, he uses the basic Hebrew term for oppression (*‘ashaq*), in reference to the four classes of the weak and poor (cf. Deut 24:14-18), whose mistreatment always provokes God’s wrath against the oppressors (Ex 22:20-23). God’s self-portrayal is not that of a passive judge, but rather one who actively seeks evidence and bears witness against the oppressors:

“Then I will draw near to you for judgment;  
I will be swift to bear witness against  
the sorcerers,  
the adulterers, and  
those who swear falsely,  
against those who oppress/defraud the *hired workers* of their wages,  
the *widow* and  
the *orphan*, and  
who deny justice to the *immigrants*,  
And do not fear me,  
Says Yahweh of hosts” (Mal 3:5 → Ex 22:20-23).

Malachi also uses the word “violence” (*hamas*; to shed innocent blood) with reference to rejected women (as in “divorce”), left without the necessary protection in a turbulent epoch (Mal 2:16). He accuses the priests (whose judicial authority increased after the exile, with no king) of favoritism and a lack of fairness in their judgments, (2:9, “have shown partiality in your interpretation of “Torah”).

The characteristic attitude of the oppressors, according to Malachi, is “arrogance” (*zedim*, “arrogant”, 3:15 and 4:1), which when referring to “evildoers” (4:1, 3) points specifically to

the unjust and violent oppressors. Faced with such injustice, oppression and violence, the people demand “Where is the God of justice?” (2:17), the God of the Exodus, who judges the oppressors and liberates the oppressed (3:5)? Contrasted with the evil priests of his epoch, Malachi remembers the true and just teachings of the Levites who walked with God in integrity and justice (2:6). As for the future, Malachi’s hope and answer is firm:

“But for you who revere my name the sun of liberating justice shall rise, with healing in its wings (4:2; cf. the expected just/legitimate offerings, 3:3).

Meanwhile, those that take their tithes to the temple will prosper (3:6-12).

**2. Women.** Julia O’Brien has pointed out certain sex and gender diversity made explicit in the Hebrew text, but commonly covered up in the translations<sup>1</sup>. In 2:11 Malachi describes Judah as “she” that has been faithless, as “he” that profanes the sanctuary, and as “he” that married the daughter of a foreign god. Furthermore, in 2:14-15 the prophet accuses Judah as “he” that betrays the wife of his youth, although the previous prophets had spoken of Judah as the bride and adulterous wife of Yahweh (Jer 2:2; Ezek 16:60). But Marie-Theres Wacker<sup>2</sup> questions O’Brien’s conclusions about viewing Yahweh as the “wife” of Judah, pointing out that the predominant images of God in Malachi are masculine: God as Father, King and Lord. At any rate, undoubtedly Malachi refers explicitly to women in two texts: denouncing Judah for having married with “the daughter of a foreign god” (2:11) and for having betrayed “the wife of your youth” (2:14-15), following with the condemnation of divorce as an aversion (2:16, see below).

Malachi 2:10-16 is quite problematic in the Hebrew, and no consensus has been reached that might resolve the difficulties. Beth Glazier-McDonald offers what is perhaps the most coherent interpretation<sup>3</sup>. The text, she concludes, refers to a “covenant of our ancestors” (2:10) and “your wife by covenant” (2:14). Commentators often suppose that Malachi thus understands marriage as a “covenant” between husband and wife (with an exchange of promises/vows). W. Sibley Towner even declares that “the Bible *always* thinks of marriage as a holy covenant” and supports this conclusion by citing Gen 2:24; 31:50; Prov. 2:17; and Eph 5:21-33. However, we find no mention of any covenant in Gen 2:24 (Adam and Eve – what option did Eve have?!), nor in Ephesians 5:21-33. In Genesis Jacob made a covenant with Laban, his father-in-law, not with his wives Leah and Rachel (Gen 31:44, 50), as it is to be expected in patriarchal societies, where the wife is the property of a man (father or husband). Proverbs 2:17 probably refers to a covenant between a man and God, not with a wife. And that is precisely Glazier-McDonald’s conclusion concerning Malachi: 2:14 as well as 2:10 refer to the covenant between Israel and Yahweh, where the Israelite males promised not to marry any idolatrous Canaanite woman (Ex 34:15-16; Deut 7:3-4), like the “daughter of a foreign god” (Mal 2:11).

Glazier-McDonald shows how the historical context facilitates a proper interpretation of Malachi 2:10-16. Although polygamy was common before the 8<sup>th</sup> Century (see the patriarchs, David, Solomon, etc.), when monogamy became more common, divorces increased (leading to the legal provision for divorce, perhaps in the 7<sup>th</sup> Century, in Deut 24:1-4). Furthermore, when the Jews returned to Judah, under the Persians, after the Exile (539 B. C.), economic conditions contributed to the increase of divorces and mixed

marriages, since Jewish males sought to increase their economic status by marrying rich, non-Jewish women. So Ezra and Nehemiah (shortly after Malachi) confronted the acute problem of mixed marriages and *ordered the divorce* of idolatrous foreign wives (→ Ezra 9:2; 10:3; → Neh 13:23-31).

Malachi, Ezra and Nehemiah's concern, however, is not with ethnic purity, but a religious syncretism with idolatry (the reference to "covering the Lord's altar with tears" in 2:13 could indicate the incorporation of idolatrous fertility rites into the cult of Yahweh). Thus Malachi, in his treatment of divorce, stresses God's intention that marriage avoid sterility and produce "Godly offspring" (2:15; see "holy children" in 1 Cor 7:14), meaning faithful male heirs to the covenant between Yahweh and Israel. The "infidelity/ betrayal in such contexts, then, refers primarily to the infidelity of the man to the covenant with God and with God's people (2:10-11).

Of course, the wife also forms a part of the people, and if the husband marries a foreign or idolatrous woman, he also betrays the original wife (2:14). But the betrayal does not consist in having sexual relations with another woman, but in having united with the idolatry prohibited by the covenant with Yahweh. In such patriarchal contexts, where the woman is the property of the man (father or spouse), there is no exchange of vows between the couple, but rather between the men (father-in-law and husband). After marriage, the Israelite male might have sexual relations with the widow of a deceased brother in order to prevent the inheritance from falling into someone else's hands (the Levirate Law, Deut 25:5-10), take concubines or other wives (polygamy), or have sexual relations with an Israelite prostitute. It is totally anachronistic to suppose that in such cases the covenant between the husband and the father-in-law is like the exchange of vows of "fidelity" (permanent and exclusive sexual relations on both parts) in the modern matrimony, since today we presuppose the equality of the man and the woman, and a mutual exchange of vows or promises (a type of covenant).

### **3. Sexual Minorities.**

#### **3.1 The divorced: Does God *always* hate divorce? (→ Mark).**

If one hates and dismisses [if one dismisses a wife simply because of aversion] says the Lord, the God of Israel, then he covers his garment with violence [*hamas*= shed innocent blood] says the Lord of hosts. So take heed to yourselves and do not be faithless (2:16).

Glazier-McDonald interprets the text this way by as does evangelical biblical scholar Gordon Hugenberger in his doctoral thesis: "We prefer to maintain the MT and to interpret Mal. 2:16 as condemning only unjustified divorce, that is, divorce based on aversion."<sup>4</sup> In Hugenberger's treatment of the Hebrew terms for "divorce", obviously none are equivalent to our modern processes (legal and ecclesiastic), since, in patriarchal societies, the male, as the household authority, simply orders/sends off/dismisses<sup>5</sup>. The requirement of a divorce document in Deut 24:1-4 attempts to limit the patriarch's arbitrary authority; cf. Genesis 21:8-21, where Abraham cruelly dismisses his concubine, Hagar, to the desert along with her son. Thus, as Ezra calls for the divorce of *foreign* women (9:1-10:44; esp. 10:2-3, 11; cf. Neh 9:23-27), Malachi orders *not* divorcing *Israelite* wives.

**3.2 Malachi married?** The book gives no indication that Malachi was married. He seems to be another bachelor prophet, in the style of the shamans (→ Joel).

**3.3 Does God hate Esau/Edom and the “queers”?** “Is not Esau Jacob’s brother? Yet, I have loved Jacob but *I have hated Esau*: I have made his hill country a desolation and his heritage a desert for jackals. Edom...the wicked country, the people with whom the Lord is angry forever” (Mal 1:2-4; (→ Obadiah)). Paul quotes Malachi’s oracle of Malachi (Rom 9:13), which continues to serve as the basis for those who would want to justify their hatred toward sexual minorities. See above all the American cleric Fred Phelps, who takes his campaign everywhere, including to the funerals of people who have died of AIDS, with signs announcing: “God hates fags”.

In addition to fanatics like Phelps, even some erudite Biblicists defend a theology of divine “double predestination” based on God’s supposed hatred for certain persons<sup>6</sup>. Nevertheless, Paul does not cite Malachi in order to produce a theology of divine hate, but rather to confirm God’s supreme grace, by which he decides freely, without being bound by considerations of human merit or virtue, and in order to establish that throughout Israel’s history only a remnant remains faithful. Moreover, the Apostle concludes his argument in Romans 9-11 by showing that God’s project in human history is to “imprison all in disobedience *so that he may be merciful to all*” – including Esau and Edom (Rom 11:32).

The expression in Malachi can indicate, not hatred in our sense, but a simple preference or choice in the context of a concrete project in history (nothing of “double predestination” or “Hell” is on Malachi’s horizon (see “I loved Jacob and rejected Esau”, JB; see also NISB note Rom 9:10-13; Luke 14:26)<sup>7</sup>. The many texts concerning Esau and Edom in the Hebrew Bible set forth a great *diversity* of teachings. Therefore, we should not suppose that certain strongly negative texts (Mal 1:2-5; Obadiah) represent the Bible’s entire teaching about Edom,<sup>8</sup> nor isolate a few negative proof texts and attempt to reduce the entire diversity of the Bible into a single idea, which has been the common method in traditional systematic and fundamentalist theologies.

**Conclusion.** In his historical context, Malachi struggled to preserve Israel in a situation that threatened the very survival of the people’s faith in Yahweh as the Liberator God of the Exodus. Malachi’s perspective on women, the poor and sexual minorities may appear narrow and nationalistic. Nevertheless, when he denounces the Jerusalem Temple’s corrupt worship, he communicates one of the most inclusive and universal visions in the Bible:

“For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name is great among the nations, and in every place incense is offered in my name, and a pure offering” (1:11).

Thus, the renewal that God seeks *begins with the Gentiles*, but ends up transforming, also, God’s people in Jerusalem. (see, similarly, Paul → Romans 9-11).

### **Bibliography: Edom (→ Obadiah)**

- Bartlett, J. R. (1989). Edom and the Edomites. JSOT.S 77. Sheffield: JSOT.
- (1992). "Edom". The Anchor Bible Dictionary. David Noel Freedman, ed. New York: Doubleday, II, 287-295.
- Dicou, Bert (1994). Edom, Israel's Brother and Antagonist: The Role of Edom in Biblical Prophecy and Story. JSOT.S 97. Sheffield: JSOT.

### **Notes**

1. Julia O'Brien 1995:247-250
2. Marie-Theres Wacker 1998/99:380
3. Beth Glazier-McDonald 1992/98:249-250
4. Gordon Hugenberger 1994/98:83
5. Hugenberger 1994:72
6. See the erudite Baptist Biblicist, Thomas Schreiner, Romans. BECNT. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998, 500-503
7. See Brendan Byrne, *Romans*. Sacra Pagina. Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 1996:295, note 13)
8. J. R. Bartlett 1989; Bert Dicou 1994; cf. Schreiner, 1998:502-503

## Bibliography

- Baldwin, Joyce G. (1972). Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi. Tyndale. London: Tyndale.
- Glazier-McDonald, Beth (1992/98). "Malachi". Women's Bible Commentary. Carol A. Newsom y Sharon H. Ringe, ed. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 248-250.
- Graffy, Adrian (1999). Comentario Bíblico Internacional. William R. Farmer, ed. Estella: Verbo Divino, 1089-1095.
- Hill, Andrew H. (1992). "Malachi, Book of". The Anchor Bible Dictionary. David Noel Freedman, ed. New York: Doubleday, IV, 478-485.
- Hill, Andrew H. (1998). Malachi: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary. Anchor Bible 25D. New York: Doubleday.
- Hugenberger, Gordon P. Marriage as a Covenant: Biblical Law and Ethics as Developed from Malachi. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994/98. Ver Nota abajo.
- O'Brian, Julia (1995). "Judah as Wife and Husband: Deconstructing Gender in Malachi". Journal of Biblical Literature 115, 241-250.
- Peterson, David L. (1995). Zechariah 9-14 and Malachi. OTL. Louisville: Westminster John Knox.
- Redditt, Paul L. (1995). Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi. NCB. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- (2001). "The God Who Loves and Hates". Shall Not the Judge of All the Earth Do What is Right? David Penchansky and Paul L. Redditt, ed. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns.
- Smith, Ralph L. (1984). Micah-Malachi. WBC 32. Waco: Word, 61-90.
- Sweeney, Marvin. A. (2000). The Twelve Prophets. II. Berit Olam. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 713-752.
- Verhoef, Pieter A. (1987). The Books of Haggai and Malachi. NICOT. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Wacker, Marie-Theres (1998/99). "Das Buch Maleachi: Zur Ehre Gottes, des Vaters?". Kompendium Feministische Bibelauslegung. Luise Schottroff and Marie-Theres Wacker, ed. Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser, 376-383.