
An Unworthy Sacrifice: Malachi, Chapter One, and the Failures of Post-Exilic Judah

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Malachi 1:1. *The burden of the word of the LORD to Israel by Malachi.*

Though the Old Testament Books of Ezra and Nehemiah may have been written later than the book of Malachi, this last book of the Old Testament is the last prophetic word heard from God prior to the coming of the Messiah, Jesus Christ. Since Jesus refers to John the Baptist as the greatest of the Prophets, the time between Malachi's words and those of John the Baptist represent about four centuries of "darkness" when no word was heard from the LORD.

Malachi, מלאכי, is the Hebrew word for "my messenger" and is usually translated in this form in Chapter 3, verse 1. Consequently, the word could be translated in the same manner in this first verse of the prophecy. It is possible, and some hold likely, that the actual author of the text does not reveal his own name. For example, the Septuagint (LXX) translates the phrase, "by the hand of his messenger." "The Targum of Jonathan ben Uzziel translates it "by the hand of my angel" and adds "whose name is called Ezra the scribe." In spite of all arguments to the contrary, there is no compelling evidence for rejecting the proper name. If not a proper name, this would be the only OT prophetic book where the prophet's name is not given in the opening verses."¹ A tradition of anonymity is common in intertestamental writing.² For convenience, we will

¹ Huey, F. B. Jr. An exposition of Malachi. *Southwestern Journal of Theology*, 30 no 1 Fall 1987, p 12.

² Meyers, E.M. "Priestly Language in the Book of Malachi," *Hebrew Annual Review*, 10 (1986): p. 226.

refer to the author of this text as “Malachi” without concern as to whether it is a proper name or a pseudonym.

“The so-called "minor" prophets of the Old Testament have often received bad press.³ Unfortunately Malachi, like the others, has received unfair treatment. Some accuse him of emphasizing the letter of the law rather than its spirit, while others see in his preaching overzealous attention to the external details of religious ritual. His book is said to have only ‘slight religious and literary importance.’⁴ He is sarcastically labeled a scribe or a casuist (in the derogatory sense of one who rationalizes or even quibbles) rather than a prophet. In like manner, it is said that Malachi appeared on the scene when prophecy's creative period had come to an end, thus again inferring a lesser status for one whose prophetic work in actuality plays a significant role in the biblical canon.”⁵ Quite the opposite is true as its study will reveal the important issues that Malachi was addressing, and their relevance to the worship of God today.

“The oracles of Malachi cannot be understood apart from at least a basic knowledge of the context in which he lived. Like the rest of the prophets, he prophesied from God, but he did so within the backdrop of the circumstances and situations of his time. Malachi addressed Judeans of a recently founded province of Judah (formally Yehud) in the Persian satrapy of Eber-Nahara probably during the reign of king Darius I (522–486 BCE). His audience included emigrants or deportees resettled in Judah and offspring of those Hebrews who survived

³ The attribution of “major” and “minor” prophets is based upon the size of the books, not upon their importance, or any other property.

⁴ Pfeiffer, Robert H. Introduction to the Old Testament (New York and Evanston: Harper & Row, 1948), p. 614.

⁵ Heflin, J N Boo. The prophet Malachi, his world and his book. *Southwestern Journal of Theology*, 30 no 1 Fall 1987, p 5-11.

the Babylonian sack of Jerusalem, but were not deported to Mesopotamia.”⁶

Based upon the content of the writing, it is evident that Malachi’s prophecy refers to the period after the Judean exile in Babylon and most likely after the rebuilding of the Temple and the reconstruction and reestablishment of the City of Jerusalem, led by Ezra and Nehemiah, respectively. This would make Malachi a contemporary of Nehemiah, and the writing may be referring to the period around 435 B.C. “Many scholars date the Book of Malachi between 515 B.C. and the careers of Ezra and Nehemiah. They do so on the following grounds: (1) the ruler in Jerusalem is called a governor rather than a king, thus eliminating the preexilic period; (2) Edom has fallen (1:4), an event impossible to date precisely, but since the prophet Obadiah castigated Edom for its complicity in the fall of Jerusalem the book probably arose after 586; (3) the temple appears to be standing, so the date must be brought down to 515 or later.”⁷

“Most of the canonical prophets lived and preached during a season of change and political upheaval. With Malachi, the opposite was true. He brought God’s message during an uneventful waiting period when God seemed to have forgotten His people as they endured poverty and foreign domination. The Jews had completed the temple but nothing momentous had occurred since that time. God’s presence had certainly not returned to fill His house with glory as Ezekiel had promised. The days of miracles appeared to have passed. Israel had

⁶ Boloje, Blessing Onoriode; Groenewald, Alphonso. Malachi’s concern for social justice: Malachi 2:17 and 3:5 and its ethical imperatives for faith communities . *HTS Theological Studies*, 70 no 1 2014, p 1-9.

⁷ Redditt, Paul L. The Book of Malachi in Its Social Setting. *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 56 no 2 Apr 1994, p 240-255.

settled down to a drab existence as a minor colony of the Persian empire.⁸

During this time the Judeans struggled to maintain obedience to the LORD, making several commitments to Him during and immediately following the rebuilding. “Though the Jews had returned from Babylon and the temple was rebuilt, the material blessings and kingly power promised by Haggai and Zechariah were not restored. The long dominance of the Persian Empire led Malachi’s audience to believe that the Lord would never again act in history to punish and reward: therefore one could get away with slovenly worship and disdain the Lord’s requirements.”⁹

However, we must understand that the Judean community was not, in itself, a Holy Spirit-led community, but rather a community within which there was only a small remnant of those who were sincere in their faith in the LORD. This remnant did not have enough influence in the region of Judea to make a significant impact on the culture, so try as many did to keep the Mosaic Law, most failed to find the true righteousness that is given by the LORD to all who would place their faith and trust in Him. This newly formed, cohesive, community was far more concerned with Mosaic Law than they were the expression of faith in the LORD.

Devoid of true faith, the Judeans fell far-short of God’s expectation for them. “Across the vast Persian empire in the fifth century B.C., useless fires burned on the altars not only of the pagan temples, but even on the sacrificial altars of God's people. It was a period marred by unacceptable worship (1:10), by a corrupt priesthood (1:6-14), by the desecration of the sanctuary (2:11), by contempt for the place of worship (1:7), by blatant abuses of the rituals (1:8, 13-14), by violation of the

⁸ Wood, Fred M., *The Life Situation of Malachi*. *Biblical Illustrator*. 22(3), Spring 1996. p 75

⁹ Matheney, M. Pierce, Jr., *God's Covenant with Levi*. *Biblical Illustrator*. 25(4), Summer 1999. p 26.

covenant (2:8), by dishonesty with the tithes (3:8-10), by violation of the sabbath law,¹⁰ and even by association with foreign gods (2:11).¹¹

It is into this phenomenon that Malachi writes. “Malachi faced a mountain of apathy. Malachi spoke of faith to a people for whom religion had become humdrum and who were lackadaisical in their observance of the ancient tradition. Malachi had an uphill task.¹² It is never easy to deal with indifference. When people cease to care, religion, morality, social customs, and values cease to function as the mortar that holds a society together. In Malachi's time certain religious fundamentals such as election, the love and justice of God were doubted. Malachi tried to rekindle the fires of faith in the hearts of his discouraged people. He assured them that God still loved them and the covenant was still in force.”¹³ Malachi observes the community around him through the eyes of one who loves the LORD, who has a deep and sincere relationship with Him, and being led of the Holy Spirit has a deep understanding of the truths surrounding the issues of his day. This allows the LORD to speak through Malachi. However, because of the state of Judea, the message that Malachi has for Judah is not an easy one to bring. As he observes Judean worship, he finds it devoid of any true holiness. “The primary issue of the book of Malachi is the challenge of the prophet for the people to identify and to live out of a sense of holiness.”¹⁴

Using the Hebrew word *māssā'* that is often translated “lift up”, “bear”, “oracle” or “burden,” the idea is that the presentation of

¹⁰ Nehemiah 13 :15-22.

¹¹ Gray, Scotty Wayne. Useless fires: worship in the time of Malachi. *Southwestern Journal of Theology*, 30 no 1 Fall 1987, p 35-41.

¹² Craigie, Peter. Twelve Prophets vol. 2, *The Daily Study Bible*. Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1985, p. 255.

¹³ Smith, Ralph L. The shape of theology in the book of Malachi. *Southwestern Journal of Theology*, 30 no 1 Fall 1987, p 22-27.

¹⁴ Tillman, William M Jr. Key ethical issues in Malachi. *Southwestern Journal of Theology*, 30 no 1 Fall 1987, p 42-47.

the message from the LORD carries a weight on the writer's spirits. Some think of *māssā'* in terms of "verdict" or "sentence" meaning judgment upon the people.¹⁵ This same word is used by Nahum and Habakkuk as they initiate their prophetic works.¹⁶

Malachi specifically notes that his prophecy is directed toward Israel. At this time the northern nation of Israel has been long-since destroyed and scattered. There is literally no tribal identity left in the ten of the twelve tribes of Israel that split away from Judah and Benjamin during the short reign of Rehoboam, the son of King Solomon, and the grandson of King David. With the loss of the two Israelite nations that came at the hands of the Assyrians and Babylonians, it is reasonable that the title of Israel again be applied to the remaining Children of Abraham, and Malachi makes use of this term as we still do today. As Malachi refers to Israel, he is not referring to the lost northern nation, but rather the remnant of the Children of Abraham that remain, and these are almost exclusively Judean. "Malachi perceived his social setting to reflect three distinct groups: an inner-group of the pious and the faithful whose blessedness was assured, an in-group of skeptics whose salvation was questionable but still possible if they repented, and an out-group of arrogant evildoers for whom only condemnation was possible. This three-group model was an essential element of Malachi's thought."¹⁷

"The opening verse of Malachi serves as a superscription or introduction to the entire book. It states three important facts: (1) what follows is the word of God, (2) it is addressed to the people called Israel, and (3) it is communicated through human agency."¹⁸ "This prophet spoke at a time when the people were

¹⁵ de Boer, Peter A. H. An Inquiry into the Meaning of the Term *Massa*, *Old Testament Studies* 5 (1948): 197–214.

¹⁶ Nahum 1:1; Habakkuk 1:1

¹⁷ Berquist, Jon L. The social setting of Malachi. *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, 19 no 4 Oct 1989, p 121.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, Huey.

unhappy with their condition, and ministered to a community that was spiritually disappointed and had practically lost faith in God (1:2). The people of Israel had returned to their land with high expectations and hopes of a glorious future, but the return from exile in Babylon had not restored the glories of the past and had not ushered in the messianic age as promised by the prophets. Soon the returnees had to face the realities of a hostile land and the problems of restoring a nation devastated by the blight of war. A severe drought had destroyed their crops and increased their unhappiness. The economic condition of the nation at the time of Malachi was so difficult that some of the poor had to mortgage their fields and sell their own children to pay their taxes¹⁹.²⁰

Malachi 1:2. *I have loved you, saith the LORD. Yet ye say, Wherein hast thou loved us? Was not Esau Jacob's brother? saith the LORD: yet I loved Jacob,*

Before exposing the sins of Judah, Malachi provides some words of encouragement to a very discouraged nation. “The very first verb to encounter in the book is the verb ‘to love’ uttered by YHWH to his people. This statement of God’s love for his people serves as the foundation of all other prophetic words in the rest of the book. It is quite significant that the book’s opening statement is a statement of God’s love for his people, in fact it is the only book in the Bible making this profound statement right at the beginning of the book.”²¹

Though Israel as a community has now returned to Jerusalem, Judea is still under the tight control of the king of Persia, most likely Darius, preventing them from any form of national independence. Approximately three generations prior to their

¹⁹ Nehemiah 5:1-5.

²⁰ Mariottini, Claude F. Malachi: A Prophet for His Time. *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, 26 no 3 Jul - Sep 1998, p 149-157.

²¹ Snyman, Fanie. A theological appraisal of the book of Malachi. *Old Testament Essays (New Series)*, 27 no 2 2014, p 597-611.

return (enough time for adults who were taken to have died), the Judeans experienced the destruction of their nation by Babylon, and previously the destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel by Assyria. They have experienced neither peace or prosperity. Consequently, it would be easy for them to assume that God has abandoned them, or no longer cared for them. It is certainly reasonable for us to think in terms of a rewards-based acceptance system that is common to man: reward for good behavior, punishment for bad. Aware of their personal and national sin that took them out of the hand of God's protection, many might think that God no longer cares for them because of their unrighteousness.

Using a form of poetic dialogue, Malachi reminds Israel that God does, indeed, love them. They have been taught of God's love, yet Malachi's question implies that the people are questioning that love. It is as though the people are saying, "We don't see that love... how is it that you say you love us?" Malachi's response to the question is a truth of the LORD that He blesses those who have faith in Him and he warns of a cursed future for those who do not.

Malachi 1:3-4. And I hated Esau, and laid his mountains and his heritage waste for the dragons of the wilderness.

Malachi then goes on to demonstrate how the love of God is lavished upon those who love him through the contrast of God's acceptance of Jacob and His rejection of Esau. This gives us an introduction of how "love" and "hate" by the LORD is approached in Old Testament writing where "the antonyms 'love' and 'hate' in biblical covenant contexts and ancient Near East political texts refer respectively to keeping and not keeping covenant or treaty commitments. The proposal made here is that the diametrically opposite divine disposition regarding Jacob and Esau in Malachi 1:2-3 has to do with covenant succession — God's disregard for the right of primogeniture of Esau, said to be 'hated,' in deference to his younger twin, Jacob,

said to be “loved.”²² Consequently, it is very important to understand the prophetic uses of the terms “love” and “hate” and how they refer to the covenant. God does not “hate” Esau in the way we would first think of our use of the terms. We know that God loves all people, and it is His desire that all would be saved.²³ This is simply a metaphorical reference to the division between those who have been saved by their faith in God, and those who are lost because of their rejection of Him. The plan of salvation has not changed from one Testament of the Bible to the next. Salvation and redemption has always been found by faith, and by faith alone. This is simply a common word usage used by the Old Testament writers.

The comparison he makes is between Esau and Jacob. It was understood that the LORD blessed Jacob because of his faith, and he cursed Esau because Esau despised the blessing of God. However, the reference here also includes the tribes that came from Jacob and Esau. The tribes of Esau never turned to God in faith, and always maintained themselves as an enemy of God. Though Jacob and Esau resolved the conflict between themselves,²⁴ their families never did. Esau’s nation of Edom set itself as an enemy of Jacob.

The Hebrew word that is rendered hate when it refers to individuals who have rejected God is not quite as simple as the word we use today. It is more of a comparison term that implies a dramatic contrast between the way that the LORD related to the tribes of Jacob and the tribes of Esau. Edom is the region that was home to the tribes of Esau, so both terms refer to the same people group. This is a group who demonstrated arrogance in the face of God. Not only would Having removed themselves from God’s hand of protection, Esau did not prosper, and their rebellion against God would be known by all

²² Bergey, Ronald L. How Did God Hate Esau (Malachi 1:2-3)? *Unio cum Christo*, 7 no 2 Oct 2021, p 33-49.

²³ 1 Timothy 2:4.

²⁴ Genesis 35:29.

people. Certainly, the biblical narrative proves this prophecy to be true.

“That the holy One of Jacob/Israel, *Yahweh Tsebaōth*, is capable of hatred is beyond any doubt, considering the testimony of the different tradition streams in the Old Testament. God hates abominable acts such as idolatry.²⁵ God also hates other transgressions of his covenant law such as injustice, robbery or a nominal altar ministry.²⁶ Hence, *Yahweh Tsebaōth*, the God of Jacob/Israel, is capable of hatred, a deeply emotional movement within him, called up by the wayward behavior of his covenant partner, Jacob/Israel.”²⁷

In contrast to the state of Esau/Edom, the LORD held Judah close to His heart, as this was the people group that contained the remnant of those that were faithful to God. Through the years of the kings, there were several kings of Judah that attempted to lead the nation towards faith in God. God’s promise to Abraham would be fulfilled through Judah: a promise to build a mighty nation of faithful people who would find salvation through the coming of The Messiah.

Consequently, it is reasonable to use words like love and hate to describe the contrast between the way the LORD treats those who love Him and those who despise Him. Malachi reminds Israel (now reduced to the tribe of Judah) that it is they who still hold the benefits of Abraham’s blessing.

Malachi 1:4. *Whereas Edom saith, We are impoverished, but we will return and build the desolate places; thus saith the LORD of hosts, They shall build, but I will throw down; and they shall call them, The border of*

²⁵ Deuteronomy 12:31.

²⁶ Psalm 45:7; Isaiah 1:14; Amos 5:21; Hosea 9:15.

²⁷ Wielenga, B., 2022, ‘The God who hates: The significance of Esau/Edom in the postexilic prophetic eschatology according to Malachi 1:2–5 with a systematic theological postscript’, *In die Skriflig* 56(1), a2822.

wickedness, and, The people against whom the LORD hath indignation forever.

Malachi's reference to Edom is a continuation of His rejection of Esau's rebellion against Him. Where the LORD promises blessings upon those who place their faith and trust in Him, no such promise is made to those who reject Him. By their rejection of God, they have removed themselves from the LORD's hand of protection and are subject to the consequences of their sin and their immersion of a sinful world culture. Rather than place their trust in the LORD for his protection, they placed themselves in the center of the intrigue of the surrounding nations that included war and violence. Edom is aware of their "impoverished" state where they find no blessings in life. So, without the help of the LORD they think they can rise above their state on their own power. However any attempt to do so is in vain as the blessings of the LORD cannot be attained by the work of our own hands.

Malachi 1:5. And your eyes shall see, and ye shall say, The LORD will be magnified from the border of Israel.

Though Israel may not be able to perceive the love of the LORD now, He promises that there is coming a time when Israel will indeed experience the love of God, and they will praise His name. Also the identity of the LORD will become known outside of Israel's borders as people from every tongue and every nation will acknowledge the LORD and follow Him in faith. Up to this point Israel has held that they are the sole "children of God" and all others are pagan Gentiles who are not in a position to be loved by God. Yet, God's offer of grace to those who place their faith and trust in Him is extended to all people, as it always had.

When we observe the state of the world today, certainly the community of faith is a small, persecuted minority of the world's peoples. However, there are people of faith in virtually every

nation in the world today. The LORD has, indeed, been magnified far beyond the borders of Israel. However, Israel itself still rejects the LORD's offer of grace and salvation, replacing faith in the LORD, Jesus Christ for a form of worship that relies on tradition and laws that are still impossible to keep. The result is a broken system:

Malachi 1:6. A son honoureth his father, and a servant his master: if then I be a father, where is mine honour? and if I be a master, where is my fear? saith the LORD of hosts unto you, O priests, that despise my name. And ye say, Wherein have we despised thy name?

It is likely that the people of Judah would be astonished at the remainder of his prophecy. Israel has actually come a long way from where they were prior to the Babylonian exile. The sin of Israel was particularly egregious in those years when they not only participated in the lascivious worship of the pagans, but even replaced the worship of the LORD with those pagan practices. This behavior characterized the apostasy of the nation, for which they were judged and ultimately destroyed.

Fully understanding this, the Judeans had no interest in repeating their error. We will find that the post-exilic nation was no longer characterized by pagan idolatry and an attraction to the Canaanite religions. However, their cessation of idolatry was not inspired by a new-found love of the LORD. It was simply a logical behavioral move that would serve to prevent another such calamity. The destruction of their nation and their exile in Babylon brought Israel back to what they understood to be God's plan for them: the Mosaic Law. Consequently, they still responded to God without faith as they went through some of the motions that would make it appear that they were being obedient to the LORD by keeping to the law.

One of the areas where Israel has demonstrated its true lack of faith and trust in God is in the nature of their worship. They refer to God as their “Father” and their “Master” in words, but not in their actions. Though God loves His children with a love that is greater than any father has for his own children, the children do not love Him. Focused on their religion, on their relationship with the Law of Moses, they have abandoned the search for a relationship with God, so they do not know God as their Father.

Furthermore, they call Him Master, but they do not submit themselves to Him as a servant does to his master.

The question that Malachi poses presupposes the attitudes of the priests and worshippers. They sincerely believe that, because they attempt to keep the law, that they are righteous, and there is no problem with their worship. As the LORD accuses them of despising His name, they would be astonished. “In what way have we despised you?” would be their question. They are so satisfied with their manner of worship and their “relationship” with God that they have no idea that they are so far outside of the will of God. As we observe the problem that is so deeply seated in the heart of Israel, it may be instructive to apply the arguments to our own hearts, the heart of our own churches, and the heart of the global church today. We may find some similarities.

Malachi 1:7-8. *Ye offer polluted bread upon mine altar; and ye say, Wherein have we polluted thee? In that ye say, The table of the LORD is contemptible. ⁸And if ye offer the blind for sacrifice, is it not evil? and if ye offer the lame and sick, is it not evil? offer it now unto thy governor; will he be pleased with thee, or accept thy person? saith the LORD of hosts.*

The LORD exposed to Malachi one area of Judean worship where the true nature of their heart is demonstrated: the way that sacrifices, tithes, offerings, and gifts were given to the LORD. Known as the “first fruits,” the Mosaic Law maintains that the first and best be brought to the LORD. They are bringing their left-overs to the LORD.

It may be important to understand the context of the Mosaic Law that is still misunderstood today. The purpose of the Law is to expose sin by the illumination of its breaking rather than to condemn those who cannot follow it. That is, if one truly loves the LORD they do not need the law to tell them what to do. If one loves the LORD they will bring their first and best to the LORD, and do so with great joy. Watch a grandparent lavish gifts on the first grandchild. Not only does the grandparent give the best possible gifts, they are given in an overabundance of love and joy. This is the way that one gives when they love the LORD. Consequently, when one does not love the LORD, they do not bring their best, and they do not bring it in joy. They are, by their actions, not keeping the Mosaic Law. Those who love the LORD seek to keep the law, but not because it is a law, but because they love the LORD.

This issue goes all the way back to Cain and Abel. Abel loved the LORD and brought the best of his goods to the LORD. Cain despised the LORD, despised the necessity of bringing an offering to the LORD, and hated his brother because of the difference.²⁸

Though I illustrated the spirit of giving with the example of a loving grandparent, Malachi uses the example of a Governor (or Emperor). Would you not bring an acceptable gift to the Emperor? One would not think of insulting the Emperor when approaching him for his service. Yet, because the worshippers do not truly love the LORD, they give no thought to the insult

²⁸ Genesis 4:8.

they bring by offering the blind, lame, the unsellable of their flocks, etc.

“In Malachi’s time the sacrificial system had broken down at every level, symptomatic of the spiritual malaise of the people. Forbidden animals were brought regularly as offerings. Those who brought them obviously were not taking seriously their commitment to God. Their whole attitude appears to have been casual and callous. Their respect for the LORD was at a low ebb indeed.

Perhaps worst of all was the role of the priests in this charade. They were expected to insure that all was done according to the clearly and precisely defined laws. They were failing to live up to their God-given responsibility.”²⁹

When serving as a pastor of a new work, I noted on arrival that the facilities were filled with old, used, broken down, mismatched furniture that members brought. The kitchen was filled with mismatched and broken utensils and accessories. The church members, sincere in their giving, were still bringing their leftovers, their throw-aways, thinking that the church could use these things. They were not aware that their “gifts” of leftovers sent a message to all who saw them and only served to denigrate their witness before the LORD. After explaining the issue, we were quickly able to repent and began replacing these items by purchasing new equipment for the infrastructure of the church, and we all agreed to never to give our old used items to the LORD again.

Malachi 1:9. *And now, I pray you, beseech God that he will be gracious unto us: this hath been by your means: will he regard your persons? saith the LORD of hosts.*

²⁹ Eakins, J. Kenneth, Sacrifice in Ancient Israel. *Biblical Illustrator*. 25(4), Summer 1999. p 18-19.

Malachi, reflecting the LORD's intent, calls upon the priests to repent of their disregard for God, and to ask for forgiveness. Note that Malachi did not give them instructions to bring a sacrifice to the LORD. The sacrificial system that is established in the Pentateuch is complex and comprehensive. However, it provides no remedy for deliberate sin. The only remedy for deliberate sin is God's grace, given lavishly upon those who place their trust in Him.

Malachi 1:10. *Who is there even among you that would shut the doors for nought? neither do ye kindle fire on mine altar for nought. I have no pleasure in you, saith the LORD of hosts, neither will I accept an offering at your hand.*

The shutting of doors and kindling of sacrificial fires is the responsibility of the priests. Therefore, Malachi has turned from a focus on the people to those who are charged by the LORD to lead them in obedience. "Of the charges brought against the priests, the foremost is that of gross misconduct in their performance of the temple service (1:6-13). That which is holy they treat not only with indifference, but with open contempt (1:7-12). Defective and worthless offerings are habitually offered upon the altar without scruple. The priests themselves provide, as they also readily accept from others, the crippled and diseased of the flock as good enough for the worship of YAHWEH (1:8,13). They have thus publicly desecrated the sanctuary and profaned YAHWEH's name (1:6-7,12, 22). Such worship as this is worse than useless; it would be better that the service of the temple should cease altogether (1:9-10). Even the heathen are not guilty of such mockery; their service is at least reverent; what is more, in all heathen lands where there is sincere worship of the supreme God, YAHWEH

accepts it, and his name is truly honored (1:11). But among the Jews, the chosen people, it is profaned (1:12a).”³⁰

Having already revealed the disregard for the LORD that is evident in the offerings and sacrifices that Israel is bringing, Malachi continues by describing how God receives these offerings. In an almost sarcastic statement, the LORD states that they might as well close the doors of the temple and extinguish the altar fire because He simply will not accept an offering that is inappropriately given.

Given the importance of this issue, we might take a moment to consider the context and content of our own offerings that we bring to the LORD. If our heart is in the right place and our love for the LORD is sincere, we may be able to observe our offerings and come away pleased that we do bring to the LORD our very best, and the nature and amount of our gifts are consistent with what the Holy Spirit is leading. For example, since the Old Testament formula for offerings is the tithe, which literally refers to one tenth of the first fruits, many hold that they are being obedient by giving exactly ten percent of their gain. Tithing eleven percent must hold some special blessing. However, even a tithe that is given with the wrong attitude is an affront to God. It is likely that, as we honestly consider the gifts that we bring to the LORD, we will find there is room for improvement in both our attitude and in the nature of the gifts.

When asked what is an appropriate percentage of our income is an appropriate sacrifice to the LORD, I have advised that I cannot answer that question with a literal number. One must listen to the Holy Spirit’s guidance and consider just how much they really love the LORD and His work. Most who read these words are probably a member of a church fellowship that collects *tithes*, *offerings*, and *gifts* in order to accomplish what

³⁰ Torrey, Charles Cutler. The prophecy of 'Malachi'. *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 17 no 1 1898, p 1-15.

is intended to be the LORD's work. It may be instructive to understand the difference between these three sacrifices.

Tithes are regular and consistent sacrifices that we bring to our local church fellowship to support its regular operations and ministries. Most fellowships maintain and publish an operating budget that is dependent upon those tithes. Almost universally, people give very little to the operation of a church and by so doing they severely limit what the church can do and often demand that their pastor live at the poverty level with no hope for retirement. This is one of those sins that the LORD is quite aware of. This is likely the most prevalent sin of giving in the modern church.

Offerings are given over and above the tithe when special needs are made known, or expenses are incurred by the church fellowship that are not a part of their regular budget. Often churches take up missions offerings, benevolent offerings, love offerings, and many others. A primary blessing of these offerings is received by the giver who loves the LORD when they understand that they are contributing to a good purpose that is consistent with the LORD's will and are pleasing to Him.

Gifts are brought to the LORD independent of any church program. One might know of a need and simply make a gift to the church to meet that need.

Malachi shows us that the attitude of the giver is far more important than the nature of the gift. God is pleased with a disciple who loves Him and gives spontaneously out of their love for Him and the joy of knowing that they are being used of the LORD to accomplish His will. True blessings are received from this form of giving, where nothing of value is received by the giver when the gift is given with the wrong attitude.

Malachi 1:11. *For from the rising of the sun even unto the going down of the same my name shall be great among the Gentiles; and*

in every place incense shall be offered unto my name, and a pure offering: for my name shall be great among the heathen, saith the LORD of hosts.

"Interpreters have considered Malachi 1:11 one of the most difficult texts in the OT, both exegetically and theologically. A number of solutions have been offered, but none has achieved the status of a scholarly consensus."³¹ The most popularly held view of Malachi 1:11 has been that it is the neighboring nations who currently perform the sacrifices that are pleasing to YHWH.³² Also the phrase "from the rising of the sun to the going down..." is a common Hebrew idiom that refers to the global, or fully widespread nature of the rule of YAHWEH.³³ Because of this some hold that "this verse appears to express divine approval of heathen worship, and indeed this is the way in which it has been taken by the majority of interpreters during the last hundred years."³⁴ While the Judean priests have profaned the sacrifices, even the neighboring nations honor the LORD with theirs.

A less popularly held view, but that of this author, is that this statement is one of prophecy as Malachi is referring to the true worship of YAHWEH that is lacking in the Judean leadership and their nation will, because of their apostasy, spread among the Gentiles who will worship God in Spirit and in truth. This second consequence of Israel's faithlessness would have been received as another shock by the priests who believe that the physical progeny of Abraham are the only "children of God" and all others are unrighteous and are to be shunned. They firmly hold to YAHWEH's rejection of the Gentiles. Malachi states that there is coming a time when the LORD will be praised every

³¹ R.L. Smith, *Micah-Malachi* (WBC 32; Word Books: Waco, 1984) 312-6;

³² Viberg, Ake. Wakening a Sleeping Metaphor: A New Interpretation of Malachi 1:11. *Tyndale Bulletin*, 45 no 2 Nov 1994, p 297-319.

³³ Psalm 50:1, 113:3; Isaiah 45:6, 59:19.

³⁴ Baldwin, Joyce G. Malachi 1:11 and the worship of the nations in the Old Testament. *Tyndale Bulletin*, 23 1972, p 117-124.

hour of the day when people all around the world will praise Him, and that praise will be lifted up by, not Israel, but by the Gentiles, those whom they despise. This would probably have been received by the faithless Judean leaders as a grave insult.

Malachi 1:12-14. *But ye have profaned it, in that ye say, The table of the LORD is polluted; and the fruit thereof, even his meat, is contemptible. ¹³Ye said also, Behold, what a weariness is it! and ye have snuffed at it, saith the LORD of hosts; and ye brought that which was torn, and the lame, and the sick; thus ye brought an offering: should I accept this of your hand? saith the LORD. ¹⁴But cursed be the deceiver, which hath in his flock a male, and voweth, and sacrificeth unto the Lord a corrupt thing: for I am a great King, saith the LORD of hosts, and my name is dreadful among the heathen.*

Rather than bring a contemptible gift to the LORD, we would be better to give no gift at all. Malachi has revealed a great sin that characterized the ancient Judean people as well as the church today. When we bring tithes, offerings, and gifts to the LORD with the wrong attitude, when we bring less than our best, and when we give the minimum to “get by” we have profaned the offering. Some of the consequences of this sin are quite evident in the church today, particularly as their members struggle to maintain a minimal budget that, even of itself, is designed to bless the church and its membership rather than the LORD. Members are quick to donate and spend money on the things that they want such as nice seats, a great sound and lighting system, etc. and are less interested in giving to that which does not bring them a clear, tangible, reward such as benevolence, missions, and evangelism.

Often members demand that their name is placed on the more expensive items given so that all will know who gave it. These

are all examples of giving in a manner that retains value or use by the giver. Such giving is not a sacrifice. If the giver receives anything in return for a gift except the joy of giving, it is not a sacrifice.

During a major expansion of our own church facility, my wife and I decided to gift a top-end digital piano to the new worship center and a pool table and two foosball tables to the youth center. I was approached by members who were very concerned that they may not be treated appropriately and asked what would I do to protect my “investment.” My answer was simple: “These items are not mine. They belong to the LORD, and I have no attachment to them at all. I will leave that responsibility to those who are tasked with that ministry.”

In another church, the remodeling of the sanctuary required the removal of the plaques from the pews and stained-glass windows that honored those who gave them. I kept meticulous records to assure their correct placement if the congregation desired to do so. I was very pleased that no effort was made to do so, and those gifts remain anonymous to this day. That represented, to me, a modicum of spiritual growth on the part of the congregation.

A quick estimate of a true tithe of a church membership can bring a startling revelation. If every member of the church was joyfully obedient in the giving of tithes, offerings, and gifts, there would never be a lack of resources to do the work that the LORD has given the church to do. Though there are many areas where the church would be blessed, the most important of these involves our pastors and staff who could devote themselves to the ministry without fear of the bill collectors and without anxiety about their lack of preparation for their later years.

It is evident that the sin the Malachi exposed to the ancient Judeans is still relevant today. Let us look prayerfully at the nature of our faith, for if we are attempting to support the work of the LORD without faith, our efforts are in vain already. If we

are people of true and dynamic faith, let us look at the nature of the attitude that we have towards our tithes, offerings and gifts. It may be difficult for us to get past the excuses and rationalizations that we have been using over the years to explain away our failure to exercise our faith through giving in a manner that blesses the LORD.

Finally, as Malachi continues, we will come to understand one of the most important points of his revelation: It is not the quantity of the tithes that the LORD is concerned with, though it may appear so to the unrepentant. When one fails to give appropriate sacrifices to the LORD, that behavior is an indicator of the condition of the heart of the believer, and it is that condition that the LORD is concerned with. Failure to give tithes, offerings, and gifts in a manner that honors the LORD simply reveals that there is a deeper issue within the heart of the believer that needs to be addressed.

Just as Malachi writes to inspire change in the heart of the Judeans, let us consider if we also need to change our hearts so that the LORD will be honored, not by our gifts, but by the attitude of our hearts as we serve Him and give to His work with both generosity and joy. Then we will realize the promises that Malachi is about to reveal: that we will be blessed by the LORD for this fruit of faith.

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