

S.D. Snyman

Prof. S.D. Snyman,
Research Associate,
Department Old and
New Testament Studies,
University of the
Free State, South Africa.
E-mail: snymansd@ufs.ac.za

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0633-295X>

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MALACHI'S CONTROVERSIAL CONCLUSION: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

ABSTRACT

This contribution briefly outlines some of the prominent problems encountered in Malachi 3:22-24 (Eng. 4:4-6). The question posed can be formulated as an investigation of the most important problems that confront research on this final part of the book of Malachi and, secondly, what possible prospects are there to solve (at least some of) the problems? This contribution argues that Malachi 3:22-24 (Eng. 4:4-6) should be viewed as two (Mal. 3:22 and 3:23-24, respectively) later additions to the book. It is also argued that the reading of the Septuagint, where verse 22 is placed as the last verse of the book, should be accepted as the better reading. Verses 23-24 were initially added to serve as an update to the previous unit (Mal. 3:13-21).

1. INTRODUCTION

Malachi 3:22-24 (Eng. 4:4-6) concludes the book of Malachi. The verses of this prophetic book are more than the conclusion of a prophetic book; they also mark the end of the Book of the Twelve, the end of the so-called Latter Prophets as well as the entire *Corpus Propheticum* (from the book of Joshua to Malachi). In the vast majority of translations of the Bible, the last verses of the book of Malachi also mark the end of the entire Old Testament. It is thus worthwhile to examine these three verses in more detail. Closer investigation reveals that these three verses are not without problems. This contribution briefly outlines some of the prominent problems encountered in these verses. The question posed can be formulated as

an investigation of the most important problems met in the research on this final part of the book of Malachi and, secondly, what possible prospects are there to solve (at least some of) the problems?

2. THE TEXT OF MALACHI 3:22-24/ENG. 4:4-6

22 Remember the Torah of Moses, my servant, that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel – statutes and ordinances.

23 Look out! I shall send you Elijah the prophet, before the great and fearful day of Yahweh comes.

24 He will turn the hearts of the fathers to the sons and the hearts of the sons to the fathers so that I will not come and strike the land with a ban.

3. A SURVEY OF PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED IN THE TEXT

Three categories of problems are identified as the main problems that confront a researcher when investigating this text. Malachi 3:22-24 presents a text-critical problem, a redactional problem and problems concerning the interpretation of this passage.

3.1 The text-critical problem

The major text-critical problem is the differences between the Masoretic Text (hereafter, MT) and the Septuagint (hereafter, LXX). A careful reading of the text reveals that there are several variations between the MT and the LXX. Ausloos (2014:479-493) thoroughly investigated the text-critical problems in these three verses and highlighted the following differences between the MT and the LXX. The Day of the YHWH in verse 23 is described as “great and notable” in the LXX, whereas the MT describes it as “great and terrible”. This reading of the LXX seems to soften the threatening tone of the MT reading. Secondly, Elijah is described as “the Tishbite” in the LXX, whereas he is identified as “the prophet” in the MT. This variant can be explained as an attempt by the translator of the LXX to harmonize the text with I Kings 17:1, where Elijah is described as “the Tishbite”. To identify Elijah as “the prophet” is not without meaning. Elijah may be considered one of the major prophetic figures in the Former Prophets. To mention him at the end of the collection of the Latter Prophets may serve as a link between the Former and the Latter Prophets. The prophetic speeches recorded in the book of Malachi stand in the same tradition of prophets going back as far as the towering figure of Elijah. A third noteworthy variant is that, in the LXX, “father” in verse 24 is used

in the singular form, whereas in the MT the reading is in the plural "fathers". This opens up the possibility that the LXX saw in "father" a reference to God, as God is indeed referred to in Malachi 1:6.¹ It also seems that the LXX focuses on reconciliation between people, in general, whereas, according to the MT reading, reconciliation should happen within the realm of family relationships between fathers and children and vice versa.

The most important difference is that, in the LXX, the sequence of the verses is different from that in the MT: verse 22 follows verses 23 and 24. This change in the sequence of verses means that the admonition to remember the Torah of Moses now forms the last verse of the book, preceded by the mentioning of the coming of Elijah. This change in the sequence of verses may not be underestimated, as it involves a significant change in the (theological) meaning of the text. In the LXX, the book of Malachi now concludes on a positive note: the people are reminded to remember the Torah of Moses given to him at Mount Horeb. In the MT, the concluding verses take on a more threatening tone: the land may be stricken by a ban (Ausloos 2014:489-490).

Ausloos (2014:490-491) concludes that it is difficult, if not impossible, to determine a firm and final decision on which reading to prefer. It appears that the best option is to acknowledge that there are differences between the MT and the LXX and that these differences amount to different theological interpretations of these verses. Having said that, it must also be stated that there is much to be said in favour of the sequence of verses followed in the LXX. The theme of the Day of the Lord mentioned in verse 23 fits neatly in with the previous passage, where the Day of the Lord is discussed as a prominent theme. The admonition to remember the Torah of Moses as the last verse of the book can then be viewed as the climax not only of the book of Malachi, but also of the *Corpus Propheticum* as a whole.

While the major text-critical problem is the sequence of verses in Malachi 3:22-24, the prospect offered in this contribution to the problem is to prefer the reading of the LXX. It makes better sense to render the last verse of the book as verse 22. Willi-Plein (2007:282) drew a similar conclusion, arguing that verses 23-24 link better with verse 21, while verse 22 serves as a conclusion to the book. It has been observed that the prophetic books close on a positive note. Doom, destruction and judgement do not have the last word; restoration is rather foreseen. It would, therefore, be strange if the conclusion to the book of Malachi were an exception to this custom found in the remainder of the Book of the Twelve. When verse 22 is viewed as the last verse of the book, the book concludes on a positive note, as is the case in most of the prophetic books, in this instance with an admonition to adhere to the Torah of Moses.

1 See also Malachi 2:10.

3.2 Redactional problem

The fact that the order of these verses is in dispute is an indication that they were considered a later addition to the book and that this gave rise to the next major problem.

There are mainly three answers to the redactional problem related to this passage. Should the concluding verses of 3:22-24 be viewed as a later addition to the book or should they form an integral part of the book? Scholarly opinion differs widely on this problem. Some scholars (Baldwin 1978:250; Glazier-McDonald 1987:243; Kaiser 1984:106; Frey 1963:180-181; Verhoef 1987:338; Floyd 2000:568) view verses 22-24 as an integral part of only the book of Malachi. Verhoef (1987:338) argues that these verses are “fully in agreement with the general scope of Malachi’s prophecy”. Stuart (1998:1391) agrees, stating that the themes addressed in these verses are “entirely consistent” with those found in the remainder of the book. Therefore, “linguistically and theologically, Mal 3:22-24 is part and parcel of Malachi’s prophecies”. According to Floyd (2000:568), the “claims of thematic discontinuity between these verses and the preceding parts of the book have been greatly overstated”.

Other scholars view these verses as a later addition to the book. It does seem odd that the phrase “says the Lord Almighty”, which is so prominent in the remainder of the book, does not occur in this instance. It is also strange that, in this instance, there is no literary device of antithesis that occurs so frequently in the remainder of the book. To add one more argument, the question-answer style of dispute characteristic of the remainder of the book does not occur in these last three verses (Noetzel 2015:241). Kessler (2011:302) noted: “Mit 3,22-24 ist die Ebene der Diskussionsworte verlassen”. Whereas the prophet is speaking on behalf of God in the remainder of the book, it seems that God himself is speaking in this instance. Moses is called “my servant” who received decrees and laws from “me”, indicating that God is the speaker. As a last argument, it may be added that it seems strange that the names of Moses and Elijah are mentioned right at the end of the book for the very first time. It is also interesting to note that the first-person singular pronoun “anoki” is used, whereas “ani” is used in the remainder of the book (Mal. 1:4; 1:6; 1:14; 2:9; 3:6; 3:17; 3:19). The introduction of Elijah, the prophet, brings a completely new idea to the line of argumentation presented in the previous passage not found in Malachi 3:13-21 nor in the remainder of the book. In this regard, scholars (Reventlow 1993:161-162, Glazier-McDonald 1987:244-245; Kessler 2011:306) mention that the Deuteronomistic language such as “Horeb”, “all Israel”, “ordinances and statues” is used in this instance. Finally, the idea of Elijah sent on mission to bring reconciliation between families is a completely new topic. It seems, therefore, best to view Malachi 3:22-24 as indeed a later addition to the book.

Once it is granted that Malachi 3:22-24 has to be viewed as a later addition to the book, another question comes to mind. Do these verses comprise one or two additions? In this regard, Noetzel (2015:240-241) makes the following remark: "Heute werden Mal 3,22-24 in der historisch-kritischen Forschung nahezu unumstritten als ein oder zwei Anhänge verstanden". Some scholars (Petersen 1995:227) think in terms of only one addition, while others (Zenger 2008:585) think of two distinctive additions consisting of verses 22 and 23-24, respectively. The differences in these verses are obvious. In verse 22, Moses and the Torah are mentioned, whereas, in verses 23-24, Elijah the prophet is mentioned. Verse 22 is positive in tone, but verses 23-24 reveal a more threatening tone. These differences are reflected in the different literary genres used in these verses. Scholars noted that, in verse 22, the literary genre of a "Mahnung" is employed, whereas a "Gotteswort" in the form of an eschatological "Heilswort" is used in verses 23-24 (Snyman 2015:184). The two different genres used are important indicators that Malachi 3:22 and 3:23-24 represent two different additions to the book.

To summarise: It has been established thus far that the LXX provides the reading to be preferred; that Malachi 3:22-24 is a later addition to the book, and that these verses represent, in fact, two additions (verses 23-24, followed by verse 22, respectively). Once it is established that Malachi 3:22-24 should be viewed as two redactional additions to the book, the next question is raised: To what does it represent an addition? Various answers have been given to this question. Is the addition or are the additions to be viewed as a conclusion to the book itself (Horst 1964:275; Smith 1984:340-341), the Book of the Twelve (Deissler 1988:337-338; Redditt 1995:243), or even the entire *Corpus Propheticum* (Rudolph 1976:291-293)? Rudolph (1976:291) views verse 22 as an allusion to Deuteronomy 34 and Joshua 1:2, 7 with no connection with the message of Malachi. Hill (1998:365) opines that these verses serve as a kind of double duty by functioning as a summary to the book of Malachi as well as a conclusion to the Book of the Twelve. He further argues that the figures of Moses and Elijah link and, in effect, bridge two literary collections of the Primary History and the Latter Prophets. To Hill (1998:365-366), the mentioning of Moses and Elijah has a significance reaching further than the book itself.

The prospect argued in this contribution differs from these viewpoints. To argue that Malachi 3:22-24 consists of two additions does not imply that there is hardly any or no relationship between the last unit of the book and the remainder of the book. The book of Malachi contains numerous allusions or even quotations from the Pentateuch. For example, in Malachi 1:2-3, there is a reference to Jacob and Esau (see also 2:12; 3:6). Malachi 1:6-14 consists

of various references to the Torah of Moses. That the latter is mentioned at the end of the book is quite understandable.

The reference to Elijah is a more complicated matter. It is most probably an update and later interpretation of Malachi 3:1a, where it is stated that “my messenger” or Malachi has been sent on a preparatory mission before the Lord himself will come. Malachi 3:1a is probably a later addition to Malachi 2:17-3:7a, identifying the prophet Malachi as the one who is already sent as messenger of the Lord. In verses 23-24, the theme of a sent messenger is picked up again and this time it is Elijah. It is clear that it concerns two different persons with different tasks and responsibilities. In the case of Malachi 2:17-3:7a, the messenger/Malachi was sent to prepare the people to face the imminent coming of the Lord. In Malachi 3:23-24, Elijah is tasked with reconciling family relations, as observed by Weyde (2000:392-393). The mention of Elijah the prophet in Malachi 3:23 is thus not a clarification of the messenger mentioned in Malachi 3:1a (Hill 1998:383); rather, it is a reinterpretation of the figure mentioned in Malachi 3:1a. Be it as it may, verses 23-24 have Malachi 3:1a as background and, therefore, establish a close connection between the closing verses of the book and the remainder of the book.

There is an even closer relationship between Malachi 3:13-21 (the unit immediately preceding) and verses 22-24. The point argued, in this instance, is that Malachi 3:23-24 should not be viewed as a later addition to the book, but rather that they were meant as an addition to the previous unit of Malachi 3:13-21. Malachi 3:13-21 serves as an apt ending to the book. Those fearing the name of YHWH will ultimately be vindicated and experience healing in the rays of the sun of righteousness and share in the victory over the wicked and godless people. The sceptical questions raised and the religious and moral laxity will be a matter of the past when the Day of the Lord will happen and the righteous people will be restored. The book concludes with Malachi 3:13-21 on a positive note, as is the case with other prophetic books.

When these prophecies were not fulfilled, an addition was added to this last passage in Malachi. Those who are addressed in verses 23-24 are those who feared the Lord (Mal. 3:16), who revered the name of the Lord, and for whom the sun of righteousness will rise (Mal. 3:20). A redactor picked up the theme of the Day of the Lord so prominent in Malachi 3:13-21. In verse 17, mention is made of “the day I shall make” and, in verse 19, it is said that “the day will come”. The topic of the coming of the day of the Lord is once again repeated in verse 21. In verse 23, “the day of YHWH that will come” is picked up and provides an explanation for the delay in the fulfilment of the prophecy uttered in the previous unit. Before the Day of the Lord will come and the victory foreseen in Malachi 3:19-21 can happen, Elijah the prophet will now have to come first. His task will be to reconcile fathers with children

and vice versa. Only then will the prophecy of Malachi 3:13-21 be fulfilled. It is also noteworthy that “hinne” (“see”) mentioned in verse 19 is found again in verse 23, and that the reading of the LXX in verse 23 starts with “kai” (“and” in Greek) linking verses 23-24 with the preceding passage. In other words, the delay in the fulfilment of the prophecies uttered in Malachi 3:13-21 is explained by introducing the coming of Elijah as the prophet who will have to reconcile families before the restoration and victory described in Malachi 3:13-21 may come to pass.

The close ties between verses 23-24 and the preceding passage do not mean that verses 23-24 should be viewed as part of Malachi 3:13-21. As argued earlier, there is enough evidence to view verses 23-24 as a later and, therefore, separate addition to the book.

This close relationship between verses 23-24 and the previous passage suggests that these verses were not primarily added to serve as a conclusion for a larger corpus of prophetic literature, whether it is the Book of the Twelve or the *Corpus Propheticum* as a whole. Verses 23-24 should rather be viewed as an addition to the preceding passage to explain the delay in the fulfilment of the prophecies uttered there. Kessler (2011:302) agrees with this line of thinking when he notes that the last passage in the book can be regarded as a continuation of the prophetic speech in the previous passage.

At a still later stage, Malachi 3:22 was added as a conclusion to the book reaching back to the Torah of Moses. The reference to the Torah of Moses is probably an indication of the unrivalled authority the Torah achieved within the believing community of that time. The purpose of the reference to the Torah is to claim that what is said in this book (and for that matter in the remainder of the *Corpus Propheticum*) does not differ from the stipulations already contained in the Torah (Snyman 2015:187). The reference to the Torah of Moses also serves to connect the prophetic literature with the Torah. The link with Elijah as a major prophetic figure in the Former Prophets comes first and, secondly, there is the wider connection with the Torah of Moses (Kessler 2011:304).

3.3 Problem of interpretation

The interpretation of these verses raises a number of questions.

3.3.1 The Torah of Moses

What is meant by the reference to the Torah of Moses? Scholars have given different answers to this problem. It may refer to the book of the covenant in Exodus 20-23 (Baldwin 1978:250-251), or to the book of Deuteronomy (Smith 1984:341-342), or to the law book of Ezra (Horst 1964:275), or to the commandments of the YHWH in more general terms (Van der Woude

1982:158). The vast majority of scholars in recent times consider the entire Pentateuch (Glazier-McDonald 1987:244-245; Hill 1998:365-366; Redditt 1995:243; Meinhold 2006:414; Noetzel 2015:242-243).

3.3.2 The reference to Elijah

The reference to the prophet Elijah seems odd. Suddenly and rather abruptly, Elijah the prophet appears. The mention of Elijah establishes an intertextual link with the Elijah narratives recorded in I Kings 17-II Kings 2. The promise of sending Elijah to the people makes it the only reference to him in the Latter Prophets. In only two other instances is Elijah identified as “the prophet” (I Kgs. 18:36; II Chr. 21:12). The question is: Why Elijah? Scholars have offered four possible answers.

First, Elijah is known for his tireless attempts to let the people worship Yahweh alone (I Kgs. 18), a conviction that will cohere well with the emphasis on proper worship of Yahweh in the book of Malachi (Mal. 2:10-16).

Secondly, Elijah is the prophet who confronted King Ahab on the issue of Naboth’s vineyard (I Kgs. 21), making him also a prophet who is concerned about social justice. It might be that the importance of justice within the realm of human relationships triggered the idea of Elijah as the one who will restore relationships between family members. The task Elijah has to perform is described as “turning the hearts of the fathers to the sons and the hearts of the sons to the fathers”. This is a vague description that makes it difficult to determine what exactly is meant.

In the prophetic literature, the theme of disrupted human relationships does occur, even within families (Jer. 9:4-9; 12:6), but the relationship between fathers and sons is not addressed, in particular. In Amos 2:7, father and son are both guilty of the same sexual sin. Micah 7:6 (a post-exilic text) mentions a son insulting his father. The closest parallel to a reciprocal disrupted relationship is found in Ezekiel 5:10, where it is mentioned that “fathers will eat their own sons within your midst and sons will eat their own fathers”. This verse occurs in the context of a prophecy of doom on Jerusalem, resulting in the eventual fall of Jerusalem with the Babylonian exile.

Thirdly, and the answer normally given is that, because Elijah did not die but ascended into heaven (II Kgs. 2:11), it was expected that he might return. Apart from Enoch (Gen. 5:24), he is the only person in the Old Testament/ Hebrew Bible who escaped death in this way. This put him in a class of his own, combined with the fact that Elijah was regarded as one of the prominent and more successful prophets when one considers his encounter with the prophets of Baal (I Kgs. 18). Furthermore, Elijah the prophet serves as an excellent counterpart for Moses, the mediator of the Torah. Both were devoted

to Yahweh alone, worked signs and wonders, and had a meeting with Yahweh on Mount Horeb.

Fourthly, the expected coming of an earlier prophet may be an indication that prophecy in the classical sense was on the decline and that there would be no more prophets (Wöhrle 2008:392).

It is also not clear what is meant by the statement that Elijah will be sent. Does it mean that Elijah the prophet will return to the people living in the mid-5th century BC/E? The mentioning of Elijah should then rather be understood as a metaphorical reference to a prophet such as Elijah and not a reincarnated or resurrected Elijah (Hill 1998:383).

A recent proposal on the issue of the mission of Elijah is that of Assis (2011:207-220). According to his interpretation, "sons" or "children" refers to the people of God and "fathers" must be viewed as referring to God. Assis based his argument on the plural form of EL as Elohim, indicating the one God. He refers in particular to "Adonim" in Malachi 1:6, where YHWH is meant especially in the context where God is referred to as father. The reconciliation that has to take place is the reconciliation between the people and YHWH and not between fathers and their children, according to Assis' interpretation.

Assis' interpretation, however, cannot be maintained. In fact, Assis himself admits that there is no other instance in the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible where God is referred to in the plural form of father. The plural form "Adonim" in Malachi 1:6 is interpreted as an intensive or majestic plural (Hill 1998:175; Van der Woude 1982:94). Moreover, as Hill (1998:175) observed, the synonymous parallelism with "father" requires a singular meaning. It is also to be noted that "Adonim" is followed by "ani" to be translated as "Lord am I". The first-person singular form used requires the interpretation of "Adonim" as singular. Even if the word in Hebrew is grammatically written in the plural form, it signifies a singular meaning (Kessler 2011:137). Noetzel (2015:246) also agrees with this conclusion: "Mal 3,24 als Metapher zu deuten und auf das Verhältnis von Gott als Vater und Israel als Kind zu beziehen, ist nicht möglich". In Malachi 2:10, God is referred to as "one Father" and "one God", clearly militating against the interpretation of God referred to as father in the plural form.

4. PROSPECTS AND CONCLUSION

The problems investigated in the research history of the book reveal the following prospects:

- The sequence of the LXX should be viewed as the preferred reading of the text of Malachi 3:22-24.
- Verses 23-24 were added primarily as an addition to the passage immediately preceding the closing verses of Malachi. Verses 23-24 became part of the book as an update and elaboration of the previous passage in Malachi 3:13-21 when the promises made there were not fulfilled. The same people who are addressed in Malachi 3:13-21 are addressed in Malachi 3:23-24. The theme of the Day of the Lord mentioned in Malachi and picked up in the addition of verses 23-24 serves as a link to the remainder of the Book of the Twelve, where the Day of the Lord is also recognised as an important theme (Kessler 2011:309).
- Verse 22 was added at a later stage as a reference to the Torah of Moses. The reference to the Torah of Moses right at the end of the Book of the Twelve as well as the entire *Corpus Propheticum* provides an undeniable link with the Torah of Moses.
- It is significant that Elijah is mentioned in this case, the only instance where Elijah is mentioned in the Book of the Twelve. Elijah was probably regarded as one of the more successful prophets in fulfilling his mission to proclaim YHWH as the one and only God. While it is not an Elijah *redivivus* that is expected, a prophetic figure such as Elijah is expected.
- The dating of the additions remains problematic and difficult to determine, due to a lack of evidence to link this passage to a historical time frame. Likewise, exactly what it means to reconcile fathers with children and vice versa remains uncertain. Why this was a pertinent issue needs to be investigated further.

The concluding verses of the book of Malachi present the interpreter with more questions than answers. While some prospects surface in solving some of the problems, more research is necessary to resolve some of the unanswered questions.

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