

## A Theological Appraisal of the Book of Malachi

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### ABSTRACT

*The central question put in this paper is: what is the contribution Malachi makes to a theological appreciation of the OT? Four dimensions in determining the theology of the book of Malachi have been detected: a theological dimension portraying the God active in the book, a cultic dimension emphasising the way in which YHWH demands to be worshipped; an ethical dimension highlighting the expected behaviour of the people of God and finally an eschatological dimension opening up a vision of a future to come.*

### A INTRODUCTION

The book of Malachi occupies a special place in the canon of Scriptures. In the Christian Bible Malachi is the last book of the OT and in the HB Malachi is the last book of the *Corpus Propheticum*. Yet, in spite of this and perhaps because of its brevity consisting of only fifty-five verses, this book does not receive the attention it deserves.

The central question put in this paper is: what is the contribution Malachi makes to a theological appreciation of the OT? The paper seeks to answer this question by highlighting four aspects of the theological message Malachi has. It addresses the book's understanding of God and then goes on to distinguish a cultic, ethical and eschatological dimension in Malachi's theology.

It is impossible to give a comprehensive overview of all attempts at describing the theology of the book. Summaries of the main theological emphases are found in commentaries, but a comprehensive treatment of the theology of Malachi is still lacking. The most recent overview of the theology of Malachi is found in the book of Fischer<sup>1</sup> who treats the theology of the book of Malachi under three headings: the Lord as great king, even among the nations; the Lord as Father to all and thirdly, love and care for his sanctuary. The first heading clearly derives from Mal 1:11, "My name is great among the nations" and Mal 1:14, "I am a great king, says the Lord Almighty." In these verses (cf. also Mal 1:5) God is acknowledged as a universal God whose name is feared among the nations even beyond the borders of Israel. The second heading refers to Mal 1:6 where the honour and respect God deserves as father is taken for granted. In Mal 2:10 God is once again portrayed as father this time to underline the basic conviction that the people's relationship with God is noth-

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<sup>1</sup> Georg Fischer, *Theologien des Alten Testaments* (NSKAT 31; Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk GmbH, 2012), 133–138.

ing else but the foundation of their relationship with one another. The last heading refers to the way in which sacrifices are brought to the sanctuary. Not only the quality of the sacrifices is criticised but also the attitude of the officials overseeing the sacrifices. This all culminates in the devastating judgement voiced in Mal 2:11, “Judah has desecrated the sanctuary the Lord loves.”

## **B     A THEOLOGICAL DIMENSION**

### **1     YHWH, the God who Speaks to his People**

The book of Malachi commences in the very first verse with two words indicating beyond doubt that what follows is nothing else but the Word of YHWH to Israel through Malachi. The word *massa*’ (מִשָּׂא) is a *maqal* nominal form derived from the root *nasa*’ (נָשָׂא) meaning “to lift up” or “carry.” In its *maqal* form it is usually rendered as “burden” or “load” even “weight.” Some think of *massa*’ (מִשָּׂא) in terms of “verdict” or “sentence” meaning judgment upon the people<sup>2</sup> but this is probably a too narrow interpretation of the word. In an extended sense it also got the meaning of “message,” “pronouncement,” “announcement,” “utterance,” “proclamation” or “oracle.”<sup>3</sup> Perhaps it was thought that for a prophet to announce the word of YHWH was a burden to be delivered to the hearers of the utterance.

*massa*’ (מִשָּׂא) is a term often found in the prophetic literature of the OT (Isa 13:1; 14:28; 15:1; 17:1; 19:1; 21:1, 11, 13; 22:1; 23:1; 30:6; Ezek 12:10; Nah 1:1; Hab 1:1; Zech 9:1; 12:1) where it has the function of a superscription to a prophetic utterance and as such became a *terminus technicus* for prophetic oracles announced by prophets.<sup>4</sup>

*massa*’ (מִשָּׂא) is followed by the phrase “a word of YHWH” (דְּבַר יְהוָה). Whereas *massa*’ (מִשָּׂא) is an indication of the tone of what may be expected in the book (it is a prophetic announcement), the next phrase *debar yhwh* (דְּבַר יְהוָה) characterises the content of the book as a word from YHWH, indicating nothing else than divine revelation.

<sup>2</sup> Peter A. H. de Boer, “An Inquiry into the Meaning of the Term Massa,” *OtSt* 5 (1948): 197–214.

<sup>3</sup> Michael H. Floyd, “The Massa’ as a Type of Prophetic Book,” *JBL* 121/3 (2002): 401–422. Jacobus A. Naude, “Massa’ in the Old Testament with Special Reference to the Prophets,” *OTWSA* 12 (1969): 91–100. Robert B. Y. Scott, “The Meaning of Massa as an Oracle Title,” *JBL* 67 (1948): 5–6.

<sup>4</sup> Ina Willi-Plein, “Wort, Last Oder Auftrag? Zur Bedeutung von מִשָּׂא in Überschriften Prophetischer Texteinheiten,” in *Die unwiderstehliche Wahrheit: Studien zur alttestamentlichen Prophetie: Festschrift für Arndt Meinhold* (ABGB 23; ed. Rüdiger Lux und Ernst-Joachim Waschke; Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2006), 431–438.

The phrase "says the Lord Almighty" (אמר יהוה צבאות) became then in the rest of the book a kind of a catch phrase repeated no less than 26 times. It may seem trivial to notice the repeated use of this phrase but in a time when the prophetic word was heard less and less the message that the Lord still speaks to his people should be seen as important. Ever since the time of Moses and for centuries through a multitude of prophets the Lord God is known for speaking to his people.

Speaking to his people is a testimony to the fact that God is active in the midst of his people and that he responds to the behaviour as well as the questions in the minds of the people.

## 2 YHWH, the God who Loves

The first statement made by the Lord God is quite remarkable and is found right after the heading of the book: "I have loved you, says the Lord" (Mal 1:2). 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.<sup>5</sup> 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.

YHWH's love for Israel is illustrated by his actions against Edom specified in the rest of the unit. Israel was not and is not treated in the same way as Edom. Edom's mountains were (supposedly recently) turned into a waste and their inherited land (Deut 2:4–5) was given to desert jackals. While Edom may try to rebuild of what is left after the devastation, YHWH will pull it down once more. It is remarkable that in other prophecies against Edom a motivation is given for the announcement of punishment.<sup>6</sup> It might be because Edom rejoiced over Israel (Ezek 35:14); or it might be the pride of Edom (Jer 49:16); or it might be the violence done to Jacob (Obad 10-15) but Mal 1:3b–4 lacks any motivation for the announced judgment. The actions of YHWH against Edom serve as a proof of YHWH's love for Israel. The emphasis is not on YHWH's hatred for Edom, it is his love for Israel that must be demonstrated to his people. By destroying even an attempt by Edom to rebuild what is ruined, YHWH demonstrates his covenant loyalty to Israel.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Rainer Kessler, *Maleachi* (HTKAT; Freiburg: Verlag Herder, 2011), 120. Arndt Meinhold, *Maleachi* (BKAT 14/8; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2006), 38.

<sup>6</sup> Karl W. Weyde, *Prophecy and Teaching: Prophetic Authority, Form Problems, and the Use of Traditions in the Book of Malachi* (BZAW 288; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2000), 94.

<sup>7</sup> David L. Petersen, *Zechariah 9–14 and Malachi: A Commentary* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 170.

Israel was also devastated in the time of the exile now more than 120 years ago, but eventually was allowed to come back to the land courtesy of the Persian rulers, reclaim it and start to rebuild it. While Edom’s land will be called wicked (even evil) country, Israel’s land will be known as a territory where YHWH is great even beyond the borders of the land. YHWH’s treatment of Edom will be the cause of praise in contrast to the lament at the beginning of the unit. By way of comparison what happened to Edom will never happen to Israel. Verses 2–3a is not a statement on YHWH’s hate for Edom, it is a statement on his love for Israel. The evidence of YHWH’s love for Israel they are so desperately looking for, is produced by his actions (past and present) against Edom. YHWH demonstrates special favour to Judah by desolating Edom’s hills.<sup>8</sup> If the form of the unit is that of an oracle against a foreign nation, another argument is added: the function of an oracle against a foreign nation is that of reassurance.<sup>9</sup>

Once a declaration of love is made it is expected that it will be answered with a similar declaration responding to the initial declaration. Not so in the case of Malachi’s people! They question God’s love for them. God’s love for his people is proved by the way in which he reacts to the accusations levelled at him. Even though he finds the words uttered by the people harsh (Mal 3:13), the Lord does not condemn them for that, to the contrary, he answers the concerns and questions of the people without judging them.

### **3     YHWH, Father of his People (1:6; 2:10)**

YHWH is also revealed as Father of his people. Although not a frequent metaphor, the idea that YHWH is Father of his people is not foreign to the OT/HB. In some texts it is presumed or hinted at (Exod 4:22; Hos 11:1) while in other texts it is overtly said (Deut 32:6; Isa 63:16; 64:8; Mal 2:10). That YHWH is Father of Israel means a relationship of origin in the sense that YHWH “fathered” his people, that is, they owe their existence to YHWH who brought them into being a people (Deut 32:6). Just as an earthly father is instrumental in the procreation of children, so is YHWH in relation to Israel. Without YHWH there would have been no Israel. YHWH is one who made (created) Israel into a people. Historically that happened when Israel was led out of Egypt and brought to Sinai where they entered into a covenant with YHWH. It is significant to note how the idea of YHWH as Father of Israel is closely linked with YHWH as Creator. In Malachi this link is also found in 2:10. In Deut 32:6 one reads: “Is he not your Father, your Creator, who made you and formed you?” and Isa 64:8 echoes the same kind of statement: “Yet, O Lord, you are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter, we are all the work of your hand.”

<sup>8</sup> Petersen, *Malachi*, 171.

<sup>9</sup> Douglas Stuart, “Malachi,” in *The Minor Prophets: An Exegetical and Expository Commentary* (Vol. 1; ed. Thomas E. McComiskey; Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1998), 1282.

The origin of Israel is seen as a creative deed of YHWH by which he called Israel into being. In this sense then YHWH is Father of Israel, it serves as an expression indicating a relationship that can be traced back to the origin of Israel itself. YHWH as Father does not only have the meaning of a relationship of origin, it also denotes a lasting relationship with his people. It is thus not only the beginning of the relation between YHWH and his people, it also all about the continuation of this relation even beyond the disaster of the exile (Isa 63:16).

In Mal 1:6 a proverbial saying pertaining to the relationship between a son and his father is applied to the relationship between YHWH and the priests (and the people in general). If the honour a son has for his father is beyond dispute, and YHWH is the father of Israel, then he has all the right in the world to question the honour and respect due to him.<sup>10</sup> What does honour and respect for YHWH entail? To honour YHWH and to respect him means to regard him for what he is for his people, the one who revealed himself in a series of redemptive acts in the history of the people.

#### 4 YHWH, the Great King

YHWH is also depicted as a great king in Mal 1:14. YHWH is a great king and his name is feared among the nations. The prophet reminds the priests and the people who YHWH is; he is a great king. That means that YHWH is king over and above the great Persian Empire. YHWH is more than the local governor (v. 8) or the king of the Persian Empire at large. To call YHWH a great king reminds one of the way in which foreign rulers refer to themselves. In 2 Kgs 18:19 the Assyrian king is called a "the great king" and it is also known that Darius called himself a great king.<sup>11</sup> Verse 14 is nothing less than a claim to the universal kingship of YHWH. Even though the people of Judah may be a subjected nation, and the land they occupy may only be a small part of a world empire, they still worship YHWH, the great king, the one who rules over more than the Persian Empire. If that is the case, it is incomprehensible that they worship him in the way they do. It is unthinkable that YHWH may be honoured by sacrifices completely unworthy of his majesty and glory as great king. Kings were honoured and revered by their subjects and likewise YHWH should be honoured and revered as a great king.

YHWH as king is an epithet not often used in prophetic literature (Isa 33:22; 43:15; 44:6; Jer 8:19; 10:10; Mic 2:13; Zeph 3:15; Obad 21;), but it is well known from the Psalms (24:7–10; 47:3; 93:1; 95:3; 96:10; 97:1; 98:6; 99:1). In fact, the only cases where YHWH is called a great king apart from v.

<sup>10</sup> Pieter A. Verhoef, *The Books of Haggai and Malachi* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1987), 211; Andrew E. Hill, *Malachi: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 25D; New York Doubleday, 1998), 174.

<sup>11</sup> Kessler, *Maleachi*, 160–161.

14 is in Pss 47:3 and 95:3. To acknowledge YHWH as a great king is little less than a doxology and reminds one of Mal 1:5 where YHWH is also hailed as “great beyond the borders of Israel.”

In Mal. 1:11 it was said that YHWH’s name is great among the nations. Here it is said that YHWH’s name is feared or revered among the nations meaning that his name is held in awe among the nations. The term *bagoyim* (בגוים) should be understood as “among the nations” and not “by the nations.” Judean believers beyond the borders of Judah held YHWH’s name in awe by their proper worship; the idea is not to indicate a worldwide honouring of YHWH by pagan nations or an imminent conversion of the nations.<sup>12</sup> The fact that YHWH’s name is feared among the nations is a testimony to the fact that he is worthy of the title of “great king” because he is not a local god feared only within the restricted borders of a province of the Persian Empire. A striking contrast is also created: while it is evident that YHWH’s name is not feared in Jerusalem, his name is feared among the nations. A sharp contrast is thus created between what is done in Jerusalem and outside the borders of Judah.

The fear of YHWH’s name harks back to v. 6 where it is implied that YHWH should be feared, creating an *inclusio*. The question put in v. 6 is justified; there is indeed no fear of YHWH evident in the cult practiced in Jerusalem. Yet, at the same time, in an awkward way the question put in v. 6 is answered in an unexpected way: YHWH’s name is feared “among the nations,” beyond the boundaries of the official cult practiced in Jerusalem.

## C     A CULTIC DIMENSION

Prophecies highlighting the malpractices of the priests and the people at the sanctuary occupy a major part of the book. The most extensive pericope in the book (Mal 1:6–2:9) deals exclusively with malpractices committed at the cult and makes up almost a third of the book. Three other units (Mal 2:10–16; 2:17–3:7a; 3:7b–12) also deal to some extent with the way in which the people worship YHWH in their cultic activities.

An offering brought upon an altar signifies a relationship with YHWH and to worship YHWH and therefore the prophet may speak of “my altar” when he announces the word coming from YHWH in Mal 1:7. Offerings described as defiled means that they are unacceptable, not fit for a proper offer dedicated to YHWH. Although it was the people who bring the offerings to be sacrificed, it was the responsibility of the priests to ensure that sacrifices brought meet the appropriate requirements. The concern of the prophet is not only about the sacrifices as such; ultimately it is about the attitude of the priests – an attitude

<sup>12</sup> Stephanus D. Snyman, “Mission Perspectives from Malachi 1:11?,” in *Perspectives on Mission in the Old Testament* (eds. Hendrik A. J. Kruger, Edward C. Orsmond and Hennie van Deventer; Wellington: CLF, 2012), 203–211.

of disrespect and ignorance for the way in which YHWH is worshiped which in its turn amount to ignorance of YHWH himself.

In Mal 2:10–16<sup>13</sup> a related issue is addressed. A man committing the sin of marrying a woman while she still worships foreign deities is also excluded from bringing sacrifices to YHWH. The prohibition of taking part in sacrificial rites because of the connection with other gods may also be an allusion to the first and second commandments of the Decalogue where the exclusive worship of YHWH is required in clear terms. To live in a relation with YHWH means to bring him offerings – it was an experience of a living relationship with YHWH. Now this practical means of experiencing this relationship is prohibited. To bring an offering to YHWH was not only a private religious ceremony between an individual and YHWH, it was also a communal act. The man who desecrated the temple by entering into a marriage with a woman who worships a foreign deity must be cut off, eradicated from society. Entering into a marriage where foreign gods are worshipped means exit from worshipping YHWH. One cannot marry such a woman and still continue to bring sacrifices to YHWH. The verdict wished for is that of total isolation, the man guilty of being unfaithful against his brother in the community by desecrating the (holy) temple will be isolated from both the community and God.

In Mal 3:7b–12 the people are accused of robbing God, the participle form indicating a continuous action. What does it mean to rob God? To rob somebody from something implies ownership, property rights, possession of goods or stuff from whatever kind. To rob God would then mean to take something that actually belongs to God. It was a conviction in OT times that everything (especially the land and its produce) belongs to God (Ps 24:1; Lev 25:23). To rob God will then mean to withhold from God what is in fact his possession.

The people still do not get it, hence the counter question: "In what way do we rob you?" (Mal 3:8). The answer to this question comes as an exclamation, "in the tithes and sacrifices." The Hebrew words literally mean "tenths" (or tenth part) and "offerings." The term "offering" refers to something that is specifically brought (in the literal sense of the word: raised) to God (Num 18:25–32). Tithing is a religious custom known in the ANE in general (Mesopotamia, Ugarit, Egypt, southern parts of Arabia)<sup>14</sup> and also from the

<sup>13</sup> Malachi 2:10–16 is widely regarded as a notoriously difficult text cf. Wilhelm Rudolph, "Zu Mal 2,10–16," *ZAW* 93 (1981): 85–90; Stefan Schreiner, "Mischehen – Ehebruch – Ehescheidung," *ZAW* 91 (1979): 207–228; Russel Fuller, "Text-Critical Problems in Malachi 2:10–16," *JBL* 110/1 (1991): 47–57; Beth Glazier-McDonald, "Malachi 2:12: 'er we'oneh – Another Look," *JBL* 105 (1986): 295–298; Beth Glazier-McDonald, "Intermarriage, Divorce and the bat 'el nekar," *JBL* 106 (1987): 603–611; George W. Harrison, "Covenant Unfaithfulness in Malachi 2:1–16," *CTR* 2 (1987): 63–72.

<sup>14</sup> Meinhold, *Maleachi*, 311–314.

Pentateuch (Deut 14:22–29; 26:12–15) as something that was practiced also in the community of Judah.<sup>15</sup> In Deut 14:22 the people are admonished to “set aside a tenth of all that your fields produce each year” (NIV). The one who brings the tithe to the temple must then enjoy the tithe “in the presence of the Lord” (Deut 22:23). The people are also reminded not to neglect the Levites “for they have no allotment or inheritance of their own” (Deut 22:27). It seems that every third year there was also a tithe to be given to the Levites, the strangers, orphans and widows living in the towns so that they can have something to eat (Deut 22:28–29; 26:12). The system of tithing does therefore not only point to a religious duty of serving God in a very direct way, tithing has also a social, human dimension with tithes that should be shared with the poor and the landless. This will result in the blessing of the people by YHWH. In Lev 27:30 it is stipulated that “a tithe of everything from land belongs to the Lord.” It is further stipulated that “every tenth animal will be holy to the Lord” (Lev 27:32). Numbers 18:21–31 deals also extensively with the issue of tithes and offerings entitled to and brought by the Levites. From Num 18:25–29 it seems that the Levites must present a tithe from the tithe they received from the people to YHWH. This tithe of the tithe is regarded as the offering the Levites must bring. If this interpretation is valid it means that the prophet has two groups in mind, the people in general who are admonished to bring their tithes and secondly, the priests who are advised to bring their share of tithing as well. Later when Nehemiah appears on the scene in Yehud, the giving of tithes was a bone of contention again (Neh 10:38–40; 13:10–12).

The apparent lack of bringing the tithes resulted in a curse upon the people. The mention of a curse brings to mind the covenant curses in Deut 28:20 as a result of the disobedience of the people to the stipulations of the covenant. Emphasis is laid both on the severity of the curse as well as the fact that no one is exempted from the curse as the whole nation is affected by it. From the next verses (10–12) it may be assumed that the curse is seen as crop failure, drought and insects devouring the fields. The lack of tithes and sacrifices is a transgression against YHWH (“me” is emphasised in the Hebrew) in the first place and not against the temple or temple staff. Once again it is said that to rob YHWH is something done continuously by the entire nation. The threat of a possible curse coming into effect is countered by YHWH’s willingness and ability to bless the people in abundance, so much so that the nations will look upon them as happy and blessed living in a delightful land (Mal 3:12).

The economic and social conditions of the people living in the first half of the fifth century were probably not good. One may assume government taxes they have to pay to the Persian rulers while they had to suffer crop fail-

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<sup>15</sup> Hendrik Jagersma, “The Tithes in the Old Testament,” in *Remembering All The Way: A Collection of Old Testament Studies* (OtSt 21; ed. Adam S. van der Woude; Leiden: Brill, 1981), 116–128.

ure, droughts and insect pests (3:10–11). These conditions however, may not serve as an excuse not to fulfil their duty with regard to the tithes and sacrifices because it is part of the obedience required from them as a covenant people.

The people are indicated with the term "nation" (גו) and not people. While not too much should be made of this distinction of Israel/Judah as a nation and more often a people (as a covenant term), it is significant that in the rest of the book the term "nation" refers to foreign nations (1:11; 14; 3:12). Is this a subtle suggestion that they stand in danger of becoming a pagan nation just as the other nations surrounding them? It is emphasised that it is not only a part of the nation that is guilty of withholding their tithes; it is indeed the entire nation that is accused of committing this sin.

To put it all in a nutshell: YHWH is the God who demands to be worshipped in the right way.

## D AN ETHICAL DIMENSION

In Mal 2:10–16 the issue of infidelity in marriages is addressed. Two issues are addressed in this unit. In vv. 10–12 unmarried men who married foreign women are addressed. To marry a woman who keeps on worshipping a foreign god is an act of unfaithfulness against God that resulted in the desecration of the temple. In vv. 13–16 men already married are addressed. These men are reprimanded not to divorce "the woman of your youth" but to stay faithful to her.

No reason is given to the question as to why men were unfaithful to their wives. One can therefore only speculate and some of the reasons proposed were that men suddenly found the wife of their youth not attractive anymore; or that they wanted more security; or that the first wife held a place of honour and that the new foreign wives would not tolerate a subordinate position in the household; or that there were all kinds of economic reasons for trading one's wife for a foreign woman.<sup>16</sup> The latter reason seems to be the most probable one. However, having said all this, it still remains a question why leaving one's wife is an issue when polygamy is not a practice prohibited altogether in OT times. An answer to this question might be that monogamy was the accepted and most dominant form of marriage in Malachi's time.

This unit is a testimony to the high regard Yahweh has for marriage. Marriage is more than a mutual contract between a man and a woman; it also has religious and social consequences for the community at large. Furthermore, it is clear from this passage that a man may not simply swop "the woman of his

<sup>16</sup> Rainer Kessler, "Die interkulturellen Ehen im persezeitlichen Juda," in *Moderne Religionsgeschichte im Gespräch: Interreligiös – Interkulturell – Interdisziplinär: Festschrift C Elsas* (ed. Adelheid Herrmann-Pfandt; Berlin: EB Verlag, 2010), 276–294.

youth” for another one when it is convenient for him to do so. In this respect Yahweh once again acts as the defender of the rights of the helpless in society. It is also of some significance that it is said that one who divorces covers his garment with violence. Violence is a particularly strong word to use in this regard. In a sense divorce involves an element of “violence” leaving the former marriage partners with some emotional and even physical scars caused by the violence of divorce.

The second unit that deals with the ethical demands on the people of God is found in Mal 2:17–3:7a and in particular Mal 3:5. An elaborate list of transgressions is given. While two of the transgressions can be linked to the Decalogue, other transgressions can be linked to prohibitions found in the rest of the Torah, especially the book of Deuteronomy. Sorcery refers to the practice of divination and witchcraft with the aim of predicting the future and to exercise an influence on the eventual outcome of events still to happen. This is forbidden in Exod 22:18 and Deut 18:12 and regarded as an abomination to God, punishable even with the death penalty. In 1 Sam 28 an incident is recorded where Saul consulted a medium at Endor, an incident portrayed in overtly negative colours as yet another episode in the life of Saul that led to his demise as the first king of Israel (cf. also 2 Chr. 33:6). Sorcery inevitably involves foreign gods and religious practices and therefore cannot be tolerated as it jeopardises the exclusive worship of Yahweh alone (Deut 18:12; 2 Kgs 9:22).

Adultery is explicitly forbidden in the Decalogue (Exod 20:14; Deut 5:18). Adultery was seen as a man having sexual relationships with a married woman. This was also a transgression punishable with the death penalty (Lev 20:10; Deut 22:22) and regarded as one of the capital crimes in Israel. In Gen 20:9, adultery is referred to as the great sin. Elsewhere in the OT/HB adultery is mentioned alongside murder (Ezek 16:38; 23:37; Job 24:14–15) indicating the seriousness of this transgression. That adultery is mentioned here brings to mind once again the high regard the prophet has for marriage as is seen from the previous part in 2:10–16. Unstable family relationships because of adultery are seen as a threat in ancient societies and therefore these strong prohibitions are quite understandable. It is a matter raised in the wisdom literature as well where a man is advised to stay away from a strange woman (Prov 5:3–5; 7:5–27).

To swear falsely is the third transgression mentioned and the one also found forbidden in the Decalogue (Exod 20:16; Deut 5:20). The prohibition on perjury is also found elsewhere in the Torah (Lev 5:22; 24; 19:12) as well as in the prophetic literature (Jer 5:2; 7:9; Zech 5:4). To swear falsely has implications for an individual both in terms of the relationship with Yahweh as well as one’s neighbour. To swear an oath was often in the name of Yahweh (Lev 19:12; Num 30:2; Deut 10:20). To swear falsely was thus nothing more than a

violation of the name of Yahweh. At the same time it also violates the relationship between human beings by betraying the basic trust between human beings. Perjury occurs in a context where truth is expected but where lies are told thereby disrupting human relationships.

Admonitions from the wisdom literature echo the same sentiments. Prov 5:15–20; 6:20–35 and 7:1–27 advises a pupil not to fall in the trap of adultery because "a man who commits adultery lacks judgement" (Prov 6:32). Proverbs 19:5; 24:28 and 30:8 speak out against perjury so that it seems that the prophet is not only informed by traditions from the Torah but also from wisdom traditions.

To defraud labourers from their wages can also be traced back to Deuteronomy (15:18; 24:14). From Deut 24:14–15 it seems that to defraud a hireling from his wages has the implication of not paying him on the day that he earns his money. To oppress the widow and the orphan (more precisely a fatherless child) likewise expresses a concern for the *personae miserae* in the community and they are often mentioned together with the alien. It was especially the widows and orphans in a community who were particularly vulnerable in society. With the loss of a husband and father a widow and fatherless child were deprived of the care they were entitled to and left unprotected in an all too often harsh society. The social weak and vulnerable members of the community may not be exploited. To take care for the orphan and the widow is a concern in the Torah (Exod 22:21–24; Deut 24:17–22; 26:12–13; 27:19) as well as in the prophetic literature (Isa 1:17; 10:2; Jer 7:6; Mic 2:9; Zech 7:10). Naomi and her two daughters-in-law are perhaps the best known widows in the OT/HB where their vulnerable situation is described in especially Ruth 1–2. Quite telling Ruth is spoken of as the "woman/wife of the dead" in Ruth 4:5; 10. Social injustices in society are unmasked by the God of justice and revealed to the very people who had questions about the God of justice.

The Hebrew term *ger* occurs only here and in Zech 7:10 in the Book of the Twelve. The plight of the alien in society is separated from the widow and the orphan by a separate verb in this verse although the alien is often mentioned together with the orphans and widows (Deut 27:16). The alien may not be "bent," "turned away" or "thrust aside" or "deprived." The alien is object of Yahweh's care and consideration and the people should do likewise. Moreover, the people should remember that they themselves were once aliens in the land of Egypt and should therefore be kind to the aliens now that the people have their own land (Exod 22:20–21; Deut 10:18–19). That the alien is mentioned here is remarkable when one takes the previous part into account where marriages with foreign women are denounced.

Over and above the references from the Torah exhorting the people not to oppress the widows and the orphans and not to deprive the aliens, admonitions coming from the wisdom literature in this regard are also worth mention-

ing. According to Prov 14:31 the one “who oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker.”

It is a debatable point whether the phrase “and do not fear me” should be interpreted as yet another transgression mentioned or whether it serves as a summary or ultimate conclusion of the previous list of transgressions. The latter possibility seems the more probable option. What is important is that the transgressions against fellow human beings are here brought into the realm of the people’s relationship with Yahweh himself. To fear Yahweh does not only mean to honour Yahweh and to serve him in the right way, it also means to treat a fellow human being in the right way. To fear Yahweh is not an unfamiliar concept in the book (1:14; 2:5; 3:16; 3:20) showing that the term includes both the relationship with God and human beings alike. To fear Yahweh is a phrase at home in Lev 19 (19:11) but is also found in Proverbs (23:17) reflecting both cultic and wisdom influence.

It seems as if the prophet draws on various legal traditions in especially the Torah (Covenant Code, the Holiness Code, Priestly source) to list transgressions. It is also apparent that the use of wisdom traditions comes into play as well.

To summarise this part in a nutshell: YHWH is the God who demands an ethical correct behaviour.

## **E     AN ESCHATOLOGICAL DIMENSION**

Already in the very first unit of the book a dimension opening up a vista into the future is given (1:5). While it is so that the people have doubts on YHWH’s ongoing commitment to and love for them eventually they will once again see that YHWH is great even beyond the borders of the land. A time is foreseen where the judgment upon the priests (2:9) and the Levites will result in cultic worship that will be pleasing to YHWH (3:2–4). The future will also bring an answer to their questions on whether it is still meaningful to serve YHWH in a time where it seems that those who are in rebellion against God are the fortunate ones and those who did wrong are actually the ones who prosper (3:14–15). The righteous ones are assured that there will be a time when YHWH will act decisively resulting in a clear-cut distinction between those serving him faithfully and the wicked ones within the community of Israel (3:17–21). YHWH will restore justice and it will become apparent on the Day of YHWH where justice or righteousness will rise as the sun rises to restore justice in the end. Like the sun rises in the morning driving away the darkness of the night, so righteousness will rise and the injustices of the current time will be driven away. Judgment and utter destruction await the wicked people who are in rebellion against God (3:19) while the faithful believers can look forward to joyful deliverance and ultimate victory (3:20–21). Family relationships that are

currently disrupted will be restored when fathers and sons will be reconciled (3:24).

## **F WHY THIS KIND OF THEOLOGY?**

Theology is always rooted in history. It is history that gives rise to a particular theology. Therefore one must ask the question: why this kind of theology in the book of Malachi? The answer lies in the historical circumstances that gave rise to these particular theological emphases found in the book. If a date of roughly 460–450 B.C.E. is assumed, then it is clear that there was no immediate threat to the Persian Empire during the reign of Artaxerxes I.<sup>17</sup> Assuming a mainly agrarian economy, one might surmise that generally speaking times were tough. We read about drought, pests and crop failure (Mal 3:10–11) during this time. It was also a time of moral decay. Married men would all too easily get rid of their wives to marry women from foreign religions (Mal 2:10–16) and the people are reprimanded for adultery, not paying their workers their wages, oppressing the widows and fatherless children and depriving aliens from justice (Mal 3:5). Speaking from a religious point of view the literary genre of the book suggests a time of scepticism resulting in posing questions as to the righteousness of God (Mal 2:17) or whether it is worthwhile to serve God at all (Mal 3:14). This kind of religious scepticism resulted in a general laxity in the bringing of sacrifices (Mal 1:6–2:9; 3:8–10).

## **G CONCLUSION**

It is interesting to note that the cultic and ethical emphases are not separated as two different and unrelated realms of life. Cultic and ethical emphases in the book are intertwined. This is particularly illustrated in Mal 2:10–16 and in Mal 2:17–3:7a.

The second observation to be mentioned is the influence of wisdom traditions in shaping the theology of the book of Malachi. The book of Malachi not only made use of Pentateuchal traditions but was also influenced by wisdom traditions. Weyde remarks in this regard that "it appears that Mal 3:5. . . shares terms and ideas with cult and wisdom traditions."<sup>18</sup>

Four dimensions in determining the theology of the book of Malachi have been detected: a theological dimension portraying the God active in the book, cultic dimension emphasising the way in which YHWH demands to be worshipped; an ethical dimension highlighting the expected behaviour of the

<sup>17</sup> Eugene H. Merrill, *An Exegetical Commentary: Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 373; Paul L. Redditt, *Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi* (NCB; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1995), 150; Henning G. Reventlow, *Die Propheten Haggai, Sacharja, und Malachi* (ATD 25/2; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993), 130.

<sup>18</sup> Weyde, *Prophecy and Teaching*, 311.

people of God and finally an eschatological dimension opening up a vision of a future to come.

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