

Antithesis between יְרֵאִי יְהוָה and רְשָׁעִים: Malachi 3:13–21 [MT] as a reconciliation of Yahweh's justice with life's inequalities

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Note:

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This article demonstrates the vindictive tone of Malachi's final sermon by highlighting the amazing reversal of fortunes of the righteous and shocking end of the wicked. Such a reversal or antithesis this article proposes, serves as a climax to the literary motif and artistic brilliance of reversal noticeable in the book of Malachi. The substance of Malachi's message is that of triumph of Yahweh's justice over obvious inequalities of life. Malachi 3:13–21 reveals that beyond the horizon of lived reality lies a judgement moment in which good and evil are still criteria of what is acceptable and unacceptable to Yahweh. The article examines the literary structure and content of the this unit of Malachi's oracle, provides detailed exegesis of the cynicism or antithesis in the text and concludes by synthesising the result in an attempt at reconciling Yahweh's supposed justice with obvious life's inequalities. Malachi's prediction of the ultimate restoration of the fortune of the righteous and shameful end of the wicked, stands as a refutation of the insinuation that to serve Yahweh is worthless.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This article not only focuses on the synchronic dimensions of this text, but also the diachronic perspectives. The literary analysis is combined with a historical embeddedness of this text. This text poses a challenge to the reader of the 21st century and invites the modern reader to a explore life, and specifically fullness of life amidst circumstances not conducive to fullness of life.

Introduction

One of the important theological considerations in the divine-human relationship noticeable in the theology of the Old Testament and which manifests itself in the book of Malachi is the assumption regarding Yahweh's justice (Boloje & Groenewald 2014a:1–9). Ancient Israel made no attempt to hide the fact that, despite Yahweh's greatness, power, and promises to be present for the community of faith, life could be profoundly difficult and unfair. Israel's faith was not a faith that was unable to embrace both the reality of a relationship with Yahweh and the experience of horrible distress at the same time (Kessler 2013:411; Miller 1994:58–62).¹ To Israel it made no sense to put on a brave face or deny the realities of life so as to please Yahweh before a sceptical society. The willingness to argue and struggle with Yahweh in a real sense, demonstrates an understanding of the divine-human relationship that is composed of two covenant partners who can be expected to be faithful to each other. Thus, when the covenant relationship is experiencing some degree of dysfunction from the side of Israel, rather than declaring that all is well with the world even when it is obviously not, Israel cries out before Yahweh that all is not well and seeks relief and justice (Brueggemann 2002:147; Kessler 2013:411–412).

Appearing as the last book of the prophets in both the Hebrew text and the Septuagint and accordingly in the various English versions, the book of Malachi is a demanding address to the restored community of Judah during the post-exilic era (Dempsey 2000:139).² The book's perspective of lived reality divides the prophet's audience into various groups (Bedford 1995:72; Boda 2012:15; Tiemeyer 2005:178f.). Historically the suffering of the exile was over, but Yahweh's people were still not who they were meant to be in his plan. They did not have a Davidic king ruling over them. They did not have peace and security in the land. They were still waiting for

1. In the Psalms, many times in the midst of suffering, the psalmist regards Yahweh not simply as a deity who rules the world in general, but as my God (cf. Pss 22:10; 31:14; 140:6).

2. For a comprehensive treatment of issues related to authorship, date of writing, recipients of the message, style of writing, prominent themes, structure, and context of the book of Malachi, see Boloje (2014:120–175).

Yahweh's promises to be fulfilled. Whilst they waited, this post-exilic prophet among others came with a message of hope, a message that said, 'Until God finally does what he plans to do, your responsibility is to obey, to worship, and to trust' (Bramer 2011:158–159).

The book of Malachi reflects concern on the living conditions or experiences of individuals whose eloquent testimony indicates some degree of frustration in their devotion to Yahweh on account of unrealized expectations and whose supposed sufferings are unwarranted, thus proposing a complete abandonment of faith in Yahweh's justice. Their perception of injustice and unfairness of life gave rise to expressions of resentment and regret at having followed Yahweh's path (Assis 2010:366). The fact of experience seems to contradict the profitableness of godliness. The inequalities that exist within the community, Malachi's audience confirmed, constitute a reversal of fortune for the wicked. Those who have scorned Yahweh's instructions, prosper and escape divine judgement, whereas, it is implied, the righteous suffer. Why then should one obey Yahweh's commandments? What is the essence of serving Yahweh? (Brown 1996:203; Glazier-McDonald 1987:207; Petersen 1995:221)

The purpose of this article is to demonstrate the vindictive tone of Malachi's final sermon by highlighting the amazing reversal of fortunes of the righteous and shocking end of the wicked. The substance of Malachi's message this article proposes yields a character, namely Yahweh, whose power does have a liberating and restorative effect. It is a message of the triumph of Yahweh's justice over obvious inequalities of life. Malachi 3:13–21 reveals that beyond the horizon of lived reality lies a judgement moment in which good and evil are still criteria of what is acceptable and unacceptable to Yahweh. Malachi reveals that a time of justice and fairness is coming in which everyone will receive his just reward. As a background, the article examines the literary structure and content of the this unit of Malachi's oracle, provides detailed exegesis of the cynicism or antithesis in the text and concludes by synthesising the result in an attempt at reconciling Yahweh's supposed justice with obvious life's inequalities. In this regard, Malachi's prediction of the eventful rehabilitation of the fortune of the pious and shameful end of the wicked, stands as a refutation of the insinuation that to serve Yahweh is worthless. The emphasis upon the retribution principle in this oracle underscores the seriousness of divine threat and the certainty of divine promise that blend together in the book (Hill 1998:363).

Literary structure and content of Malachi 3:13–21

In line with the thematic unity of the Book of the Twelve, the book of Malachi deals with a diversity of theological motifs: covenant, temple worship and ministerial integrity, fidelity and infidelity, fertility and infertility, the day of Yahweh, Yahweh's justice (Boloje 2014:141f.; LeCureux 2012:16;

Nogalski 2007:125; Redditt 2007:184f.; Rendtorff 2000:75f.). Thus, one of the key issues for understanding the book is its structure. The book is organized into six different disputation or oracle units, a preface (superscription) and an appendix (Assis 2010:356; Clendenen 2004:227; Dempsey 2000:139; Glazier-McDonald 1987:18; Hill 1998:27).³ Fundamental to these units is their engagements of their audience through a caricature of their beliefs or attitudes, in response to which the audience voices perplexity. Malachi's exchanges are difficult to epitomize in a single explanation. A casual reading of the book indicates that it contains a recurring pattern of assertions, questions, and rebuttals (Troxel 2012:161).⁴ Like the fifth disputation, the sixth oracle unit in the book of Malachi falls within the closing dispute of his writing and is addressed to the faithful remnant within Malachi's post-exilic community who have questioned their loyalty in Yahweh's eyes (Glazier-McDonald 1987:207; O'Brien 2004:286). According to Hill (1998):

This final oracle reflects the standard three-part disputation pattern of prophetic declaration, audience rebuttal, and prophetic refutation. However, the disputation is framed in a manner similar to that of the Fifth Oracle (3:6–12), offering a more complex series of charges and counter charges. (p. 326)

Malachi's sixth oracle unit is identified as a blend of different kinds of speech acts: prophetic disputation, prophesy of salvation, prophetic exhortation (Floyd 2000:625), with the inclusion of assertive speech of accusation designed to motivate (3:13–15), narrative account designed to stimulate a response (3:16), an assertive speech of assurance (3:17–18), and an assertive speech of caution (3:19–21) (Hill 1998:326). The oracle continues the prophetic disputation in the pseudo-dialogue, question and answer format. Whilst Yahweh speaks in first person, as in most of the disputations, however, 3:16 interrupts the first person speech pattern with a narrative discourse written from the perspective of a narrator, not Yahweh (Eddinger 2012:100–101). Snyman (1996:486f.) argues for a twofold division of 3:13–21, but ends the first after 3:16 rather than 3:15. He supports this however, by certain formal features, like the inclusion of the expression *'āmar yhw'w* (*'ādhōnāy*) *ts'bhā'ōth* [says the LORD of hosts] (3:17), the grammatical structure as well as the semantic structure that requires 3:16 to start the second unit. Although Sweeney (2000:744–755) extends the oracle unit beyond 3:21, though with little explanation, the paragraph markers of the Masoretic Text (MT) divides the passage into 3:13–18 and 3:19–21 (Hill 1998:326–327; LeCureux 2012:222). This arrangement makes Malachi 3:13–21 a coherent literary unit.

The disputation functions synthetically as a summary of the prophet's previous oracles that contrast the faithful with the faithless and call the people to repentance. Thus

³The different forms of the oracle units can be seen in the writings of the following authors: Hugenberger (1994:24–25), Dorsey (1999:323), Clark and Hatton (2002:370), Clendenen (2004:227), Sweeney (2012:366).

⁴For further characterizations of Malachi's exchanges see (Achtemeier 1986:172; Clendenen 2004:219; Craigie 1985:227; Dempsey 2000:139; Floyd 2000:564f.; O'Brien 1990:47–63).

the closing speech seeks to persuade the restoration community at large, leaders, priests, and people to recognise that repentance is the only proper response to Yahweh's message, assuring Yahweh's fearers of justice in the day of Yahweh's advent, and warning the wicked of the inevitability and unavoidability of divine judgement (Floyd 2000:626; Glazier-McDonald 1987:207; Hill 1998:328; Troxel 2012:166). The disputation satirically challenges two sets of people: implicitly but distinctly, these verses condemn the attitude of those who flaunt their arrogance, and those who see the financial success of this arrogant group as evidence that serving Yahweh is profitless. The disputation presumes the classic question of theodicy and the prosperity of the wicked (LeCureux 2012:222; Nogalski 2011:1060). The question of unmerited suffering poses a major challenge for Wisdom Theology. If Yahweh is just and rewards the wise and righteous, how then does one understand the suffering of the innocent? (Kessler 2013:484).⁵ Wisdom Theology as noted by Kessler (2013:503), takes very seriously the issues of divine justice and theodicy. It recognises that evil is real, evildoers get away with it, and divine justice seems nowhere to be found (Ps 73; Eccl). The reality of evil in the world and the apparent failure of divine justice pose a great threat to those who would seek to live in faithfulness to Yahweh. It can cause them to be angry and bitter and even abandon their own lives of faithfulness (Ps 37:8, 27). Whilst calling on the faithful to wait upon Yahweh and persevere in doing good, knowing that ultimately evil will be judged and their faithfulness will be rewarded (cf. Ps 37:5, 6, 10–13, 35–35), in the interim however, Yahweh's faithfulness attends to the faithful in heart (Ps 37:39–40).

The greedy doubters of Malachi's restoration community have complained that their personal loyalty to Yahweh yielded no tangible fortune. Indeed, their lived experience showed that evildoers were actually the ones prospering (Hill 1998:328). Malachi, however, uses this unit (3:13–21) to interject hope into a bleak, gloomy and hopeless situation. For the faithful remnant of the Judahite community, Malachi offers a word of hope and a message of consolation and restoration. For him, life is not going to continue as it has been; life is about to be transformed through Yahweh's judgement that will establish justice and righteousness and liberate the exploited from their sufferings and oppression. He depicts Yahweh as having great power that will be exercised to set free the Judahite community from their sufferings, fears, and doubt (Dempsey 2000:139). Hill (1998:329) highlights the essential purpose of this last oracle in twofold: 'First the prophet assures the righteous that Yahweh intends dramatically demonstrate his justice in the life and times of post-exilic Yehud. Second, the prophet warns the wicked they will face dire consequences on the day of God's visitation.' The following section explores the cynicisms between Yahweh's fearers and the wicked and thus of the relationship between power and liberation.

5. On the general question of divine justice and human suffering, that is the theodicy question, see Leeuwen (1993:31–49), Barton (1996:71), Crenshaw (2003:175–191), Korpel (2005:138).

Exegesis of the antithesis between Yahweh's fearers and the wicked (Malachi 3:13–21)

This section of this article presents an exegesis of the two groups that stand out in the passage: the proud complainers (3:13–15) and the believing Yahweh's fearers (3:16–18). The destinies of these groups are then set forth in 3:19–21. The first question is introduced by the speech of the arrogant (3:14), and it is evaluated against the response of the wicked (13–15) and of those fearing Yahweh (16–18). Verse 18 provides a transitional thought as one is introduced to the alternative prospects for those who serve Yahweh and those who do not in 3:19–21 (Kaiser 1984:96).

The proud complainers (Malachi 3:13–15)

This discourse unit is headed by the accusation that concerns a widespread malaise that is reflected in the way the people speak of their present situation. The expression, *hāz'qū 'ālayi dibhrēkhem 'amar yhwah* [Your words have been arrogant against Me, says the LORD],⁶ confirms the gravity of the problem faced by the people. Without giving any concern for the spiritual motives or the demands of genuine heart confession, the disgruntled audience of Malachi's day demanded the rewards they felt Yahweh had owed them. The boldness with which their 'charges' (your words, 2:17; 3:13) were levelled against Yahweh is amazing, for out of their own apathy and unenthusiastic orthodoxy, they ordered Yahweh to show favour to them with great rewards (Kaiser 1984:95). The verb *hāzaq* in the Qal means 'to be or grow strong, firm, strengthen, to grow stout, rigid, hard, with the idea of perversity' (Brown, Diver & Briggs 1997:304).

Judah's response to the charge employs a slightly different expression: *wa'āmartēm mah-nidharnū 'āleykhā* [What have we spoken against you?]. This emphatic interrogative clause giving the people's response to the accusation in the previous clause does not deny that Yahweh's ways have been the object of criticism in controversial circles. However, Yahweh's affirmation that their words are strong, impudent, and presumptuous (3:13a), leads the people to marvel as to what they have said that is untrue. Their question invites Yahweh to prove the error of their cynicism, namely; defying Yahweh to disprove their accusations against him of unfaithfulness and injustice. These accusations are rehearsed by the prophet in the following two verses (Eddinger 2012:101; Glazier-McDonald 1987:209; Pohlig 1998:171).

With their evil words they made three bold assertions (3:14): *shāw' 'ābhōdh 'ēlōhīm* [It is vain to serve God], *ūmah-betsa' kī shāmarnū mishmartō* [and what profit is it that we have kept His charge], and *w'khī hālakhnū q'dhōranīth miphph'nē yhwah ('ādhōnāy) ts'bhā'ōth* [and that we have walked in

6. All translations are from the New American Standard Bible except otherwise stated.

mourning before the LORD of hosts?]. With the use of *shāw'*, a noun denoting 'emptiness, worthless, nothingness, vanity' (Brown et al. 1997:996), they label all alleged service to Yahweh as unsubstantial, unreal, and without value or worth, material or moral, to the practitioner. Piety to them yields no tangible benefits (Glazier-McDonald 1987:211; Kaiser 1984:98). Truly, serving Yahweh as these people were doing – with outward rituals carelessly and faithlessly followed whilst selfishly committing acts of treachery, sorcery, adultery, perjury, and neglect or exploitation of the defenseless and needy – was pointless, as Malachi had already noted (Mi 1:10; Clendenen 2004:437). These people were not interested any longer in righteousness, but in 'gain', that is profit, the bottom line, material prosperity. The term *betsa'* [gain] frequently denotes profit arising from unjust or violent actions: greed, dishonest gain, or oppression. Here, however, there is no nuance of unjust gain, rather, of simple profit (Clendenen 2004:437; Eddinger 2012:102; Pohlig 1998:172). In addition, they alleged that all Torah-keeping attempts resulted in no profit to the worshipper: no pay, no increase, no observable return in material prosperity, political influence, or the like. The last impudent claim was that there was nothing to be gained from 'walking in morning before the LORD of hosts' (3:14) (Kaiser 1984:98). The expression *q^edhōranīth* [like mourners] implies a hypocritical show of piety, which consist of putting on a dark-coloured garment of mourning, for the original word *qādhar* means 'to be dark, dirty' and is associated with mourning over sin (cf. Ps 35:13–14; Jb 30:28; Brown et al. 1997:871; Pohlig 1998:174). Malachi's audience had indeed been serious about the ancient covenant, but they are now questioning the utility of their zealousness.

Malachi 3:15 opens with the particle of inference: *w^e'athā^h* [and now] bringing the action from the past to the present. Based on the analysis of their situation, namely; since their keeping of Yahweh's requirements and performance of rituals of repentance for him has guaranteed them nothing, these sceptics will now make their most atrocious insinuations. They reverse the affirmation of Yahweh in 3:10. They mockingly pronounce that the *zēdhīm* [arrogant] are blessed, fortunate, or happy [*'āshar*]. The presumptuous ones refer to people with an attitude or behaviour that ignores the validity of Yahweh's authority, who have an exaggerated opinion of their self-importance, or those who arrogantly make mockery of those who follow Yahweh's commandments and attempt to take away the rights of the godly by fierce actions (cf. Dt 1:43; Ps 19:14; 86:14; 119:21; Pr 11:2; Is 13:11; Jr 43:2; Clendenen 2004:438). In Malachi 3:15a, *zēdhīm* [proud, arrogant, and presumptuous ones], is parallel to *'ōsē rish'āh* [the doers of wickedness]. To the righteous these evildoers are objects of envy because, in spite of their unrighteous acts, and their evil deeds, they prosper (3:15b), they put Yahweh to test repeatedly and escape without punishment [*gam bāhānū 'ēlōhīm wayyimātū*] (3:15c). To them the proud are built up, established, and prosperous (Clendenen 2004:439; Glazier-McDonald 1987:215–216; Kaiser 1984:98).

The believing Yahweh's fearers (Malachi 3:16–18)

This unit reveals another group that spoke to one another, but the content of their conversation was substantially different. Their words were about the fear of Yahweh and value they placed on the name, reputation and person of the living God (Kaiser 1984:99). The prophetic disputation changes to narrative in 3:16 and the changes back to prophetic disputation in 3:17. This narrative interruption is unique here in Malachi (Eddinger 2012:105). According to Hill (1998:337), 'the insertion of this brief narrative is a unique feature among the prophet's six disputations'. This uniqueness finds its import in the fact that it seems to be the only place where Yahweh is not being quoted either directly or indirectly. It is essentially linked to its context, however, contributing to the antecedent to 'they' in 3:17 and answering the objection in 3:14 (Clendenen 2004:439). The opening motivation of this section, with a short embedded narrative, is introduced by the adverb *'āz* [then]. This temporal adverb *'āz* has a logical force continuing a sequence of events (Eddinger 2012:105). It can refer to a time in the past, whether from punctiliar or durative viewpoint (Brown et al. 1997:23; Harris, Archer & Waltke 1980:54). It probably refers to the approximate period when the proud speakers of intolerable words in 3:13–15 were still speaking. It may be deduced that the population comprises more than just the proud, arrogant, and presumptuous and their admirers. It includes those who feared Yahweh and honoured his name (Berquist 1989:123).

Twice in 3:16 Malachi describes this group as *yir'ē yhw^h* [Yahweh's fearers]. As a group, they stand in contrast to the *zēdhīm* [arrogant ones] (3:15a, 19a), the *'ōsē rish'āh* [the doers of wickedness] (3:15b, cf. 3:19b) and *r'shā'im* [the wicked] (3:21a), namely 'all those who disregard Yahweh's authority, who refuse to obey his commands, who would be masters of their own fate' (Glazier-McDonald 1987:218). This is a most significant point and an important distinction, for that is where the spiritual leadership of Israel was weakest (1:6); yet Yahweh continued to expect respect and reverence of his name (1:11; 2:5; 5:5). Yahweh's fear is considered to be essentially an alternative expression for godliness or a consistent way of life that emanates from this attitude of reverence (cf. Lv 19:14; Dt 17:19; 2Ki 17:34). Fear then, became the motivation that produced holy living and an attitude of complete love, trust, and obedience to Yahweh (Kaiser 1984:100). A second characteristic of this group of Yahweh's fearers is: *hōshbhê sh'mô* [they thought on his name] (3:16b). They made an inventory of Yahweh's name, and they concluded that it was their wealth, property, and greatest asset. They valued his person and their most prized possession, and this dedication was reflected in their own character (Kaiser 1984:100).

Whilst the content of the intolerable words of the proud complainers is specified in 3:14–15, the speech of the Yahweh's fearers is not given; no description or evaluation is made of their speech. These people are not even addressed

directly as are those who spoke against Yahweh. They are only addressed until 3:20–21 (Petersen 1995:220). These believing Yahweh's fearers are a group within Malachi's community who, according to Hill (1998:337), 'took the speeches seriously and deliberated over their meaning and possible implication for post-exilic Jerusalem'. Yahweh, in turn 'paid close attention to' [*wayyaqshēbh yhw̄h*] and 'heard' [*wayyishmā*] the requests of these believers. In fact, Yahweh's evaluation of their speech is implied by his having their names and actions written in a book before him: *sēpher zikhkhārôn l'phānāyw* [scroll/book of remembrance before him]. This combination of *sēpher zikhkhārôn* appears only in Malachi 3:16 and in Esther 6:1.⁷ Malachi appears to be the only prophet to do so, and calls the book 'the book of remembrance', probably influenced by the Persian king's custom of recording the events and incidents of their reigns (Pohlig 1998:180). When Mordecai saved the life of the king, a record was made of the event 'in the book of the annals [*sēpher dibhrê hayyamîm*] in the presence of the king' (Es 2:23). When the king later chose 'the book of the chronicles [*sēpher hazzikhkhārônôth*], the record of his reign [*dibhrê hayyamîm*]' as his bedtime reading, he uncovered the memorandum and acted immediately to reward Mordecai (Clendenen 2004:443). Malachi's 'book of remembrance' refers, according to Pohlig:

[T]o the heavenly book of the names of all those who have been faithful to YHWH and to whom YHWH himself is faithful . . . It refers to a heavenly book which records, not only the names of the faithful, but, more to the point, their deeds of love and loyalty, as well as the evil deeds of the unfaithful. These records will move God to action on their behalf on the day of his judgement (cf. Mal 3:17). (Pohlig 1998:180)

The blessedness of these believers goes beyond answer to their requests or their place in Yahweh's book of remembrance. Two important promises are added: *w'hāyû lî* [they will be mine] and *s'ghulā^h* [a treasured possession] in the day when Yahweh acts (v. 17). The phrase: *w'hāyû lî* [they will be mine], implies a most intimate relationship between Yahweh and those whose names are inscribed in his book of remembrance [*sēpher zikhkhārôn*] (3:16). The term *s'ghulā^h* [a treasured possession] is found in the Pentateuch (Ex 19:4–6; Dt 7:6; 14:2; 26:18; I Chr 29:3; Ec 2:3; Ps 135:4), but is absent from the prophetic literature except Malachi 3:17. It is a covenantal terminology used in the Pentateuch solely of Yahweh's possession. Israel's obedience to Yahweh is characterized at Mt. Sinai as his *s'ghulā^h* (Ex 19:5). Although everything is Yahweh's, Israel is regarded as his treasured possession (cf. Ps 135:4), Yahweh's right by redemption (Clendenen 2004:446; Eddinger 2012:108; Pohlig 1998:183). Because of their positive response, when that day comes these believing remnant will be remembered and cared for: *w'hāmaltî 'ālêhem*

7. In Esther 6:1 the reference is not to a heavenly book but to a daily chronicle. Such a memorandum book, in which the reports of messengers coming in from the empire were recorded, was common throughout the Ancient Near East (Glazier-McDonald 1987:220). The idea of books preserved in heaven in which events are predetermined by Yahweh and in which the names of the righteous or the evil are written, is also well known in the Hebrew Bible (cf. Ex 32:32; Dt 12:1; Ps 58:8; 69:28; Is 4:3; 65:6; Jr 22:30; Ezk 13:9; Dn 12:1). In Psalm 69:28, 'book of life' is mentioned signifying and constituting 'heavenly registers of those who will be spared from judgement; they are those who constitute a holy remnant, those who are predestined for real life' (Groenewald 2003:98).

ka'āsher yahmōl 'ish 'al-b'nō hā'ōbhēdh 'ōthō [and I will spare them as a man spares his own son who serves him] (3:17b). Yahweh will spare them the punishment that will fall upon the ungodly.

Whilst the verb *hāmal* [spare], which appears twice in this verse, is mostly used to mean 'to have compassion on, to spare in compassion, be sorry for' (Brown et al. 1997:328; Harris et al. 1980:676), the comparison to a father sparing his son, *hā'ōbhēdh 'ōthō* [who serves him] is amazing. According to Clendenen (2004:448), 'it relates to the challenge of 3:14 regarding the futility of serving God and highlights the contrast made in v. 18 between those who serve God and those who do not.' Refuting their claim, Yahweh affirms that proper worship is not meaningless, for it is precisely such service that provokes a compassionate response from him (3:17d) (Glazier-McDonald 1987:227). On the basis of this relationship, Malachi notes in 3:18 that it will soon become evident that there is a reason to 'ābhadh [serve] Yahweh, and that the 'arrogant' [*zēdhîm*] and the 'evildoers' [*ōsê rish 'āh*] are not so fortunate after all (Floyd 2000:623). Men will observe for themselves the difference in the destinies of the righteous and the wicked when Yahweh awards his justice (3:18; cf. Ps 1:1, 4–6; Dan 12:2) (Kaiser 1984:101). Since lines of divisions have been consciously drawn in the community, Malachi's avows that the situation will change and this makes his prophecy to be real, not imaginary.

The destinies of the two groups: *yir 'ê yhw̄h* and *r'shā 'îm* (MI 3:19–21)

This discourse unit contains emphatic and temporal subordinate clauses of pending actions. It explains the reason why Malachi's harsh speaking audience will see the distinction between the *yir 'ê yhw̄h* [Yahweh's fearers] and *r'shā 'îm* [the wicked]. First, there will be the removal of the *zēdhîm* [proud, arrogant, and presumptuous ones] and 'ōsê rish 'āh [the doers of wickedness] mentioned in 3:15, following the initial announcement of the approaching day of judgement (3:19), and the second result applies to those who revere Yahweh's name (3:20–21) (Clendenen 2004:450).

In Malachi 3:19, the imminence of Yahweh's advent is stressed. The conjunctive adverb *kî* has a logical force and is translated 'for, because' (Brown et al. 1997:471; Harris et al. 1980:976). The particle *hinnē^h* [behold] adds immediacy to and certainty of the coming event. The combination of the adverb *kî* with the emphatic particle *hinnē^h* and the participle is a common announcement technique of something which is about to happen (Hill 1998:345). The definite article with the noun *yôm* [day] in reference to Yahweh's judgement is seen to be a definite allusion to the extended phrase *yôm yhw̄h* [day of the LORD], an important phrase in prophetic literature (cf. MI 3:23) (Barton 2004:68f; Boloje & Groenewald 2014b:53f; Coggins & Han 2011:198; Nogalski 2003:175f; Petersen 2000:3f; Rendtorff 2000:75f; Schart 2000:34f; Stuart 1998:1386). The day is described as

bō'ēr kaththanûr [burning like a furnace]. The participle *bō'ēr*, from *bā'ar* [to burn] (Brown et al. 1997:129) functions as the predicate of the clause, emphasizing not only the burning power of the divine wrath, but hints at the medium of Yahweh's judgement as well. Yahweh's day burns like an oven (Glazier-McDonald 1987:231). The noun *thanûr*, denotes a small oven for baking bread, but also a kiln for firing of pottery (Pohlig 1998:187).

The effect it will have on the wicked is figuratively but categorically stated in two phases. First, the victims of Yahweh's avenging justice are described in the same manner as in 3:15 (cf. *zēdhîm* [proud and arrogant ones] and *ōsê rish'āh* [the doers of wickedness]) (3:19). Yahweh will make stubble [*qash*] of them. It is to be noted that the chaff, refuse from the threshing process of grain, was used to kindle the fires, the portable ovens commonly used in baking. Since they are light and dry, the stubble was quickly reduced to ashes in the fires (cf. Is 5:24; 47:14; Jl 2:5; Ob 18; Nah 1:10; Pohlig 1998:189). As a metaphor, *qash* denotes the worthless or evil that are about to be destroyed. As if that was not sufficient, the *zēdhîm* and *ōsê rish'āh* will be 'set on fire', [*w'lihaṭ'ōthām*] with the resulting effect that not even a root or branch will be left [*lō' ya'āzōbh lāhem shōresh w'ānāph*] (Clendenen 2004:450). For Malachi, the destiny that awaits the evildoers on the day of his advent is complete extermination. The noun *shōresh* denotes in its primary sense the root of a plant. Here it denotes metaphorically a permanent basis or foundation of a people (Pohlig 1998:189). The roots of the wicked will be destroyed, and their branches [*ānāph*] will wither. There will be nothing left of them, they will die (Glazier-McDonald 1987:233; Kaiser 1984:104).

Having figuratively described the awful end of the wicked by means of a sequence of destructive events, Malachi discloses a sequence of positive events by which the *yir'ê yhwah* [Yahweh's fearers] will be rewarded. The metaphors in Malachi 3:20 are remarkable. The day of Yahweh is the day of the manifestation of his divine being. Here Yahweh's theophanic manifestation is portrayed through the use of solar elements. Yahweh is portrayed as the rising sun [*shemesh*] whose rays radiate healing and life for the long-suffering *yir'ê yhwah*. Thus, whilst the day of Yahweh will be a day of the destruction of the *r'shā'im* [the wicked], it will have as its corollary the triumph of the *yir'ê yhwah* [Yahweh's fearers] (Glazier-McDonald 1987:234). The verb *zārah* [to arise, come forth, shine forth] (Brown et al. 1997:280; Harris et al. 1980:580), is used in the theophany of Deuteronomy 33:2. It describes how:

[t]he LORD came from Sinai, and dawned on them from Seir. He shone forth from Mount Paran, and he came from the midst of ten thousand holy ones. At His right hand there was flashing lightning for them.

It is a metaphor for the sun's rays (Pohlig 1998:193). In the same figure of speech, *marpē'* [healing, cure, health] (Brown et al. 1997:951) carries a wide range of semantic meaning: 'healing, relief from suffering, the reversal of catastrophe,

and peace, including spiritual peace coming from forgiven sin' (Pohlig 1998:193). It thus denotes healing and fertility in Malachi. For the believing Yahweh's fearers (righteous), there will be the *shemesh ts'dhāqā^h* [sun of righteousness] that will arise for them, *bikhmāphe^hhā* [in its wings].⁸ It will be a moment of victory, vindication and healing. As soon as the sun releases or gives out its spark of rays, the long and recurrent season of sorrows and suffering for the believing Yahweh's fearers will expire with revitalising, stimulating, restorative, energising, and refreshing manifestation of Yahweh's son (Kaiser 1984:106).

The results of the healing work of the *shemesh ts'dhāqā^h* [sun of righteousness] for those who fear Yahweh will be twofold. First, the *yir'ê yhwah* will 'go forth skipping like calves released from the stall' [*wītsā'them ūphsh^ethem kh^r'egh^rlê marbēq*] after being penned up all winter long, for the 'breaker' has come (cf. Mic 2:13). Whilst, in Malachi 3:14, the *yir'ê yhwah* assert that they 'walk mournfully' [*hālakh q'dhōranîth*], in Malachi 3:20, however, their dark depression will be lifted and be replaced by an exuberance of excitement, vitality and joy. 'Like calves released from their dark stalls who gambol in the freedom of open pastures, the God fearers will break into life and energy' (Glazier-McDonald 1987:233). The second effect of the healing work of the *shemesh ts'dhāqā^h* for those who fear Yahweh will be that in the process of their *phūsh* [leaping, gambolling, jumping around], they will 'tread, trample down' [*w'asōthem*] the *r'shā'im* [wicked] who will become ashes [*ēphēr*] under their feet [*tahath kaphphōth ragh^elēkhem*] (3:21). Malachi's image of trampling the wicked underfoot is probably derived from that of crushing grapes in Yahweh's winepress (Ps 60:5; 75:9; Isa 63:2–6; Jer 25:15; 51:7; Joel 4:18; Amos 9:13), or the heroic gesture of the surmounting soldier putting his foot on the neck of his prostrate, defeated enemies (Pohlig 1998:196). Since the fire of Yahweh's advent in 3:19 will consume the wicked, the *yir'ê yhwah* will probably trample only on the ashes of what was once the remains of the wicked; the wicked being slain and incinerated by Yahweh's fire. Such an action will enable the *yir'ê yhwah* to feel as if they were contributing to the extermination of the evil they had bemoaned for a long time (cf. 2:17; 3:13–15) (Glazier-McDonald 1987:242). This dramatic outcome of history finally will vindicate Yahweh's eternal order.

Synthesis and conclusion

The classic questions of theodicy which open the sixth disputation (3: 13–14) are similar to those that begins the fourth (2:17), receive an explicit response in 3:19, with similar result, though more futuristic promises. Increasingly and interestingly, Malachi's audience experienced the distortion of theological truths and moral values. Malachi's response to the people however, reminds them that, although they find it convenient to forget the distinction between good and evil,

8. It is believed that in the ancient Near East, it was common to illustrate the sun's rays as the wings of a bird (Ps 139:9), and the relationship between the healing emanates from the metaphor of a bird's protective coverage that is, the wings (Dt 32:11) (Clendenen 2004:452).

and right and wrong, Yahweh does not (Craigie 1985:247). Malachi affirms the moral formula of divine justice on the wicked, with the associated idea that justice has only been delayed. He notes that not only will the *zēdhîm* [proud, arrogant, and presumptuous ones] and *'ōšê rîsh'āh* [the doers of wickedness] be punished but also the *yir'ê yhwah* [Yahweh's fearers, righteous] will be rewarded (Nogalski 2011:1065).

The message of the concluding pericope of Malachi's final disputation is thus, one of justice and judgement: justice in the vindication and reversal of the fortune of the righteous and judgement in punishment and destruction of the wicked (Ml 3:19–21) (Hill 1998:361). Justice for the *r'shā'im* on the day of Yahweh's advent is complete extermination, whilst salvation for the *yir'ê yhwah* takes the form of three promises: The *yir'ê yhwah* will be Yahweh's own [*w'hāyû lî*], Yahweh's *seghulāh* [treasured possession] and Yahweh will spare them. Malachi solution to the perceived problem associated with divine justice in the face of obvious life's inequalities has its counterpart in the psalmist's perception of the destiny of the wicked (cf. Ps 73:15–20). It is possible for the righteous to gain limited understanding of the inequalities of this life through imagination of the heavenly reality, knowing that Yahweh is ultimately a just judge and the wicked will no doubt perish (73:27–28). Yahweh's promise to the faithful in the assembly of the post-exilic Yehud is not necessarily one of material prosperity in the interim, but one of deliverance in the day of Yahweh's advent (Hill 1998:360).

Malachi 3:13–21 gives the readers a picture of the complex nature of Yahweh's justice and a glimpse at the power of prophetic imagination. From the perspective of the *r'shā'im* [the wicked], the exercise of Yahweh's justice is not a good thing; it brings destruction. Since Yahweh acted against unrighteousness, the *yir'ê yhwah* [Yahweh's fearers, righteous] will go free from suffering. Once freed, they will 'trample down the wicked ...' on the day Yahweh acts (3:21). Thus Yahweh's power and justice associated with the destruction of the *r'shā'im* is now associated with the liberation and emancipation of the *yir'ê yhwah* (Dempsey 2000:141). Malachi last speech to post-exilic Yehud offers a remedy for a people and community in a crisis of abandoned hope, idealization of the reality, and ethical compromise (Assis 2010:365; Craigie 1985:244). Malachi's powerful metaphors and images from life and the natural world, along with the rich content and form of his message continue to offer stimulating challenges to contemporary readers. Yahweh's promises to exercise his justice for the liberation of the Judahite post-exilic community should be seen as serving a larger purpose. Whilst the vindictive tone of the message may provoke a disturbing anxiety in the modern reader (Hill 2012:360), his message rather should be transformed into a legitimate and universal application of Yahweh's emancipation for all peoples and nations. Malachi's description of the triumph of those who fear Yahweh over the wicked therefore, is a classic case of the triumph of Yahweh's justices over obvious life's inequalities.

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Competing interests

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Authors' contributions

The article is based on research conducted by B.O.B. (University of Pretoria) for his postdoctoral fellowship at the Department of Old Testament Studies. His current research project, which is an extension of the primary aims and objectives of his doctoral thesis ('Malachi's view on temple rituals and its ethical implications') is an examination of Malachi's distinctive claims that guarantees a well-ordered community, namely the validity and feasibility of *Torah-compliance* community. A.G. (University of Pretoria), co-author of the article, acted as the research leader and corresponding author.

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