

The Book of Malachi in Biblical-Theological Context

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THE IMPORTANCE OF BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

Are Christians required to tithe? Should the ministers of churches be called “priests”? Are Christians permitted to divorce? These are some of the issues that arise in Malachi on which Christians disagree, sometimes passionately. In addition to disagreements among Christians, some outside the faith think Christians are selective in their use of the Bible. They ask, why do Christians obey some commands of the Bible and not others? To them Christians seem to have double standards. Is this criticism valid? We all know that if you quote parts of the Bible out of context, it is possible to make the Bible say almost anything. Are we guilty of proof-texting to make the Bible say just what we want to hear? To make it fit our own agendas?

These questions all underline the crucial importance of biblical theology (BT) in reading and applying the Bible. BT seeks to understand verses and passages of the Bible in the wider context of the Bible as a whole, so that

their meaning is correctly understood, applied and lived.¹ It understands the Bible not as a hodgepodge of disconnected parts, but as a unified whole, telling a story that begins with creation and ends with a new creation, with the kingdom of God that has come in Jesus Christ at the heart of the story. When the parts of the story are read in light of the whole, it explains why the application of some of the commands and instructions of God have changed through time. It explains why some of the religious and cultural practices of the Jewish people are no longer practiced by Christians today. It is not a matter of Christians arbitrarily deciding which bits of the Bible they think are relevant; rather, it is seeing how the unfolding story of the Bible itself, which climaxes in the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, determines Christian belief and practice.

Coming at the end of the Prophets, the book of Malachi provides an important perspective on how the Bible fits together. Malachi looks back over the story of Israel, with all its hopes and failures, and looks forward to the NT which explains how the various strands of OT hope are realized in the messiah Jesus and his kingdom. Two central biblical-theological themes in the book of Malachi are covenant and the Day of the Lord. These themes resound through all of the Bible and later in this article I will trace their development to show how Malachi fits into the unfolding story of the Bible and its major themes.²

MALACHI'S HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The book of Malachi is located in the post-exilic age, a period often neglected in biblical-theological treatments of the storyline of the Bible, even though the period “from the exile to Babylon until the Messiah” is one of the three distinct epochs identified by Matthew in the way he structures the genealogy of Jesus Christ (Matt 1:12-17). Before exploring the significance of this period for BT, I will briefly outline something of its history in relation to the people of Judah.

The main biblical sources for this period are the two earlier post-exilic prophets Haggai and Zechariah (who were contemporaries of each other), and the books of Ezra and Nehemiah (which cover the period from the return from exile to Nehemiah's administration of Judah).³

Jerusalem had been destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BC (see 2 Kings

25), and almost fifty years later, in 539 BC, the Persian king Cyrus had incorporated Babylon into the Persian Empire and decreed that those peoples whom the Babylonians had earlier exiled to Babylon could return to their homelands and rebuild their temples. This included the Jewish people (Ezra 1:1-4). The first group to return to Jerusalem was led by the Persian-appointed Judean governor Sheshbazzar in 538 BC (Ezra 2:64-65). Upon their return they gave offerings to rebuild the temple (2:68), built an altar (3:3), began again the sacrifices and festivals (3:4-6), and laid the foundation of the temple (3:10). Yet the people of God soon faced many difficulties including famine (Hag 1:9-11; 2:15-19), economic stress (Hag 1:6; Zech 8:10), infighting (Zech 8:10), and concerted opposition from the neighboring province of Samaria (Ezra 4; Nehemiah 2-4, 6). This all became so overwhelming that the initial work of rebuilding the temple came to a standstill (Ezra 4:24), and did not advance for some twenty years until the time of the Persian king Darius. At this point, God raised up the prophets Haggai and Zechariah to rouse the people to complete rebuilding the temple, which they finished about four years later in 515 BC (Ezra 6:14-15). However, even though the temple was rebuilt, the book of Malachi indicates that many of the economic difficulties the people faced continued (Mal 3:10-11), along with additional social problems such as a lax priesthood (1:6-2:9), intermarriage with those who were not of the Jewish faith (2:11-12), marriage breakdown and divorce (2:13-16), social injustice (3:5), neglect of the tithes and offerings (3:8-10), and a general cynicism about God and his ways (2:17; 3:14-15). These are some of the pressing issues that Malachi confronts.

There is some uncertainty about the precise setting of Malachi within the post-exilic period. Unlike the books of Haggai and Zechariah, the book of Malachi contains no dates. It also lacks any reference to persons (such as Ezra or Nehemiah) which would help to locate it. All that seems certain is that there is a functioning temple (Mal 1:10; 3:1, 10), which places it after 515 BC. Malachi addresses similar issues that faced Nehemiah: a corrupt priesthood (Neh 13:28-31), marriages outside the covenant faith and divorce (Ezra 9:1-15; Neh 13:23-28), immorality and social injustice (Neh 5:1-13; 13:15-22), and neglect of the tithes and offerings (Neh 13:10-12). Some scholars locate Malachi before or contemporaneous with Ezra and Nehemiah in the mid-fifth century, since Nehemiah brought about a measure of reform in these matters.⁴ Yet these reforms were only short-lived as the people reverted

quite quickly to their earlier behavior soon after Nehemiah took leave from Jerusalem (see Nehemiah 13). Others date Malachi earlier in the fifth century, between 500 and 475 BC, which is certainly possible.⁵ However, it seems significant that neither of the books of Ezra or Nehemiah refers to Malachi, though the book of Ezra refers to the prophets Haggai and Zechariah (in 5:1; 6:14), and the book of Nehemiah refers to Ezra (in 7:73b–8:18). Why does neither of these books refer to the prophet Malachi, especially since his message would have provided support for both Ezra and Nehemiah? This silence suggests to me that on balance, Malachi is to be located shortly after Nehemiah, who served as governor in Jerusalem from 445 BC until 434 or 433.⁶ Yet it must be noted that this is an argument from silence, which at the end of the day means certainty is impossible. Whatever the case, it is clear that providing the precise location was not important, otherwise the book would contain at least one date. Indeed, Malachi is fruitfully read against the broader historical backdrop of the post-exilic period, from the completion of the temple to the end of the Persian Empire (c. 332 BC).

MALACHI IN SALVATION HISTORY

The post-exilic period must also be considered in the context of salvation history, that is, the unfolding biblical story of God's purpose to redeem a people for himself through his son for his glory. As noted above, Matthew's gospel breaks up this story into three parts: "from Abraham to David . . . from David until the exile to Babylon . . . and from the exile to Babylon until the Messiah" (Matt 1:17, HCSB). I will summarize the important elements in each period, and particularly focus on the third, in which Malachi is located. While doing this, I will trace the themes of covenant and the Day of the Lord, which are key themes in Malachi.

From Abraham to David

Israel's story begins with the promises to Abraham that his descendants will become a great nation (Israel), who will inherit a land, be blessed by God, gain a great name, and mediate blessing to all the peoples on earth (Gen 12:1-3). Essentially these promises state God's intention to establish his kingdom. Behind these promises lies God's intention to bless all of creation (Gen 1:28; 2:3), and the promises to Abraham reaffirm God's commitment to establish

his kingdom in spite of the stark episodes of human sin in Genesis 3–11.

God's promises to Abraham are formalized in a covenant in two places in the Genesis narrative – chapters 15 and 17.⁷ They are also reiterated to the patriarchs Isaac and Jacob (e.g., Gen 26:3-5; 28:13-15; 46:3-4), and drive much of the storyline of Genesis (and the rest of the Bible). The promise of a great nation finds its fulfilment in the deliverance of Abraham's descendants from slavery in Egypt, from where they will journey to the land of Canaan, their promised inheritance (Gen 15:13-14, 18; Exod 2:24; 6:4-5). Subsequent to their exodus from Egypt, God brings them to Sinai where he enters into a covenant with the nation, mediated through Moses. Before the requirements of the national covenant are stipulated (in Exodus 20–23), God explains the purpose of his covenant relationship in Exodus 19:5-6. Israel is to be God's "own possession out of all the peoples . . . My kingdom of priests and My holy nation" (HCSB). In other words, as Israel lived out their covenant relationship with the Lord, they were to be distinct ("holy") and so mediate (like "priests") the knowledge of God to the nations ("all the peoples"), bringing the blessing to the nations that God had promised Abraham and which he had purposed in creation (Gen 1:28; 2:3). Chris Wright summarizes this:

As the people of YHWH they would have the historical task of bringing the knowledge of God to the nations, and bringing the nations to the means of atonement with God. The Abrahamic task of being a means of blessing to the nations also put them in the role of priests in the midst of the nations. Just as it was the role of the priests to bless the Israelites, so it would be the role of Israel as a whole ultimately to be a blessing to the nations.⁸

The covenant relationship was the means by which Israel fulfilled their role. Therefore, their obedience to the stipulations of the covenant was crucial; their holiness would be evident in their ethics. God's entering into a covenant relationship with Israel showed his love for them (cf. Mal 1:2), and they were to show their love for God in obedience to his commands (e.g., Deut 6:4-9). God's purpose was that Israel would serve like a "show house" or "model home" that displayed his character to the nations. Israel was meant to live in such a way that attracted the nations to their God (e.g., Deut 4:5-8).

It is essential to appreciate that this covenant relationship between God

and Israel, set out in the Torah (or Pentateuch), is fundamental for Malachi (indeed it is fundamental for all the prophets, even when they do not explicitly refer to it).⁹ At its heart, the prophets' role involved calling Israel back to obedience to the national covenant. They warned of divine judgment in situations where the covenant was being broken and called on people to repent (e.g., 2 Chron 24:19). In these contexts, the prophets often declared the law to the people (e.g., Zech 7:12). This role is summarized in 2 Kings 17:13:

Still, the LORD warned Israel and Judah through every prophet and every seer, saying, "Turn from your evil ways and keep My commands and statutes according to the law I commanded your ancestors and sent to you through My servants the prophets." (HCSB)

The prophets not only warned of divine judgment, but also promised blessing if the people should repent and obey the Lord (e.g., Jer 22:4-5; Zech 6:15). In many instances the prophetic predictions were not stating any more than had been revealed to Moses in the lists of blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience at the end of the books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy.¹⁰

In addition to the prophets, the Levitical priests were required to teach God's covenant law to Israel (e.g., Lev 10:11; Deut 31:9; 33:8-10; cf. Hag 2:11; Mal 2:5). This also involved a judicial role at the tabernacle/temple where they provided rulings based on the law for those who sought settlement of a dispute (e.g., Deut 17:8-13; 19:17). Malachi refers to a "covenant with Levi" (Mal 3:4), and while this phrase does not appear in the Torah, the role established for the priests in the Torah where they are given a special relationship with God that entails responsibility and privilege, can be understood in covenantal terms (see Num 18:19). Numbers 25:12-13 speaks of a "covenant of peace" and "a covenant of perpetual priesthood" that is made with Phinehas and his descendants and this is most likely what Malachi is referring to (Mal 2:4-5, 8; compare 1 Sam 2:30; Jer 33:21; Neh 13:29).¹¹

Tragically, the story of Israel is one where more often than not they failed to live out their calling and fell under the curses of the covenant. While God again and again proves faithful to his side of the covenant, Israel proves to be an unfaithful covenant partner. The book of Judges exhibits how Israel became worse than the nations in its moral life, but God continued to judge

and to save. The end of the book of Judges also anticipates a king who will establish God's kingdom (17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25).

From David until the Exile to Babylon

After king Saul, there is a foretaste of the kingdom of God under the reigns of David and Solomon as Israel experiences its golden age. God is seen to have kept his covenant promises to Abraham with the result that Israel flourished and mediated blessing to the world. Yet at the same time the kingdom was set on a downward path on account of David's failure to rule with justice and righteousness, using his kingly power in self-service (2 Samuel 11–12). His sins led eventually to his personal exile from Jerusalem, foreshadowing the later exiling of the nation for their sins. Similarly, despite his wisdom, Solomon disobeyed all the laws for the king set out in Deuteronomy 17:14–20.¹² Particularly damaging was marrying foreign wives and supporting them in their worship of other gods which turned Solomon's heart away from the Lord (1 Kgs 11:1–6). In response, God pronounced to Solomon that he would "tear the kingdom away from you" (v. 11) and this punishment brought about the division of Israel, after Solomon's death, into the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah.

Successive kings of Israel and Judah turned from the national covenant to other gods and the people followed. Forsaking the Lord, they also forsook his ways. God sent his prophets to call the people back to himself, but the people hardened their hearts and refused to listen (Zech 7:11–12). Punishment fell on the northern kingdom through the agency of the Assyrians in 722 BC (2 Kings 17). The people of the southern kingdom of Judah failed to learn from this and were judged by God through the agency of the Babylonians in 586 BC at which time Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed, the Davidic king was removed from his throne, and many of the Judean population were sent into exile (2 Kings 25).

Many prophets predicted these events. Indeed, the great prophet Moses was pessimistic from the outset about Israel's ability to live faithfully in the land and seemed to expect that the Lord would uproot them from the land in his wrath and throw them into another land because they would abandon the covenant (Deut 29:24–28). Yet mercifully, the scattering of "exile" was not God's final word to Moses. Instead, God promised a new work where he "will circumcise your heart and the hearts of your descendants, and you

will love Him with all your heart and with all your soul so that you will live” (Deut 30:6, HCSB). This work of God in circumcising his people’s hearts is what would enable them to return to him in covenant obedience (Deut 30:2) and appears to be the basis for what the prophet Jeremiah later calls the “new covenant,” when God says “I will put My teaching within them and write it on their hearts. I will be their God and they will be my people” (Jer 31:33, HCSB; cf. 23:3; 32:37-41). Ezekiel associates this with the work of God’s Spirit (Ezek 36:25-28; cf. 34:25; 37:26). Along with a new covenant with a new people of God (the faithful remnant), the prophets also promise a new exodus (Isa 43:15-21; Jer 16:14-15; 23:7-8), a new entry and possession of a new land (Isa 32:14-20; 35:1-10; Jer 23:7-8; Ezek 34:11-16); a new Jerusalem (Isa 44:24-28; 49:14-21; 51:3), a new temple (Isa 2:2-4; 44:28; Ezekiel 40-42), a new David (Isa 9:6-7; 11:1; 16:4-5; Jer 22:4; 23:5-8; 30:9; 33:15-16; Ezek 21:26-27; 34:23-25; 37:24-28; Hos 3:5; Mic 4:7-5:6; Amos 9:11-15), and a new creation with blessings often pictured in terms of agricultural abundance (Isa 51:3; 65:17-21, 25; Ezek 36:33-36). These blessings will not be restricted to Israel, but overflow to those of the nations who seek the Lord in keeping with the promise to Abraham (Gen 12:3; cf. Isa 2:2-4; Mic 4:1-4).¹³

For the prophets, the judgment of God which would culminating in exile, and the subsequent salvation of his people will happen on the Day of the Lord (Isa 13:6-9; Joel 1:15; 2:1-31; Amos 5:18-20; Zeph 1:7, 14; 2:1-3). Hafemann summarizes:

On this ‘day,’ God will decisively judge this evil age and in so doing deliver the people once and for all from sin and its consequences. Through this coming day of judgment, God will establish his unrivalled rule and reign as King and, under his undisputed sovereignty, bring about the new creation and its covenant.¹⁴

The prophets before and during the exile looked forward to this day, when God would establish his kingdom with all its glory. The book of Zephaniah immediately precedes the post-exilic prophets in the book of the Twelve Minor Prophets. It finishes on a note of hope and eager expectation about what will happen “on that day” (3:11, 16):

At that time I will bring you back, yes, at the time I will gather you. I will give you

fame and praise among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes. Yahweh has spoken. (Zeph 3:20, HCSB).

From the exile to Babylon until the Messiah

These positive elements of the Day of the Lord explain the great expectations among many of the exiles who first returned to Jerusalem after the decree of the Persian king Cyrus. The prophet Jeremiah had prophesied seventy years of desolation for the land of Judah (25:11-12; 29), and these seventy years were nearing their end for those who had returned to the land to rebuild the city and the temple (cf. Zech 1:12).¹⁵ The priesthood and the sacrificial system were reinstituted. The Davidic line was re-established in Jerusalem with the Persian-appointed governor Zerubbabel (Hag 2:20-23; Zech 4:6-10). Remarkably (given Israel's history of rejecting the words of the prophets), the "remnant" who returned to the land responded to the words of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah with obedience (Hag 1:12-15; Zech 1:6).¹⁶ Similarly, Malachi reports a group who fear the Lord (Mal 3:16). This response raises the question—is this the new covenant? Is God establishing again his kingdom and ushering in the new era promised by the earlier prophets? Is this the restoration of fortunes promised by Zephaniah?

While the post-exilic prophets prophesy during a time when God is restoring the kingdom, each prophet also highlights the way in which God's people still fail to live out the requirements of the national covenant mediated through Moses. They each show that even though the nation has endured the fire of exile, those who emerge as the remnant are not yet purified. The exile has not dealt finally with the fundamental problem that led to it, namely the nation's sin; the sinful human heart still needs circumcision (cf. Deut 30:6). In Haggai, the people do not have the Lord's priorities, reflected in their neglect of the temple (2:4, 9). They are defiled and so is the work of their hands and their offerings (2:14). Zechariah identifies numerous covenant violations which continue to exist within the post-exilic community: theft, false-swearing, iniquity, wickedness, lies, hatred, perjury, idolatry and false prophecy (5:1-11; 8:16-17; 13:2-6).

The sins of the post-exilic community are particularly evident in the book of Malachi as the form of the book itself reflects its content. Malachi quotes the people and responds to their poor attitudes and behaviors in a series of

six “prophetic disputations.” Three speeches are accusations directed by God against the people for their sins (the second, third and fifth).¹⁷ The other three speeches are God’s response to the complaints of his people against him (the first, fourth and sixth).¹⁸ This analysis shows that both sides are making accusations against each other, reflecting a breakdown in relationship. In this way, the form of the book reflects its content, namely the continued breakdown of the covenant relationship between God and his people.¹⁹

The book of Malachi reveals that the people fail to appreciate God’s love for them (1:2-5). The priests lack respect towards God by simply going through the motions and do not appreciate their high calling. They turn a blind eye to the second-rate offerings of the people (1:7-14) and neglect to live out and teach faithfully the ways of the Lord (2:1-9). The people exhibit covenant unfaithfulness, particularly in their marriages (2:10-16), but also in sorcery, adultery, false-swearing, oppressing the widow and fatherless, cheating the wage-earner, denying justice to the foreigner (3:6), and in their failure to support the priests by paying the tithes and offerings (3:8). The book reveals that some have assimilated with the nations and their gods (2:11; 3:5). To top things off, the people even defame God by accusing him of delighting in evil (2:17; 3:14-15). In all of these ways, the people effectively deny their calling to mediate the knowledge of God to the world (cf. Exod 19:5-6). What Malachi tragically reveals is that rather than being like a show house that displays God’s character to the nations, they are more like a hovel. Covenant unfaithfulness remains an enduring problem, even within the remnant who have returned to Jerusalem after the experience of exile.²⁰

While the earlier prophets looked forward to a glorious restoration after exile, which would happen “on that day,” Malachi (as well as the books of Haggai and Zechariah) indicates that even though the people have been through the judgment of exile and returned to the land, the full experience of the Day of the Lord still lies in the future.²¹ Reference to “the day” occurs six times in the final chapter of Malachi (from 3:2).²² Like the earlier prophets, it is a day of judgment and salvation—a day when the difference will be seen between the righteous (the “one who serves God”) and the wicked (the “one who does not serve Him”) (Mal 3:18). God’s judgment will be against those who do not fear him, evident in the fact that they continue to violate the terms of the covenant (Mal 3:5-6). The coming day will burn like a furnace and all the arrogant and wicked will be consumed like stubble

(4:1). The wicked will be trampled under the feet of the righteous (4:3). At the same time, it is a day when God will come and refine and purify the sons of Levi so that the offerings of his people might please him (3:3-4). It is a day where those who repent and fear the Lord will be God's "treasured possession" and so fulfil Israel's calling (3:17; cf. Exod 19:5). It is a day when God will bring righteousness and healing to those who fear his name so that those who experience it will leap about in new-found freedom, like "calves from the stall" (4:2). With echoes of Genesis 3:15 and Psalm 110:1, God promises his people that their enemies will be subjugated "under the soles of your feet" (4:3). In preparation for this day, God will send the prophet Elijah, who "will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the heart of children to their fathers. Otherwise, I will come and strike the land with a curse" (Mal 4:6, HCSB). In this way, Malachi indicates that there will be another Day of the Lord still to come before the kingdom of God will finally arrive in all its glory and fullness.

For the Gospel writers, this Day of the Lord comes with Jesus, who brings judgment and salvation. John the Baptist is the eschatological Elijah announced in Malachi 4:5-6, who prepares the way for the Lord. John was not Elijah in person (cf. John 1:21), but came "in the spirit and power of Elijah" (Luke 1:17). He wore the clothing of Elijah (Matt 3:4; Mark 1:6; cf. 2 Kgs 1:8), and preached a message of repentance in view of God's coming judgment (Matt 3:12; Mark 1:2-4). Luke explains John the Baptist's mission in terms of Malachi:

He will turn many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God. And he will go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of fathers to their children, and the disobedient to the understanding of the righteous, to make ready for the Lord a prepared people. (Luke 1:16-17, HCSB)

Remarkably, the coming of the Lord God in Malachi is the coming of the Lord Jesus to establish God's kingdom, which involved dealing finally with sin. It is because Jesus fully kept the requirements of the law of Moses that he could be both a true representative and a substitute for unfaithful Israel and sinful humanity. On the cross, Jesus took the curse that the last verse of Malachi threatens (Mal 4:6; cf. Gal 3:13); he bore the judgment for our sins, so that Christians are now God's "special possession" (HCSB) or "treasured

possession" (NIV) (Mal 3:17; cf. 1 Pet 1:17-21; 2:9).

All the prophetic hopes are realized in Jesus. He is the faithful remnant, the "true Israel" who brings salvation to the nations (e.g., Matt 2:11; 4:1-11; 12:18-21; 28:19). He is the new David (Matt 1:1, 20; 15:22; 20:30) and the new temple (John 2:19-22). His death brought about the new exodus (Luke 9:31) with redemption and the forgiveness of sins (Col 1:14). His resurrection and the pouring out of the Spirit are the firstfruits of the new creation (1 Cor 15:20; 2 Cor 5:16-17). Jesus established the promised new covenant (Luke 22:20; Heb 9:15), which is not only for the Jew, but also for the Gentile, bringing the blessings promised to Abraham (Gal 3:14). He brings about Malachi's hope for the praise of God's name among the nations (1:5, 11, 14; 3:12).²³ Indeed, the worship of God "in every place" (Mal 1:11; probably in contrast to the one "place" of Deuteronomy 12) is one of the motivating ideas behind Paul's mission (see 1 Cor 1:2; 2 Cor 2:14).²⁴

As well as the Day of the Lord referring to the first coming of Jesus, the NT also uses it to speak of Jesus's second coming when the purposes of God will find their consummated fulfilment. It is a day that will test the quality of the work of those who seek to build the temple of God's church (1 Cor 3:12-15; cf. Mal 3:2-3). On this Day of the Lord, the lawless one (who stands behind evil, or is a personification of evil which the people in Malachi's day complain about in 2:17 and 3:15) will be unmasked and Jesus will destroy him with the breath of his mouth (2 Thess 2:8). Jesus's return will bring the final judgment and establish "the new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness will dwell" (2 Pet 3:13; cf. Rev 21:1; Mal 4:2). In these ways the NT teaches that the Day of the Lord has come and is to come, often expressed as the "already and not yet" of the kingdom.

READING MALACHI TODAY

The post-exilic period bears many similarities to the time in which we live, between the two comings of Jesus Christ. Recognizing this provides an important framework for applying the message of Malachi today. Like Malachi's first audience, Christians are to look at how God has kept his promises in the past and how he is keeping them in the present as a basis of hope for the full realization of his promises at Jesus's return. Christians are to fear the Lord, while living faithfully in accordance with his word in

order to honor him (Mal 1:6; 3:16). When it comes to living according to his word, there are many elements of continuity between Malachi's time and ours, but also some significant elements of discontinuity. BT helps us to determine what these are, by placing the teaching of Malachi into the larger flow of salvation history.

Since God has not changed (Mal 3:6), and God's people are called to reflect his character, many ethical proscriptions of the old covenant continue into the new covenant, such as those listed in Malachi 3:6: sorcery (Gal 5:20); adultery (Heb 13:4); swearing falsely (Eph 4:25); oppressing the widow and the fatherless (Jas 1:27); cheating the wage earner (Jas 5:4); and denying justice to the foreigner (Heb 13:2). Similarly, Malachi's teaching on marriage and divorce in 2:10-16 is to be understood in relation to God's purposes for marriage in creation which span the Bible's covenants. Genesis reveals God's purposes for marriage include: the birth and nurture of godly children (Gen 1:28; cf. Mal 2:15); the provision of a different and complementary companion to follow the divine mandate to subdue the earth (Gen 1:28; 2:23); and for the expression of natural instincts and affections (Gen 2:25; Exod 21:11). The first problem that Malachi addresses in relation to marriage is that some in the community have married "the daughter of a foreign god" (v. 11). This probably means that some in Judah had married outside the faith (i.e., women who worship foreign gods). For the nation of Israel, where ethnicity was tied to faith, the problem was fundamentally one of allegiance to the Lord. Deuteronomy forbids Israelites from intermarrying with people from the land "because they will turn your sons away from Me to worship other gods" (Deut 7:4, HCSB; cf. 13:6-9). The wider OT narrative shows that even in the OT, this requirement was an issue of belief rather than race, for there are several instances where foreign women marry Israelites and the narrative celebrates this fact because they were women who trusted in the Lord (e.g., Tamar, Zipporah, Rahab, Ruth). Similarly, under the new covenant, race is not the issue; rather believers are only to marry other believers (1 Cor 7:39; cf. 2 Cor 6:14).²⁵

The translation of 2:16 in the main text of HCSB, ESV, and NIV2011 is to be preferred over other translations that say "God hates divorce." While the Hebrew is difficult, the subject of the verb "hates" more naturally refers to the one who divorces, rather than to God, so: "'If he hates and divorces his wife,' says the LORD God of Israel, 'he covers his garment with injustice'"

(HCSB). Sadly, divorce is a recognition that we live in a fallen world. The OT law allowed for divorce, and it provided protection for women where an Israelite man had to write a certificate of divorce for his wife, which would allow for her to remarry and be provided for (Deut 24:1).²⁶ The only legitimate grounds for divorce in the law were adultery (Deut 24:1), or failing to provide food, clothing, and conjugal love (Exod 21:10-11). The situation in Malachi's day was that men were divorcing their wives without legitimate grounds and this is considered an unjust or violent act (Mal 2:16). Marriage is a covenant relationship, witnessed by God, which requires covenant faithfulness by both parties. Jesus reiterates God's creation purposes when he is asked about divorce and states that divorce without adequate grounds (for "any grounds") is adultery (Matt 19:3). Like the Mosaic law, Jesus permits divorce when the marriage vows have been violated (Matt 19:9). Because marriage is founded in creation, Malachi's teaching on divorce remains directly applicable today—divorcing, simply because one falls out of love, is a treacherous and unjust act against one's spouse. Marriage requires faithfulness.²⁷

There are also significant differences between Malachi's day and ours which are crucial to recognize, especially when dealing with questions surrounding Israel's worship. The most important difference is that now that the Messiah Jesus has come, Christians are no longer bound by the old covenant and many of its requirements. For instance, since Jesus fulfilled all that the temple stood for, we must not go back to temple worship with its sacrifices and priests. As the great high priest, Jesus has offered the once-for-all sacrifice that makes the system redundant (Heb 7:27; 9:26-28; 10:11-18). Christian pastors are not priests in the sense of offering forgiveness through sacrifice, as is the teaching of some theological traditions.²⁸ At the same time, Malachi shows that priests were not only responsible for sacrifices, but also for teaching the word of God to God's people (2:7). This teaching function is also democratized under the new covenant (Rom 15:14; Col 3:16), but pastors/elders have a special responsibility to teach God's word and this function of the OT priesthood carries into the pastoral role (1 Tim 4:13; 5:17; 2 Tim 4:2; Titus 1:9). Indeed, the apostle Paul saw himself as having a priestly role of proclaiming God's good news, so that the gentiles might be an acceptable offering (Rom 15:16). Malachi demonstrates the dire consequences when leaders fail in their teaching (e.g., Mal 2:8-9).

A related issue is Malachi's instruction on tithing, which is often

misunderstood today when the weekly collection at church is called “tithes.” Since Jesus has fulfilled all that the temple stood for, Christians are no longer under the Mosaic law requiring tithing. The tithe (giving a tenth) was a means of supporting the priests as they maintained the temple system. Since the temple has been superseded by Jesus, it makes sense that there is no command in the NT for Christians to tithe. In addition, there is no sense in which Christians can earn God’s blessings by giving money to the church or anyone else—we already have been blessed with every spiritual blessing in Christ (Eph 1:3). Craig Blomberg makes an important observation in this regard:

The New Testament carried forward the major principles of the Old Testament and intertestamental Judaism [concerning material possessions] with one conspicuous omission: never was material wealth promised as a guaranteed reward for either spiritual obedience or hard work.²⁹

However, the principle of supporting those specially set apart to teach God’s word certainly continues into the NT. This is seen when Paul reminds the Corinthian church about the command of the Lord Jesus “that those who preach the gospel should earn their living by the gospel” (1 Cor 9:14; cf. 1 Tim 5:18). In addition, Paul commends those who have financially supported him in his missionary work, even referring to their money gift as an “offering” (Phil 4:15-18; cf. 2 Cor 11:8-9). The NT does not specify a percentage to give, and a couple of passages propose giving in proportion to income (1 Cor 16:2; 2 Cor 8:13-15). This suggests that different life circumstances will allow Christians to give greater or lesser amounts. If a tenth was the measure of generosity under the old covenant, this proportion might be considered the beginning of the measure of generosity under the new covenant. Indeed, Christians should not feel restricted to a tenth and for many it will be possible to give much more than this to the work of the Lord. The OT principles of contentment (Prov 30:8) and generosity towards others in view of God’s grace (Deut 15:7) continue under the new covenant (1 Tim 6:6-8, 18) and fruitful application of Malachi’s teaching about tithing can be found here.³⁰

These are just a few illustrations of the way that Malachi is to be read in its BT context, in light of the coming of Christ and his fulfilment of the national covenant with Israel. This approach helps us to appreciate Malachi not only in its first context, but also how the book continues to speak into our own

contexts, teaching us about God and his ways, and what it means for us to honor him in all of our lives.

- ¹ For an introduction to biblical theology (BT), see Brian S. Rosner, "Biblical Theology," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner, eds.; Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2000), 3-11, or D. A. Carson, "A Biblical-Theological Overview of the Bible," in *NIV Zondervan Study Bible* (D. A. Carson, ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 2637-2639.
- ² For an overview of these themes in the book of the Twelve, see T. R. Schreiner, *The King in His Beauty: A Biblical theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 397-409.
- ³ The book of Esther is also set in this period, but it is located in Susa (the winter residence of Persian kings) rather than Jerusalem.
- ⁴ For example, John L. Mackay, *Haggai, Zechariah & Malachi* (Focus on the Bible; Fearn: Christian Focus Publications, 2003), 274.
- ⁵ For example, E. Ray Clendenen, "Malachi," *Haggai, Malachi* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2004), 202-464 (207); Andrew E. Hill, "Malachi, Book of," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament Prophets* (Mark J. Boda and J. Gordon McConville, eds.; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012b), 525-33 (526).
- ⁶ So also, Pieter A. Verhoef, *The Books of Haggai and Malachi* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 156-60. Nehemiah 13:6-7 indicates Nehemiah was absent from Jerusalem for a time (not specified) and then returned to find that many of his reforms had come undone.
- ⁷ A good case can be made that God makes two distinct covenants with Abraham, given the different elements, the time gap, and the ceremonies involved in each stage of the Genesis narrative. See Paul R. Williamson, *Sealed With an Oath: Covenant in God's Unfolding Purpose* (NSBT, 23; Nottingham: Apollos, 2007), 84-93; T. Desmond Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land: An Introduction to the Pentateuch* (3rd ed; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012), 173-82. However, the difficulty with speaking of two covenants with Abraham is that the rest of the Bible never speaks in this way. It only ever speaks of a single covenant with Abraham and/or the Patriarchs (e.g., Exod 6:4; Lev 26: 42-45; Deut 4:31; Neh 9:8; Acts 3:25). For a critique of Williamson, see Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 275-80.
- ⁸ Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2006), 331.
- ⁹ So Aaron Chalmers, *Interpreting the Prophets: Reading, Understanding and Preaching from the Worlds of the Prophets* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), 72: "The importance of the Sinai Covenant traditions for the prophets is easy to see. The prophets are not essentially radicals or innovators; instead, they are better characterized as traditionalists and conservatives who are responsible for calling Israel back to their covenantal obligations to the Lord."
- ¹⁰ For instance, compare Ezek 5:10 with Deut 28:53, 64, and compare Amos 5:27 with Deut 28:63.
- ¹¹ See further, Paul R. Williamson, *Sealed*, 105-06; Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom*, 526-28.
- ¹² See the treatment by J. Daniel Hays, "Has the Narrator Come to Praise Solomon or to Bury Him? Narrative Subtlety in 1 Kings 1-11," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 28 (2003): 149-174.
- ¹³ See further, Graeme Goldsworthy, *Christ-centered Biblical Theology: Hermeneutical Foundations and Principles* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 132-49.
- ¹⁴ Scott J. Hafemann, "The Covenant Relationship," in *Central Themes in Biblical Theology: Mapping Unity in Diversity* (Scott J. Hafemann and Paul R. House, eds.; Nottingham: Apollos, 2007), 20-65 (27). See also Paul R. House, "The Day of the Lord," in *Central Themes in Biblical Theology: Mapping Unity in Diversity* (Scott J. Hafemann and Paul R. House, eds.; Nottingham: Apollos, 2007), 179-224.
- ¹⁵ There is debate today (as there probably was then) about how the seventy years should be reckoned. Is it a literal seventy years, or symbolic, representing a lifespan? The temple was destroyed in 586 B.C. and rebuilt in 515, which is almost exactly seventy years. Daniel also wrestles with this question (in Dan 9:2) and is told by Gabriel that it will be "seventy weeks" (lit. "seventy sevens"; v. 24). This could be a way of speaking of a long indefinite period since Jesus uses the expression "seventy times seven" in this way in Matt 18:22. For an alternative proposal that links it to jubilee years, see Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum,

- Kingdom, 531-64.
- ¹⁶ The earlier prophets use the term “remnant” to refer to the purified and faithful community who will emerge on the other side of exile (e.g., Isa 10:20-22; 11:11, 16; 28:5; 37:4, 31, 32; 46:3; Jer 23:3; 31:7; Mic 2:12; 5:6-7; 7:18; Zeph 2:7, 9; 3:13).
- ¹⁷ The second speech comprises 1:6-2:9; the third 2:10-16; and the fifth 3:7b-12.
- ¹⁸ The first speech comprises 1:2-5; the fourth 2:17-3:7a; and the sixth 3:13-4:3.
- ¹⁹ Elie Assis, “Mutual Recriminations: God and Israel in the Book of Malachi,” *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 26 (2012): 212-19 (217-18).
- ²⁰ Mark J. Boda, *A Severe Mercy: Sin and Its Remedy in the Old Testament* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 349.
- ²¹ The phrase “day of the Lord” occurs once in Haggai (2:23) and twenty-five times across the book of Zechariah.
- ²² Mal 3:2, 17; 4:1 (x2), 3, 5. There are also two references to earlier “days” (Mal 3:4, 7).
- ²³ On the eschatological hope for the recognition of God by the nations, see Greg Goswell, “The Eschatology of Malachi after Zechariah 14,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 132 (2013): 625-38.
- ²⁴ See further, Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 57.
- ²⁵ If Christians find themselves married to an unbeliever (because they are converted after marriage, or their spouse gives up the faith, or they were disobedient), then 1 Cor 7:12-16 teaches that they must not initiate a divorce. They are not defiled by such a marriage; rather, they have the potential to save their spouse and children by living out the gospel (cf. 1 Pet 3:1).
- ²⁶ See further, Joe M. Sprinkle, “Sexuality, Sexual Ethics,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch* (T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker, eds.; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 741-53 (743-45).
- ²⁷ See further, Anthony R. Petterson, *Haggai, Zechariah & Malachi* (AOTC 25; Nottingham: Apollos, 2015), 344-58.
- ²⁸ There are several places in the NT that describe all of God’s people as priests, just as the nation of Israel was to be a kingdom of priests (1 Pet 2: 9; Rev 1:6; cf. Exod 19:6).
- ²⁹ Craig L. Blomberg, *Neither Poverty Nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Material Possessions* (NSBT, 7; Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1999), 242.
- ³⁰ See further, Anthony R. Petterson, *Haggai, Zechariah & Malachi*, 369-75.