The Message of Malachi

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It has become usual to disparage Malachi and belittle his message by saying that the creative period of prophecy had passed, and that he was more like a scribe or a casuist than a prophet, interested merely in the details of the ritual and in applying the letter of the law. Men like Amos, Isaiah and Jeremiah, by contrast, belonged to the first rank of prophets. The yardstick by which such judgments are made is not specified, and it is questionable whether comparisons between another are meaningful. True, Malachi belonged at the end of the prophetic era, but each prophet had his specific role to play in his own historical setting, and it is more important to see how he fulfilled his task and to appreciate, ponder and apply his message than to allot him a grade in the prophetic pass list. As R.W. Funk says, "The word of God, like a great work of art, is not on trial."

Fundamental to Malachi's teaching is the concept of covenant. It is implicit in the opening theme, the Lord's love for Israel (1:2-5), and the book ends with a call to fulfill the obligations of the covenant as expressed in the law (4:4). The Lord, who initiated the covenant, and on whose dependability it was established, is the central figure and chief spokesman. Out of a total of fifty-five verses, forty-seven record in the first person the address of the Lord to Israel (the exceptions being 1:1; 2:11-15,17; 3:16). This use of the first person presents a vivid encounter between God and the people, unsurpassed in the prophetic books.

By virtue of the covenant relationship the Lord refers to Himself as a father and implies that Israel is His son (1:6; 3:17; cf. 2:10). His desire is to bless His sons with all good things (3:10-12). He wants them to find true satisfaction and be like the ideal priest portrayed in 2:5-7, accepting daily His gifts of life and peace, responding with awe to the privilege of belonging to Him, and in his turn passing on to others the good things he enjoys. A living relationship with the Lord is utterly essential if Israel's covenant destiny is to be fulfilled.

Jacob's basic sin lay in jeopardizing this relationship. Twice, Malachi specified sin as covenant breaking: the priest corrupted the covenant of Levi (2:8) and the people as a whole profaned the covenant of their fathers (2:10). Far from responding with warmth and spontaneity to the personal love shown them, both priest and people were apathetic and bored with worship (1:13) and main in their giving (3:8). In short, they despise the Lord (1:6), cheated him of vows and robbed him of dues (1:14; 3:8). Having failed to love God, they failed also to love their neighbor. A broken relationship with God led on to broken relationships in human society, inter-marriage and divorce being the examples of unfaithfulness quoted by Malachi. The objection to intermarriage was not on racial but religious grounds. Surrounding nations worshipped a "foreign god" (2:11), and therefore to enter into marriage alliances with them was *ipso facto* to be unfaithful to one's own covenant God (2:10). Similarly, divorce was hateful to God because it involved breach of covenant. Malachi's description of marriage to the wife of one's youth as companionship (2:14)

bears incidental witness to a high view of family life, based on the lifelong partnership of one man with one woman. The wife is valued for the worth of her own personality and not merely for her physical attraction. The upbringing of children is a shared responsibility (2:15) and children are to honor both parents (Ex. 20:12). Thus family relationships illustrate love and loyalty, and make the divine covenant comprehensible to man, while divorce, by contrast, typifies broken faith and severed relationships.

Lest the concept of God as Father should be misused, Malachi sets over against it God's rights as Master and King (1:6,14). The composite picture guards against over-familiarity on the one hand and a too distant subjection on the other. The note of judgment is intended to warn each individual so that no one based hopes of salvation on a false confidence, but was prepared for the testing fires which even the faithful had to expect (3:3). The God of justice (2:17) is about to do a new thing. His intervention will in some way bring the nations to worship Him (1:11), He will come to His Temple (3:1), appropriately heralded by a forerunner, and there will perform His twofold task, to refine and to judge (3:2-5). Ultimately all that resists the refining process will be burnt up (4:1). This eschatological expectation was not presented as some distant goal but as an imminent event, and so acted as a powerful spur to repentance and reformation of life in preparation for the "great and terrible day of the Lord" (4:5).

Malachi has nothing to say about the judgment of the nations. His concern is to keep faith alive in Israel, and the nations are not part of his brief (1:1). This does not mean that he was indifferent to the wider world. He knew that the Lord's dominion extended beyond Israel (1:5) and that all nations were to witness the intervention of the Lord, acknowledge Him and fear Him (1:14; 3:12). They would even bring Him a pure offering, surpassing the levitical sacrifices, which were never so described, but meanwhile his burden was to urge Israel to be true to the covenant lest history should culminate in destruction instead of blessing.

That Malachi was not teaching any doctrine of merit-making is obvious from his handling of the objection that it is vain to serve God (3:14). Those who are spared are not said to have deserved special favor. They find favor because they have "feared the Lord and thought on his name" (3:16). Similarly it is misleading to say that in this book we find "great stress laid upon the legalistic and cultic. . . .Thus fundamentally Malachi is simply a precursor of later Judaism", if by that is meant that Malachi was preoccupied with the letter of the law rather than the spirit in which it was meant to be kept. Far from being legalistic Malachi has penetrated to the core of both the law and the prophets. His one great plea is for a personal relationship with the living God, who seeks men to "walk with Him" (cf. 2:6).

Malachi's remarkable ethical thrust has lost none of its cutting edge through the passing of time. His teaching, both negative and positive, strikes at the heart of nominal, easy-going Christianity as it did at that of Judaism. Can it be that this book is disparaged because "with man as the filter through which the word must pass, or, if you like, arbiter, and meaning of the word, it is inevitable that he will sensor out what he does not wish to hear and audit only what he is predisposed to hear"?