

COVENANT UNFAITHFULNESS IN MALACHI 2:1-16

GEORGE W. HARRISON
New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary
New Orleans, LA 70126

Multiple transgressions of the covenant are enumerated in Mal 2:1-16. The initial criticism centers upon the failure of the contemporary priests to preserve the ideals of the covenant with Levi, vv 1-9. The latter indictment features problems related to the family structure vv 10-16. In addition to the obvious abuse of the marriage covenant, charges are brought against the forsaking of "the covenant of our fathers" (v 10).

I. Transgressions of the Covenant of Levi (Mal 2:1-9)

Introduction

The central concept and unifying theme of Mal 2:1-9 is the violation of the Lord's covenant with Levi. What is the historical setting for such a covenant? There may be found at least two occasions in the Pentateuch for a special covenant relationship with the Levites.

When Moses descended from Mt. Sinai with the tablets containing the Ten Commandments, he confronted a corrupted congregation (Exod 32:7-24). But when Moses issued the challenge for volunteer executioners, all the sons of Levi came forward. The instructions were terse and dreadful: "Every man of you put his sword upon his thigh, and go back and forth from gate to gate in the camp, and kill every man his brother, and every man his friend, and every man his neighbor" (Exod 32:27, NASB). The toll of casualties was about 3000.

Because of the unsparing zeal of the Levites, Moses announced: "You have been set apart to the Lord today, for you were against your own sons and brothers, and he has blessed you this day" (Exod 32:29,

NIV). Perhaps this event is the historical basis for the covenant referred to in Malachi.

Another possible setting for the exclusive covenant with Levi is found in Num 3:5-13. After reminding Israel of the special sanctity of the first offspring based upon the Passover event, the Lord commanded Moses to number all the firstborn males among the Levites (Num 3:15). A second census was taken of the first male offspring among the other tribes (Num 3:40). The two totals were nearly identical.

Then a momentous decision was announced: "Take the Levites for me in place of all the firstborn of the Israelites, and the livestock of the Levites in place of all the firstborn of the livestock of the Israelites. I am the Lord" (Num 3:41, NIV). Instead of disrupting the family solidarity of Israelite society, the Levites could serve the Lord as proxy firstborn. The support of the Levitical priesthood with tithes and offerings--surely must have been accepted more readily because of this explanation. Each Hebrew family unit could declare, "We have a son in the ministry of worship."

Valuable insights into the ideal character and conduct of the Levitical priesthood are provided by the blessing of Moses in Deut 33:8-11. After very brief statements concerning Reuben and Judah, a bountiful blessing is pronounced upon Levi:

Your Thummin and Urim belong to the man you favored. You tested him at Massah, you contended with him at the waters of Meribah. He said of his father and mother, 'I have no regard for them.' He did not recognize his brothers or acknowledge his own children, but he watched over your word and guarded your covenant. He teaches your precepts to Jacob and your law to Israel. He offers incense before you and whole burnt offerings upon your altar (Deut 33:8-10, NIV).

An analysis of the blessing of Moses leads to a better understanding of the priestly role in Israel. John D. W. Watts points to the three features: "Levi is given a place of spiritual leadership with the functions of determining God's will, teaching the law, and serving at the altar."¹

P. C. Craigie provides a helpful summary:

The blessing then indicates the three principal duties that were to be assigned to the tribe of Levi on the basis of their past actions and dedication to divine service. (i) They were to be responsible for the

¹ J. D. W. Watts, "Deuteronomy," *Broadman Bible Commentary* (12 vols; Nashville: Broadman, 1970) 2.293.

Thummim and *Urim* (v 8), by which the Lord's will would be made known to the people in matters where decision was difficult to make. (ii) They were to have an educational role in teaching the Israelites the law of God (v 10a). (iii) They were to be responsible for Israel's formal system of worship (v 10b). The blessing of the tribe of Levi consists in the strength they would be given for these tasks and protection from their enemies which God would grant to them (v 11).²

Commandment, Curse, and Covenant 2:1-4

Commandment. The first question facing the interpreter of this passage is the meaning of the expression, "And now, this commandment is for you, O priests" (2:1, NASB). Is there a specific command issued, or does the prophet refer to all of the instructions contained in 2:1-9?

F. C. Eiselen is representative of the latter position:

No command of any sort is found in these verses, not even an exhortation to repentance, though such exhortation is implied in verse 2; hence the word cannot be understood in the narrow sense of commandment, but as meaning purpose or decree. The divine decree, shown by the succeeding verses to be one of destruction, is for the priests.³

Typical of those commentators who favor a specific command-
is J. M. P. Smith:

There is no express 'command' in the immediate context. On the other hand, the arraignment in the preceding verses charges that the accused have failed to honour Yahweh fittingly, which is their just and lawful service. Likewise, in the following verses stress is laid upon the necessity of glorifying Yahweh. Hence the 'command' is most easily explained as the behest to honour Yahweh which lies behind the whole context.⁴

Earlier Malachi introduced the concept of God as father: "A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If I am a father, where is the honor due me? If I am a master, where is the respect due me?" (1:6, NIV). Reference here is apparently to the fifth commandment of the Decalogue, "Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land which the Lord your God gives you" (Exod 20:12, RSV).

The meaning of «honor" or «glory" in Hebrew includes weight, worthiness and dignity. A son honors his father by remembering that

² P. C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) 396.

³ C. Eiselen, *The Minor Prophets* (New York: Eaton and Mains, 1907) 716.

⁴ J. M. P. Smith, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Malachi* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1912) 35.

all his deeds and words reflect upon the father whose name he bears. He must strive to be a good representative of his parent.

Curse. Unless the priests respond with total and prompt obedience to the urgent command of God, a terrible curse is ready to be invoked. The double imperative warns the priests not only to "listen" but to "lay it to heart." The glory due to God's great name had been clouded by unworthy representatives, the priests.

The combination of cursing and blessing occurs frequently in the OT, but the most imposing array of these contrasts may be found in Deuteronomy 28. The list of blessings (vv 1-14) is followed by an exhaustive category of curses (vv 15-68). Surely no more vivid illustration of "cursing your blessings" could be produced. Did Malachi expect the priests to recall this ancient threat?

The "blessings" of the priests may be understood in at least two ways.⁵ Material benefits from the tithes and offerings were brought to the Levites because of their service at the sanctuary (Num 18:1-31). Since no tribal territory was assigned to them, they were dependent upon the gifts of the other tribes (Josh 13:33). The curtailing of these benefits would be disastrous.

Another interpretation of the divine threat to curse the priestly blessings involves the benediction (Num 6:24-26). Aaron and his sons were empowered to pronounce a blessing upon the people of Israel: "So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them" (Num 6:27, RSV). If this privilege is revoked, the priestly prayers are worthless. Balaam discovered that the Lord could turn his intended curses into blessings for Israel (Num 23:7-12). Does the Lord propose to reverse the process, and convert the priestly benedictions into maledictions?

The curse continues into v 3 with the double threat to "rebuke your seed" and to defile the priests with the refuse of their own festive offerings. The precise meaning of both of these threats is difficult to obtain. Translations vary widely at this point.

A literal rendering of the MT is: "Behold, I am rebuking for you the seed." The question then arises concerning the literal or figurative meaning of "seed." If the reference is to the seed, such as barley and wheat, the punishment intended is a diminishing of the produce from which the tithe is brought (Lev 27:30). Haggai reminded the people, "You have sown much, and harvested little" (Hag 1:6a). A drought or a blight could cause the crops to fail, thus serving as a rebuke to the priests.

⁵ See J. G. Baldwin, *Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1972) 232-33.

The metaphorical understanding of "seed" as offspring is preferred by most translations (NASB, NIV, RSV). Since the priesthood is hereditary, the rebuking or rejecting of the descendants would be a threat most dreadful. A dramatic demonstration of the power of the Lord to terminate a priesthood is found in the case of Eli and his unworthy sons, Hophni and Phinehas (1 Sam 2:27-34). Not only was the oracle pronounced directly to Eli, but reinforced in a revelation to Samuel: "On that day I will fulfil against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. And I tell him that I am about to punish his house forever, for the iniquity which he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them" (1 Sam 3:12-13, RSV).

Some valuable insights into the LXX rendering of the threat against the priests are provided by J. M. Kennedy. In an article appearing in the March, 1987, issue of the *Journal of Biblical Literature* Kennedy writes:

Instead of *ga'ar* the LXX presupposes the root *gd'* ("cut off") and instead of *zera'* ("seed"), that is, descendants, presupposes *zeroa'* ("arm"). This gives the reading, "I will cut off your arm" in the place of "I will 'rebuke' your seed." The meaning would be that the priests will be rendered helpless and unfit for priestly duty. In reality, the text may remain as it is and still suggest the same meaning as that of the LXX. Here *ga'ar* designates activity that results in the inability of the priests' descendants to carry on the work of the priesthood. This does not mean that *ga'ar* means "to make unfit for service as a priest," but it does point to some kind of activity that produces this result. That activity is mentioned in the next line, namely, "and I will spread dung on your faces." Although *ga'ar* cannot also be defined as "spreading dung," this activity forces the priesthood into a situation of uncleanness and so renders them unfit to serve.⁶

The climactic conclusion of the curse sentences the priests to the most humiliating treatment possible. Not only are they to be defiled with the excrement of the sacrificial animals, but men will carry them off as refuse. They will be dumped outside the camp (Exod 29:14; Lev 4:11; 16:27).

Covenant. The closing verse of this passage calls upon the priests to heed the commandment and thus preserve the threatened covenant: "Then you will know that I have sent this commandment to you, that my covenant may continue with Levi" (2:4, NASB). J. Baldwin

⁶ J. M. Kennedy, "The Root G'R in the Light of Semantic Analysis," *JBL* 106: 63-64.

argues that the command was meant to lead to repentance and so make possible the continuation of the covenant.⁷ This would be in keeping with other prophetic warnings. Eiselen affirms: "All that Jehovah will do or has threatened to do is for the purpose of maintaining the covenant made in ancient times with Levi, which demanded of the priests holiness and assigned to them an important place in the working out of the divine plan of redemption."⁸

Covenant Ideals Clarified 2:5-7

This passage contains some of the loftiest ideals of religious leadership to be found in Scripture. Life, peace, deep reverence, true instruction, and an upright walk with the Lord are featured. Nothing false came from the lips of such a priest as this. "He walked with me in peace and uprightness, and turned many from sin" (2:6b, NIV).

Where does one find such a priestly model of perfection in Scripture? Perhaps Samuel portrays more of these qualities than any other individual: "and Samuel grew, and the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground" (1 Sam 3:19, RSV). He judged the people in a circuit including Bethel, Gilgal, and Mizpah (1 Sam 7:15-16). His prayers were powerful, both in war and peace (1 Sam 7:8-9; 12:17-18). The people responded with great fear toward the Lord and Samuel. Men sought direction from him for a variety of needs. The servant of Saul observed: "Behold, there is a man of God in this city, and he is a man that is held in honor; all that he says comes true" (1 Sam 9:6, RSV).

However, Samuel was not merely a priest. It was in his prophetic role that he functioned most frequently.

Ezra may have served as a more recent reminder of the priestly ideals. His genealogy is traced all the way back to Aaron (Ezra 7:1-5). "He was a scribe skilled in the law of Moses which the Lord the God of Israel had given; and the king granted him all that he asked, for the hand of the Lord his God was upon him" (Ezra 7:6, RSV). He personified the threefold ideal of studying the law of the Lord, practicing it, and teaching it (Ezra 7:10). His prayers could persuade an entire assembly to renew the covenant (Ezra 10:1-5). When the walls built under Nehemiah's direction were dedicated, Ezra led in the public reading of the law (Neh 8:1-8).

Probably no one individual was envisioned by Malachi, but a composite figure of all that the Lord intended the priests to represent.

⁷ Baldwin, *Malachi*, 233.

⁸ Eiselen, *Minor Prophets*, 717.

Such nobility of character and conduct surpassed the achievements even of Samuel and Ezra.

Covenant Ideals Corrupted 2:8-9

From the mountain peaks of idealism Malachi descends to the dark valley of reality. The priests of his day present a revolting contrast: "But you have turned from the way and by your teaching have caused many to stumble; you have violated the covenant with Levi" (2:8, NIV). Instead of turning others from evil, they have swerved from the straight way. Rather than teaching the truth, they have led others into their own perverted lifestyle. Far from preserving the covenant with Levi, they have corrupted it.

The ultimate fate of men who have betrayed a position of sacred trust is announced: "So I have caused you to be despised and humiliated before all the people because you have not followed my ways but have shown partiality in matters of the law" (2:9, NIV). The hypocrisy of compromise and partiality produced contempt and derision. The words of Jeremiah are appropriate: "Your ways and your doings have brought this upon you. This is your doom, and it is bitter; it has reached your very heart" (Jer 4:18, RSV).

II. Transgressions of the Family Covenant (Mal 2:10-16)

This entire passage is the subject of another article within this issue of CTR, dealing especially with the problem of divorce. It may be possible to treat separately vv 10-12, interpreting these verses as providing the broader foundation for the solidarity of the family unit.

Covenant of Our Fathers 2:10

The priority of God as father is established first: "Do we not all have one father? Has not one God created us?" Any uncertainty as to the identity of "one father" is clarified by the parallel construction, "one God created us." T. Miles Bennett comments: "God's creating Israel as his people gave them a new existence, a new relationship to one another a new unity. Therefore any offense of one man against another was a violation of his relation to God, in whom as their common Father their unity was grounded."⁹

Building upon the foundation of unity, Malachi addresses the problem of disunity: "Why do we deal treacherously each against his brother so as to profane the covenant of our fathers?" (NASB).

⁹ Miles Bennett, "Malachi," *Broadman Bible Commentary* (12 vols; Nashville: 1972) 7.384.

Is there a specific historical antecedent for the "covenant of our fathers?" At what point in the early history of Israel was there a binding relationship established between God and the people, as well as among the families of Israel?

After the divine proclamation of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20) but before the two engraved tablets were presented to Moses (chap. 32), specific ordinances were set before the people (chaps. 21-23). These statutes appear to be designed primarily to govern the relationships among the Hebrew people. At the conclusion of this recital, representatives of the people were summoned by the Lord to respond: "Moses came and told the people all the words of the Lord and all the ordinances; and all the people answered with one voice, and said 'all the words which the Lord has spoken we will do.' And Moses wrote all the words of the Lord" (Exod 24:3-4a, RSV).

Following the erection of an altar, twelve pillars representing the twelve tribes of Israel were constructed and sacrifices were offered. Moses presided over a ceremony in which "the book of the covenant" was central:

Then he took the book of the covenant, and read it in the hearing of the people; and they said, 'All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient.' And Moses took the blood and threw it upon the people, and said, 'Behold the blood of the covenant which the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words'" (Exod 24:7-8, RSV).

Surely this impressive ancient ceremony could constitute the foundation for a sacred "covenant of our fathers." Sealed with the sprinkling of blood and affirmed by the assembly, its binding power should be timeless. (See Heb 9:18-20).

Judah's Abomination 2:11

The particular transgression condemned in this verse has been interpreted from two very different points of view. First, it may be an indictment of individuals within Judah who have married foreign women. Second, it could refer to a national cultic involvement with a female deity.

Perhaps the strongest argument in favor of the former position is the existence of this abuse in the post-exilic community. Ezra vigorously condemned the practice, and demanded that the men separate themselves from their foreign wives (Ezra 9-10). Baldwin comments: "Narrowing now from the general to the particular, the prophet turns to a practice which through the centuries had undermined spiritual

life in Israel, namely marriage into a family of a different religious and cultural background."¹⁰

It is interesting to note that the original Judah, son of Jacob, married the daughter of a Canaanite (Gen 38:2). No cultic implications are suggested, but Judah's first two sons by this marriage were executed by the Lord (Gen 38:7, 10).

R. Smith presents a helpful summary of the evidence supporting a cultic or typological interpretation of "marrying the daughter of a foreign god."¹¹ J. M. P. Smith argued:

The use of the singular number seems to render it difficult to understand this as referring primarily to literal marriages between the men of Judah and idolatrous women, though such marriages undoubtedly took place. . . . It is more natural to interpret the statement as meaning that an alliance has practically been made between Judah and some people that does not worship Yahweh through the common celebration of such marriages."¹²

The experience of Israel at Baal-peor illustrates the tragic consequences of involvement with cultic marriage. The Moabites invited the people of Israel to their sacrifices. "So Israel yoked himself to Baal of Peor. And the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel" (Num 25:3, RSV). The plague consumed 24,000, and was halted when Phinehas plunged a spear into the bodies of an Israelite man and a Midianite woman (Num 25:7-8). The location of the sacrilege was "the tent" (NIV) or "the inner room" (RSV).

With this background, Malachi's charge seems to assume some cultic implications: "Judah has broken faith. A detestable thing has been committed in Israel and in Jerusalem: Judah has desecrated the sanctuary the Lord loves, by marrying the daughter of a foreign god" (2:11, NIV).

The final verdict pronounced against any and all persons guilty of such flagrant desecration was to be "cut off from the tents of Jacob" (v 12). This should discourage others from following the practice, whatever its exact nature may have been.

Transgression of the Covenant of Marriage 2:13-16

Since another article within this issue of CTR provides an in-depth exploration of marriage and divorce, only a brief summary will be attempted here.

¹⁰ Baldwin, *Malachi*, 238.

¹¹ R. L. Smith, *Micah-Malachi* (Waco: Word, 1984) 322.

¹² R. P. Smith, *Malachi*, 49.

The concept of a marriage covenant with God as witness provides an eternal dimension to the relationship (v 14). The precise formulation of marriage vows is not contained in the records of the OT. In the brief narratives of weddings, little emphasis is placed on the ceremony itself. This argument from silence must not be interpreted to mean that there was not a religious element in the nuptial celebrations. A people in covenant relationship with the Lord viewed marriage as a divine endowment. (See Prov 18:22; 19:14; 31:10).

Baldwin comments:

This spiritual dimension should have contributed to the stability of home life. The loyalty of each partner to the covenant God was a uniting bond which created a lasting companionship between the partners. . . Malachi is a quiet witness to a mutually satisfying marriage relationship which, though begun in youth, does not become jaded with the passing of time.¹³

¹³ Baldwin, *Malachi*, 2.39-40.

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