

THE SUBTLE CRISES OF SECULARISM: PREACHING THE BURDEN OF ISRAEL

C. RICHARD WELLS
Criswell College, Dallas, TX 75201

The path from the "then" of biblical exegesis to the "now" of biblical preaching always proceeds between borders. On one side are the times, on the other, timeless principles. The contemporary preacher must negotiate the path so as to bring the truly universal teaching of Scripture to bear on conditions similar in some significant ways to those addressed in Scripture. The path is strewn with debris from earlier (and sometimes careless) travellers. And we must be sure we actually remain on the path, lest we find ourselves digressing along an overgrown trail that leads to a place where nobody lives.

Our plan for this article is to point out some of the significant landmarks that lie on the path from the prophet Malachi to a generation approaching the last decade of a phenomenal century. We will work in two ways. First, we will attempt to mark the path in broad outline. We will suggest: (a) parallels between the conditions of Malachi's age and those of our own; and (b) major theological themes addressed to Malachi's audience; and, by application, to us. Second, we will attempt to develop a preaching program from Malachi.

I. A Practical Theology of Malachi

Malachi and the Malaise of Israel

Most scholars agree that Malachi was written sometime during the last half of the 5th century B.C. The reader will find extensive introductory material elsewhere in this Review. The critical point here is that Malachi's prophecy appears within a strategic nexus of social and religious realities.

The Social Realities. Just as there were three deportations to Babylon, there were three returns to Palestine. Zerubbabel returned with a group of exiles in 536 B.C. After some delay (cf. Haggai and Zechariah), the people completed the Second Temple in 516 B.C. In 458 B.C., Ezra the Scribe returned with a second group, and labored to restore the knowledge of the Law (Ezra 7:14, 25-26). In 455 B.C., Nehemiah came with a third group. Under his twelve-year governorship, the walls of Jerusalem were rebuilt, and numerous reforms inaugurated (Neh 5:1-13; 13:7-27). If we assume that Malachi dates from a period following Nehemiah's brief return to Persia (433 B.C.), then the setting for his ministry is about one century after the end of the Exile.

During this century of gradual return to the land, several important changes occurred in the political environment of Israel. First, the balance of power in the Near East began to shift from Persia westward toward Greece. The Persians lost the historic Battle of Marathon in August, 490 B.C. Ten years later they defeated the Spartans at Thermopylae and briefly occupied Athens; but, Xerxes himself watched his navy defeated at Salamis in the same year. From that point on, the Persian government became less and less efficient, and more and more corrupt and weak, an unnerving experience for Israel. Second, the people who filled the void left by the deportations continually frustrated the returning exiles. They evidently taxed the Jews (Neh 5:4), a burden that lay on top of that imposed by Persia itself. Some had to borrow money just to buy food and pay taxes (Neh 5:14-15). These neighbors accused them to the central government of Persia (Ezra 4:6; 4:7-23), and physically opposed their work, so that it had to be done in shifts, with half the men working and half standing guard (Neh 4:16-18).

The pragmatic realities which awaited the exiles may have proved more distressing than the political. The situation in Jerusalem was bleak. The extensive ruins (Neh 4:10), and the inferiority of the project compared to those of the more glorious past (Ezra 3:12; Hag 2:3), diminished whatever initial enthusiasm may have existed. And the prospects for a better life seemed no better now. Small wonder that few in Babylon wanted to return to Israel. Many had grown accustomed to life there, many knew no other life, and some had prospered.

The Religious Realities. The greatest difficulty for Israel lay, however, in what the Exile and subsequent events did to her identity. The shattering experience of the Exile raised many questions about Israel as the people of God. But the post-Exile raised these questions

in a new way. In the Exile, Israel wondered about the justice of God in the face of catastrophe. Now she wondered about the presence of God in the face of life!

Furthermore, the Exile had the advantage of being a trauma. Traumatized summon the reserves of the human spirit. They tend to purify, to strengthen, even to ennoble. The post-Exile was not trauma; but, to use the popular description of America's last decade, a "malaise." As G. A. Smith put it, the Jews of Malachi's age were "denied the stimulus, the purgation, the glory of a great persecution." Instead, they were "severely left to themselves and to the petty hostilities of their neighbors."¹

Theologically and pragmatically, these were hard realities. After all, the Jews had returned. They had returned to Yahweh from their idols. They had returned to Israel from Babylon. They had returned to build the Temple and the holy city out of its ruin. They had returned to re-institute the true worship of the true God. It is in this context of "obedience" that the crisis of God's presence develops. Once again, Smith is helpful:

[The Jews] entered the period, it is true, with some sense of their distinction. In exile they had suffered God's anger, and had been purged by it. But out of discipline often springs pride. . . . The tide of hope, which rose to flood with [the completion of the Temple], ebbed rapidly away, and left God's people struggling, like any ordinary tribe of peasants, with bad seasons and the cruelty of their envious neighbors. Their pride was set on edge. . . .²

This generation had done the "right things," but God had not responded in kind.

Malachi and the Crisis in Israel

T. V. Moore pointed out in the last century that whereas "before the captivity the besetting sins of the Jews were idolatry and superstition," after the Exile "they were prone to the other extremes of practical atheism and Epicureanism."³ Israel had indeed lost her distinctiveness. Out of disappointment and difficulty, she had lost any sense of the nearness, the power, the glory, the relevance of God. The irony is that she had thus become essentially pagan--"secularized,"

¹ G. A. Smith, *The Book of the Twelve Prophets* (2 vols; New York: George H. Doran, n.d.) 2.342.

² *Ibid.*, 2.342-43.

³ T. V. Moore, *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi* (1856, reprinted; Philadelphia: Banner of Truth, 1979) 350.

we might say. In her complaint that her faith did not get her any advantages, she abdicated her faith. She joined secular culture, then complained that God did not care! R. Braun puts it finely: "through [Malachi] God spoke his word to a people sadly disappointed with the course of events in their time and sorely tempted to give up their religion as an irrelevant relic from the past."⁴

The Subtle Crisis of Secularism. Malachi's opening word reflects the extraordinary seriousness of this condition. Massa' ("a burden") is rare in the prophets: "It never occurs in the title except when it is evidently grave and full of weight and labor."⁵ The "burden" belongs to Israel: "An oracle (*massa*): The word of the Lord to Israel. through Malachi" (1:1). The prophet lays before Israel the reality of a crisis⁶ which involves at least three elements.

First, it constitutes a subtle accommodation to the prevailing culture. G. Campbell Morgan points out in his fine little devotional commentary that the character of the people was bound up in their continued defense "wherein?" "Wherein hast Thou loved us," they asked (1:2), or "despised Thy name" (1:6) and so forth (1:7; 2:17; 3:7; 3:8; 3:13):

They have been boasting themselves in their knowledge of truth, responding to that knowledge mechanically, technically; . . . and, when the prophet tells them what God thinks of them they, with astonishment and impertinence, look into his face and say, "We don't see this at all!"⁷

Malachi is a prophet for our age. Certainly Christians suffer terrible persecution in many parts of the world. But in most of America and the Western world, the dangers are hidden. Christians tend to accept dominant cultural values uncritically. Their commitments frequently amount to little more than window dressing. Contemporary artist Steve Taylor puts this form of Christianity in the mouth of his "Christian" politician who proudly declares:

⁴ R. Braun, "Malachi-A Catechism for Times of Disappointment," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 4 (October 1977) 293.

⁵ Thus Jerome on Hab 1:1. Cited in C. F. Keil, *The Twelve Minor Prophets* (2 vols.; 1868, reprinted; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 2.3. All Scripture quotations are NIV unless otherwise indicated.

⁶ J. Baldwin, Haggai, *Zechariah, Malachi* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1972) 162.

⁷ G. Campbell Morgan, *Malachi's Message for Today* (reprinted; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972) 30-31.

I'm devout, I'm sincere, and I'm proud to say,
That it's had exactly no effect on who I am today!⁸

D. R. Davies has put it more strongly. The sin of our age he is *the enthronement of Man at the centre of life, being and thought*.⁹ Modern culture seems (quite unconsciously) to assume that it is within modern man's capacity to erect what is, in effect, a Christian civilization on a basis of secular belief.¹⁰ The real tragedy, however, is that

Church members are only a degree less secularized in their consciousness than the public that is completely divorced from the Church. Theoretical appreciation of belief in another world is, of course, stronger in the Church than in the world. But it is not by any means a dynamic disturbance in the life of the believer.¹¹

The religion of Israel has ceased to be a "dynamic disturbance." The danger is universal.

The Relation between Faith and Life. Second, the crisis in Malachi involves the relation that exists between true faith and real life. It is a crisis of relevance, that is, of the role God plays in the task of living. Malachi indicts Judah for leaving God out of life. Their lifestyles betray a cozy belief that what one did with God on the Sabbath and what did Sunday through Friday had very little to do with each other.

Christian psychologist Newton Maloney observes that this sort of belief permeates contemporary society. He cites the influential "role" theory of T. R. Sabin who hypothesizes that each individual moves in five different environments, which together constitute a pattern of roles leading to identity.¹² The five environments are: (1) physical (including the body and natural environment); (2) situational (one's cultural life, including work, play and the like); (3) interpersonal (the people with whom one interacts); (4) idealistic (one's goals, ambitions, values and so forth); and (5) transcendental (one's experience

⁸ S. Taylor, "It's a Personal Thing" (Waco: Word Records, 1985).

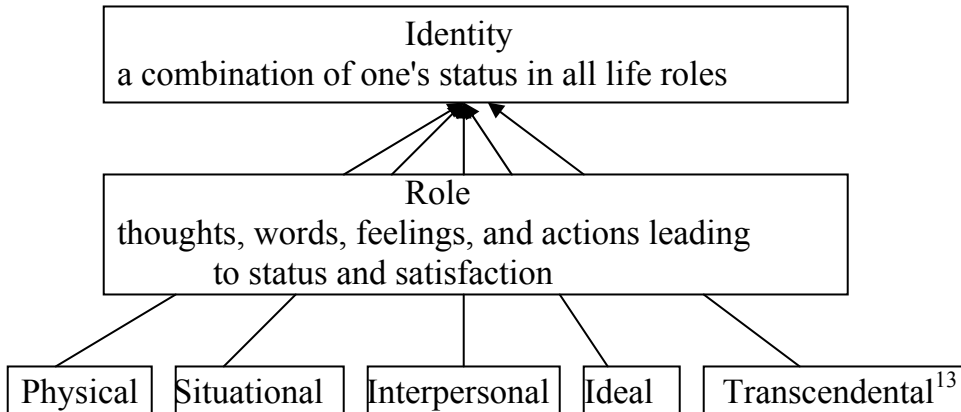
⁹ D.R. Davies, *The Sin of Our Age* (New York: Macmillan, 1947) 23.

¹⁰ Ibid 12.5

¹¹ Ibid.,61.

¹² T. R. Sabin, "A Role Theory Perspective for Community Psychology: The of Social Identity," *Community Psychology and Mental Health* (ed. D. Adelson and B. L. Kalis; Scranton: Chandler, 1970) 89-113.

of or with God, or the supernatural). Maloney illustrates the this way:



Maloney goes on to point out that while Sabin is right to include God in human identity, he is wrong to make God just one more among equals.¹⁴

Malachi would emphatically agree. God will not be one among equals. One may live as though God were irrelevant, but God is still relevant! Disaster follows the relegation of God to the periphery of life. The priests may forsake the covenant of Levi, perhaps thinking they will be more in tune with the times (2:7-8), but it explodes before their eyes: "So I have caused you to be despised and humiliated before all the people"(2:9). And those who accept the pagan view of marriage and sexuality uncritically (2:11) produce innumerable sorrows (2:13), destroy family life (2:15), and degrade themselves ("so guard yourself in your spirit," 2:15; 2:16).

Perhaps we may borrow again from Davies. He points to three remarkable paradoxes that have ensued from the coronation of man: (1) The "abolition of other-worldliness" has failed to produce a better world here and now; (2) The "dissolution of the spirit" of man has failed to produce a better knowledge of humanity; and (3) The anthropocentric faith has actually resulted in "the degradation of the human person."¹⁵ Accommodation is a subtle crisis, but a real one. In trying to be relevant to culture, we make God irrelevant. But God will never be irrelevant. He is eternally contemporary.

¹³ H. N. Maloney, "Introduction," *Wholeness and Holiness* (ed. H. N. Maloney; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983) 21.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁵ Davies, *Sin*, 58-123.

The Meaning and Value of Covenant. Third, the crisis in Malachi centers on the meaning and value of covenant. The word for "covenant" (*berit*) occurs six times in the prophecy (2:4; 2:5; 2:8; 2:10; 2:14; 3:1), but the idea permeates the book.¹⁶ And it has immense homiletical significance.

It is of course well-established that various legal, contractual agreements were known in the ancient world, and that many of the essential features of these covenants appear in various biblical contexts.¹⁷ However, the biblical covenant is not merely a legal device. In G. Quell's words, it "is a legal transaction for which there is no analogy in the circle of experience"¹⁸ precisely because it is not, strictly speaking, legal. It is personal and relational, as well as regulative, judicial, normative, and obligatory. Quell seems to struggle putting its exact character into words. He calls it "a regulated form of a fellowship between God and man or man and God" (and, at times, man and man as well).¹⁹ He also describes it as "a medium in man's relation to God which is designed to promote reflection"²⁰

These and similar definitions yield three distinctive features of *berit*. First, covenant is a personal relationship: "The Presence of YHVH is built into the structure" of covenant.²¹ Second, the covenant is a committed relationship. This explains why *berit* and *hesed* ("loyal love") are so closely linked, even equated (cf. Deut 7:9). Covenant is not mere friendliness, compassion, mercy, or benevolence. It is committed relationship.²² Third, covenant is a responsible relationship, that is, a relationship which has a norm by which it can be evaluated.

The contemporary implications of these three features of covenant could be guessed by making a simple comparison. Think, for example, of the modern notion of "relationship," recurring so frequently in the media. Now think of Malachi's powerful contention that marriage is a "covenant" (2:14)--a "personal, committed, responsible relationship!"

¹⁶ For example, 1:2 reminds of God's covenant faithfulness; 3:10-12 renews the covenant promises for renewed faithfulness; the hortatory summary of 4:4 is a charge to return to the Law around which the covenant was established (cf. Exod 19:5; Exod 7-8). S. L. McKinzie and H. N. Wallace ("Covenant Themes in Malachi," *CBQ* 45 549) suggest the possibility of interpreting the entire book around the concept.

¹⁷ G. E. Mendenhall, "Covenant," *IDB* 714-21.

¹⁸ G. Quell and J. Behm, "διατίθημι, διαθήκη," *TDNT* 2 (1964) 110.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 109.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, n. 25. The thought is borrowed from J. Wellhausen.

²¹ J. Jocz, *The Covenant: A Theology of Human Destiny* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968) 51.

²² See E. Jacob (*Theology of the Old Testament* [New York: Harper and Row, 1958] 104-7) for an excellent discussion of this point.

These implications profoundly shape our applications of the messages of this book, to which we now turn.

II. A Preaching Program from Malachi

Malachi's prophecy might be summarized as a call to distinctive and discerning godliness. His message might therefore be thematized as follows: "Do not exchange treasures for trifles, your birthright for a bowl of soup." This is a crisis of relevance. "Do not suppose," the prophet declares, "that a bankrupt and skeptical culture can give you something God cannot."

Following E. Clendenen's fine structural analysis,²³ we may structure a preaching program developing this central theme from the specific "problems" pinpointed by Malachi. Taking 1:1-5 as a summary introduction, each of the problems which appear subsequently can be thought of as resultant, or consequent, or perhaps concomitant "crises of secularism." We might envision a preaching program, therefore, which grows out of six crises:

1. The Crisis of Identity (1:1-5)
2. The Crisis of Commitment (1:6-9; 2:1-5)
3. The Crisis of Responsibility (1:10-14; 2:6-9)
4. The Crisis of Marriage (2:10-16)
5. The Crisis of Lifestyle (2:17-3:5)
6. The Crisis of Hope (3:6-4:6)

We will take up each of these sections individually. Rather than simply outline possible sermons, we will suggest a preaching thesis for each section, while developing some potential homiletical themes.

The Subtle Crisis of Identity (1:1-5)

The opening section of chap. one documents the subtle decline of Judah into secularism. The literary device by which this takes place is a tacit juxtaposition of Israel and Edom.²⁴ Edom may boast proudly, "Though we have been crushed, we will rebuild the ruins" (v 4); but Judah asks cynically, "How have you loved us?" (v 2). Sigmund Freud once said that religion is harmful because it keeps people from facing their problems wholeheartedly and head on.²⁵ Religion was to him more *pathetic* than *wrong*. We can sense something of that here. Both

²³ Cf. his article in this volume of the Review.

²⁴ For a fine discussion of this curious structure, see C. D. Isbell, *Malachi: A Study Guide Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980) 33-36.

²⁵ S. Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1927) 67-68.

Edom and Judah make God irrelevant--but at least Edom has the dignity of consistency! Perhaps the only real difference between pure secularism and apathetic religionism is that one overtly emphasizes human ability while the other covertly emphasizes God's inability.

These verses point to a sense of God's love as the true character of Israel's crisis. Herein lies the strength of W. Kaiser's suggestion that the love of God constitutes the central argument of, and key to, the prophecy: "God has, and continues, to love us, and no amount of doubting, objecting, or arguing will remove this fact."²⁶

The loss of the experiential knowledge of the love of God is really a loss of identity as the people of God. Psychologically speaking, identity is the operative assumption about who one is. As parents of adolescents know well, identity is a profound accomplishment, affecting virtually everything that follows. The prophet's opening thrust, therefore, speaks to all of life: *Build your lives on the supreme fact that God always love you.*

J. A. T. Robinson's startling *Honest to God* of 1963 shows how critical this foundation is. Robinson, an English bishop, acknowledged that in many discussions "between a Christian and a humanist, I catch myself realizing that most of my sympathies are on the humanist's side."²⁷ He suggested that both an existentialist like Camus and a thinking Christian share in, and speak to, a humanity "for whom the consolation of religion, the *deus ex machina*, the god-hypothesis, are dead beyond recall."²⁸ In a bold move, Robinson concluded that the Christian is one who, in that milieu, can still be open to the "divine" agape "of the universe."²⁹ The Christian determines to love selflessly simply because love is the ultimate reality.

Robinson was not naive. He knew the implications of these re-interpretations: "It will condition everything,"³⁰ he declared; and, it did. A decade later, J. I. Packer wrote a rebuttal. Two trends, he said, characterize modern Christian minds: (1) That "They have been conformed to the modern spirit;" and (2) That "They have been confused by the modern scepticism." Packer noted that a century ago C. H. Spurgeon "described the wobblings he then saw among Baptists on Scripture, atonement and human destiny as 'the down-grade.'" Could he survey Protestant thinking about God at the present time, Packer said, "I guess he would speak of 'the nose-dive!'"³¹ We are courting

²⁶ W. Kaiser, *Malachi: God's Unchanging Love* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984) 13.

²⁷ J. A. T. Robinson, *Honest to God* (London: SCM, 1963) 8.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 129.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 130.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 133.

³¹ J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1973) 7.

disaster, for knowing God is the "most practical project anyone can engage in." Packer's conclusion offers a fit illustration for the situation of Malachi's Judah:

As it would be cruel to an Amazonian tribesman to fly him to London, put him down without explanation in Trafalgar Square and leave him, as one who knew nothing of English or England, to fend for himself, so we are cruel to ourselves if we try to live in this world without knowing about the God whose world it is and who runs it. The world becomes a strange, mad, painful place, and life in it a disappointing and unpleasant business, for those who do not know about God.³²

The Subtle Crisis of Commitment (1:6-9; 2:1-5)

The word "relationship" activates the popular imagination. There are "open" relationships, "distressed" relationships, "creative," "growing," and "stagnant" relationships. There is relationship "enhancement," "theory," and "therapy." A dictionary kind of definition probably expresses the contemporary understanding as well as any thing--a relationship is just an emotional connection between people.

As vital as relationships are to human life, Malachi insists that they are not truly satisfying unless they are qualified in some important ways. He frequently uses the concept of covenant to express these qualifications. As we noted earlier, covenant relationship exists only in terms of commitment and responsibility. In a very general way, and without pressing the point, this section from 1:6-2:9 addresses these two dimensions in order.

"Commitment" is the focal point of Malachi's first indictment against Israel: "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) Interestingly, Malachi charges the people through the priests. One might have expected them to sustain their commitment even in troubled times. More importantly, one might expect that priests need not be reminded of the basic imperative of obedience. Indeed, this irony yields the point of the section. Obedience is the primary demand of God on his people. God surely desires our love; but, first he demands our respect!

Commitment elevates relationships above the merely emotional. First, commitment acknowledges what is due. Second, commitment involves the whole self. That is the difference between "interest" and "commitment." One may nurse an interest in the theological concept of God's "fatherhood." But commitment makes God "my father."

³² Ibid., 14.

These people retain an attachment to the philosophical system of Yahweh-religion, but they do "not lay it to heart to give glory to my name" (2:2). Third, commitment performs. Her inferior and half-hearted exercises prove that Israel lacks commitment (1:8). Excellence (or lack of it) reflects basic commitment.³³

Finally, and perhaps the most sobering thought of all, basic commitments ultimately constitute character. There are several hints of this truth.³⁴ But 2:5 is explicit: "My covenant was with him, a covenant of life and peace, and I gave them to him; this called for reverence and he revered me and stood in awe of my name." In leaving the commitment to God, the priest left the covenant by which "life and salvation were guaranteed and granted to him."³⁵ We all ultimately become our commitments.

The Subtle Crisis of Responsibility (1:10-14; 2:6-9)

Like the obverse and reverse of a coin, commitment and responsibility surround, define and qualify relationships. Commitment is the subjective, personal dimension of relationships, while responsibility is the objective, interpersonal dimension. The peculiar subtlety of this third crisis seems to emerge from Malachi's remarkable use of irony. The prophet appears to give two clear examples of Israel's lost distinctiveness while pointing to broad applications of this loss for Israel's life.

The first irony consists of a contrast between the worship of Israel's priests and that of the nations. God rejects the former, then

"My name will be great among the nations, from the rising to the setting of the sun. In every place incense and pure offerings will be brought to my name, because my name will be great among the nations," says the Lord Almighty (1:11).

The precise meaning of this verse is disputed. However, unless we see a reference to overt universalism,³⁶ it makes little difference

³³ A fascinating illustration of this elemental truth comes from the best selling of American business by T. J. Peters and R. H. Waterman, Jr., *In Search of Excellence* (New York: Warner, 1982). The authors note that the truly "excellent have incorporated "the values and practices of . . . great leaders" (p. 26, added). They succeed because they "are so effective in engendering . . . commitment (p.55).

³⁴ Cf. 1:10, "I am not pleased *with you*;" 2:2, "I will curse your blessings" (which priests treasured as symbols of status and position).

³⁵ Keil, "Malachi," 2.445.

³⁶ Cf. G. A. Smith, *Prophets*, 359-60.

homiletically whether it refers futuristically to the church's worship,³⁷ to the presence of genuine belief among some Gentiles,³⁸ or to the unintended worship of God in pagan forms.³⁹ In any of these cases, the indictment against Israel is the same. They who should affect the consciousness of the whole world with the knowledge of God languish in bored semi-consciousness.

There is something profoundly contemporary and convicting about this scenario. God is God whether anyone believes it or not. But somehow the loss of wonder and awe at the knowledge of this God assumes tragic proportions. God has placed in human hands the responsibility of making himself known. When those people lose the sense of God's power and nearness, the tragedy is irredeemable. Malachi's point here is disturbing: *God expects his people to impact culture, not invest in it.*

A second irony develops around the priest's specific responsibilities to the people of Israel. The priest was appointed to teach the truth, live the truth and impart the truth (2:7). But Malachi suggests not only that the priests failed with their responsibilities, but that they failed in a particularly unsettling way:

"But you have turned from the way and by your teaching have caused many to stumble; you have violated the covenant with Levi," says the Lord Almighty. "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" (2:8-9).

Perhaps the meaning of this judgment lies in this. In difficult times, the priests had responded to the questions and doubts of the people not with courage, hope and confidence in the veracity of God; but with compromise and neglect. Like parents trying to be "buddies" to their children, like churches that soft-pedal the gospel, like countless Christians who compromise their positions, the priests tried to be "relevant." The irony, of course, is that the plan backfires (2:9). Not many people have the stomach for someone who accommodates, who rides the fence of commitment, who refuses to stand up for fear of being counted. The only position of influence is still distinctive, committed faith.

³⁷ J. Packard, "The Book of Malachi," *Commentary on the Holy Scriptures* (reprinted ed. J. P. Lange; 12 vols.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1960) 7.12. Cf. also Keil, "Malachi," 2.438.

³⁸ H. Wolf, *Haggai, Malachi: Rededication and Renewal* (Chicago: Moody, 1976) 72-74. J. Swetnam ("Malachi 1, 11: An Interpretation," *CBQ* 31 [1969] 200-9) offers a variation that the reference is to actual cultus in the *synagogue*.

³⁹ E. Cashdan, "Malachi," *The Twelve Prophets* (ed. A. Cohen; London/Jerusalem: Soncino, 1948) 340-41.

It is an inescapable fact. A position of influence carries a presumption of responsibility. This is what makes covenant relationships so significant. Committed, responsible relationships have the potential for lasting, godly influence.

Subtle Crisis of Marriage (2:10-16)

This dynamic interplay of commitment and responsibility takes on visible form as Malachi's prophecy shifts from principle to practice in the second movement (2:10-3:6). Two problems dominate the movement--marriage (2:10-16) and lifestyle (2:17-3:6).

It is tempting to ask why Malachi chose marriage as the starting point for application. We are not told, of course. The law prohibited religious intermarriage (cf. Deut 7:3), and Nehemiah sternly rebuked the practice (Neh 13:23-27). But there is evidence that Malachi began with marriage simply because that relationship is the crux for all others. The home was (and is) the center of human development. From a sociological point of view, it serves five vital functions, in all cultures.⁴⁰

First, the family serves to regulate sexual activity. The sexual drive demands careful regulation, else a society is thrown into indiscriminate sexual activity, high incidences of illegitimate birth, and dehumanization of women as sexual objects. Every culture recognizes the need to sanction the sexual life of its members and assure responsible parents for its children.

Second, the family serves as the agency of reproduction. All societies must replenish members who die. Families are thus crucial to the very survival of the race.

Third, the family socializes the members of a culture. The family transmits to its children the goals, values, norms, obligations, expectations, rules, rights, and so on, which characterize life in a given society.

Fourth, the family provides the most basic and primary form of companionship and love, which are needed by all persons. Ideally, husband, wife and children all find their love needs met in the family circle.

Fifth, the family gives the members of society their identity. Religious, social, ethnic, and national identity are conferred, first of all, in and by the family.

⁴⁰ S. A. Grunlan, *Marriage and the Family: A Christian Perspective* (Grand Rapids: 1984) 25-26. J. D. Unwin's classic study *Sex and Culture* (New York: 1934) dramatically illustrates. His massive investigation of the correlation marital/sexual practice and cultural achievement led him to conclude that:

A crisis involving marriage and the family is therefore a cultural crisis of the first order. Social life quite simply cannot survive without the family.

For the people of God, however, the crisis threatens the survival of their culture, not generic society. The Jews have accommodated the prevailing cultural view of marriage. And Malachi warns that such compromise impacts their religion, their relationships, and their responsibility. His point might be made this way: One's view of marriage (including sex and the family) is not neutral, it determines the kind of life and society we will have. We may develop preaching themes around this idea by examining the prophet's diagnosis and his corrective.

The Prevailing View of Marriage. In the ancient Near East, as in every other culture, marriage was a civil or legal affair. But every society sanctions and approves marriage at another level. Indeed, the legal restrictions usually reflect, over time, this more primary view of marriage.

The Babylonian, Assyrian and Egyptian cultures surrounding post-Exilic Judaism countenanced all manner of divorce and remarriage,⁴¹ so long as the legal requirements were observed. For these societies, marriage was a powerful socio-economic institution. Marriages were frequently arranged or terminated on the basis of economic considerations. Divorces could be granted for numerous reasons, especially childlessness; but, in all cases the marriage involved carefully detailed written contracts, and carefully specified legal divorce proceedings and settlements.

The contemporary view of marriage differs only in particulars. Tim Stafford has recently exposed the dominant sexual ethos of our American culture. He calls it the "Ethic of Intimacy." It is, he says, both a rejection of the out-and-out hedonism of the Playboy philosophy, and a narcissistic attempt at "caring" without long-term commitment. The interesting thing about the Ethic of Intimacy, Stafford goes on to say, is that it devalues marriage precisely because it elevates this vague, compatible relationship of intimacy above everything else.⁴² Under the Ethic of Intimacy, a married man or woman could hardly

"The greatest energy has been displayed by those societies which have reduced their sexual opportunity to a minimum by the adoption of absolute monogamy" (p. 431).

⁴¹ For a good discussion of these practices, see G. A. Barton, "Marriage," *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* (1921).

⁴² T. Stafford, "Intimacy: Our Latest Sexual Fantasy," *Christianity Today*, 31 (January 16, 1987) 21-27.

be faulted for seeking a divorce if the "relationship" proved incompatible or unsatisfying, or if the spouse were making demands on one's personal autonomy.

In the case of ancient Israel or modern America, marriage has suffered at the hands of the prevailing cultural view. The Israelite may have sought an exciting foreign wife, or maybe just a wife who could have children. A contemporary American (maybe a Christian) might be seeking a happy relationship. But in either case, marriage degenerates into a convenience.

The Prophetic Message about Marriage. Malachi countered with three powerful assertions. This subtle crisis of marriage has far-reaching implications for religion, for relationships, and for responsibility. Put another way, marriage is a covenant⁴³ with God, with each other, and with our children (and thus the whole world).

First, Malachi stresses that marriage involves a Covenant with God. The language takes marriage back to creation and to the "covenant of our fathers" (2:10). The exogamous⁴⁴ marriages of these Israelites were contracted with the daughter of a foreign god" (2:11).⁴⁵ Malachi calls this "a detestable thing" (2:11). Judah "has desecrated the sanctuary the Lord loves" (2:11).

Malachi stresses the fact that marriage is not a solitary affair. The relationship of marriage is uniquely intimate, so that each partner is profoundly affected by the other as a person. Two persons join together their personalities melding into one.⁴⁶ To deny God's involvement in, and authority over, that kind of relationship, amounts

⁴³ See our discussion above on the meaning and value of covenant.

⁴⁴ "Exogamy" refers to marriage outside one's group; in this case, outside of Israel.

⁴⁵ J. M. P. Smith (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Malachi* ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1912] 49) notes that the phrase may mean only that "an alliance has practically been made between Judah and some people that does not worship Yahweh through the common celebration of such marriages." The sin may not have been marriage to overt idolators, just alliance with idolatry through marriage.

⁴⁶ Numerous NT passages reflect this dynamic quality of marriage. Consider, e.g., 1 Cor 6:15-18 where Paul warns that sexual sin not only violates the "one flesh" principle constitutes the only sin against one's own "body" which here likely means "the place where faith lives and where man surrenders to God's lordship" (E. Schweizer, "σῶμα," *TDNT* 7 [1971] 1066). Cf. also Eph 5:32 where Paul labels the husband-wife, Christ-church analogy a *mega musterion*. Throughout the Bible, marriage appears a "social and relational unit of two people who belong to each other in such a way that without each other they are less than themselves; the unity cannot be broken without damage to both parents in it" (O. R. Johnston, *Who Needs the Family?* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1979] 64).

to high treason against him. This same sort of thinking clearly underlies Paul's prohibition against mixed marriage in 2 Cor 6:14-18. This constitutes a critical point for contemporary Christians. Our view of sex, marriage and family must never be detached from our commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ. Our Christian lives are literally at stake.

Second, Malachi emphasizes that marriage involves a covenant with each other: "The Lord is acting as the witness between you and the wife of your youth, because you have broken faith with her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant" (2:14). The starting point for any understanding of the Jewish marriage ideal, according to E. Stauffer, is "the original order of creation" which casts marriage as "the original form of human fellowship."⁴⁷ This explains Jesus' own insistence on the inviolability of marriage, and his observation that "hardness of heart" (Matt 19:8, *sklerokardian*) alone accounts for the miseries of divorce. Malachi has virtually a NT perspective here.

The contemporary value of the prophet's message lies in two clear principles. First, owing to the very nature of covenant, marriage demands commitment before intimacy. Someone has well said that people in our world marry because they "love"; while, biblically, people ought to love because they are married! Second, when put in its proper context, marriage offers people God's highest and most fulfilling kind of life. The idea pervading so much of the history and literature of marriage seems to suggest that marriage is somehow necessary, but that it somehow prevents our enjoying life fully.⁴⁸ Again, Malachi refutes the notion. The wife you are casting away, he declares, is "your partner" (2:14). The word indicates one who shares a task, a common life. The Jews were exchanging God's pattern for life for pleasure, or convenience, or economic considerations. It is a profound danger for our world-that we may forsake the joy and beauty of lifelong commitment, growing fellowship, the traditions of home and family, for the dubious thrills of cheap pleasures and greener pastures.

Finally, Malachi declares that marriage involves a covenant with our children and thus with the whole world. In 2:15, a notoriously difficult Hebrew passage, the prophet links the practices of the Jews

⁴⁷ E. Stauffer, "γαμέω, γάμος," *TDNT* 1 (1964) 649.

⁴⁸ Citations could be multiplied. Shakespeare's (*All's Well That Ends Well* [New Haven: Yale, 1926] Act II, scene iii, line 315) parasitic Parolles, e.g., counsels young Bertram to forsake his (arranged) marriage: "A young man married is a man that marr'd."

with "godly offspring."⁴⁹ Whatever the interpretation, two vital points are made. First, raising godly children is commended. There is an implicit warning here against false goals for our children. God does not commend the desire for "talented," "successful," "educated," "handsome," "beautiful," or "athletic" children, but, for godly children. Second, godly children are clearly seen as the products of godly marriages. Couples who "stay together for the sake of the children" have it all wrong. Families build on the actual marriage relationship. The quality of that relationship is what establishes the quality of the family itself. It is pointless to talk of building good, strong families apart from healthy marriages.

Subtle Crisis of Lifestyle (2:17-3:6)

The fifth of the crises of secularism emerges out of an astonishing set of ironies. It begins with Malachi's typical question-answer format which exposes the unbelief of God's people (2:17). God is wearied by the incessant drone of charges against His justice. At least two implications derive from these questions.

First, the Jews linked the presence of God with circumstances. The silly conclusion of Russian cosmonauts in the early sixties that they had searched the heavens and found no God may be less culpable than this conclusion: "The circumstances are not what we want, so where is God?" C. S. Lewis once remarked that God is never localized in circumstances, anymore than Shakespeare is localized in Falstaff or MacBeth.⁵⁰ The nearness of God, he said, is after all a matter of who one is.⁵¹

Second, the Jews implied that God failed to make a proper distinction between the "good" and the "bad." As R. Bailey points out, the Jews really hinted at two accusations. On the one hand, they suggested that God no longer took note of "good people." On the other hand, they implied that they themselves were exempt from

⁴⁹ There seem to be three broad categories of interpretation: (1) The passage refers to an exception involving Abraham's ("the one") marriage to Hagar. "He did that to raise up godly children, you are doing it for lust or convenience"; (2) The passage refers to the example of Adam and his wife (cf. AV, NIV). "God could have created more than one (wife for Adam), but he made only one in order to provide optimal conditions for raising godly children"; and (3) The passage refers to an treacherous exchange which these Jews attempt to justify, perhaps claiming their wives are barren, or that marriage is "not a moral or religious issue" (cf. NASV). "How will you raise godly children if you destroy their homes?"

⁵⁰ C. S. Lewis, "The Seeing Eye," *Christian Reflections* (ed. W. Hooper; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967) 167.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 170.

judgment (and thus deserving of blessing) because they were chosen, and had already endured their "hell" in Exile.⁵² But the "benefits" of being "good" had failed to materialize. Now, like atheists who swear there is no God, agnostics who are unsure, or deists who regard the whole matter as irrelevant, the chosen of God ask, "Where is the God of justice?" (2:17).

It is a tragicomic feature of human nature that people should actually demand justice. Hardly anyone really wants justice. The bitter irony of that reality explodes' out of Malachi's answer:

"See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the Lord Almighty .

But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap (3:1-2).

Through his prophet, "God Himself takes up the challenge, 'Where is the God.'"⁵³ The Lord "*whom you seek*," he declares, the messenger of the covenant,⁵⁴ "*in whom you delight*,"⁵⁵ that one is coming, and "who can endure?"

The people do not realize what they have asked! "This judgment is threatened," says Keil, "*against those who wanted the judgment of God to come.*"⁵⁶ It is, once more, a disturbing thesis: *God is not coming, first of all, to demolish the strongholds of secular culture, but to expose the pockets of secularism in the sanctuary of God.* Like a fuller employed full-time to wash stains out of the vestments of a priest,⁵⁷ like a smelter hired to refine the metal used for Temple furniture,⁵⁸ the Lord will remove the profane impurities from Israel. The graphic metaphors drive home the point which, according to D. Johnson, Peter later utilized in his "Theology of Suffering" (1 Pet 4:12-19). The judgment Malachi announces reminds God's people of all ages of "our identity as the temple of God. . . . a token of God's glorious presence."⁵⁹ The judgment of eternal salvation ultimately

⁵² R. W. Bailey, *God's Questions and Answers* (New York: Seabury, 1977) 67.

⁵³ J. J. Perowne, *Malachi* (Cambridge: University Press, 1893) 28.

⁵⁴ Probably a reference to the Lord himself. Cf. Packard, "Malachi," 7.19.

⁵⁵ Baldwin, *Malachi*, 243, says this is "probably ironical."

⁵⁶ Keil, "Malachi," 461.

⁵⁷ The words for "launderer's soap" bear this peculiar sense. Cf. Isbell, *Malachi*, 60.

⁵⁸ For the nuances of the different words for "refine" here, see Wolf, *Malachi*, 102-3.

⁵⁹ D. Johnson, "Fire in God's House: Imagery from Malachi 3 in Peter's Theology of Suffering (I Pet 4:12-19)," 29 (1986) 293-94.

falls on unbelief, but the judgment of present purification "begins with us" (1 Pet 4:17).

The ironies of this passage reach a climax in 3:5. The people question God's presence; Malachi says he is coming. The people demand justice; God promises it--to them! And here, God answers the charge that he cannot, or does not distinguish good and evil. The people mocked God with the charge that "all who do evil are good in the eyes of the Lord, and he is pleased with them" (2:17). Malachi counters with staggering irony: "Those of you who do 'good' (with half-hearted ceremonies!) are *evil* in my sight." He warns that:

"I will come near *to you* for judgment. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers, against those who defraud laborers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive aliens of justice, but do not fear me," says the Lord Almighty (3:5).

William Wordsworth once wrote that the leaders of the French revolution gradually twisted their motives of conviction into motives of conquest. They came to live, he said, in "that tempting region. . . . Where passions have the privilege to work and never hear the sound of their own names."⁶⁰ Such is Malachi's case against Israel. Her people hide their compromise behind smug religious forms. God is not pleased. He will not have his people nursing the values, attitudes and behaviors of the prevailing culture--while calling it "faith," or "therapy," or "contemporary," or "state-of-the-art," or any of the names by which compromise is cloaked. He demands a difference.

The Subtle Crisis of Hope (3:7-4:6)

It has been said of Marxists that they dispensed with any hope of "pie in the sky" and concentrated on the task of getting boiled beef and carrots here. Such is the nature of secularism. It strips life of its supernatural character, and shifts the focus of existence to the temporal and tangible. The thesis of Malachi's final message to the world addresses this pervasive present-mindedness: *Hope is what makes life really liveable.*

The crisis of hope dominates the third and final movement of Malachi. Clendenen locates the problem specifically in 3:13-14:

"You have said harsh things against me, says the Lord. Yet you ask, 'What have we said against you?' You have said, 'It is futile to serve God. What did we gain by carrying out his requirements and going about like mourners before the Lord?'"

⁶⁰ W. Wordsworth, "The Prelude," Bk. XI, line 230.

Such murmuring is characteristic of lost or abandoned hope. In the OT, the "attitude of expectant and confident hope increasingly expresses the realisation that everything in the earthly present is provisional."⁶¹ The crisis of hope, therefore, evolves out of an over-emphasis on the present. Said another way, the trees of the present hide the forest of the future. The investment of time, energy, money and interest solely in the present reduces the hope of eternity to mere doctrine.

Although at first they appear unrelated, all the sections of this final movement concern that problem of abandoned hope. They seem rather naturally to underscore three vital facts about hope.

In the first section (3:7-12), the prophet suggests that hope should be the operative principle of life. This emphasis can be seen in his exhortation to "Return to me" (3:7). When the injured innocence of the people asks, "How are we to return?" (3:7) Malachi answers that they must return in tithes (3:8-10).

Although apparently unconnected, "tithes" and "hope" stand on common ground. W. Zimmerli has pointed out that the OT, unlike the New, lacks an unambiguous term for hope (such as *elpis*). The concept is clearly present, however, in a number of terms that express (1) "A waiting, an existence toward that which is to come";⁶² and (2) The thought "of trust and refuge in God."⁶³ Hope is, therefore, oriented toward the future, while secularism is oriented to the present. It is oriented toward the person of God, while secularism is oriented to circumstances.

The tithe simply expresses these commitments pragmatically. The "tithes" (*ma'aser*, 3:9 [=MT 3:8]) were offerings from the harvest (Num 18:21) as were the "offerings" (*teruma*, 3:9 [=MT 3:8]; cf. Num 18:11). When crops are failing (cf. 3:11), such rituals represent hard choices! They symbolize a genuine conviction that "this," the "here and now," is not everything.

There may even be a touch of bitterness here that intensifies the irony for the people. E. Cashdan notes that these tithes and offerings benefitted the priests and Levites.⁶⁴ Given what Malachi has said about the disdain the people have for these unfaithful priests (2:9), the people might well have rationalized the withholding of tithes. It would be easy to excuse when the recipients are so unworthy! But Malachi will not excuse them. They are robbing God (3:8). The

⁶¹ R. Bultmann, "ἐλπίς," TDNT 2 (1964) 52.3, emphasis added.

⁶² W. Zimmerli, *Man and His Hope in the Old Testament* (London: SCM, 1971) 8.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁶⁴ Cashdan, "Malachi," 351.

withholding of tithes affronts God personally.⁶⁵ On the other hand, the invitation here is to "return to God." The net effect of the exhortation is that the tithe represents a living, operational hope, for it symbolizes a commitment to eternal values rather than provisional ones, and a vital trust in the God who is the Lord of life rather than in the circumstances which go into making up life.

In the second section (3:13-18), Malachi underscores the fact that hope elevates life. The emphases which appeared in the first section reverberate here; but, the prophet adds a new thought. When the people lament that there is no profit in obedience they muddle the distinction between belief and unbelief. Religion is irrelevant. Malachi responds in two ways.

First, he records the fact that some emerged from this mass of unbelief; "The those who feared the Lord talked with each other" (3:16). What they said we are not told. Calvin says "they were touched with repentance" and sought "to unite. . . as many friends as possible."⁶⁶ Luther says the reference is to "those who comfort each other."⁶⁷ On Calvin's view, they repented of their murmuring and complaint, turning again to the eternal God of hope. On Luther's, they supported each other in their commitment to live in hope despite the prevailing skepticism around them. On either view, they are distinguished, separated, demarcated, from the surrounding culture. Their hope (whether renewed, or sustained) marks them as the true people of God. The point is very important. It shows that the final judgment ("the day of YHWH") which ultimately separates the believers from the unbelievers is already taking place. To live in the hope of eternal life is in some sense already to experience that life!⁶⁸

Second, Malachi answers these people with a metaphor of God's constancy; "A scroll of remembrance was written in his presence concerning those who feared the Lord and honored his name" (3:16b). The "scroll" likely draws on the imagery of the Persian compensation

⁶⁵ The word for "rob," (*qaba'* may mean "to circumvent" (*BDB*, 867); or, more likely "to take forcibly" (Cashdan, "Malachi," 351). The difference is only one of degree. Either rendering implies that the people appropriate to themselves the rights of God.

⁶⁶ J. Calvin, "Lectures in Malachi," *Calvin's Commentaries* (24 vols.; Grand Rapids: A. P. and A., n.d.) 6.1094.

⁶⁷ M. Luther, "Lectures on Malachi," *Lectures on the Minor Prophets* (ed. H. C. Oswald; Luther's Words 38 vols.; St. Louis: Concordia, 1975) 18.416.

⁶⁸ Cf. R. Mason, *The Books of Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi* (Cambridge: University Press, 1977) 157. This concept recurs frequently in the NT (cf. Rom 8:24-25). As G. E. Ladd has argued so well, the whole idea of the kingdom of God presupposes the advent of a new life that is, here and now, a real experience of the life of God there and then! See his *Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974).

roll. The Greek historian Herodotus reported that the names of "Royal Benefactors" were placed on the roll because the government took special care to insure a proper reward for service.⁶⁹ Herodotus also reported, however, that such persons sometimes waited months or years for their honors.⁷⁰ If that figure is in view here, it communicates a profoundly *realistic*, but *comforting* message. The life of hope accepts the responsibility of obedience in uncertain circumstances, and in skeptical society, even though the reward for doing so is not immediately apparent. The life of hope is oriented to the long-term, not the short-term, toward eternal not temporal values, toward God's will, not self-gratification.

The theme of distinction is also expanded with this thought. Those who distinguish *themselves* from the prevailing culture now (when it is difficult, perhaps dangerous) will finally be distinguished forever as God's "treasured possession" (3:17). Make no mistake, Malachi declares, there is a difference between the life of unbelief and that of belief. A fallen world tends to blur the distinction. Compromise and accommodation on one side, irreligious humanism on the other may raise doubts for believers. But the difference is radical: "You will again see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not" (3:18).

The third and final section of this movement draws this thought to a climax with two dramatic assertions. The first is that the distinction made now between those who believe and those who do not has *real* and *eternal* consequences (4:1-3). Pope's famous line that "hope springs eternal in the human breast"⁷¹ expressed a quality of humanity--a craving, a yearning, a desire for that which God made us to experience. Malachi assures Israel that such hope will never be frustrated:

Hope humbly then; with trembling pinions soar;
Wait the great teacher Death, and God adore!
What future bliss, he gives thee not to know,
But gives that hope to be thy blessing now.⁷²

It is sobering to reflect on the fact that we are living, whether we realize it or not, for eternity. Our lives, our values, our commitments, our interests, our behaviors--all of it has eternal significance.

Malachi's second assertion here is that while God has given hope as the essential *motivation* for life in the present, he has given Law

⁶⁹ Herodotus, *Herodotus*, VIII, 85.

⁷⁰ Herodotus, *History*, V, II; IX, 107. Cf. also Perowne, *Malachi*, 35.

⁷¹ A. Pope, "An Essay on Man," Epistle I, line 95.

⁷² *Ibid.*, lines 91-94.

and prophecy as the essential *guides* for life in the present.⁷³ Despite J. M. P. Smith's rather brutal remark that this reference to the Law "makes connection with neither the foregoing nor the following context" being is merely "can isolated marginal note from some later legal-its,"⁷⁴ the context suggests a legitimate purpose. The Law looks back to obligation, the coming of Elijah *forward* to the promised salvation of God.⁷⁵ The Law stands complete, etched in the stone tablets of Horeb. Elijah, the first prophet, appears as the next and last prophet, suggesting that prophecy "is exhausted and her message to Israel fulfilled."⁷⁶ The Law reflects the character of God-holiness. Elijah heralds the Messiah of God--redemption.⁷⁷

God has not left his people helpless. The Law represents the norm of life. Commitments, relationships, all the values and activities of life can be evaluated. The prophet stands for the transformation of life. Elijah's coming signals the restoration, not just the diagnosis, of relationships.⁷⁸ It is the glorious final appeal of Scripture--return to the God of hope, to the one who not only enables you to understand your life, but invites you to experience his!

⁷³ The word is Kaiser's (*Malachi*, 100).

⁷⁴ J. M. P. Smith, "Malachi," 81.

⁷⁵ Baldwin, *Malachi*, 251-52.

⁷⁶ G. A. Smith, *Prophets*, 371.

⁷⁷ Kaiser, *Malachi*, 106-7.

⁷⁸ Cashdan, "Malachi," 354.

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