

Above & Beyond: Malachi's Marriage of Ethics & Missions

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Abstract

The book of Malachi rhetorically and powerfully intertwines the ethics of God's people with their missionary task of reaching the nations with the knowledge of God. This study examines the macrostructure of Mal 1:1-2:17 with the goal of defining the rhetorical strategy of these verses.

Introduction

For a couple decades now there has been a trend in Old Testament scholarship to investigate Malachi not as an individual book, but rather as one part of a larger collection. Many scholars study Malachi as the closing unit of the Book of the Twelve, a perspective which views all twelve Minor Prophets as one cohesive work.¹ Others more narrowly discuss Malachi as part of a Haggai-Zechariah-Malachi corpus, focusing on affinities and resonances among those three books.² Still others have even more narrowly viewed Zechariah 9-14 and Malachi as a distinct literary grouping of three small works, all beginning with an "oracle of the word of YHWH" (Zech. 9:1; 12:1; Mal 1:1).³ So, the trend in scholarly treatments of the book has been a move away from simply

¹ E.g. James Nogalski, *Literary Precursors to the Book of the Twelve*, Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft (BZAW), vol. 217, ed. Otto Kaiser (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1993).

² E.g. Paul R. House, *The Unity of the Twelve*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series, vol. 97, ed. D.J.A. Clines & P.R. Davies et al (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1990). House titles the Haggai-Zechariah-Malachi corpus "Hope for Restoration." Note that he discusses this corpus as part of his larger work on the Book of the Twelve, which demonstrates how these various investigations usually overlap.

³ E.g. David L. Petersen, *Zechariah 9-14 and Malachi*, Old Testament Library, ed. J.L. Mays et al (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), esp. 1-3. Petersen divides his commentary into "The First 'Oracle,'" "The Second 'Oracle,'" and "The Third 'Oracle.'"

investigating “Malachi” towards understanding its relationship with and contribution to larger units and collections in the Hebrew Bible.

Although all three of the above perspectives have merit and have proven fruitful and thought-provoking in biblical studies, Old Testament scholarship must not abandon the study of Malachi as an individual, cohesive, and coherent book. Its message is simply too important, its theology too relevant. Moreover, one merely has to scan the commentaries, special studies, and articles on the book to see that many interpretive issues lack consensus. One such issue is Malachi’s rhetorical strategy. By rhetorical strategy I am referring to both the intent of the book and its organization around that intent. In other words, what is the purpose of Malachi? How does its structure accomplish its purpose?

The following is a rhetorical investigation of Mal 1:1-2:17. The goal of this study is not to provide a thorough exegesis of each pericope comprising these verses, but rather to shed light on their larger organization and rhetorical strategy. Malachi displays purposeful organization and an intentional strategy aimed at moving God’s people toward an actualization of God’s ethical demands, as well as their greater mission to reach the world. Mal 1:1-5 establishes the priority of covenant faithfulness as a driving force in the book. Mal 1:6-2:17 displays how a breakdown in ethics (i.e. covenant unfaithfulness) renders the people of God incapable of carrying out their task of missions. Finally, Malachi’s marriage of ethics and missions has drastic implications for God’s people today.

Malachi 1:5 – *Above or Beyond?*

Interpreters tend to agree that Mal 1:1-5 establishes a covenantal theme for the entire book.⁴ Verse 1 serves as a superscription, or title, while verses 2-5 give the first of several disputations in Malachi. Here YHWH states His love for Israel only to have His people dispute that claim. In turn, YHWH reminds His post-exilic people that He has both hated and desolated Edom (*Esau* in the text), Israel’s longtime antagonist to the southeast, and will never allow Edom to rebuild. In other words, the very fact that Israel has returned from exile and rebuilt anything serves as hard evidence that God has been and remains faithful to His covenant and to Israel, a sort of exhibit A in this disputation.

⁴ For a lucid discussion of Malachi and covenant see S.L. McKenzie and H.N. Wallace, “Covenant Themes in Malachi,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 45.4 (Oct., 1983), esp. 555-57 on 1:1-5. For a thorough and technical discussion see Andrew Hill, *Malachi*, The Anchor Bible, vol. 25D, ed. W.F. Albright and D.N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 41-45, 145-170.

While scholars tend to agree that there are covenantal undertones in Mal 1:1-5, some disagreement comes concerning Mal 1:5, which reads: “And your eyes will see and you will say, ‘May YHWH be honored *above* the territory of Israel.’”⁵ I emphasize the word *above* for a reason – the vast majority of translations render the Hebrew form מַעַל as *beyond* or something similar.⁶ Commentators tend to do likewise.⁷ This translation choice looks ahead in Malachi to YHWH’s concern for being worshiped among the Gentiles, in *every place*, and among the nations (1:11, 14) and recalls other prophetic passages which envision the nations recognizing the rule of YHWH (e.g. Isaiah 2:1-4).

Still, *beyond* is not the best translation of מַעַל in Mal 1:5. The form is a combination of two prepositions, מִן (from, out of) and עַל (over, concerning, unto), occurs quite often in the Hebrew Bible, and can have the sense of *away from* or *out from*, especially when something or someone is departing.⁸ It also, however, quite frequently means *above* or *over* in the spatial sense,⁹ particularly in texts discussing the proximity of one object to another. Moreover, Verhoef has demonstrated that when מַעַל is followed by the preposition לְ (as in 1:5), it nearly always means *above/over*.¹⁰ Thus in Gen. 1:7 God separates the waters below the expanse from the ones *above* it; in 1 Sam. 17:39 David girds his sword *over* his armor; and, in Jon. 4:6 the plant grows up *over/above* Jonah and is able to provide shade.¹¹

⁵ All translations are the author’s own unless indicated otherwise.

⁶ E.g. RSV, NASB, HCSB, NKJV, NEB, etc. Also, note the KJV’s precedent, *from the border of Israel*, which undoubtedly has influenced more contemporary translations.

⁷ E.g. Petersen, 167, 173; Ralph Smith, *Micah-Malachi*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 32, ed. D.A. Hubbard et. al. (Waco: Word, 1984), 304-06; and recently E.R. Clendenen, *Malachi*, New American Commentary, vol. 21A, ed. E.R. Clendenen et al (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2004), 258-59.

⁸ E.g. Gen. 13:11, Exod. 40:36.

⁹ See *HALOT*, s.v. עַל II.8, as well as *BDB*, s.v. עַל IV.2.e. מַעַל לְ, which interestingly suggests *over* or *above* for the occurrence in Mal 1:5.

¹⁰ Peter Verhoef, *The Books of Haggai and Malachi*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament, ed. R.K. Harrison (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 194, 206. Verhoef accordingly translates מַעַל as “above,” as does Hill, *Malachi*, 145, 161-62.

¹¹ See also Gen. 7:17, Ezek. 1:25, Neh. 12:31, 37, 2 Chr. 13:4. Verhoef rightly gives 2 Chr. 24:20 and 26:19 as “possible” exceptions (p. 206). A quick look at the uses of מַעַל, even without a following לְ, will show how regularly the form means “above/over.”

Mal 1:5 clearly uses the term in the same spatial sense as it describes exactly where YHWH will be honored in proximity to Israel's territory.¹² Also, and perhaps most convincing, the Septuagint translates מַעַל in 1:5 with the Greek word ὑπεράνω, meaning over or above.¹³ The external evidence clearly suggests that Mal 1:5 reads, "And your eyes will see and you will say, 'May YHWH be honored *above* the territory of Israel.'" So, after YHWH uses the example of Edom's destruction to demonstrate that He has indeed loved Israel, 1:5 looks forward to a time when His people will recognize it (*see* in the text) and realize that they must honor their God above their own borders.

The question remains, however, whether or not context supports translating מַעַל as above in Mal 1:5. As mentioned earlier, in the book of Malachi YHWH does indeed look to a time when He will be worshiped in every place among the nations (1:11, 14), and translating מַעַל as beyond in 1:5 is indeed an attractive option for evangelicals with a missionary impulse. As I will demonstrate, however, using above in 1:5 in no way robs Malachi of its message for missions. To the contrary, it expands that message as it intertwines this task of missions with YHWH's ethical demands.

Rhetorical Strategy in Malachi 1:1-2:17

As mentioned from the outset, Mal 1:1-5 establishes a covenant theme for the entire book. YHWH has shown and will continue to show covenant faithfulness towards His people; put otherwise, He will continue to *love* them (1:2). Although Israel questions God's love and covenantal fidelity, the people will take notice of Edom's destruction and call for the honoring of YHWH above the territory of Israel (1:5). However, the next unit of Malachi – 1:6-2:16 – contains three sections giving undisputable proof that Israel is in fact dishonoring YHWH *above* its territory. The following overview will briefly demonstrate this rhetorical strategy in Malachi while leaving more technical elements to the finer commentaries.¹⁴

First, 1:6-14 displays that the priests are dishonoring God in worship. Unlike a son who knows to honor his father, or a servant who knows to

¹² The word for "territory" is גְּבוּל, sometimes translated "border" but with the same sense.

¹³ Interestingly Clendenen notes this fact but still renders מַעַל as "beyond." Clendenen, *Malachi*, 259, footnote 70.

¹⁴ Hill, *Malachi*, is an essential tool, unquestionably the most thorough and informed resource in English dealing specifically with Malachi.

do the same for his master, the priests of Israel *despise* YHWH's name by offering defiled and inadequate sacrifices (1:6-8). As a result, their entreaties and their worship are in danger of being rejected (1:9-10). This rejection runs contrary to God's plan to have His name great among the nations, who will some day honor and fear His name in every place (1:11, 14). God's people are profaning worship and complaining about it (1:12-13), which occasions a curse from YHWH.¹⁵ Thus Mal 1:6-14 gives undisputable proof that Israel is dishonoring YHWH above the territory of Israel.

Next, 2:1-9¹⁶ discusses covenantal punishments for the priests and elaborates on their unfaithfulness. God will curse the priests (2:2) and humiliate them with their own pathetic offerings (2:3). The very language of curses and blessings in this passage has everything to do with the concept of covenant, with rewards (i.e. blessings) for covenant faithfulness and punishments (i.e. curses) for covenant unfaithfulness.¹⁷ The passage continues by contrasting the priests in Malachi's day with the ideals of the Levitical covenant: they fail to reverence YHWH, speak truth, instruct the people, walk with God, or serve as capable messengers of the Divine (2:4-7).¹⁸ In fact, the priests were so unfaithful they were

¹⁵ The use of "curse" (Heb. אָרַר) in this verse connotes the warnings and punishments an Ancient Near Eastern suzerain would mete out to his vassals, in this case YHWH unto Israel. The relationship between a suzerain and a vassal (i.e. a larger, powerful empire and a smaller, dependent city or nation, respectively) was a covenant one, reinforcing the claim here that Israel, as a vassal of YHWH, is failing to honor Him above its own borders. See Robert P. Gordon, "אָרַר," *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, vol. 1, ed. W.A. VanGemeren et al (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 524-26.

¹⁶ Although I am taking 1:6-14 and 2:1-9 as two distinct sections against the priests, the reader should be aware that many interpreters take 1:6-2:9 as one section, e.g. R. Smith, *Micah-Malachi*, who accordingly calls 1:6-2:9 "the longest section in the book of Malachi" (p. 310). This organizational issue is minor and does not really affect interpretation. It is either one long section against the priests or two distinct ones. I personally see it as the latter. See also James Nogalski, *Redactional Processes in the Book of the Twelve*, Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft, vol. 218, ed. Otto Kaiser (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1993), 182-86.

¹⁷ See McKenzie and Wallace, 557-60, and Verhoef, 236-54.

¹⁸ Although some theorize that "priests" and "Levites" are labels for different groups in Malachi's day, O'Brien convincingly argues against finding support for such a theory in the text of Malachi. See Julia M. O'Brien, *Priest and Levite in Malachi*, SBL Dissertation Series, vol. 121, ed. D.L. Petersen (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), esp. 47-48.

actually managing to lead others away from YHWH, functioning as the very antithesis to what priests of God should be (2:8-9), as well as the antithesis of what God meant Israel to be. Thus Mal 2:1-9 gives undisputable proof that Israel is dishonoring YHWH above the territory of Israel.

Finally, 2:10-16 displays how all the people of Israel (not just the priests) characteristically lack faithfulness. They *break faith*¹⁹ with one another and, collectively, with YHWH (2:10-11). Because of blatant unfaithfulness, especially in worship, YHWH threatens to cut them off from Jacob (i.e. Israel) and disregard their offerings and emotional pleas (2:12-13). As further evidence of Israel's general, characteristic unfaithfulness, YHWH presents the fact that the men even break faith with their wives (2:14-16).²⁰ In short, Mal 2:10-16 gives undisputable proof that Israel is dishonoring YHWH "above the territory of Israel."

Mal 2:17²¹ completes the first part of the book (1:1-2:17) with a final estimation of Israel in light of the evidence given in 1:6-2:16: their very words weary YHWH. Israel is failing to honor God over its own territory (1:5) and apparently lacks the spiritual discernment to recognize its spiritual shortcomings. The people are so unfaithful that they accuse YHWH of delighting in evildoers while questioning His justice. Malachi 1:1-2:17 exhibits the evidence and makes the verdict clear: God has been faithful, yet Israel has not. The conduct of His people was dishonoring God's name.

This covenant unfaithfulness has everything to do with ethics, or the lack thereof. What Malachi 1:1-2:17 presents is a complete ethical

¹⁹ "Break faith" or "deal unfaithfully" is, in context, a better translation of בָּגַד than the typical "deal/act treacherously" (as in NASB, HCSB, NKJV, etc.). Although the meaning might be similar, I follow Hill, Smith, and Verhoef in retaining the language of faithfulness/unfaithfulness in continuity with the overall literary context.

²⁰ Baldwin rightly acknowledges the linguistic and conceptual difficulty of these verses. The best that interpreters can do with these verses on divorce is simply regard them as more proof that Israel is characteristically unfaithful in its dealings, even one person with another (going back to 2:10). See J. Baldwin, *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, ed. D.J. Wiseman (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1972), 239-41.

²¹ Although the vast majority of commentators take 2:17 as the beginning of the second major division of Malachi (thus 2:17-4:6), I regard it as a bridge verse which ends the first division and begins the second one (thus 1:1-2:17 AND 2:17-4:6). In this respect I agree with Clendenen who, although clearly in the minority, treats 2:17 as a distinct section which answers the previous section and prepares the reader for the next section. See Clendenen, *Malachi*, 370-72, 382.

breakdown in Israel from top to bottom. Here I am referring to the addressees within the basic organization of the text. God first addresses the nation of Israel in 1:1-5. Each of the next three sections within 1:6-2:16 essentially evaluates conduct. Mal 1:6-14 ends with a cursing of the priests for being swindlers and breakers of vows. Also, 2:1-9 ends with the priests as corrupters who show partiality. Finally, 2:10-16 deals with the faithlessness of the common person and concludes with a warning for anyone who “covers his garment with wrong/violence.” The nation, the priests, and the common people display a thorough, top to bottom, national, cultic, and individual breakdown of ethics. Truly the Israel of Malachi’s day was incapable of honoring YHWH above its own borders and within its own territory.

Malachi’s rhetorical strategy is to look forward to a time when Israel will realize it must honor YHWH *above* its own borders (1:5), offer three sections of proof that Israel in the present is failing to accomplish this purpose (1:6-14), and then supply a final evaluation of Israel (2:17). Unfortunately the predicament does not end here. The purpose of God’s people in the world is not simply to walk virtuously amongst themselves within their own territory. Living ethically and morally upright has a further purpose; but, an ethical failure like Israel’s in the book of Malachi runs contrary to that purpose.

From Above to Beyond: The Marriage of Ethics & Missions

So, Malachi 1:1-5 sets the tone for the entire book: “And your eyes will see and you will say, ‘May YHWH be honored *above* the territory of Israel.’” As the book proceeds to demonstrate how Israel is most certainly not honoring YHWH above its own borders, the very next section hints at a greater purpose than simply walking upright. Mal 1:6-14, a section dealing with ethical failures of the priests in worship, strategically provides two statements which clearly go beyond the mere scope of Israel’s borders.

The first is Mal 1:11, where YHWH says, “Indeed, from the rising of the sun even to its setting, My name will be great among the nations; and, in every place incense will be offered to My name, as well as a pure grain offering. For my name will be great among the nations’ says YHWH of Hosts.” The context is telling here. In the previous verse (1:10) YHWH, in response to the priests’ failings, calls for an immediate halt of Israel’s worship, and the following verse (1:12) gives a clear explanation: “But you are profaning it.”

Mal 1:11, couched in between these verses, informs the reader of what is ultimately at stake – the knowledge of Israel’s God among the nations! The phrase “from the rising of the sun even to its setting” (i.e. from east to west) continues the spatial dimension of Malachi’s conceptual framework begun in 1:5, obviously expanding it beyond Israel. Moreover, the anticipation of international offerings in every place further condemns the priests’ pathetic ones at the temple in Jerusalem. In short, Israel’s failure to honor God in covenant faithfulness at home endangers its wider mission to reach the world. So, Mal 1:5 calls for honoring YHWH *above* Israel, but 1:11 stretches that scope and reveals a further purpose of Israel’s faithfulness – honoring YHWH *beyond* Israel.

The other verse is Mal 1:14, where YHWH says, “‘Cursed is the deceiver who has in his flock a male, and even vows it, but sacrifices a blemished one to the Lord; for I am a great king’ says YHWH of Hosts, ‘and My name will be feared among the nations.’” The previous two verses (1:12-13) emphatically characterize Israel as profaning and scorning sacrificial worship. Mal 1:14 closes the section and demonstrates the overall point of this study by simultaneously condemning Israel’s ethical conduct in worship while looking *beyond* the borders of Israel to the fear of the Great King YHWH among the nations. Again, Mal 1:5 calls for honoring YHWH above Israel, but 1:14 (like 1:11) stretches that scope and reveals a further purpose of Israel’s faithfulness – honoring YHWH beyond Israel.²²

Although the conduct of God’s people in the post-exilic, insignificant Persian province of Yehud²³ may have seemed inconsequential on the international scale, it certainly had larger ramifications than the people realized. As the prophet indicated, God had abandoned neither His people nor His covenants, although His people in fact were unfaithful to Him. God’s covenant with Abraham looked forward to a time when all the families of the earth might be blessed, and His covenant with a

²² A few interpreters have suggested a sort of universalistic or syncretistic meaning of 1:11 and 1:14, meaning they see the verses referring to legitimate worshippers of YHWH in the pagan religions of other nations in Malachi’s day. Sane exegesis, however, recognizes that the Hebrew Bible is full of references to Israel’s role to reach the other nations with the knowledge of the true God, YHWH. See Smith, *Micah-Malachi*, esp. 313 for summary of various interpretive positions.

²³ I.e. the name of the Persian, post-exilic community in central Palestine which was much smaller and more insignificant than the Israel which existed before the Babylonian invasion and exile; see Hill, 51-76 for a detailed introduction to historical situation of Malachi.

fledgling Israel anticipated the nation's unique role as a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation" in the world – a world of which YHWH claims, "all the earth is Mine."²⁴

In Malachi's day the prophet had to remind the people of their multifaceted calling to both be holy and to reach the world with the knowledge of God. In other words, the book of Malachi endeavors to refocus the people of God above and beyond, concerning both their ethical conduct at home and the worldwide scope of their mission, "from the rising of the sun, even to its setting."²⁵ This duality in focus further demonstrates the necessity of correctly translating מַעַל as above in Mal 1:5. The next unit – Mal 1:6-2:16 – hinges on the above concept and, via 1:11 and 1:14, expands its implications to beyond.

The remaining material in Malachi (3:1-4:6) is beyond the scope of this discussion, but a word concerning 3:1-4 is appropriate. In these verses we see that, ultimately, ancient Israel would never be ethically whole or completely pure in its worship, and thus never fully capable of drawing the nations to the Holy One. But we also see that, ultimately, God will address that dilemma too. He will intervene. God will send His special messenger to clear the way, and God Himself will come and purify His people. Only then could the people of God be whole.

Conclusion: Going Above AND Beyond

This rhetorical analysis of Mal. 1:1-2:17 demonstrates that the text intertwines the ethics of God's people with their missionary task of reaching the nations with the knowledge of God. By taking מַעַל in 1:5 as *above* (contra the usual *beyond*), we see that the organization of the following verses (1:6-2:17) demonstrates that Israel was most certainly not honoring God above its own borders. This breakdown of ethics and covenant unfaithfulness ran contrary to Israel's calling to be holy and to reach the nations with the knowledge of God, for YHWH is in fact the Great King of the entire world. Mal. 1:1-2:17 calls God's people to live faithfully to Him in two spheres – both above AND beyond.

The prophet's timeless message cuts like a razor for North American churches today. In our quest to be relevant, up-to-date, attractive, and effective in reaching the larger culture, churches must be careful. As new

²⁴ See Gen. 12:1-4 and Exod. 19:1-6.

²⁵ Although he does not emphasize מַעַל as I have in this study or translate it as "above," I appreciate Froese's conclusion: "Malachi's theological underpinning, concerning Yahweh's revelation to the world, is the obedience of his people, whom he never forgets." See Brian Froese, "Approaching a Theology of the Book of Malachi," *Direction* 25.1 (Spring, 1996), 14-20.

church paradigms emerge, we must withstand temptations to leave high ethical standards on the ash heap of yesterday's traditions. One difficulty will continue to be sorting out legalism from ethics, or deciding what really matters and what does not. This task will be painful, and perhaps quite a long one, but God's people do not have the luxury of abandoning the challenge and sacrificing biblical ethics on the altar of relevancy simply for the sake of convenience. The things of God are not convenient.

But also, and as noted above, the purpose of God's people in the world is not simply to walk virtuously amongst each other. The church has a beyond dimension: taking the message of the one true God to the world. Churches will face tough questions and hard decisions, as they always have. Will they talk to the ones beyond the church about felt cultural needs such as wellness, entertainment, success, etc. at the expense of informing them about the gracious God who sent Christ to redeem the lost? What will churches do if the message of God fails to garner a sizable hearing? Or perhaps, when the last embers of Christian ethics lose their spark and turn to ash, will we make room on the altar of relevancy for our witness to God as well?