

PROPHETIC CRITICISM OF TEMPLE RITUALS: A REFLECTION ON MALACHI'S IDEA ABOUT YAHWEH AND ETHICS FOR FAITH COMMUNITIES

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Abstract

This article presents some perspectives about Yahweh and ethics from Malachi's criticism of the rituals of the temple. Malachi's theological and ethical uniqueness is observed somehow most clearly in the preponderance of negative emphasis the prophetic book places on temple rituals and the way the language of the cult dominates its analysis of malpractices. Prophetic criticism of temple rituals, as this article demonstrates, lies at the heart of the controversy between the prophets and the priest; namely the role of cult and ethics in the religion of Ancient Israel. While scholars have yet to explain fully the phenomenon of criticism of the cult in prophetic writings, this article brings the prophets and the priests closer by proposing that the one way to explain the discrepancy is to advocate that these prophets could not see the importance of rituals for the improvement of ethical life. If the cult is understood to be the vertical dimension of the Law and ethics its horizontal dimension, one would notice that these dimensions go together, both are expressions of God's will. When the vertical dimension (worship, offering, sacrifice) is experiencing some degree of dysfunction, the horizontal dimension (social justice, etc.) will be affected. Malachi's emphasis on the temple obviously helps one to see that there was nothing wrong with the cult unless it was not used appropriately and effectively to enhance the ethical life of the people as an essential component of the larger framework of the covenant relationship that Yahweh had with them as his people. The article thus emphasizes some underlying theological reflection on the uniqueness of Malachi's oracles about Yahweh and ethics for faith communities.

Key Words: Temple Rituals; Prophetic Criticism; Cult; Ethics; Malachi;
Faith Community

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Introduction

Malachi² is considered to be one of the windows through which an adequate survey can be attained of the religious and social needs of Yahweh's³ people in Judah and Jerusalem during the early fifth century BCE (Dempsey 2000:139). The book appears as the closing section of the Hebrew Bible Book of the Twelve and the last Old Testament book in the English Bible (Rendtorff 1993:57-65; Blenkinsopp 1996:209; O'Brien 2004:315; Coggins & Hans 2011:199-200; Watts 2000:209; LeCureux 2012:207,226). This has made a number of scholars consider the book to be substantially a literary unit (Schart 2000:45; Fuller 2012:372; Snyman 2012:2; LeCureux 2012:222). It conveys Yahweh's word first to Yehudites living in the Second Temple Period and beyond them to all believers in all times. It deals with issues of declining faith, disrespect or even contempt for Yahweh, empty religious rituals, self-seeking betrayal of marital vows and of the rights and needs of others, greed, injustice and materialism. Both priests and people had fallen away and need the message of Malachi to call them back to repentance.

Having returned to the land of their fathers after the tragedy that befell them and the difficulties they experienced in the land of bondage, with hearts yearning for the fulfilment of earlier prophetic visions of the establishment of Yahweh's new kingdom, the reconstruction of the temple wherein Yahweh will once again make himself manifest to them, and in addition, the assurance that they have been delivered from the shameful and reprehensible servitude of the adversaries of Yahweh – and thereafter, not to witness any of these anticipations – was no doubt devastating. The resultant implication was a watershed for the faith of the Yehudites. The situation opened up a crisis of faith for them and also endangered the reputation of Yahweh. It cast misgivings and uncertainty on the reliability and authenticity of Yahweh's words and promises as well as His capacity to sustain them (Block 2006:36; Bramer 2011:158-59). In an earlier article (Boloje & Groenewald 2013:376-408), the misdemeanour of the priests and people in Malachi's era were highlighted. Malachi criticised the priests who had violated their covenant relationship with Yahweh by despising his name and defying his altar. The book dealt extensively on the function and purpose of the priests and Levites:

Priests were saddled with the responsibility of guarding the entire cultic life of the people. Thus, the principal way they despised and defiled Yahweh day after day was through deficient and unacceptable offerings (1:6-2:3). On the other hand, the teaching aspect is considered to have been an integral part of the priestly office. Malachi accuses the priests of causing many to falter by their pedagogical functions and or obligations to Yahweh (2:8) and by implication, the people of Yahweh were led astray for lack of the knowledge of God. Their failure was indeed the ground for the humiliating judgement

² In this article, reference to Malachi always implies the book. In some cases, reference is made to the 'authors' of the book as well as its redactors, in the light of the final stage or form of the book of Malachi as part of the Christian canon. See Boloje's (2014:120f) thesis Chapter Three for details of authorship and date of composition of the book of Malachi. Cf. also Jeremias (2013:93-117) who discusses the problem of 'written prophecy'. He addresses *inter alia* questions regarding the intention behind the production of prophetic books in the HB, the origin of written texts, the origin of prophetic books, the appearance of genuine written prophecy without any oral basis. These are all regarded as stages in the continuous growth in the authority of prophetic books and messages.

³ We will also make use of the name Yahweh in a similar manner as Barton (2014:vii) states: "After some thought, I have freely used the name 'Yahweh' for the God/god worshipped in ancient Israel ... I think it better to write the name straightforwardly in the form it is generally thought to have taken in the time before its pronunciation became taboo..."

pronounced on them by Yahweh in the inspired words of Malachi 1:6-2:9 (Boloje & Groenewald 2013:376).

The purpose of this article therefore is to present a highlight on the intricacies of the prophets' criticism of the rituals of the temple as observed from both pre-exilic and post-exilic prophetic writings. This article demonstrates that prophetic criticisms of temple rituals, namely the role of cult and ethics in the religion of Ancient Israel,⁴ lay at the heart of the controversy between the prophets and the priests. It shall then conclude with some underlying perspectives about Yahweh and ethics from Malachi's criticism of the rituals of the temple for faith communities.

Prophetic Criticism of the Rituals of the Temple

The following discussion focuses very briefly on the criticism of the rituals of the temple from a literary and textual perspective. The aim is simply to demonstrate an understanding of the idea of the temple as expressed by the prophets/prophetic books. Such understanding is necessary in the light of the prophetic criticism of the rituals of the temple in the book of Malachi. With respect to such criticism it is observed that from both pre-exilic and post-exilic prophetic writings on this subject, the evidence leans toward two opposite directions (Barton 2007:111). Heaton (1977:64) notes that this debate is unlikely to reach an end because of the lack of substantial evidence. With the exclusion of Micah who speaks clearly against offerings for sin and not to general religious ritual observances concerned with sacrifices following feasts and celebrations (Barton 2007:119), the prophetic writings attributed to the pre-exilic prophets particularly of the eighth and seventh centuries are presented as being very critical and hostile of the cultic religious practices of the temple, especially the sacrificial services in it. On the other hand, some post-exilic prophetic writings record prophetic approval of the sacrificial cult, yet sometimes with condemnation of its existing forms (Barton 2007:111-112). In the following paragraphs, the article shall present a few observations from the biblical text and then reflect the views of scholars on the prophetic criticism of rituals of the temple. The attempt here is to consider briefly what comprises the prophetic criticism. The texts that are cited frequently are those in which the prophets oppose the cultic and ritual practices of their contemporaries. They are treated mostly as an indictment of established principles, an analysis of why these kinds of ritual act and specific cultic circumstances are dishonest. In their appeal to principles that are usually described as one's 'personal' relationship with God or the 'moral' or 'ethical' dimensions of religion, the prophets can be seen as casting doubts on the whole cultic enterprise.

⁴ With regard to the choice of the term 'Ancient Israel' Barton (2014:4) remarks as follows: "I am concerned with the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament not as the Scriptures of Judaism or Christianity, but as evidence for the thinking of ancient Israelites and Jews... Ancient Israel's 'moral philosophy' will turn out to be highly theological, though far less simply so than in the popular imagination". He continues: "In calling this book *Ethics in Ancient Israel*, I am deliberately avoiding the more customary title for such works, *The Ethics of the Old Testament*... In practice, however, the main source by far for ethical thinking in ancient Israel remains the text of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, including the deuterocanonical/apocryphal books" (Barton 2014:14).

Amos⁵ for example, ridicules the sacrificial cult at Bethel and Gilgal by ironically asking the people to pile up their sacrifices: “Enter Bethel and transgress; in Gilgal multiply transgression! Bring your sacrifices every morning, your tithes every three days. Offer a thank offering also from that which is leavened, and proclaim free will offerings, make them known...” (4:4-5). Later on in another paradigmatic text, one sees him denouncing the festivals: “I hate, I reject your festivals, nor do I delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer up to me burnt offerings and your grain offerings, I will not accept them; and I will not even look at the peace offerings of your fatlings. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not even listen to the sound of your harps” (5:21-23).⁶ An upshot of this cultic expression is found in Hosea, who criticises mainly what he considers to be a highly Baalized cult (Barton 2007:111), “For I delight in loyalty rather than sacrifice, and in the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings” (6:6). In Micah, the prophet opposed to sacrifice, presents a proposal for accommodation between Yahweh and Israel, the groups that were having discrepancies at the opening of the chapter. When tried, judgment is issued against Israel; they are condemned of injustice and ungratefulness towards Yahweh. The guilt of their crime is too clear to be denied, too great to be discharged, and thus, they express their plea to be at peace with Yahweh: “With what shall I come to the LORD and bow myself before the God on high? Shall I come to Him with burnt offerings, with yearling calves? . . . Shall I present my first-born for my rebellious acts, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, And to walk humbly with your God?” (6:6-8).

Isaiah announces the same message of dislike of their festivals and sacrifices in his first chapter (1:11-14), and in Jeremiah, the prophet’s message assumes a disapproving viewpoint with respect to the temple. He is recorded as being drastically opposed to some aspects of the sacrificial cult, maintaining that it did not form any part of Yahweh’s worship (Barton 2007:112). As noted by the author of the text, God asks derisively through the prophet, “For what purpose does frankincense come to me from Sheba, and the sweet cane from a distant land? Your burnt offerings are not acceptable, and your sacrifices are not pleasing to me” (Jer. 6:20). He criticises all who hold wrong and distorted perspectives about the temple: “Do not trust in deceptive words, saying, ‘This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD’” (Jer. 7:4), and calls their attention to the fortune of Shiloh’s sanctuary (Jer. 7:12). However, the prophet’s attack is not directed at the temple as an institution but at those with misleading perspectives and a deceitful cultic attitude (Ahn 2011:78).

In his theological assessment of the cult as the place and activity of public worship, Brueggemann (1997:650) notes that the cult plays an essential role in the faith and life of the ancient Israelite community. Old Testament scholarship must therefore reckon with the fact that the community which creates testimonies about Yahweh is, in principle and in

⁵ According to Barton (2012:52) Amos was Israel’s first theologian: “As far as we know, no one before him had subjected the religious beliefs and practices of people in Israel to critical scrutiny. His message was delivered in short, pithy sayings, but they were soon collected into larger complexes”.

⁶ Cf. also in this regard Barton (2012:66-67): “Amos apparently disapproved of the sacrificial cult, but it is evident that the people he was speaking to took it for granted that sacrifice was pleasing to YHWH. The impression his prophecy leaves us with is that they did not think YHWH was interested in anything else... Certainly, at the national level, the prosperity of the nation depended on continuing to enjoy the favour of the gods, and for that, the national institutions, primarily the temples and shrines, need to keep up a steady supply of sacrifices... Here, Amos’s message was extremely radical”.

practice, a worshipping community. He contends that in worship Israel deals with the person, character, will, purpose and presence of Yahweh in a much regularised, stylised way rather than by history as much modern Old Testament scholarship contends. The textual traditions about Israel's worship are rich and varied. These texts seek to articulate and make accessible real presence. More importantly, the concrete practice of 'rituals and sacraments' fashioned Israel as a community intensely and definitely related to Yahweh. He rejects the general Christian conception of Old Testament theology derived from classical Protestantism with its profound aversion to cult, regarding cultic actions as archaic, magical and manipulative and thus finding value only in the Old Testament's prophetic-ethical traditions (Brueggemann 1997:651).

In the ritual criticism of the prophets, Brueggemann points out that the cult does become a place of self-indulgence and satiation. He maintains that the prophets were concerned with the gross abuses in the cult and would not have entertained the notion of abolishing the cult. The cult in these prophetic polemics should be a witness to and embodiment of the practice of communion with Yahweh – in his true character as sovereign and merciful. So he concludes that beyond its instrumental use as a necessary support for ethical intentions, the cult provides a place in which Israel might be in the presence of Yahweh, the Holy One, and thus no evidence that the prophets opposed public worship itself, as long as that worship focused on the peculiarity of Yahweh, the true God of Israel (Brueggemann 1997:678). What is very special to Brueggemann's assessment is his identification of Israel's cult as a direct witness, or testimony about one who is behaving in an ethical manner.

In his explanation on the pre-exilic prophets who are opposed to sacrifice, Barton (2007:119) notes that only Micah, speaks against the sin-offering in Mic. 6:6, "With what shall I come to the LORD and bow myself before the God on high? Shall I come to Him with burnt offerings, with yearling calves?". The other pre-exilic prophets seem more interested in sacrifices following feasts and other celebrations:

...overwhelmingly concerned with the kind of sacrifice which accompanies feasting, probably the *s^lamîm* type, offered with rejoicing and thanksgiving in mind ... that could mean that at least some of the anti-sacrifice polemic in, say Amos and Isaiah, is linked to their disapproval of feasting and self-indulgence, rather than to questions of what for us would be strictly questions of religious ritual observance (Barton 2007:119).

As Barton proceeds, he addresses the argument of scholars who deny the sustainability of the rituals in ancient Israel and who promote the idea of religion which has at its heart rather right social interaction than mere observance of ritual stipulation (Barton 2007:116-121). Barton, however, does not explain the post-exilic prophetic statements in favour of the cult, which are far more than the statements against the cult from pre-exilic prophets. While he also fails to address further the question of how far the prophets opposed the cultic rituals considered it improper for those who were engrossed in such activities which to them were sinful, such as oppression of the poor and perversion of justice, he notes that the majority of prophetic criticism of the cult does appear to concern the offering of sacrifices or the habit of fasting by those who have compromised themselves morally (as in the case of Isa. 58). To him, "The way to please Yahweh, the prophets urge, or the way to be forgiven for one's sins, is to engage in moral reform. Until that is done, practicing cultic observances compounds the insult being offered to God" (Barton 2007:120).

Ben Zvi (2006:19-30) notes that as one turns to books explicitly set in the Persian period, one finds again a case of prophetic diatribe against priests who failed to perform

their duties (Mal. 2:1-3), but even this book is certainly not anti-priestly. On the contrary it reaffirms the importance of proper priests and the centrality of the temple. This reveals that the existence of a central temple requires the presence of faithful priests (Ben Zvi 2006:23). Klawans (2006:75-100) presents an excellent analysis of discussions on the modern study of prophetic criticism of the cult and concludes that the opposition of the prophets to sacrifice reflects the social and economic messages of the prophets themselves. In the prophetic criticism of cultic activities, Klawans advances that the prophets articulated their hostility to sacrifices and offerings, even though they did not intend to repudiate the legitimacy of cultic worship. He notes that the gifts presented for sacrifice by the people were unacceptable on the grounds that the offerings themselves (the material gifts), had been stolen. "Sacrificing a stolen animal is, at one and the same time, both ethically and ritually wrong" (Klawans 2006:98). He bases his argument on some prophetic statements concerning sacrifices that are in line with expressions of concern over the economic manipulation of the poor and needy, as seen in passages such as Amos 5:10-11 (cf. Amos 5:23, or Isa. 1:11-15). That the priests could accept stolen material gifts (even if they did not know it) for ritual purposes implies that they presumed rightful ownership on the part of those bringing the offerings (Klawans 2006:87-88). However, while Klawans does not offer reasons as to why the prophets of the eighth century would swiftly criticise temple ritual practices as well as explain the impact that individual prophetic criticism of sacrifice had on their respective audience, his perspective of the problem of rejection of sacrifices is a matter of urgent priority.

In his work, Zevit (2006:189-217) notes that the classical prophets of ancient Israel were individuals concerned primarily with Israel's ethical behaviour. Consequently, for them, adherence to the ethical stipulation of the covenant was deemed more important than the punctilious fulfilment of cultic minutiae. If this is true, as the consensus maintains, it is clear that they must have given some thought to priests, promoters of that which they felt impeded Israelites from fulfilling their ethical covenant obligations (Zevit 2006:189). In this vein, it is reasonable to infer that some prophets must have felt animus toward priests, and their hostility should be imprinted in the preserved literature (Zevit 2006:190). In her prophetic critique of the priority of the cult, Lafferty (2010:4) begins with a survey and critique of the cult in ancient Israel and establishes the place and significance of the cult particularly in pre-exilic Israel and Judah. Lafferty (2010:13) attempts to answer the question as to what role ethical language play plays in light of the prophets' rejection of ritual and then establishes that their background knowledge of wisdom ethics and of the cult enabled Amos and Isaiah to voice what Yahweh desires most of all as a matter of the people's attitude. These prophets' criticism of the cult does not judge the cultic actions, nor the goodness of the sacrifices offered, or the piety with which the prayers are offered. As an alternative, the prophets charge the people to perform suitable, viable, merciful and ethical attitudes toward one another. It is such ethical behaviour that helps to establish whether Yahweh accepts the cult or declares it outrageous.

Reflection on Malachi's Oracles about Yahweh and Ethics for Faith Communities

As a book dominated by the religious questions of appropriate temple worship and priestly malpractices, Malachi no doubt carefully conducted his criticism of the rituals of the temple by directing attention to certain highly unacceptable and inexcusable misdemeanours, namely disrespect for Yahweh, worthless cultic rituals, unfaithfulness to marital vows that

resulted in the malpractices of mixed marriages and divorce, and violation of the rights and needs of others, greed, injustice, and materialism. In the light of the fact that the main focus of the priests is on cult and ritual activities (cf. Barton 2007:111; Hrobon 2010:6), the prophetic criticism of the rituals of the temple is considered to be a rhetorical characteristic that compels attention to significance of their ethical conduct rather than mere refutation. It is in this regard that theological and ethical dimensions of Malachi's criticism of the rituals of the temple shall be considered. In this reflection, the biblical text is assumed to be the authoritative word for the church,⁷ and thus the fitting context within which one can do an ethical reading of the ecclesial community.⁸ To this end, ethics cannot be simply an academic activity that has to be isolated from the practical life of the church (Boloje & Groenewald 2014a:1). Since ethics and theology are indivisible in the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament (Wright 2006:17):

...the best way for one to appreciate OT ethics, as well as to make an adequate application of same is for one to attempt to identify with Israel's standpoint. Additionally, one needs to appreciate how they comprehended and lived out their affiliation with Yahweh, and how that perspective shaped their ethical standards as a community of faith and practice (Boloje & Groenewald 2014b:2).

As observed by Davies (1995:165) the Old Testament⁹ is not much of a resource for ethics in that it usually resorts to invoking obedience to commands (where ethical living amounts to obedience to the prescriptions), whether they are from a deity, a prophet or a parent. This is so because its literature reflects a system of communal rather than individual ethics. Davies focuses attention on the Garden of Eden narrative in Genesis 3, in which the woman's choice is between two propositions: whether or not to obey the divine command not to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge, to illuminate his point (Davies 1995:165-170). Although he calls into question whether the Bible can be normative for ethics in the light of such obedience to the prescriptions, he admits that it does provide a basis for ethical reflection (Davies 1995:165).

In her attempt to grapple with the role of the Hebrew Bible in contemporary Christian ethics, Arndt (2011:5) observes, "To remark that the Hebrew Bible is important for Christian ethics is both to state the obvious and to make a claim fraught with countless complications." While biblical scholarship and ethicists continue to grapple with how to articulate and overcome the complexities of accounting for the Hebrew Bible in Christian moral theology,¹⁰ this experience of reading and the concerns it creates must be accorded more importance in moral theology, if the Hebrew Bible is to be claimed as significant, and

⁷ In this article, the expressions 'church', 'faith community', 'ecclesia community', and 'Christian community' are used alternatively to refer to the community of baptised believers in Christ through all ages, a company which is distinct from the world by virtue of its calling from and separation unto God (Eph. 1:22; 3:10,21; 5:25-32) (see Boloje & Groenewald 2014a:1).

⁸ It is important though to bear the following statement by Barton (2014:94) in mind: "I shall not argue that ethics in ancient Israel was never seen as deriving from divine commands... But I shall try ... to present the evidence for an ethic based on a perception of moral order in the world, which, if it does derive from God, does so by way of God's character as creator rather than as a result of this (potentially arbitrary) command".

⁹ Davies (1995:164) uses this term 'Old Testament' because the reception history which influences this reading is a Christian one. The Hebrew text underlying his discussion is, however, the Masoretic Text, i.e. the (Jewish) *Tanakh*.

¹⁰ Arndt (2011:6-7) identifies a vast array of challenges and pitfalls facing contemporary Christian ethicists to include: the interdisciplinary hurdles of working with the Hebrew Bible itself, the challenges of relating to this sacred text in a pluralistic context and the problem of relating to an ancient and strange text as a twenty-first century person. She notes that the complexity of the problems requires that Christian ethicists collaborate more closely with biblical scholars and other critical disciplines (Arndt 2011:21).

at the same time authoritative for the ethical lives of those who hold it to be a sacred text and thus authoritative for present day Christian ethical scholarship (Arndt 2011:7). While stressing the significance of the Hebrew Bible as a crucial (re) source of Christian moral theology, Arndt (2011:7) notes:

While biblical reading certainly involves personal and communal engagement and interpretative moments, exegetical work that takes advantage of the contributions of biblical scholars, modern and postmodern, can and should make an important contribution to the ethical appropriation of these texts. But beyond this, Christians *as* Christians have a basic imperative to be attentive readers, re-readers, and re-tellers of the biblical story. The Christian ethicist must consider what it means to our moral lives to be this kind of reader.

In dealing with certain tendencies in contemporary ethical treatment the biblical texts, Arndt chooses the biblical account of the aborted sacrifice of Isaac by his father, Abraham (Gen. 22), and provides a particularly apt locus for contending with the challenges of Christian ethical interpretation of the Hebrew Bible, and for addressing methodological consideration (Arndt 2011:20). She demonstrates in her ethical reading of Genesis 22, how the power of even the most alarming and sometimes unpleasant and embarrassing Old Testament narratives communicate and impart basic ethical lessons for a contemporary Christian life. Her illustrative reading of this text helps to realise the significant and authentic role biblical texts play in one's ethical scholarship and in his or her moral life as the individual places himself or herself in relationship to such difficult, thought-provoking and imaginably, such indeterminable biblical texts.

Similarly, in his attempt to make Christians read the Old Testament and find in it ethical values, Sloane (2008:29) remarks that the best framework for understanding the Old Testament in Christian ethics is what Christopher Wright outlines in three key 'angles', as he refers to them: God, Israel and the Land, or the theological, social and economic angles. Old Testament ethics is considered to be always theological and God-centred in nature. In this regard, ethics is viewed as a response to God's grace, which stimulates, patterns and empowers the action of God's people. In addition the ethics of the Old Testament is addressed to Israel as a faith community and thus seeks to shape them as God's people. Israel is called to be a model of God's purpose to a watching world; they are "a 'paradigm' of God's purpose for human community as a whole" (Sloane 2008:30).

Israel is assumed and portrayed throughout the Hebrew Bible as an ethical community.¹¹ As such Israel's focus is understood in her relation to God. Since the existence of the canon implies that the story of Israel as an ethical community in relation to God is intended to play a crucial role in the modelling of successive generations of ethical communities in continuity with biblical communities themselves (Birch 1995:119), recent scholarship on biblical ethics has become more conscious of the biblical text as both proof for the establishment of an ethical community in Israel or the early church, but also as intended to model the ethical development of future generations of the communities of faith in relation to God (Birch 1995:124). Thus an understanding of Israel's ethics emanating from Israel's relationship to God, and encompassing character and conduct, leads to a broader set of

¹¹ The term 'Israel' connects diverse socio-political or organised forms, some historical, some framed by the canonical traditions (wilderness wanderers, tribal federation, nation, socio-cultural group, religious community). However, in all of the different traditions, these forms reflect that Israel is the community which serves as the galvanising force of ethical identity, the guardian of ethical tradition, the power point of ethical discussion and the provocateur of ethical deed (Birch 1995:119).

categories for understanding the source of Israel's moral norms, namely moral norms arising from knowing God, moral norms arising from imitating God and moral norms arising from obeying God. Attention to these dimensions of moral relationship between God and Israel is basic to a full understanding of the ways in which the Hebrew Bible plays its role as an ethical resource (Birch 1995:134-135).

One's reading of the text should be able to ask questions about its function theologically, socially, economically and relationally. This properly personal perspective ought to govern the individual and communal reading of the whole Bible, as a Christian canon. As one reads the Bible, he or she should be able to ask what its theological and relational message is. How does a particular text describe God's person, character, and actions, and what does that mean? How does it describe human beings, God's purposes and plans, human community and life, the consequences of human actions and so on, and what does that mean? One is expected to look for the theological and ethical function of the text. How would it have modelled its original recipients, their beliefs and behaviour and how then does one understand those purposes in the light of the larger picture of the story of God and the world (Sloane 2008:30-31)? Ethical ideals would no doubt begin with who Yahweh is and then proceed in relation to the individual. What does Malachi teach about God and human relation to him? The following section will synthesise Malachi's theological and ethical relevance of his ritual criticism for faith communities.

Malachi's Narrative in Relation to Yahweh

Since the ethical teachings of the Old Testament are at each given point associated with Yahweh, as his character, his will, his action and purpose (Boloje & Groenewald 2014a:1), the following observations are important in any contemporary theological reflection on Malachi's oracles about Yahweh.

Yahweh's Faithfulness to his Covenant

Yahweh's fidelity to the covenant is fundamental to the book. The continued existence of the relationship of Israel with Yahweh "depended totally on his faithfulness and loyalty to his own character and promises, not on their own success in keeping the law" (Wright 1983a:23). Within the entire covenant framework of the book, the fundamental issue is that of Israel's election – God has chosen Jacob (Schuller 1996:855-56). In demonstrating this principle, Malachi, at the outset, firmly follows the outlines of the ideal community in which he reduces the whole symbolic enterprise to matters of covenant and community relationships (Hill 1998:41). The affirmation of divine affection and fidelity to the Torah-abiding community is the first phrase: *'āhabhî ʾethkhem* ("I have loved you," Mal. 1:2). In this regard, "Malachi points to a historical event of the past, to God's choosing Jacob over Esau and to his consequent faithful treatment of Israel/Judah in spite of their wickedness contrasted with his just treatment of Edom for their wickedness" (Clendenen 2004:233).

The imagined audience of Malachi has endured more disappointment than encouragement, more dissension than unity. Thus, to respond to Israel's doubts about divine favour, Malachi points to Edom's destruction and by implication, Judah's survival (Stulman & Kim 2010:241). In the light of the fact that Israel's misfortunes had not been inadvertent nor ordinarily caused by men, this same fate can also be said about the destruction of Edom. Yahweh has placed a curse on Edom; an indefinite one for that matter, as an illustration of

his fair and objective government of the whole world (Mal. 1:4, 5). While they would be known and addressed as *g^ebhûl rish \bar{a} ^h* (“a territory of wickedness”) as a result of Yahweh’s fairness (Mal. 1:4), Israel on the other hand, would be known and addressed all over the world as *‘erets hēphets* (“a land of delight”) (Mal. 3:12). This is not based on any merit on their part, not because they had pleased Yahweh but simply because Yahweh has been faithful – “Because I, Yahweh, have not changed, you descendants of Jacob have not been destroyed” (Mal. 3:6) (Clendenen 2004:233). Malachi shows that Yahweh, in his goodness, justice, faithfulness and commitment to his people, has not changed; this is the reason why his people have not been destroyed (*lō’kh^elithem*).

Yahweh’s Sovereignty over History

In the light of deteriorating circumstances, Malachi clearly constructs a coherent apology for divine sovereignty (Yahweh’s uniqueness) and justice, which manifests itself in harsh allegations against both priests and people (Stulman & Kim 2010:243). The book of Malachi, familiar with earlier prophetic traditions, proclaims the theology of Yahweh alone as the sovereign of all creation, universalism, judgment, justice and punishment, covenant renewal and restoration of fortunes (cf. Exod. 3:14; 14:14; Zeph. 1:2-3,7, 14-18; 3:8) (Udoekpo 2010:275). The temple theology in Jerusalem was firmly connected to the theme of ethical norms and values, and had its origin in Yahweh as the divine king (Groenewald 2009:424). Yahweh, the liberating God of justice, is portrayed as the sovereign king. Faithful Israelites knew: “Your own eyes will see it and you will say, ‘Yahweh is great beyond the land of Israel’” (Mal. 1:5), “for my name *will be* great among the nations” (Mal. 1:11), and “for I am a great King, says the LORD of hosts, and my name is feared among the nations” (Mal. 1:14 NASB). Their God was universal in his sovereignty, and had proven it by eliminating for their good their most stubborn and persistent national enemy (Stuart 1998:1293).

However, in their bitter attitude toward Yahweh the community had lingering questions about divine favour and justice. In their opening question they asked: “How have you loved us?” (Mal. 1:2).¹² In their failure to recognize their own disobedience and corruption, they saw their current situation of socio-economic predicaments as indications of the unfaithfulness and unfairness of Yahweh to them. They earnestly anticipated the abundance of Yahweh’s blessings but on the contrary, they were reaping divine afflictions and scarcity. In Malachi, the various questions of the sceptic and disillusioned are not met with silence but rather elicit divine response. Absolutely at home in the prophetic tradition, Malachi speaks from the centre of that tradition “against those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow and the orphan” (Mal. 3:5).¹³ Yet the world of the priests and the temple and meticulous observance of cultic norms are treated with equal attention (Schuller 1996:861).

Malachi, in order to demonstrate Yahweh’s sovereignty over history, places the blame on their shoulders – priests and people. Yahweh was Israel’s *‘ābh* (Father) in that he

¹² In Malachi, these insensitive and disorderly people asked other similar questions: “How have you loved us?” (1:2), “How have we shown contempt for your name?” (1:6), “How have we defiled you?” (1:7), “How have we wearied you?” (2:17), “How are we to return?” (3:7), “How do we rob you?” (3:8) (Clendenen 2004:413).

¹³ With regard to Mal. 3:5 Barton (2014:233) remarks as follows: “Malachi 3:5, seldom mentioned in discussions of digests, seems close to this tradition, with much about the treatment of employees, though it also mentions the classic sins, false worship and adultery...”

brought them into existence, and as such has become their Master (Mal. 1:6; cf. Mal. 2:10). This was the ground upon which he required *kābhōdh* (honour) and *mōrā'* (fear) from them (1:6). The *kōhānīm* were accused of their failure to respond in this manner to the provisions and blessings of Yahweh at his *mizb'ē ḥī* (my altar) and *shūlḥan yhwē* (the table of Yahweh) (Mal. 1:7). Their failure to provide moral leadership and instructions to others truthfully and faithfully (Mal. 2:6-7) and to supervise and protect the integrity of Israel's worship, impugned the integrity of Yahweh and set the whole community in severe danger. They had no right whatsoever, to request for or expect Yahweh's favours because of their wrong treatment of Yahweh's blessings to them (Mal. 1:9). In reality, Yahweh declared that his delight in them was over; he threatened to do away with their sacrifices, for their continued rituals were altogether unserviceable (*ḥinnām*) (Clendenen 2004:234). Malachi specifies the terms of the judgment on the priests (*khōhānīm*); their persons, blessings and perhaps their offspring will be cursed (2:3). The reason for this punishment lies in the priests' attitude toward Yahweh and his service; their slackness and failure to give God the very best.

Malachi stresses Yahweh's control of history by stating that the Day of Yahweh will be a day of the Lord's covenant by which he establishes his sovereign Lordship over human beings, either by instituting the covenant or by enforcing the provisions of the covenant (Udoekpo 2010:276). He will "purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver" in order that they can offer "offerings to Yahweh in righteousness," and Judah's offerings would "please Yahweh as in days of old and years gone by" (Mal. 3:3-4). The promise of a future restoration which includes a covenantal messenger, a renewed temple and a community of reverence who will enjoy righteousness and healing, is another fundamental ethical aspect of Yahweh's sovereignty over history in Malachi. The Lord Almighty would come as the sovereign Lord of the nation to enforce His covenant (3:1). Yahweh is to come unexpectedly, and His day is to bring judgment upon the godless; but for those who fear God, 'the sun of salvation' will shine forth.

The Day of Yahweh as envisioned by Malachi will alter the realities of life for Judah. The Israelites expected a day that would bring divine deliverance from their enemies. They held, of course, that their enemies were Yahweh's enemies but they were themselves Yahweh's enemies, by reason of their covenant violations. So, while they eagerly await the messenger of the covenant to come (Mal. 3:1), in fact his coming would not be delightful for them. In the decisive events of the day, the prophet discerns with particular simplicity the awesome presence of Yahweh in the world in his ongoing activity of judging those who have violated the covenant, and who invariably are no longer under its protection for a future day of renewal and restoration of the fortunes of those who fear the Lord. It is this eschatological dimension of the Day of Yahweh that intensifies the ethical uniqueness of the book of Malachi. As Clendenen (2004:238) notes, "God's faithful love in the past as elaborated in 1:2-5 and the coming day of Yahweh announced in 3:16-4:6 together were to be the motivating factors for all the exhortations in the book."

Yahweh's Unqualified Moral Character

The structure of the ethics of the Old Testament was ascertained mainly by the character of Yahweh: what Yahweh is like is to be seen in what he does or has done. This was a practical axiom of Israel's belief about Yahweh's self-manifestation. The clearest expression of this principle is seen in Leviticus: "Be holy, because I, the Lord your God, am holy" (Lev. 19:2) (Wright 1983b:26). Malachi reveals that Yahweh is not only dependable

and trustworthy but conscientious and unrelenting in his dealings (Mal. 2:4; 3:6, 17). “As his love is equitable and impartial toward all his people, he expects his people to be impartial in their treatment of others (2:9; 3:5)” (Clendenen 2004:234). As a holy God, he expects his people to be holy as well (cf. also Lev. 11:44-45; 21:8; Deut. 10:12-19). And more precisely, Leviticus 19 shows that “God’s own holiness is thoroughly practical.” This of course is the most significant idea of the Old Testament faith. Yahweh as the Holy one stands out in contrasts to all false gods (Exod. 15:11), and in opposition to all that is created. God is holy (Isa. 40:25). He makes Himself available in relationship with this world. He created the world and all creatures live by His power and grace. He is therefore the giver of life. He is loving and merciful. He communes with man (Exod. 34:6; Isa. 49:15; Gen. 24:27). He also commands man to love (Lev. 19:18). This holiness includes generosity to the poor at harvest time, justice for all and integrity in judicial processes, considerate behaviour, impartiality and honesty, and other necessary earthly social matters (Wright 1983b:227). Truly, Yahweh was ridiculed by Israel’s many and current malpractices which were obviously on account of their failure to recognise and appreciate what Yahweh had done for them. The repeated indictments in the book all bear witness to the justification of why the blessings of Yahweh were not within reach his people. They could not obey his law and thus had lost both motive and model for obedience to Yahweh. In this regard, Malachi continues with an emphasis on how Yahweh was being perceived, treated and depicted by Judah’s teaching leadership (Clendenen 2004:234).

Expectations from Yahweh’s People in Faith Communities

An individual’s personal experience of who Yahweh is must be translated into motivation for consistent ethical behaviour. What shape, then, should Israel’s obedience as well as Yahweh’s people in faith communities today take? What should be the standard and property of their ethical action as they seek to respond to Yahweh’s self-disclosure? The following observations are important in any contemporary ethical reflection on Malachi’s oracles for Yahweh’s people living as a community of faith.

Reverential Obedience to Yahweh’s Commandments

Malachi reiterates that covenant is neither an entitlement nor a blank check: “Yahweh’s covenant demands reverential obedience to the divine commandments and reverential dealings with one another” (Stulman & Kim 2010:243). While one may live in an age when faith is not self-evident and the simple affirmation of the fundamental statements such as “God loves you” may not guarantee assent, as a faithful covenant partner, Yahweh’s chosen people in all ages can count on his faithfulness in all their disillusionments, intense suffering and brokenness, calculations and imaginations and reckon possibilities with it (Schuller 1996:856-57). For Malachi, the ideal community is a Torah-observant community, one that acknowledges Yahweh’s justice and sovereignty and in response lives as a reverential covenant community (Stulman & Kim 2010:240).

Malachi reveals that the secret to living as God’s covenant people is by preserving and practicing the laws of Yahweh. The divine exhortation to God’s people: “From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from my statutes, and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts” (Mal. 3:7; cf. Hos. 2:7; Joe. 2:12; Am. 4:6-11; Hag. 2:17; Zech. 1:2-3) echoes the significance of returning to Yahweh and Yahweh’s statutes. No matter how impressive the map of the future might be, such a future

is absolutely deficient without definite and sincere commitment to Yahweh, his teachings, and his people. Thus, Torah obedience is absolutely crucial for both the Jewish as well as the Christian faith communities (Stulman & Kim 2010:243).

Exhortation to Moral Integrity of Religious Leaders

The realities of the Christian church today provide the best atmosphere for the application of the truth of these indictments. While the understanding of the *priesthood of all believers* may be familiar in some Christian communities, few lay people, on hearing the accusations "O priests, who despise my name" will immediately think of themselves. What may naturally come to mind is the latest scandal about some pastors, priests or televangelists. While it is relatively easy to apply this passage to the priests and other religious leaders of the Christian community, the sins of the priests are paralleled by, indeed may even be implicitly supported by the larger lay community. Thus this passage invites reflection on the interdependence of priests and laity in our communities. The exposure of the abuses, corruption and sins of the leaders calls the entire community to conscious and careful self-evaluation and mutual accountability (Schuller 1996:862).

Consequently, Malachi's remarks offer Yahweh's people and contemporary religious leaders at every level of Christian ministry a glimpse into the nature of the priesthood. Priests had to be men of irreproachable moral character both because they are messengers of God who make known divine commands to the faithful, and because they have the privilege to offer sacrifices. Integrity of character is an eternal prerequisite for transformation. While integrity may not be perfection in all attitudes, Yahweh recognises as his people only those who are pure in their character. The minister's honesty concerning his/her character guarantees effective and productive movement towards ethical maturity in ministry (Swears 2000:38). The grade of membership in the Church depends on moral character. The distinguishing feature of the Church is not wealth, ability or social distinction, but high moral character which qualifies for exalted services. Since the position of the priestly leader in a community is a very noble one with high expectations, the Christian minister is expected to be a person of integrity in life and in ministry. He/she must be able to demonstrate a clear and evident coherence between word and deed. Such a person must avoid all irregular and sensual desires, pride, ambition, and, above all, the lust for power, which can twist and destroy the ministry. The minister's comportment, walk, language, outward conduct, should at all times validate the dignity of his/her calling. He/she should be one who possesses a functional knowledge of Yahweh; confident of his power, committed to his word, commissioned by his will, compelled by his knowledge and consumed with his glory (MacArthur 1995:22-28; Wright 1983b:204).

Just as the actions of a ruler should serve as an example for his people, so also the religious leaders should work to live well so that the people under their care become imitators of their own upright actions. Malachi's oracle implies an exhortation to Christian clergy to live in a way worthy of their status. It is necessary that those chosen for holy work or those called to the priesthood live in a holy way and conduct themselves morally in the church (O'Keefe 1996:149). Priests in the OT and throughout the Ancient Near East were not innovators and revealers of new knowledge, but acted as faithful custodians who transmitted the accumulated lore and rules of behaviour. In this regard, the priesthood functioned as a conservative force in Israel's life (Nelson 1993:88-93). Malachi's emphasis on the role of the priest as teacher (2:5-7), as both the repository and the hander-on of the traditions of the community, invite Yahweh's people in faith communities to look anew at

the institutions in the church and their society that can serve as carriers of true ethical instruction (Schuller 1996:862-63).

Exhortation to Moral Perfection of Worshippers and Inner Character of Worship

Malachi's prophetic narrative includes a scolding of the entire people as well as the inner quality of their worship, not just the priests alone. Although he does not state it explicitly, one can infer a contrast between the lack of virtue in Israel at the time of Malachi and the great virtue of the Christian people and their way of life, especially as manifest in ascetic practice. Acceptable worship is inseparably linked with acceptable living. It is in worship that the demands of the covenant with the entire nation confront the individual afresh, even in the secret places of the heart and with respect to sins hidden from public view or observation. It is in worship that the moral perspectives are sharpened and readjusted to see clearly issues from Yahweh's point of view rather than through the confusion, hopelessness and discouragements of outward appearances (Wright 1983b:204-208).

The liturgy of Israel is saturated with moral contrasts.¹⁴ In Malachi, the link between morality and worship is of major concern. It was a link that was broken by the people. The most stinging vehemence is directed at those who presume to perform the rituals of worship while living in blatant wickedness. The rampant social injustice made a blasphemous mockery of it. Malachi's words, thus, become an exhortation to all Christian people to a life of virtue and piety. This mandate constitutes the true meaning of Malachi's warnings about a swiftly approaching judgment (Mal. 3:5).¹⁵ Thus, it is absolutely necessary to reject wicked actions with all our might, to be eager for what is better, and to strive to perform fully the actions through which one might become full of virtue and every praiseworthy quality; for such an individual will be free of the charges coming from God's wrath issued against those accustomed to sin (O'Keefe 1996:151). Malachi's warnings to the people of ancient Israel must be transformed into both an everlasting indictment of their transgression and a legitimate application of the Christian values of the twenty-first century church. In the prophetic words of Malachi, not only divine commands ordering the people to lead lives of virtue are heard, but also a prediction of actual virtues associated with the Christian way of life (O'Keefe 1996:152).

On the other hand, Malachi's prophetic narrative includes a scolding of the inner quality of the people's worship. In Malachi, the issue of flawlessness in the sacrificial animals is emphasized. Garner (2003:6) notes:

Although the fundamental meaning of sacrificial worship as contained in the Old Testament is to improve man's relationship with his God, the various rites performed have not always been an act of celebration or worship. Not only have they assumed a multitude of forms and intentions, but the attitude is equally variable depending on, for example, the context of the situation, the requirement of God, the willingness of the participant, and or the particular occasion.

In this regard, "Sacrifices offered to the Lord must be sincere, offered in humility, and in acknowledgement that nothing less than the very best for the Lord will do. Any animals

¹⁴ The Psalms (15, 25) are clear illustrations of entrance requirement liturgy. "Lord, who may dwell in your sanctuary? Who may live on your holy hill? He whose walk is blameless and who does what is righteous" (Ps. 15:1f). Even more clearly is Psalm 24, which presents outward act and inward motive in the phrase, "He who has clean hands and a pure heart" (Ps. 24:4) (Wright 1983b:207).

¹⁵ Cf. also Barton 2014:233.

with any defects are therefore not acceptable” (Garner 2003:13). There is something very important and down-to-earth about the discussion of the physical condition of the animals brought for sacrifice. Malachi’s insistence that sacrifices must be without blemish (Mal. 1:8,13,14), exhorts Yahweh’s people in faith communities to inspect their own souls for blemishes and to live in virtue. The prophetic narrative insists that the requisite inward religious reality and concrete physical regalia of worship cannot be totally separated. Christian communities today in Africa and all over the world may not be concerned about blemished animals. However, what would Malachi’s prophetic narrative say about the quality of music, books, bread and wine, physical surroundings, art, and second-rated items (vehicles, cell phones, shoes, etc.) brought forward as seed-faith offerings and for use in worship today (cf. Schuller 1996:862)?¹⁶ Religious leaders in faith communities must assume responsibility of guarding and protecting the purity and authenticity of the entire cultic life of the Church in their various contexts of ministry. As McMickle (2005:7) puts it, “One of the essential needs in every congregation of believers is an occasional sermon rooted in the words and witness of the Old Testament prophets.”

Conclusion

While it is now clear that the book of Malachi contains a fundamental critique of the sacrificial practices of the time, no doubt, the criticism of the temple cultic activities was conducted primarily on the basis of covenantal principles. The primary aim of the cult was basically that of illustrating the worshipper’s personal and intimate relationship with Yahweh. Such a relationship was based on and sustained by the grace of Yahweh who had mercifully chosen his people to be his own. Malachi’s emphases on the temple obviously helps one to see that there was nothing wrong with the cult unless it was not used appropriately and effectively to enhance the ethical life of the people as an essential component of the larger framework of the covenant relationship that Yahweh had with them as his people.

The prophet did not treat the priests as innovators, but as people who are expected to follow policy, maintain standards determined by others, and to perform their duties in a conventional manner. Malachi consistently roots his prophetic dialogue on Yahweh’s fidelity to the covenant, constructs a coherent apology for divine sovereignty (Yahweh’s uniqueness) and justice, which manifests itself in harsh allegations against both priests and people, and familiar with earlier prophetic traditions, proclaims the theology of Yahweh alone as the sovereign of all creation. Malachi reiterates that covenant is neither an entitlement nor a blank check: Yahweh’s covenant demands reverential obedience to the divine commandments and reverential dealings with one another. His insistence that sacrifices must be without blemish (Mal. 1:8,13,14), exhorts Yahweh’s people in faith communities to inspect their own souls for blemishes and to live in virtue. The prophetic narrative insists that the requisite inward spiritual reality and concrete physical regalia of

¹⁶ The above observation is an apt description of the Nigerian Church, which seems to be a fitting context for the interpretation and application of Malachi’s prophetic narrative. Today it is not uncommon to witness across denominational lines various items that are brought forward as seed-faith offerings during preaching. I am aware (first author – BO Boloje) of the diversity of the Christian community in Nigeria. Obviously, no one can be so presumptuous as to claim to describe Christianity in Nigeria in the singular. My perception of the Church bears the stamp of the part of the Church I have experienced and into which I minister as a pastor and teacher. The rest of Nigeria and Africa may not be too far from this description.

worship cannot be totally separated. His criticism implies an exhortation to Christian clergy to live in a way worthy of their status. They are challenged to assume responsibility of guarding and protecting the purity and authenticity of the entire worship life of the Church in their various contexts of ministry – their performance of the cult should satisfy the most rigorous cultic demands.

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