

# Malachi's concern for social justice: Malachi 2:17 and 3:5 and its ethical imperatives for faith communities

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Any time humans in any culture consider primary ethical concepts, justice will be to the fore. Much seems to hinge upon it whether human society is to function with any semblance of civil order, security and harmony. When justice is pervasively trampled upon, the very fabric of liveable society crumbles. The apprehension for justice is clearly reflected in almost all of the Old Testament (OT). It is an important theological motif in the OT. This is found in such OT literature as historical, legal, prophetic and wisdom writings. This evidence thus reveals that the apprehension for the issue of justice was one of the many ways by which Israel's multifaceted social life was knit together throughout its various ancient historical developments. No aspect of the life of Israel was excluded from this kind of apprehension for justice, and Yahweh was understood to be actively involved in its entire phase. This article examines Malachi's fourth disputation in the light of the lawlessness alluded to in Malachi 2:17 and the corruption of personal and civil morality in Malachi 3:5. In the discussions that follow, this article examines the need for the justice of Yahweh; that is, Yahweh's righting of past wrongs and the reversal of sinful societal order. The purpose is to enact a communal ethic for those who generously care for the neighbourhood and are firm in their devotion to Him, that is, God.

## Introduction

Any time humans in any culture consider primary ethical concepts, justice will be to the fore. Much seems to hinge upon whether human society is to function with any semblance of civil order, security, and harmony. When justice is pervasively trampled upon, the very fabric of liveable society crumbles. The apprehension for justice is clearly reflected in almost all of the Old Testament (OT). It is an important theological motif in the OT. This is found in such OT literature as historical, legal, prophetic and wisdom. This evidence thus, reveals that the apprehension for the issue of justice was one of the many ways by which Israel's multifaceted social life was knit together throughout its various ancient historical developments. No aspect of the life of Israel was excluded from this kind of apprehension for justice, and Yahweh was understood to be actively involved in its entire phase (Wright 2006:253). For the purpose of theological interpretation, understanding justice in the context of covenant, where every covenant member is obligated to love God and love their neighbour is a useful approach. Additionally, justice is an ethical term used to describe people who live generously in the community in order to develop, sustain and enhance the well-being of the community. The 'who' is considered as just as he or she that is characteristically seen as one who invests actively in the community, demonstrating unique concern and attentiveness to the poor, helpless and the needy. Such a communitarian ethic is thoroughly sketched out by the prophets (Brueggemann 2002:177).

The prophets have long been understood as champions of social justice. In both the historical and prophetic books, prophets demonstrate broad social concern, which is rooted in the person of God, who is committed to humanity and deeply moved by injustice and the suffering that it causes (Carroll 2012:185). Whilst they seldom accuse Israel of breaking specific laws, rather, they 'appeal to known norms of humane conduct of "justice and righteousness" norms which are exemplified in the "apodictic law", but cannot be limited by it' (Houston 2006:70–71). In their advancement and promotion of justice they appeared to be conservatives of religion. Their concerns are firmly rooted in the ancient Israelite traditions and the essential promises of Yahweh to summon Israel to pay attention to the concern for social justice (Fretheim 2008:159).

There is no question of doubt on the existence and reality of the plight of the oppressed in the OT. Thus, if one takes as a basic assumption that the biblical text is the authoritative word for the church,<sup>1</sup> then the appropriate setting within which to do ethical readings will be the ecclesial community. In this regard ethics cannot be simply an academic exercise removed from the

1. This article understands the term 'Church' to mean the people of God that are built together into a spiritual building for God's habitation (Eph 2:20–22). It includes that assembly of baptised believers in Christ in all ages, which are different from the world by virtue of their calling from and separation unto God (Eph 1:22, 3:10, 21, 5:25–32). The expressions: ecclesia community, Yahweh's faith community and Christian community are used interchangeably in this article.

life of the church. Ethics and theology are undividable in the Hebrew Bible (HB)/OT. Ethics in the OT is primarily theological ethics, because the OT is a theological book:

God is its chief character, its major actor, the chief person about whom statements of character and agency are made. Critical thought about the text is bound to include ethical reflection on the conduct of this character as much as on that of others. (Walter 2007:1)

Thus, one is bound to say that OT ethics is 'God-centred in origin, in history, in content and in motive' (Wright 1983:21).<sup>2</sup> OT ethics focuses on the understanding of Israel's moral character, the opportunities it gives in addition to its validation (Groenewald 2009:421). Thus, 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 comprehend and lived out their affiliation with Yahweh, and how that perspective shaped their ethical standards as a community of faith and practice (Wright 2006:17).

The ethics of the OT/HB is rooted on insight into the character of God. Yahweh, the God who behaves ethically, also demands ethical behaviour from his worshippers. Obedience and commitment to the declared will of God is a strong justification for ethical obligation in the books OT/HB. The justification for ethical deeds is furthermore rooted in the festive cultic community. The scribes writing the biblical books regarded 'the good' as that 'way of life' (Ps 16:11) which God instructed and demanded of human beings. In this regard, ethical behaviours become noticeable when they are fully established through experience and reason, and are relayed through teaching (Groenewald 2009:430–431). What characterised moral action in the ancient time, particularly of the near Eastern Mediterranean, was an artificial understanding of life; namely, it takes on a communicative correspondence between the experience of people in life and in their deeds (Otto 2004:84). Here, the interrelationship between sapiential thought and the ethics of the OT/HB becomes very clear. That is, when it embraces the idea of orderliness of life in terms of good moral behaviour and in agreement with ethical standards which should give rise to a high-quality of life (Groenewald 2011:1 of 6).

It is however stated that the ethical instructions found in the wisdom literature are quite different from those of the law codes. The literary account of the wisdom literature was basically linked to the theological dialogue that concerns the legitimisation of these instructions and the implications of moral behaviour. On the contrary, at the beginning of the post-exilic era wisdom in Israel, in contradistinction with such wisdom ideas in Egypt and Mesopotamia, experienced a substantial process of theologisation (Groenewald 2011:

2. Whilst there may be no single, simplified construct of God in the OT, this article's primary concern is to analyse the internal surface structure of the book of Malachi as part of the Christian canon. This approach does not intend to solve all inherent problems of interpretation which are contained in the text. The significance of the text is essentially the application or contextualisation of its principles. In this article, Malachi's ethical construct of God provides the ground for the contextual application of the book's message and/or of the development of an ethical relevance of Malachi's message for a contemporary Christian audience.

1 of 6). Whilst it is noted that the fundamental of ethics of the Hebrew Bible should rather be hunted in the proper framework and structure which legitimises its worth and standards (Groenewald 2009:422),<sup>3</sup> the theological traditions that undergirded prophetic ethics in the OT/HB during the first three-quarters of the 20th century scholarship are considered to be primarily the covenant, law, clan wisdom and creation. The ethical message of the prophets cannot be restricted to any theological tradition. They would have moved and spoken within a moral universe into which numerous varieties of theological emphasis were sustained (Carroll 2012:186–187).

In his survey, Carroll (2012:191) demonstrates that the prophetic literature has abundance of ethical resources, whether the goal is to illustrate the ethical thought and moral behaviour of ancient Israel (or of the authors of the books), or the intention is to investigate the prophetic books for contemporary ethical direction. The meaning of Malachi for Christianity and/or the Christian tradition must therefore be found within the limitations of the text's basic orientation. Since Malachi was about the failure of both priests and the people to worship God, the Christian meaning of the text cannot depart from these themes into, say, flights of allegory. One must attempt to discover what an exegete thought the text meant as part of the Christian Scripture and/or canon for his community (O'Keefe 1996:142–143).

Malachi as conscience of his people was skilful and creative in adapting the older prophetic traditions to the advantage of his religious, economic and socio-cultural context. The oracles of Malachi to his generation in addition to the events they witnessed threw into question the various covenantal obligations and assurance on which the people had placed their safety and that were supposed to guarantee the fortitude of the tripartite covenantal triangle revolving around Yahweh, Israel, and the land of Canaan (cf. Block 2006:35). Yahweh's established system of ordered community was subverted (Barton 1995:90–91). As a background, the article examines the social setting of Malachi's oracle; the literary form of the fourth disputation in the light of the lawlessness alluded to in Malachi 2:17 and the corruption of personal and civil morality in Malachi 3:5. In the final analysis, the article highlights its ethical dimensions focusing directly on Yahweh's people in faith communities for the purpose of enacting a communal ethic for those who generously care for the neighbourhood and are firm in their devotion to him.

## Social setting of Malachi's oracles

Malachi (*mal'ākhi*) in the HB simply means 'my messenger'. The identification of the form *mal'ākhi* has constituted research problems and defensible positions have emerged from several scholarly debates. On the one hand, Malachi is

3. It is clearly of note that with respect to the constitution of the code of conduct of the HB, the emphasis is essentially on the Pentateuch which serves as the major foundation of information for its basic framework (cf. Otto 1994:162, 2007:26; Jensen 2006:20). Accordingly, Groenewald (2011:1 of 6) states, 'the legal collections in the Torah form one of the pillars of a study of the ethics of the HB, specifically the system of legal and ethical rules which we find in the Decalogue (Ex 20:1–17; Dt 5:6–21), Covenant Code (Ex 20:22–23:33), Deuteronomic Law (Dt 12–26) and the Holiness Code (Lv 17–26)'.

considered to be the proper name of the writer of the oracles, and on the other hand, it is seen as a name or title for the unidentified person who is responsible for the book (Hill 1998:15). It is also seen to be a product of scribal prophecy, with no single individual acting as its author (Gertz *et al.* 2012:521).<sup>4</sup> The oracles of Malachi cannot be understood apart from at least a basic knowledge of the context in which he lived. Like the rest of the prophets, he prophesied from God, but he did so within the backdrop of the circumstances and situations of his time. Malachi addressed Judeans of a recently founded province of Judah (formally Yehud)<sup>5</sup> in the Persian satrapy of Eber-Nahara probably during the reign of king Darius I (522–486 BCE). His audience included emigrants or deportees resettled in Judah and offspring of those Hebrews who survived the Babylonian sack of Jerusalem, but were not deported to Mesopotamia. The edict of Cyrus the Great in 538 BCE serves as the historical background for the ministries of the post-exilic prophets Haggai-Zechariah-Malachi. Sheshbazzar, whom Cyrus appointed as governor (Ezr 5:14), barely laid the foundation of the temple. It is noted that from Cyrus' time until Darius' rise to power, the construction of the temple was not completed (Ezr 5:14) (Lee 2011:163). Sheshbazzar may have encountered at least reluctance to assist on the part of the governor in Samaria, and somehow even with direct hostility (Lee 2011:163). The Second Temple was erected under the auspices of Persian king Darius I, and the moneys granted for the rebuilding took the form of 'tax rebates' from the Persian royal treasury (Hill 2012:526–527).

Socially, Malachi confronts a population given to religious cynicism and political scepticism. Malachi's day was one of disillusionment and gloom. The tidal waves of enthusiasm that had been created by the preaching of earlier prophets had by then crashed on the rocks of reality. The disillusionment of the post-exilic Jewish community was prompted by several theological misunderstandings. These misunderstandings includes the expectations for wealth that Haggai had promised once the second temple was rebuilt (Hg 2:7, 18–19), the restoration of the Davidic covenant predicted by Ezekiel (Ezk 34:13, 23–24) and the implementation of Jeremiah's 'new covenant' (Jr 31:23, 31–32) (Hill 2012:527). There was great excitement in the waning years of the 6th century BCE. The people believed, based on the words of the prophets, that a new, more prosperous and glorious, messianic age was about to manifest itself at any moment.

The Second Temple would be more glorious than the first (Hg 2:9). Their land would be renewed and produce

4. The various controversies about the title *mal'ākhi* that have constituted research problems and from which defensible positions have emerged in several scholarly debates have been dealt with in the first author's Doctoral thesis which is still in progress.

5. Stuart (1998:1253) observes that Yehud was a small province out of 120 that formed the Persian Empire. It was around 20 x 25 miles. The province was divided into at least six districts: Jericho, Mizpah, Jerusalem, Beth-Zur, Beth-Hacherem and Keilah (Hill 1998:62). Hill (1998:62) states that a 'residential population' can be estimated around 150 000 based on certain texts such as Malachi 3:5; Ezra 10:2; Nehemiah 13:3, 23. The population 'was very small in number, and ... larger parts of the towns and villages were either completely or partly destroyed, and the rest were poorly functioning' (Stern 2001:350). The important archaeological and demographic studies of Carter (1994:107–145) and Lipschits (2005:261–271, 2003:323–376) have clarified one's understanding of the period. Lipschits (2005:261–271) estimates the population of Yehud to have been 30 000 at its maximal level in the later part of the Persian period. See also Kessler (2010:309–351).

abundant harvest (Ezk 34:26–30; Is 41:18–19). The land would not be able to accommodate all the people (Is 54:1–3) and the population of Jerusalem would overflow its borders (Zch 2:4). Instead of Israel being the slave, the nations of the world would serve them (Is 49:22–23) and the glory of the Lord would return to the temple (Ezk 43:1–5). However, as time went by, it became more and more obvious that these prophecies would not be fulfilled in the way and the time the people anticipated. The lives of the Israelites were restricted to Jerusalem and its immediate environment. They saw no evidence that God's glory had returned to the temple and, perhaps most disappointing, there was no visible restoration of the kingdom promises made to David.

In the events of broken dreams, lost hopes, disillusionment, sadness and resentment the people of Judah sunk lower and lower morally and ethically. Israel's reaction was predictable. How could it be explained that God seemed to have abandoned and forgotten the people, the Davidic king and the priesthood he himself had chosen? Many have lost faith in the God of their fathers who, in their view had punished them beyond reasonable measure. According to Korpel (2005), they asked:

'(Why) do we humble ourselves, if you do not take note of it?' (Is 58:3). 'We await justice, but there is none, salvation, but it is far away from us' (Is 59:11). 'It is useless to serve God. What have we gained by keeping his charge and walking in abject awe of the Lord of Hosts?' (MI 3:14) ... what evidence could be presented to verify the claim that she was in covenant with Yahweh and that he did love her (MI 1:2). 'Where is the God of justice?' (MI 2:17). (p. 138)

Morality seemed to have been totally forgotten. In the light of the selfishness of human nature, alms for the poor and Yahweh's tithe were inevitably forfeited in order to expand personal financial interests. Thus, the only appropriate means to obtaining financial standing in the community was to marry into the 'brokerages' of resident aliens (Hill 1998:75). One can observe that the majority of these resident aliens were non-Judeans and as such partly heathens who were worshipping strange gods, and strangers to the law of Yahweh. For the Judean men to be able to marry the women who belonged to these wealthy and influential families, many had to separate from their Judean wives. Consequently, divorce (MI 2:13–16) and adultery (MI 3:5) were so common that the total destruction of Jewish families seemed almost imminent. The less-privileged – the widows, orphans, and foreigners – were ignored and/or even persecuted (MI 3:5). Discrimination was the norm. Perjury was common within the court system (MI 3:5), as was employers cheating their employees (MI 3:5). It was obviously not a pretty picture. The people were corrupt and sin was publicly practiced and tolerated.

## Literary form of the fourth disputation

It is vital at this point to identify the themes present in the book of Malachi for an insightful scholarly exegesis. Malachi focuses attention on several primary theological themes as well as other minor ones. Redditt (2007:184) observes

that several principal themes appear throughout the scroll of Haggai – Malachi, and most importantly, the theme of Judah’s restoration along with its institutions. He discusses themes other than restoration to include: Lack of Wage, the Temple, God as Refiner, Divorce and God’s Love, God as King and One, Law and Prophets, and Sin and Punishment (Redditt 2007:188–195). In a related development, Nogalski (2007:125) observes that within the Book of the Twelve, there are four themes which deserve investigation in the light of the role they play as means through which they are read as a composite unity. These themes: the Day of Yahweh, fertility of the land, the fate of God’s people, and theodicy, have emerged in the debate of editorial pursuit, literary growth, and theological viewpoints.

With respect to the literary form of the oracles, it has been noted that Malachi has a style that is unique amongst the OT prophetic books (Clendenen 2004:218). Many scholars have assessed the literary features of Malachi and the discussions have centred on how one can best describe the approaches Malachi uses to communicate with Yahweh’s people: it may be described as ‘prophetic disputation’ (Murray 1987:110), ‘confrontational dialogue’ (Hendrix 1987:465), ‘covenant lawsuit’ (O’Brien 1990:63),<sup>6</sup> ‘sermonic’ (Pierce 1984:285) or ‘oracular’, but its frequent use of quotations, rhetorical questions (see Merrill 1994:380), and polemical argument gives it a peculiar character (Clendenen 2004:218). Again, ‘catechetical format’ has also been advanced to detect the questioning pattern used in Malachi, an approach that has also been found in Haggai (Braun 1977:299).<sup>7</sup> The division of the book’s message into six smaller sections (Pierce 1984:282) with most of these segments having a three-part form namely, ‘frequent use of quotations, rhetorical questions and polemical argument’ (Clendenen 2004:218), which may itself be made up of smaller elements, that is, oracle of salvation, threat, or admonition, has given rise to the classification of the book as comprising of disputation speeches (Clendenen 2004:218; Petersen 1995:29; Redditt 2000:849).<sup>8</sup>

Malachi’s fourth oracle (MI 2:17–3:5) reflects the standard three-part disputation pattern of declaration: ‘You have wearied Yahweh with utterance’ (MI 2:17a), refutation: ‘How have we wearied (Him)?’ (MI 2:17b), and rebuttal: ‘See! I am sending my messenger ...’ (MI 3:1). Whilst the people, especially the priests, had been wearied by the services of worship (MI 1:13), the Lord was now wearied with their utterances. This is an oracle that is both an *assertive* speech act intended to assure the audience (MI 2:173:1) and an *expressive* speech act framed as a threat to the hearer or reader (MI 3:25)

6. In order to account for the use of covenant terminology that many have noted in the book, O’Brien analyses the book as comprising five ‘accusations’ (MI 1:6–29; 2:10–16; 2:17–3:5; 3:6–12; 3:13–21), in addition to a ‘prologue’ (MI 1:2–5), a ‘final admonition’ (MI 3:22), as well as a ‘final ultimatum’ (3:23–24).

7. Boda (2000:299–300) notes, ‘[t]he interrogative mood engages the audience in a powerful way, forcing them to reflect on the message in a deeper measure than in mere pronouncements. It is used by Haggai both to bring judgement (Hg 1:4, 9; 2:12–13, 19) and to express sympathy (2:3).’ See also Craig (1996:244) and Pierce (1984:277) who have also developed these question styles and suggest that they point to the agreement of Haggai-Zechariah-Malachi.

8. In Malachi, Clendenen (2004:219) identifies six disputation speeches: ‘(1) MI 1:2–5, (2) 1:6–2:9, (3) 2:10–16 (with the exception of vv.11–12 as a latter addition), (4) 2:17–3:5, (5) 3:6–12, and (6) 3:13–21 (English 4:3; as the last three verses of the canonical book, 4:46 in English are excluded as a latter addition).’

(Hill 1998:259). Like the other oracles of Malachi, the fourth disputation includes a rhetorical question: ‘Who can endure the day of his coming?’ (MI 3:2), and a pseudo-dialogue: ‘Yet you say’ (MI 2:17). It forecasts the eschatological arrival of the angel of the covenant who prepare the people for the day of Yahweh’s visitation by judging their sins and making their worship pure through the purification of the levitical priesthood (MI 3:14). The faithlessness of post-exilic Yehud extends to false statements about Yahweh in that they accused him of rewarding those who are doing evil and are being unfair to those they considered to be right (MI 2:17) (Hill 1998:260).

The interrogative ‘*’ayyēh*’ [where?] is mostly employed by Yahweh’s foes to show their reservation with respect to Yahweh’s capacity to be faithful in keeping his people, Israel (e.g. Jl 2:17; 2 Ki 2:14; Ps 115: 2; 79:10; Mi 7:10). However, it is also corroborated in the appeal of the psalmist to a God who was almost inattentive and missing (Ps 89:50; cf. Ps 42:3, 11). In this regard, it is an expression that intensely conveys disbelief in the best interest of the spokesperson (Tiemeyer 2005:186). Glazier-McDonald (1987:123, 127) observes that the people, ‘having lived with the almost magical assumption that good begets good and evil begets evil, ... were standing on a precipice.’ They felt that there was nothing to indicate that justice was practiced within their environment and could not discern any form of Yahweh’s intervention. They had it very difficult to reconcile the supposed justice of Yahweh in the light of obvious disparities of lived reality. It is argued that Jonah’s protest against the extension of divine mercy to the wicked is an ironic reflection of the popular questioning of divine justice described in Malachi. Although the problem of evil is stated most strongly in Malachi amongst post-exilic prophetic writings, the issue of the delay of justice against the nations is also present in the other late prophetic texts, such as Haggai 1:111 and Zechariah 1:112 (Jones 1995:156). Malachi attempts to justify the justice of Yahweh and to rebuild trust in him in at least three ways:

First, by reminding Israel that it was inconceivable she enjoys the blessings of God without fulfilling her duties, namely obedience to Yahweh’s covenant ... Second, by pointing to the recent downfall of Israel’s old spiritual foe, Edom, as indicative of God’s concern for His people and His present activity in history (1:2ff). Third, by reminding them about the awesome Day of Yahweh ... (3:16ff) when all injustice would be obliterated and all meritorious service for Yahweh rewarded ... (Klein 1987:35–36)

Yahweh was obviously slighted by Israel’s several and present misconducts. The several accusations in the book all indicate the rationale why Yahweh’s blessings are so far-off from his people. This first position is to act as a reproof for the spiritual weariness of Israel, whilst the last two positions are envisioned to quicken their faith in the Lord once again (Klein 1987:35). Malachi 3:16–18 brings the disputation genre to a close and in its place, readers find a testimony:

Then those who revered the Lord spoke with one another. The Lord took note and listened, and a book of remembrance was written before him for those who revered the Lord and thought

on his name. So that they shall be mine says the Lord of hosts, my special possession on the day when I act, ...So that you shall again distinguish between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve him (MI 3:16–18). (Nogalski 2007:134)

In the discussions that follow, this article examines the rationale for questioning the justice of Yahweh and Yahweh's righting of past wrongs and the reversal of sinful societal order.

### Lawlessness and corruption of personal and civil morality (MI 2:17 and 3:5)

Malachi's fourth disputation introduces a new topic, namely the coming of the divine messenger to cleanse Yahweh's people and restore true worship and obedience to the ethical standards of the law. Earlier Malachi had castigated the priests and people for their attitude and actions toward sacrifices and the altar. Now, in the light of the lawlessness alluded to in Malachi 2:17, the corruption of the priesthood in Malachi 3:3, the inadequacy of worship in 3:4 and the corruption of personal and civil morality in Malachi 3:5, readers are introduced to three urgent issues: the need for messianic intervention, the need for the day of judgement and the need for social justice. It is believed that the post-exilic community as believed was in a difficult and disappointing situation. In their varied circumstances their religious life was very nominal, and their morality had dwindled, as they asked why there was no divine judgement on wrong-doing. Their problem was indeed the problem of every monotheistic religion, namely the origin of evil (Korpel 2005:138). Here, the theodicy problem which can be discerned and as remarkably as expressed by Exodus 34:6–7, proposes such questions concerning vengeance and justice, and concerning charity and remuneration from Yahweh's perspective (Barton 1996:71; Crenshaw 2003:175–191; Leeuwen 1993:31–49).

In Malachi 2:17, the prophet accuses the nation of two sins: practicing evil as if it were acceptable and practicing injustice as if Yahweh would never intervene in their affairs (Stuart 1998:1346). The expression *hōgha'tem*, the Hiphil form of the verb *yāgha'* [to weary, wear out, and tire out] (Brown, Diver & Briggs 1997:388) generally means to tire from physical exertion as a result of prolonged labour, travel, or other activities. It can also refer to emotional disturbance or exhaustion from persistent stresses, sorrow, and trials of life. It is used figuratively of God and implies a prolonged and often unpleasant activity that is soon to end (Clendenen 2004:371; Pohlig 1998:129). These complaints grew out of an inner societal division. Whilst the act of unfaithfulness that was rampant in Judah was a case of injustice, Judah could not recognise its own corruption, but saw its present socio-economic crises as signs of Yahweh's unfairness and unfaithfulness to them. They expected Yahweh's blessings and abundance, but they were reaping divine afflictions and scarcity as an alternative.

The expression *kol-'ōšē'rā'ṭōbhō'ênēyhwhūbhāhemhū'hāp hēts* [Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the

LORD, and He delights in them] is clearly that of frustration and probably also of resignation. To them, the degree of sin, violations, injustice, dishonesty and exploitation of all sorts were as if Yahweh was promoting and supporting it (Stuart 1998:1348). On the one hand there are those who practice evil, and on the other, there are the righteous. The latter are angered by the fact that Yahweh apparently allows the wicked to get away with injustice. This indeed was a radical affront to Yahweh and reflects clearly the crisis which the community undergoes (Finitis 2011:29). Whilst the first expression: *kol-'ōšē'rā'ṭōbhō'ênēyhwhūbhāhemhū'hāphēts* [Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the LORD, and He delights in them] is more a venting of emotion, the second: *'ō'ayyē'ēlohēhammishpāt* [or where is the God of justice?] introduced by the rare clausal coordinating conjunction *'ō* and the adverbial interrogative *'ayyē'* is more a call for explanation, which, of course, the rest of the oracle will provide. Yahweh does not let the challenge to his justice go unanswered. The God of Justice replies: *w'qārabhtī'ālēkhemlammishpāth* [surely, I will draw near to you for judgement] (MI 3:5).

Whilst Yahweh is pictured as a prosecutor in Malachi 2:17, he is described as both a witness and judge in Malachi 3:5. Malachi 3:5 rounds out the disputation and/or oracle by enumerating some of the kinds of practices that caused people to say: *kol-'ōšē'rā'ṭōbhō'ênēyhwhūbhāhemhū'hāphēts* [Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the LORD, and He delights in them] or ask: *'ayyē'ēlohēhammishpāt* [or where is the God of justice?]. The drawing near of Yahweh for judgement is expressed by the verb *qārabh* [to draw near, come, appear, and step forward] (Brown *et al.* 1997:897; Harris, Archer & Waltke 1980:2065). The verb is used in a forensic sense, as often in Isaiah, but it is always others who are called to come before God (Is 34:1; 41:1, 5; 48:16; 57:3). It is only here that God is referred to as the one who comes (Clendenen 2004:392; Stuart 1998:1356). The phrase: *ēdhm'mahēr* [swift witness] indicates that, when the time comes for Yahweh to judge, he will do so quickly, without hesitation; in passing sentence on the evildoers and executing the sentence (Pohlig 1998:149).

In this juridical function of the Day of Yahweh, several violations of the Mosaic covenants are emphasised. They are mainly infractions of God's covenant with Israel or simply the Mosaic Law. These infractions are all expressed in the participle, thereby denoting habitual actions (Pohlig 1998:148). The first enumeration of law breakers is the *khāshsh'phīm* [sorcery, witchcraft].<sup>9</sup> The verbal expression *kāshaph* is translated by many as a noun: 'sorcerer' (KJV, NASB, NIV, NLT NJB, and NRSV).<sup>10</sup> It is also translated as 'to practice sorcery' (Brown *et al.* 1997:506), or 'to practice

9.This is an attempt to control the physical and the spiritual world through magical means such as incantations, charms, and rituals. The practice was an abomination to God (Dt 18:19–22), borrowed from pagan religion (2 Ki 9:22) and, though widely practiced in Israel (2 Ch 33:6, where they are lumped together with those who sacrificed their children in the fire, who practiced divination, gave oracles, interpreted omens, cast spells, were mediums or spiritualists, or who consulted the dead. See also Jr 27:9), deserved execution (Ex 22:17–18) (Clendenen 2004:393).

10.KJV, King James Version; NASB, New American Standards Bible; NIV, New International Version; NLT, New Living Translation; NJB, New Jerusalem Bible; NRSV, New Revised Standard Version.

witchcraft' (CEV<sup>11</sup>). The fact that sorcery was going on in Malachi's day reveals the severe level of disregard for the Mosaic Law and covenant in Judah (Stuart 1998:1357). What may be, especially in view in the context of Malachi, was probably the use of sorcery to harm people (cf. Ezk 13:18–20) (Clendenen 2004:393).

Another example of the violation of law is those who commit adultery – *bhamnā 'āphīm*.<sup>12</sup> Adultery in the OT and in ancient Israel is defined as:

sexual intercourse between a married or betrothed woman and any man other than her husband. The marital status of the woman's partner is inconsequential, since only the married or betrothed woman is bound to fidelity. The infidelity of a married man is not punishable by law but is criticized (Mt. 2:14–15; and Pr 5:15–20). (Clendenen 2004:392)

Adultery appears to have been regular, if one takes seriously the many divorces in Malachi which the Judean husbands committed against their wives. Adulterers were violators of the Mosaic covenant (Ex 20:14; Dt 5:18) and were thus certainly illustrations of moral decadence that set aside the covenant and called for divine punishment. Both sorcery and adultery were regular in pagan religious practices. In the book of Isaiah idolaters are called, 'children of the sorceress' (*b'nē 'ōn'nā<sup>h</sup>*) and 'offspring of the adulterer' (*m'nā 'ēph*) (Is 57:3) (Stuart 1998:1358).

Again, on Malachi's list of law breakers are those who swear dishonestly by Yahweh's name (*ūbhannishbā 'īmlashhāqer*), that is, perjurers, those who swear to a lie (*sheqer*).<sup>13</sup> In Zachariah there is the prediction of judgement for the perjurers: God sends a curse to rectify the situation (Zch 5:4), and in Malachi, God's theophany is imminent. This crime is followed by 'those who defraud labourers of their wages' (*ūbh' 'ōshqēš'khar-šākhr*), 'those who oppress the widows and fatherless' (*'almānā<sup>w</sup>yāthôm*) and 'those who mistreat aliens' (*ūmaththē-ghēr*). It was recognised, not only in Israel, but also in the rest of the ancient Near East, that widows and orphans needed divine and governmental protection. Thus, to mistreat widows and orphans was to show gross contempt for Yahweh's will (see Ex 22:22–24; Zch 7:10) (Pohlig 1998:149). Like orphans and widows, aliens are listed as examples of dependant people who need the justice of others. Exploitation of aliens was clearly an act of covenant violation (Ex 20:21; Dt 10:18–19) (Glazier-McDonald 1987:167–168). As a summary statement, the final clause: *w'lō 'y'rē 'ūnī* [those who do not fear me – Yahweh] may be taken to encompass all the various covenant violations of which the Israelites of Malachi's day are guilty. This position is taken in the light of the fact that the fear of Yahweh denotes reverence for him; it obligates one to follow his covenant and adopts Yahweh's

11.CEV, Contemporary English Version.

12.The seriousness of the sin of adultery is nowhere pronounced but in Job. Here it is described as 'indecent and disgusting sexual conduct and a criminal offence'. It is also called 'a destructive, hellish fire consuming everything I have' (Job 31:11–12).

13.Stuart (1998:1358) observes that swearing falsely is considered to be a specialised, elevated form of lying, done in a context designed to avoid lying. Yahweh's name was invoked in taking oaths, which were legal (Lv 19:12; Dt 6:13; 10:20), but swearing falsely, perjury, was a serious crime (Lv 19:12). Jeremiah calls it an abomination (Jr 7:9–12).

concerns as his own. These concerns include Yahweh's social concerns, which are in focus in this verse (Pohlig 1998:149). The concern for the less fortunate ones in Malachi stresses the significance that the prophet assigned to social justice.

## Ethical imperatives for faith communities

At this point, one's ethical understanding of the OT must take into account the fact that so much of its ethical uniqueness is essentially social. According to Wright (1983):

Its concern is not just to enable the individual to lead a privately upright life before God (though this is important), but to promote and protect the moral and spiritual health of that whole community ... who in their social life would embody those qualities of righteousness, peace, justice and love which reflect God's own character and were his original purpose for mankind. (p. 34)

The relevance of the social angle is that one must study the OT passage in its own social environment of the life of Israel and be able to ask what it says to him or her within their community and then proceed to what social impact it will have in the larger human society (Wright 1983:35). Malachi's fourth oracle reveals that Yahweh's established system of ordered community was disrupted. The situation manifests itself in several and apparent crimes against social order: the less-privileged; namely, the widows, orphans, and foreigners, were ignored or even persecuted (Mt 3:5). Barton (1996:69) notes that the oppression of poor is viewed as 'the expropriation of the land and miscarriage of justice.' The key terms that can be seen in his evaluation of the society are found in the words of Blenkinsopp (2000:108), namely, 'justice and righteousness.' Discrimination was the norm. Perjury and the giving and acceptance of bribes were common within the court system (Mt 3:5), as was employers cheating their employees (Mt 3:5).

What ethical imperatives and/or moral demand does Malachi's prophetic narratives make at this point upon personal Christian ethics in the individual's own course of life and in his or her daily living and the Christian community in the larger human society?

## Christian social responsibility, quest for truth and justice

Yahweh's concern for widows and the fatherless (*'almānā<sup>w</sup>yāthôm*) and aliens (*ghēr*)<sup>14</sup>, as indicated by Malachi, calls for Christian social responsibility, 'responsibility is the greatest overarching theme of Yahweh's call in the Bible' (Sacks 2005:135). In prophetic literature such as Isaiah and others (Am 5:11–12; Ezk 16:49; Ps 82:3), the prophet charged people, 'learn to do good; seek judgement, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow' (Is 1:17). The Bible requires that the whole of humanity's

14.The word *ghēr* is mostly rendered as 'foreigner' or 'guest' and clearly fits well with the word 'immigrant'. Yahweh expects that the Israelites provide these guests or foreigners in their community with similar privileges, rights, and other benefits as natives. In the Torah, one can find such statements, '[w]hen a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God' (Lv 19:33–34).

economic structure be established on the firm foundation of social accountability and justice (Friedman 2011:299). Again, Malachi's prophetic narrative calls Christians to be committed to the quest for justice, truth and equity. The significance of justice and truth is emphasised in the Bible; it is an all-embracing theme of the Bible.<sup>15</sup> Obedience to the laws was an important issue of grateful response to the saving acts of Yahweh. Having experienced justice; the Israelites were to do justice in every area of their lives (Wright 1995:278–279). The quest for justice, truth and equity also includes commercial and judicial ethics. Operating a business enterprise in a manner that is unscrupulous and immoral is unfair to clients (cf. Am 8:5–7). It is noted by Friedman (2011):

The Torah is concerned with such issues as ensuring accuracy in weights and measures, environmentalism, paying wages and rent on time, providing fringe benefits for employees and treating them fairly, providing an honest day's work, caring for the poor, and not discriminating against the stranger. (p. 299)

Yahweh, who is the God of justice, truth and equity, passionately demands scrupulous truth and honesty in all dealings. The Scripture makes it quite clear:

You shall do no wrong in judgment, in measurement of weight, or capacity. You shall have just balances, just weights, a just *ephah*, and a just *hin*: I am the LORD your God, who brought you out from the land of Egypt. (Lv 19:35–36)

The Bible requires that Christians, as well as humans in general, be preoccupied with the concern for justice and be willing to do all things in their ability to guarantee that foreigners are handled with sympathy by the lawful and legitimate structure of their society (Ex 23:1–8; Lv 19:35f.; Dt 16:18–28). Any form of corruption and dishonesty is by definition and implication a denial of the character of the God we claim to worship (Friedman 2011:299; Wright 1995:279). Since a moral and just society is that which respects a foreigner and uplifts those who are oppressed and demoralised, the book of Malachi challenges Christians in faith communities, religious leaders, political leaders and business leaders to be embodiments of integrity, to be more interested in alleviating the plight of the downtrodden and doing what is best for their country. The characteristic of a worthy leader is his or her encouragement of people to making such sacrifices that would be of great benefit to future generations as well as the weak, vulnerable and defenceless (Friedman 2011:301–302).

### Motivation for justice mission and commitment to social responsibility

Preservation of order and justice was a chief responsibility of kings in the ancient Near East (Patterson 1973:126; Saggs 1962:198; Wilson 1956:133). Since Yahweh is unchangeable in

15. In his argument with Yahweh, Abraham, has the boldness to ask: 'Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?' (Gn 18:25). The Lord made it so obvious that he chose Abraham in order that 'he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice; in order that the LORD may bring upon Abraham what He has spoken about him' (Gn 18:19). In Deuteronomy it is said: 'Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue, so that you will live and possess the land which the Lord your God is giving you' (Gn 16:20).

his character,<sup>16</sup> so is the essence of his ethical requirements. Yahweh in his righteousness has ordained a specific system of order in the world that must be adhered to. However, when people in their own choice deliberately contravene this established order, they will be punished, so that God's reputation will not be questioned. Similarly, Yahweh, whilst he is conceived to be a God of love, is at the same time a God of vengeance who metes out justice to his creature's trespasses against his holiness on the basis of his fairness. Since Yahweh is unchangeable in his nature and perfections, the principle of divine justice rooted in that very nature must also remain very persistent. Malachi demonstrates concern for the integrity of Yahweh and for the universal acclamation of his sovereignty. If Yahweh, the God of Israel was indeed the just ruler of the universe, then he must intercede on behalf of the innocent and oppressed. Malachi's prophetic narrative reveals that the infringement of social dimensions (horizontal) of the covenantal relationship and responsibilities amounts to the infringement of the religious aspects (vertical) of the same covenantal relationship and responsibilities. Because Yahweh had been a 'witness' to the marriage covenants which they broke (Ml 2:14), he was also a witness of several crimes of injustice (Ml 3:5) and would come 'swiftly' to vindicate those who had been wronged. He would come against all those in Judah who practiced treachery and oppression of the weak (Clendenen 2004:236).

For Christianity to be a living experience of transformation in any human society, a transformative process of personal and communal engagement with the biblical text is crucial for Christian mission within the ecclesial community and the larger human society. The book of Malachi's ethics serves as a kind of motivation for Yahweh's faith communities to an engagement and commitment to the mission of justice and affirmation of Christian social responsibility. Mission is therefore any endeavour aimed toward the goal of reaching beyond the needs of the local congregations for the purpose of fulfilling Yahweh's concern in the world (Oladeji 2004:206). Christians should be compelled by Yahweh's concern for the innocent, poor and oppressed to go to the nook and cranny of the world to relieve these needy elements in the human society. The attitude of Yahweh's faith communities must not be that earthly justice is either of no significance or unattainable and that the ultimate judgement is the one and only justice that is worth striving and waiting for (McIlroy 2011:182).

Any meaningful formulation of biblical theology of justice would require that one takes his or her time to examine the biblical data for such narratives dealing with Yahweh's redeeming intentions and procedures for a just society. Whilst at this point the significance of justice is clearly obvious

16. It must be acknowledged here that, though the book of Malachi states that Yahweh is unchangeable (Ml 3:6), the biblical representation of Yahweh presents some obvious contradictions with respect to the character of God which is invariably problematic. Carroll (1991:34ff.) describes Yahweh as 'the hidden problematic' and lists examples of statements about the deity repenting of actions and intentions (Gn 6:6; cf. 1 Sm 2:20; Jnh 3:9–10), about divine deception (1 Sm 15:29; 1 Ki 22:19–23; Ezk 14:9; Jr 4:10), and as creator of evil (Is 45:6–7; Job 9:13–24), to illustrate the biblical contradictions of the problem.

however, in the prophetic literature of the Old Testament.<sup>17</sup> A growing awareness to the anguish of the less-privileged who are susceptible to social isolation, economic exploitation, poverty, oppression should lead Christians to an appreciation of the value of justice, and, to be specific, the employment of standard regulations to administer entitlements and privileges, as basic companions of the Christian mission in the world (McIlroy 2011:183). The church's and/or Christian mission in the world cannot be divorced from issues of social justice, and real understanding of people and their problems. Pobe (1997) says:

Authentic theology includes education of the ear to hear the cry of the people, of the heart to heed and to feel, of the tongue to speak to the weary and the broken a word that rebuilds them and kindles in them a fire of hope, and of the hands to work with the lowly to build a human world which the wealthy, the mighty and the clever have shown themselves incapable of envisioning and fashioning. (p. 31)

The special mission of the church in the world therefore, calls for a covenant affirmation of Christian social responsibility. McIlroy (2011) notes:

God is concerned for justice and reconciliation throughout human society and for the liberation of [*human beings*] from every kind of oppression ... The doctrine of the image of God enables us to see that the evils, for example, of racial discrimination and social prejudice are an offense to human dignity and therefore to the God in whose image human beings are made ... Since God hates evil and injustice, we should not be afraid to denounce evil and injustice wherever they exist. (pp. 189–190)

Malachi's prophetic narrative challenges faith communities to recognise God's saving acts. It motivates and thus places a necessity upon faith communities to identify with people in their various situations, namely their social condition, their pains and joys, grief and sorrow, and in their efforts for equity and fairness against tyrannical forces that are in power. If Christian mission in the world is not associated with a deep passion and commitment to alleviating if not eradicating people's needs, it may simply be unbelievable. Thus, as Christians proclaim the reign and rule of Yahweh in the world, it is necessary that they be devoted to the requirements of peace and justice. Christian mission in the world must involve ministry to the weak and/or sick (physically and spiritually), giving food to the hungry, taking care of those who are convicted, that is, prisoners, assisting the underprivileged and those who are physically and mentally challenged, and setting free the burdened. It must also include the condemnation of wickedness wherever it is found, including established violence, injustice and oppression, dishonesty and all forms of human exploitation. Since God has commissioned the Church with the responsibility of making him known; his ethical requirements for justice and righteousness, it must therefore make it a point of duty to impact the human society with its culture of negligence and not invest in it.

<sup>17</sup>The apprehension for equity and fairness in the OT is not in any way immaterial. It is built around certain susceptible individuals within the human society. Yahweh's special objects of concern include: *ghēr* is mostly rendered as foreigner or guest, the fatherless and the widow (Lv 19:33–34; Job 22:9; Pr 15:25). 'These three are identified because each of them has lost the protection of close family members and so is vulnerable to social isolation, economic poverty, oppression and exploitation. This concern is to be found embedded within the social legislation of the Mosaic Law itself (Ex 22:22; Dt 10:18; 14:29; 24:17–21; 26:13; 27:19) and is repeated in the messages of the prophets (Is 1:17; 10:2; J. 7:6; 22:3; 49:11; Ezk 22:7; cf. Ml. 3:5)' (McIlroy 2011:184).

## Conclusion

This article reveals to some extent that justice is an important theological motif in the OT. It is clearly rooted in the context of a covenant, where every covenant member is obligated to love God and love their neighbour. Thus, when justice is pervasively trampled upon, the very fabric of liveable society crumbles. As a background, the article examines the social setting of Malachi's oracle, the literary form of the fourth disputation in the light of the lawlessness alluded to in Malachi 2:17 and the corruption of personal and civil morality in Malachi 3:5, and its ethical dimensions for the purpose of enacting a communal ethic for those who generously care for the neighbourhood and are firm in their devotion to him, that is, Yahweh. In Malachi's fourth disputation the article reveals some degree of subversion of order in the Judean post-exilic community. The resultant implications are obviously the various crimes against social structure, namely the less-privileged – the widows, orphans, and foreigners – were ignored and/or even persecuted (Ml 3:5). Discrimination was the norm. Perjury was common within the court system (Ml 3:5) as was employers cheating their employees (Ml 3:5). It was obviously not a pretty picture. The people were corrupt and sin was publicly practiced and tolerated.

Yahweh's concern for the less-privileged as indicated by Malachi, calls for the enactment of communal ethics such as Christian social responsibility and an engagement in the pursuit of truth and justice. Thus, in the light of the special mission of the Church in the world, Malachi's ethics serves as a strong enough motivation for Yahweh's faith communities to an engagement and commitment to the mission of justice and affirmation of Christian social responsibility. It motivates and thus places a necessity upon faith communities to identify with people in their various situations, namely their social condition, their pains and joys, grief and sorrow, and in their efforts for equity and fairness against tyrannical forces that are in power. Christian mission in the world must be associated with a deep passion and commitment to alleviating if not eradicating people's needs. Thus, as Christians proclaim the reign and rule of Yahweh in the world, it is necessary that they be devoted to the requirements of peace and justice. Christian mission in the world must involve ministry to the weak and/or sick (physically and spiritually), giving food to the hungry, taking care of those who are convicted, that is, prisoners, assisting the underprivileged and those who are physically and mentally challenged, and setting free the burdened. God's ethical requirements of justice and righteousness must be upheld and emphasised so as to impact the human society with its culture of negligence.

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## Authors' contributions

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