

# Syncretism after the Exile and Malachi's Missional Response

**JERRY HWANG**

---

**Jerry Hwang** is Associate Professor of Old Testament at the Singapore Bible College, Singapore, where he has taught since 2010. He received his PhD in Old Testament from Wheaton College. As a missionary in theological education, his publications and ongoing work aim to build bridges between the Old Testament and mission studies.

## INTRODUCTION

“The chief enemy of faith in the Old Testament is magic.”<sup>1</sup> With this statement Edwin Good’s begins an exploration of *magic* in Israel, not as the craft of the illusionist but rather the desire to control unseen powers for one’s own benefit. More than being a set of occult practices, magic is the superstitious worldview that “the right deed at the right moment, or the wrong deed at the right moment, will inexorably be followed by results good or bad.”<sup>2</sup> This idea of retribution as magic resembles at first glance the covenants of the OT which proffer rewards for obedience and punishment for disobedience. The blessings and curses of Deuteronomy 28, for example, show how the faith of Israel reflects part of “the common theology of the ancient Near East”<sup>3</sup> with its belief in the principle of divine recompense for human behavior.

Israelite faith is nevertheless distinct in its cultural context for its denial that morality is primarily a transactional matter of seeking rewards and avoiding punishment.<sup>4</sup> Or stated in terms of comparative religion, the dynamism of relating to a personal God cannot be reduced to the impersonal notion of *karma*, here understood in its philosophical sense as the moral causality that “each person makes his own fate, and all suffering happens for a reason.

There is no arbitrary or meaningless suffering in the world.”<sup>5</sup> The universal desire for justice in the face of evil and suffering means that the concept of retribution is part of every system of thought to varying degrees. Karma in this broader perspective is not unique to Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, the three major Eastern religious systems that originated on the Indian subcontinent. What then are the differences between the OT’s creational theology of sowing sins and reaping consequences (e.g., Hos 8:7; Prov 22:8), and the notion of karma as the universe’s law of cause and effect?<sup>6</sup>

### **MALACHI AS A MISSIONAL BOOK**

The prophetic book of Malachi addresses the mixture of magical and karmic ideas which infected Israel’s theological understanding after the exile to Babylon. YHWH had repeatedly warned that apostasy would lead to exile from the land, but the arrival of judgment in the sixth century BC still led to Israel’s objection that this suffering was unjust for being the fault of their ancestors (e.g., Jer 31:29; Ezek 18:2). Several rounds of disappointing returns to the land (cf. Neh 9:36–37) which fell short of the glorious restoration that the Prophets had foreseen (e.g., Isa 35; 55) only increased the stridency of Israel’s protests that YHWH had leveled an unfair curse against an innocent generation. This crisis of faith reached its apex during the fifth century BC in the disputations recorded by Malachi.

The escalating cycles of challenge and riposte in the book of Malachi are comprised of six disputations between Israel on the one hand, and YHWH with his prophet on the other. At stake are the issues summarized by the pointed question that opens the fourth disputation (2:17–3:6): “Where is the God of justice?” (2:17). The trauma of being deported to Babylon had evidently raised doubts about the whereabouts of YHWH’s presence (“Where...?”) and the fairness of his dealings with Israel (“Where is the God of justice?”). Since Israel had mistakenly believed that YHWH abandoned his people even before Jerusalem was sacked by the Babylonians (e.g., Ezek 8:12; cf. ch. 11), it is no surprise that magical concepts of YHWH’s presence or karmic accounts of his justice continued to find currency after the exile. Indeed, monotheistic faith in YHWH among those who returned to Jerusalem was syncretistic at best—a confused blend of Yahwism and pagan practices such as intermarriage with worshipers of other gods (e.g., Ezra 9–10; Nehemiah 13).

The prevalence of syncretism in Israel after the exile suggests that the discipline of missiology can provide insight into the prophetic message of Malachi. This book uses the missional approaches of contextualization to communicate both *through* and *against* human culture as part of summoning its nominal audience to sincere faith and faithfulness. So along similar lines to George Hunsberger's pioneering work on missional hermeneutics,<sup>7</sup> this article will explore Malachi's message in three interrelated aspects of the *missio Dei*, that is, the mission of God to redeem his entire creation: 1) the missional interaction of Malachi with human culture in exposing its audience's syncretism of Yahwistic faith with magical and karmic concepts; 2) the missional thrust of Malachi in reestablishing the unique identities of YHWH and Israel among the nations; and 3) the missional place of Malachi within the larger biblical story of God's redemption, especially as one of the Twelve Minor Prophets who testifies of the coming Messiah. Each of these dimensions contributes to transforming Israel from those who dishonor YHWH's "name" among the nations (1:11, 14; 2:2) to a distinctive people whom "all the nations will call blessed" (3:12a; cf. Gen 12:3). Such a fulfillment of the Abrahamic promises will also vindicate the reputation of Israel's God as "YHWH of hosts" (24x in Malachi)—the Sovereign whose incomparable presence and justice lie beyond the reach of magic and karma. As much as in biblical times, the missional response of Malachi to syncretism needs urgently to be heard in our generation when prosperity theologians frequently use Malachi 3:8–10 as a proof-text that material blessings from God will overflow in response to bringing tithes and offerings.<sup>8</sup>

## SYNCRETISM AND MISSIONAL RESPONSE IN MALACHI'S SIX DISPUTATIONS

### *First Disputation (Malachi 1:1–5) – Israel's Uniqueness among the Nations*

The syncretism which plagued Israel after the exile becomes evident at the beginning of Malachi. The first disputation of the book (1:1–5) contains YHWH's address to a people who are all too ready to abandon the covenant relationship that was inaugurated in the exodus and consummated at Mount Sinai. In response, YHWH asserts that "I have loved you" (1:2a), a declaration that he chose Abraham and his descendants to be a channel of blessing to the whole world (Gen 12:2–3; Deut 7:7–8).<sup>9</sup> It is no accident that YHWH

retraces the story of Israel back to the patriarchal promises so as to preempt the question that arose naturally after the chastening of exile, “How have you loved us?” (1:2b). As will be confirmed in later disputations, this objection to divine justice represents a distortion of Deuteronomy’s covenant theology into the principle of karmic retribution for sin.<sup>10</sup> The experience of Israel is unique among the nations, however, in that YHWH overturns conventional ancient Near Eastern wisdom—as epitomized by the “friends” of Job—that suffering is always a consequence of sin.<sup>11</sup> For Malachi to speak of YHWH’s love from the beginning serves to reframe the exile as one chapter in a bigger covenantal story, rather than being the mechanistic operation of the universe’s moral causality. Justice has indeed been served by suffering in Babylon, but not in the unfeeling and automatic manner imagined by Israel (cf. Isa 40:1–2, 27).

The special status of Israel as a people whom YHWH “loved” (Mal 1:2a, 2d; cf. Hos 11:1; Jer 31:20) is reinforced by a contrast with Esau whom he “hated” (Mal 1:3a). This statement of YHWH’s affection for Jacob over Esau (cf. Gen 25:23) has sometimes been interpreted as “Damn-Edom theology,”<sup>12</sup> that is, the sort of ethnic favoritism that stands at odds with the *missio Dei*. In what follows, though, YHWH outlines the punishment that the nation of Edom has received for its own sins which has nothing to do with Esau being a less-favored ancestor (1:3b–4).<sup>13</sup> The transgressions in view are not named in this passage, but the book of Malachi follows on the heels of other OT prophetic traditions which make Edom’s historical sins of pillaging Israel as it underwent exile into a typological symbol for every form of arrogance against God and his people.<sup>14</sup> By virtue of their similarity in Hebrew, “Edom” (*‘ēdôm*) in the Book of the Twelve Prophets can serve as a cipher for “Adam” (*‘ādām*), the prototype for humanity’s rebellion against God and the chaos in creation that resulted (e.g., Joel 3:19; Amos 9:11–12; Obad 15–21).<sup>15</sup> The universal and cosmic stakes in Israel’s conflict with Edom are clear.

In the same vein, the stated desire of Edom to reverse its destruction and “build [*bnh*] again the ruins” (Mal 1:4c; cf. Gen 11:4) will be met by YHWH’s determination to “tear down” (*hrs*; Mal 1:4d). The pairing of these two verbs in Mal 1:4 evokes Jeremiah’s prophecies of global scope in describing a pattern of judgment followed by salvation for the nations, Israel first among them (Jer 1:10; 24:6; 31:28; 42:10; 45:4). In contrast to this pattern of ultimate redemption, though, Malachi asserts that the fate of Edom will move in the

opposite direction of other nations when its attempts to save itself (Mal 1:4c) will instead result in destruction (1:4d). Judgment against Edom furnishes the ultimate proof that YHWH's covenant with Israel remains efficacious with reference to deliverance in the future and not merely judgment in the past.

Malachi's first disputation concludes in vv. 4–5 by linking the vindication of Israel among the peoples to the reputation of "YHWH of hosts" (1:4d). Here is found a special epithet for Israel's God that denotes his uniqueness as "Lord of all powers" in both heaven and earth.<sup>16</sup> What had appeared to be the parochial question of Israel's status compared to Edom (1:2–3) actually has cross-cultural significance (1:4–5), because the God of Israel was wrongly thought by the nations to be either defeated or absent in his people's exile to Babylon (e.g., Joel 2:17; Ps 79:10; 115:2). In response, Malachi emphasizes the sovereignty of YHWH over all peoples, and not merely his own, in vv. 4–5 through repetition and wordplay on the Hebrew term *gēbûl* ("territory, border"). On the one hand, YHWH's power surpasses the typical national deity who focuses on domestic affairs when Edom suffers shame on the international stage as "the wicked territory [*gēbûl*] and the people with whom YHWH is angry forever" (1:4d–e).<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, this demonstration of power will transform Israel's self-loathing as an exiled people into the joyful recognition that "YHWH is great beyond the border [*gēbûl*] of Israel" (1:5). YHWH has therefore done his part in upholding his covenantal obligations by vindicating Israel's unique place among the nations (cf. Deut 26:18–19). The next section of Malachi, however, will show that Israel has brought dishonor to YHWH's reputation through its syncretistic rituals.

### ***Second Disputation (Malachi 1:6–2:9) – YHWH's Reputation among the Nations***

The second disputation of Malachi begins by setting Israel's syncretism during the fifth century BC in a broader cultural context. When YHWH attacks Israel's priesthood for failing to esteem "my honor" and for "despising my name" (1:6), the accusation of having brought shame to YHWH reflects the ancient Near Eastern reality that "[h]onor is meant to be recognized and acknowledged; it is very much a public phenomenon."<sup>18</sup> The ways in which national deities were venerated by their people, such as YHWH by Israel and Chemosh by Moab, was a matter of public knowledge among neighboring

peoples. And just as the OT's prophetic oracles against the nations mock their gods using the very rituals associated with them (e.g., Isa 44:9–20), foreign emissaries to Israel had enough knowledge about worship in Israel to opine on how best to venerate YHWH (e.g., 2 Kgs 18:22; Jer 40:2–3). The fact that YHWH was known as the national god of Israel meant that his reputation among the nations rested to some extent on how faithfully his people displayed him as such.<sup>19</sup>

The exalted status of YHWH over all powers is thereby presumed when Malachi explains the disrepute to his “name” (1:6) as the act of offering worthless sacrifices that violated Pentateuchal law (1:7–10, 12–13). The costliness of the sacrifices prescribed by Moses would have led to the ever-present temptation to use blemished rather than perfect offerings (e.g., Lev 22:17–33).<sup>20</sup> Such a gap between ideal and reality in cultic worship reflects the tension that every system of belief exhibits between the official character of “formal religion” and its expression at the popular level as “folk religion.”<sup>21</sup> In this respect, missiologists and anthropologists have recognized that expressions of faith tend to become syncretistic when the institutionalized rituals of formal religion are modified by folk religionists into ways of solving ordinary problems such as illness, famine, or infertility.<sup>22</sup> The pragmatic bent of folk religion also means that rituals which lack power or effectiveness then become ripe candidates to be replaced by or blended with new ones through another round of syncretism. Further acts of devotion to a god of questionable utility may even be withheld until he grants what his worshipers seek from him.<sup>23</sup> In the time of Malachi, the syncretism of formal and folk religion is manifested in how the priests of that time continue to bring the sacrifices mandated by formal religion but reflect the priorities of folk religion in asserting that “the table of YHWH is to be despised” (Mal 1:7).

YHWH offers an ingenious, twofold response to Israel's capitulation to a magical worldview which seeks either to bend the divine will or at least mitigate its demands.<sup>24</sup> The first is that the shaming of YHWH's “name” through worthless offerings (1:6–7) will not force his hand to act, but rather bring shame upon Israel when he rejects their mediocre gifts just as any human benefactor would (1:8–10).<sup>25</sup> YHWH's *šēm* (“name”) in the sense of his “reputation” among the nations remains vulnerable because he is known as the patron deity of his people, as noted above. Yet the shaming of Israel cannot ultimately diminish the holy character of his *šēm* (1:6) since his

transcendent nature stands above being tarnished by the sins of his people.<sup>26</sup> And in keeping with this balance between subjective and objective dimensions of the divine šēm, the second aspect of YHWH's missional rejoinder to syncretism is found in the irony that the rest of creation will attribute more honor to him than his own people (1:11–14). The three references to šēm in vv. 11–14 thus assert that his “status” as sovereign Creator will be known by all his creatures (v. 11a), that the nations will bring cultic offerings to his “name/presence” (v. 11b) even as his people do not recognize his worth (vv. 12–13), and that his “reputation” as a king who deserves the best offerings will be acknowledged among the nations (v. 14).<sup>27</sup>

This contrast between Israel and the nations in Malachi 1:11–14 dashes the concluding hope of the first disputation (1:1–5) that Israel might come to recognize YHWH's reputation as “great [*gd̄l*] beyond the border of Israel” (1:5). The failure of YHWH's people to honor him (1:6–10) leads instead to the irony that he will be recognized as “great [*gādōl*] among the nations” (1:11). In sum, Malachi 1:11–14 echoes the OT's tragic refrain that the nations have sometimes been more faithful than his own people in grasping the incomparability of YHWH (e.g., Jon 3:9). The apostate family of Abraham for whom YHWH promised to “make your name great” (Gen 12:2; cf. Deut 26:19; 2 Sam 7:9) must now face the ignominy of having their reputation severed from their God who also possesses a “great name” (Josh 7:9; Ps 99:3; Ezek 36:23). What hope remains for a people whose unique connection to YHWH should have empowered them to be agents of the *missio Dei* in the world?

Precisely this issue is addressed when the second disputation concludes by warning Israel's priests that this represents their final opportunity to repent. In Malachi 2:1–9, YHWH takes his audience back to Mount Sinai with a series of biting contrasts between Israel's priestly task for the world as first conceived and the priesthood's apostasy in the present. The urgency of the moment is underscored by YHWH's conditional statement, “If you do not listen and do not take it to heart to give honor to my name...” (2:2). This condition alludes to YHWH's invitation to a missional people, “If you will surely listen to my voice...” (Exod 19:5a). A positive response to YHWH in the course of Israel's history would have resulted in mediating his presence to the whole world as a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exod 19:6). Yet the condition of obedience in Exodus 19:5a has gone unmet, so

the result has not been international blessing from the God who owns “the whole earth” (Exod 19:5d) but rather that he will “send the curse upon you and curse your blessings” (Mal 2:2d; cf. Lev 26:14–39). In the context of Malachi itself, this exchange of curses for blessings is leveled against the priests, but in its broader canonical horizon envisions the promise of YHWH to Abraham and his progeny that “I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse” (Gen 12:3; cf. 27:29; Num 22:6, 12; 24:9).

These allusions to the Abrahamic promises indicate that Malachi 2:2’s warning is directed at Israel’s priestly identity among the nations and not merely its official priesthood. Subsequent verses, however, specifically target the priests by taking up the cherished Aaronic blessing that they were to pronounce upon Israel (Num 6:24–26) and turning it against them.<sup>28</sup> Shockingly, their invocation that YHWH would “shine his face [*pānīm*] upon you” (Num 6:25) becomes the threat that he would “spread offal on your faces [*pānīm*]” (Mal 2:3b); the hope that YHWH would “lift [*ns’*] his countenance upon you” (Num 6:26a) becomes the accusation that “you are lifting [*ns’*] the countenance [i.e., showing favoritism in justice]” (Mal 2:9); the benediction that YHWH would grant “peace [*šālôm*]” (Num 6:26b) becomes the charge that Levi’s descendants have failed to guard “peace [*šālôm*]” (Mal 2:5); and the closing commission for the priests to “invoke [*šîm*] my name [*šēmi*]” (Num 6:27) has its mirror image in the accusation that the priests do not “set [*šîm*] to heart to honor my name [*šēmi*]” (Mal 2:2b). Thus the chapter’s opening salvo against Israel’s failure to give honor to YHWH (2:1) finds its counterpart in the priests becoming “despised and abased before all the people” (2:9a).<sup>29</sup> The public shaming of the priests is also parallel to a priestly nation’s shaming of YHWH before the nations (1:11–14), again pointing to a symbiotic relationship between a priestly people and their official priesthood.

To summarize the logic of the second disputation, the corruption of Israel as a priestly people always works in concert with an immoral priesthood which abuses its position to enrich itself (cf. Isa 24:2; Jer 5:31; Hos 4:6, 9). But since a priestly ministry in general and its blessing in particular were ultimately intended by God for Israel to bless the nations (e.g., Exod 19:5–6; Ps 67),<sup>30</sup> Malachi’s use of this invocation to condemn Israel and its priesthood marks a major setback in the missional storyline of the Bible. As will be asserted in the fourth disputation (2:17–3:6), the entwined failures



of Israel and its priests as “messenger of YHWH of hosts” (2:7) necessitates that YHWH will send “my messenger who will clear the way before me” (3:1)—a Messianic figure who fulfills the ultimate purpose of the Abrahamic covenant in blessing the nations.

### ***Third Disputation (Malachi 2:10–16) – Syncretism in Divorce and Inter-marriage***

Before the arrival of the divine Messiah and the judgment he brings (2:17–3:5), however, the third disputation of Malachi (2:10–16) probes more deeply the syncretistic underpinnings for the sins mentioned in the first two disputations (1:1–5; 1:6–2:9). Speaking himself for the first time, the prophet confronts the repeated acts of “committing treachery, breaking trust” (*bgd*; 2:10, 11, 14, 15, 16) found in intermarriages with female worshipers of a foreign deity (2:11–12) and Israelite men divorcing their Yahwistic wives (2:14–16). Past approaches to this challenging passage have tended to dichotomize sharply between understanding Israel's faithlessness as figurative references to apostasy and as literal descriptions of divorce.<sup>31</sup> As missiologists and social scientists have shown, however, conversion from one religious system to another tends to involve changes in beliefs and ethics which are interdependent and not easily separated.<sup>32</sup> Likewise in Malachi's time, the faithlessness of Israel toward both divine and human spouses is driven by a pragmatic attraction to the magical and karmic ideas which claim to offer a better gateway to the supernatural. In short, Israel is being pulled between the competing worldviews of Yahwism and animism.<sup>33</sup>

The holistic scope of Malachi 2:10–16 is traced through numerous allusions to the first and second disputations in the book. In the opening question posed to Israel, “Do we not all have one father [*’āb*]?” (2:10), the prophet echoes the assertion of YHWH that he is Israel's “father” (*’āb*) who deserves honor and fear (1:6). And in the next verse's accusation of treachery, Malachi describes Israel's motive in marrying the female worshiper of a foreign deity as “love” (2:11), the same verbal root (*’hb*) which earlier described both YHWH's declaration of “love” for his people as well as Israel's objection that their God had failed to “love” them (1:2). These uses of kinship language indicate that Israel's skepticism about YHWH's loving care (1:1–5) and unparalleled worth among the gods (1:6–2:9) has

engendered two kinds of estrangement that are mutually reinforcing—both the family ties that bind YHWH to Israel as well as Israelite men to their wives (2:10–16).

The synergy of these two relationships is also evidenced in how the end of the divine-human covenant is described as Israel's retaliatory act of marrying "the daughter of a foreign god" (2:11).<sup>34</sup> This somewhat cryptic phrase describes Israel's conversion from Yahwistic faith to the syncretism of venerating one who "was neither foreign woman nor goddess; she was both at once. Those married to her were lured to her cult and her gods."<sup>35</sup> Such a connection between idolatry and sexual sin evokes the OT's other uses of the harlotry metaphor to condemn both spiritual and physical adultery, a theme summarized here in Malachi as the sin of "profaning the covenant of our fathers" (2:10).<sup>36</sup> Israel perceives that YHWH has not upheld his supposed promises to enforce the "piety-prosperity equation,"<sup>37</sup> so a disappointed people act in turn upon their misunderstanding of the Deuteronomic covenant as a karmic system by abandoning YHWH for a female deity (and her worshippers).

Why, then, is apostate Israel said to continue presenting "an offering to YHWH of hosts" (2:12)? While the coexistence of different religious practices may seem incoherent to modern Westerners who are typically influenced by secularism, missiologists have shown how eclecticism in rituals is typical of non-Western and/or animistic societies in which relationships with an assortment of supernatural powers are carefully balanced against one another so as to meet the felt needs of a people.<sup>38</sup> It is not until later in Malachi that these needs are named as Israel's desire for fertility in offspring (2:15) and land (3:11). Since the postexilic period was characterized by privation in the land (Hag 1:9–11; Neh 9:36–37) despite the OT's repeated claim that YHWH is superior to the fertility deities of Canaan (e.g., Hos 14:1–9), syncretism which venerated both YHWH as well as other gods would have appealed to practically minded Israel as a way to "cover all the bases" in seeking the restoration of fertility for its land and people. The fact that Israel's rituals are an expression of a magical worldview is confirmed by reappearance of the term "offering" (*minhâ*; Mal 2:13) that was used earlier (1:10, 11, 13) to describe Israel's attempts to minimize the costs of sacrificing to YHWH while maximizing the benefits from him.

Syncretism in Israel is found not only in observing non-Yahwistic rituals

alongside Yahwistic ones. In a reference to Israel's old fascination with Baalistic practices, the latter half of Malachi's third disputation portrays Israel as a melodramatic people who "cover the altar of YHWH with tears, with weeping, and with groaning" (2:13). These attempts to force YHWH's hand using pagan practices of mourning (Hos 7:14; cf. Ezek 8:14) represent a continuation of the syncretism with Canaanite nature religion which dates back to the monarchical period.<sup>39</sup> Given the synergy of Baalistic practices and sexual immorality in Israel's past (e.g., Hos 4:13–14; Jer 3:1–2), it appears that Malachi condemns apostasy from YHWH and estrangement from a God-given wife in the same breath by joining them through a reference to "the wife of your covenant" (2:14). This parallel phrase to "covenant of your fathers" (2:10) emphasizes that the degree of intimacy in Israel's human marriages reflects directly on the Mosaic covenant as a marriage relationship (cf. Jer 31:32).<sup>40</sup> Or stated negatively, the act of divorcing an Israelite wife in favor of marrying a foreign one who worships another deity (2:15–16; cf. v. 11) is a consummate act of apostasy that encompasses both theological and ethical dimensions. For this reason YHWH cannot help but "hate" (*śn'*; 2:16) divorce among Malachi's hearers with the same intensity that he "hated" (*śn'*) Esau for its determination to rebel against him (1:3).

#### ***Fourth Disputation (Malachi 2:17–3:6) – The Non-Magical Arrival of YHWH's Non-Karmic Justice***

To this point, the disputations of Malachi have taken aim at Israel's misunderstandings that retribution could be harnessed by rituals to placate a demanding deity (e.g., 1:7–8, 10; 2:13). But as Glazier-Macdonald observes, YHWH's comprehensive rebuttal of these errors in the preceding three disputations (1:1–5; 1:6–2:9; 2:10–16) has left his people without much of a framework to understand how divine justice ought to work: "Having lived with the almost magical assumption that good begets good and evil begets evil, they were standing on a precipice. They could find no evidence for the existence of a just judge of the world when they saw the wicked prosper and God showing no sign of intervention."<sup>41</sup> A people whose karmic worldview has imploded then protest that only two ways are left for them to understand the nature of divine justice—either the moral standards revealed in YHWH's covenant are nonsensical ("everyone who does evil is

good in YHWH's sight"; 2:17c) or YHWH himself is absent or apathetic to begin with ("Where is the God of justice?"; 2:17e). Each objection will be addressed in turn through Malachi's sixth (3:13–4:3 [MT 3:21]) and fifth (3:7–12) disputations.

YHWH provides a surprising third way, however, in response to Israel's complaints about his justice and presence. Although the question, "Where is the God of justice [*mišpāṭ*]?" (2:17e), had been directed against YHWH as a lament or taunt (cf. Ps 42:3, 10; 79:10; 115:2), Malachi 3:1–5 asserts that YHWH's presence will indeed arrive through the person of "my messenger" (3:1),<sup>42</sup> a Messianic figure who is also revealed to be YHWH himself coming to his people in "judgment" (*mišpāṭ*; 3:5).<sup>43</sup> This wordplay on *mišpāṭ* indicates that Israel speaks better than it knows, for what the people had been demanding the presence of a magical deity whose justice would be expressed in karmic ways. What appeared to be a lack of "justice" on YHWH's part, though, was in actuality a temporary relenting of "judgment" in the face of Israel's unrighteousness. Instantaneous judgment from YHWH would only have reinforced Israel's cause-and-effect worldview, so Malachi first provides an alternative foundation for morality as the postponed, but still certain, arrival of a holy God.<sup>44</sup> This sort of antimony between the concepts of karma and grace—the former as impersonal and mechanistic punishment which contrasts to the latter as personal and restorative deliverance—has long been noted by philosophers and theologians.<sup>45</sup>

Between this wordplay on *mišpāṭ* which frames the passage, the intervening verses explain why YHWH's apparent absence from his people was a gracious delay before the coming of his judgment. In an allusion to the "Day of YHWH" tradition of Amos 5:18–20, Malachi 3:2–4 warns that those who long for the Day of YHWH must know that its coming will bring chastening upon Israel rather than the vindication expected by the people. In particular, the same priesthood that defiled YHWH's reputation among the nations (cf. 2:1–9) must undergo purification in order to present "offerings in righteousness" (3:3). Restoration of "righteousness" (*šēdāqā*), the virtue of faithful covenant relationship with YHWH (cf. Isa 1:27; 33:5; Hos 10:12), will also restore Jerusalem as the place of pleasing worship to YHWH (3:4). Jerusalem can then fulfill its intended purpose as "Zion" (e.g., Ps 48:1–2; 125:1–2), the seat of YHWH's earthly rule where his "great name" (Mal 1:11, 14) is to be honored by all nations (cf. Zech 8:13).<sup>46</sup>

Yet before Jerusalem can reassume this missional role in which Israel is reappointed as worship leader for the world (e.g., Pss 48; 99), YHWH must purge every trace of impurity from his city so that his presence may dwell there. It is striking in this regard that Malachi 3:5 names the first sin to be condemned by YHWH's "judgment" (3:5a) as the syncretism of consulting "sorcerers" (3:5b). This term refers to practitioners of the occult and witchcraft whose activities were common in Israel before and throughout the exilic period (cf. Mic 5:12[11]; Isa 47:9, 12).<sup>47</sup> In light of these magical practices, the following verse's assertion that "I, YHWH, do not change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed" (Mal 3:6), is best understood in this context as YHWH's declaration of unique steadfastness as compared to the fickle powers that Israel sought to manipulate through ritual. For if the God of Israel had truly arrived in the magical ways envisioned by his people, then the result would have been an impersonal act of destruction and being cast off rather than Malachi's characterization of YHWH as "*drawing near for judgment*" (3:5a). The coexistence of relationship in "*drawing near*" (*qrb*) and holiness in bringing "*judgment*" (*mišpāt*) exemplifies the uniqueness of the Deuteronomic principle of recompense against a cultural context of karma and magic. In the fifth and sixth disputations which follow, the distinctiveness of how rewards and punishment from YHWH should have been understood by Israel is outlined in detail.

### ***Fifth Disputation (3:7–12) – The Retribution Principle after Syncretism, Part I***

The next two disputations rework the concept of retribution in a polemic against Israel's syncretism with karmic and magical ideas. In this respect the fifth disputation is famous for an oft-misunderstood invitation from God: "Test me now in this—says YHWH of Hosts—if I will not open for you the windows of heaven and pour out for you a blessing until it overflows (3:10b). Since "this" refers to the preceding commands to bring tithes and stop robbing God (3:8–10a), Malachi has often been adduced by modern prosperity theologians as evidence that financial giving to God's servants will bring greater prosperity to the giver, as noted earlier.<sup>48</sup> It is deeply ironic, however, that Malachi's missional response to syncretism has often been misinterpreted as evidence for the very worldview of magic and karma that is being overthrown by the prophet.

The literary and canonical contexts of the fifth disputation (3:7–12) indicate that YHWH's offer of "blessing" (*bērākā*; 3:10; cf. 2:2) does not refer to extraordinary prosperity. What is instead in view is the restoration of everyday sustenance from the land as described in the book of Deuteronomy.<sup>49</sup> In Malachi 3:7, the prophet's audience is confronted using the covenantal language that Moses employed to warn a former generation of Israel against "turning aside" (*sūr*; Mal 3:7a; cf. Deut 4:9; 9:12, 16) rather than "keeping" (*šmr*; Mal 3:7b; cf. Deut 4:2; 5:1) the ways of YHWH. Following the arrival of Deuteronomy 28's covenant curses in the various exiles of Israel, the call from Malachi to "repent" (*šûb*; 3:7c) also evokes Moses as one who foresees that "return/repentance" (*šûb*; Deut 30:8) on the part of Israel will invite YHWH's "return" (*šûb*; Deut 30:9b). This act of restoration will not be a supernatural overflow, but rather the land's natural provision as attained through "all the work of your hand" (Deut 30:9a). Similarly, Malachi's explanation that true repentance entails bringing the "tithe" (*ma' āšēr*; Mal 3:8, 10) does not denote money, but the firstfruits of the land which Deuteronomy mandated as offerings. These were tithes intended for celebrating YHWH's faithfulness in the harvest (e.g., Deut 12:6, 11) and as sustenance for disadvantaged members of the community, such as the Levitical priests who lacked a tribal inheritance (e.g., Deut 14:27–28; 26:12–13). Finally, an agricultural understanding of the "blessing" (Mal 3:10) as the land's normal yield accords with how YHWH promises to remove the natural pests which sabotage the vine and prevent it from growing properly (3:11). The nations will recognize that YHWH has blessed his people with the blessings of the covenant (3:12).<sup>50</sup>

The numerous allusions to the land's covenant blessings in Malachi 3:7–12 place the injunction for Israel to "test [*bhn*] me in this" (3:10b) in a quite different light than the neo-animistic view of prosperity theologians. Rather than a magical use of ritual to master natural forces, as is the norm in animistic systems,<sup>51</sup> the people of Israel are being summoned to enact the theological reality that life under YHWH's covenant provided them with daily sustenance that they never deserved or earned. This means that "prosperity and blessing are more appropriately linked with the grace that initiated the covenant than they are with the idea of merit flowing from obedience to its demands."<sup>52</sup> So whether *retribution* is the right term to describe this sort of grace-motivated obedience to YHWH, it is undeniable that Israel's system of rewards and

punishment contrasts starkly to karmic systems which focus on the merit of the giver or the giver's behavior.<sup>53</sup>

***Sixth Disputation (3:13–4:6[MT 3:23]) – The Retribution Principle after Syncretism, Part II***

The sixth disputation sharpens further these distinctions between proper and improper understandings of retribution by reusing several terms from the fifth disputation. In response to YHWH's invitation to "test" (*bhn*; 3:10) him, that is, to trust his faithfulness to fulfill his promises (3:11–12), the people of YHWH revert to the karmic understanding of immediate and mechanical recompense. They exclaim in frustration, "It is vain to serve God; and what profit is it that we have kept [*šmr*] his charge? . . . not only are evildoers built up but they also test [*bhn*] God and escape" (3:14, 15b–d). But like the *double entendre* in Israel's demand for a "God of justice" (2:17; cf. 3:5), the present objections that obedience lacks rewards (3:14) and disobedience avoids punishment (3:15) serve to highlight a series of ironies that are deeper than Israel understands. To begin with, the failure of Israel to "keep" the ways of YHWH (2:7, 9, 15), despite their present claim to the contrary (3:14), places them among "the evildoers" (3:15b) to whom they object so stridently. Their complaint about those who "test God and escape" (3:15c–d) similarly condemns themselves as rebels against YHWH who have thus far not received their just deserts. In this context the reappearance of the verb "test" (*bhn*) indicates that Israel has distorted the invitation to "test" YHWH's faithfulness (cf. 3:10) into an accusation that YHWH permits the evil to "test" his justice without consequences (3:15c). In sum, this people exhibits the telltale signs of nominal faith in misinterpreting YHWH's patience in dialoguing with them as an excuse for their own apathy in refusing to respond to him.

The seesaw dialogues of the fifth and sixth disputations show that Israel mistakenly seeks retribution when YHWH offers grace, whereas this divine gift which Israel has received in abundance is in turn misused by a syncretistic and ungrateful people to accuse their God of being unfair. In reality, however, the ability of Israel to lodge such complaints in the first place against YHWH's lack of karmic justice hinges upon the fact that the worldview of karma is not true. As YHWH refuses to play by the mechanistic rules of karma, this impersonal worldview then becomes its own downfall

since Israel is in effect complaining to a personal God that the universe is not a closed system of ethical retribution. The logic of Israel's syncretism refutes itself through the realization that human suffering cannot be explained as a karmic connection between cause and effect nor as the magical use of rituals to control the powers. Inadvertently, Israel arrives at the realization that YHWH is a transcendent Creator who enforces the morality of the universe without being subject to the ancient Near Eastern dictates of karma and magic.

The collapse of syncretism leads to a change of heart for a missional people. Among those in Malachi's audience who now commit to giving YHWH the "fear" (*yirē'*) that his "name" (*šēm*) deserves among the nations (3:16; cf. 1:11, 14), YHWH promises that they will be reinstated as the same kind of "royal possession" (*sēgullâ*; 3:17) among the world's peoples which he designed Israel to be at Mount Sinai (Exod 19:5). More urgently, the need for the rest of Malachi's audience to repent is reinforced by the fact that, for all of YHWH's grace and patience, the covenant principle of reward and blessings remains operative in a modified way which differs from their former misunderstandings. YHWH will still separate the righteous and wicked on a day of fiery judgment (3:18–4:1[MT 3:19]), while those who repent and heed YHWH's summons for a missional people to "fear my name" (4:2[3:20]; cf. 1:11–14) will be among those who judge the wicked rather than themselves being judged (4:3[3:21]). And in a conclusion to not only Malachi but the entire Book of the Twelve and Latter Prophets, the better way of obedience to Moses (4:4[3:22]) will enable coming generations to avoid judgment on "the great and terrible day of YHWH" (4:5[3:23]; cf. 3:2) and experience reconciliation with YHWH, family, and the rest of creation (4:6[3:24]). In summary, the missional message of Malachi warns against syncretism's assumption that a delay in YHWH's arrival means that this "God of justice" is unjust or will never come—the unavoidable conclusions of magical and karmic approaches to divine retribution.

## CONCLUSION

The prophet Malachi speaks to God's people in every age who are prone to manipulate him like a magical power or diminish his justice into a karmic



force. Throughout the history of Israel but especially after the shattering event of exile, the experience of defeat or weakness among the nations led YHWH's people to seek ways of seizing control over their destiny instead of walking by faith with the God who promised to uphold his people. Sacrificial rituals designed to bring honor to YHWH as "great king" among the nations (e.g., 1:11, 14) became Israel's attempts to twist his arm into acting on their behalf. Such a magical approach went hand in hand with distorting the covenantal promise of rewards and punishment into the karmic principle of retribution from the ancient Near East. In essence, the distinctive identity of Israel as a people who would receive blessings from YHWH as long as they did not seek them for their own sake was compromised by the syncretism of using their God as a means to their selfish ends.

Against these errors that are animistic at their core, Malachi proclaims that the God of Israel is "YHWH of Hosts" who defies the usual laws of causality to which deities are usually subject (e.g., 1:5; 2:17; 3:6). YHWH answers the misshapen question of Israel, "Where is the [magical] God of [karmic] justice? (2:17)," with the countercultural truth that he will come to his people in gracious restoration even as he judges them (3:5). From such temporary chastening will reemerge a missional people of "my messenger" (3:1), the Messianic figure who succeeds where Israel and its priesthood failed to intercede between YHWH and the rest of creation as a priestly "messenger." The temporary task of the prophet Malachi—whose name means "my messenger" (1:1)—to bear YHWH's word to a syncretistic people will thus be superseded by the presence of a missional God himself whose presence is not magical (3:17) nor his justice karmic in nature (3:18).

The allure of syncretism is hardly unique to an ancient and/or Eastern cultural environment. For in the modern technological world, in both First World and Majority World contexts, the primal temptation to humanism remains present in the impulse to control one's destiny through science and other myths about self-actualization—what Lesslie Newbigin has labeled the Enlightenment's illusion to have become an autonomous possessor of "the secret of knowledge and therefore the secret of mastery over the world."<sup>54</sup> In this regard the book of Malachi stands equally against the animist's rituals to control the natural world and the technologist's quest to harness the scientific universe in the name of human progress. Responding to both kinds of syncretism which see creation as impersonal and materialist, the missional

God of Israel promises in Malachi to draw near with his unique blend of presence and justice as “YHWH of Hosts” and so dethrone the presumption that human causation is the key that unlocks the Creator’s domain.

- 
- 1 Edwin M. Good, *Irony in the Old Testament* (2nd ed.; Bible and Literature Series; Sheffield: Almond Press, 1981), 196.
  - 2 *Ibid.*, 197–98.
  - 3 As famously noted by Morton Smith, “The Common Theology of the Ancient Near East,” *JBL* 71 (1952): 135–47 (144–45).
  - 4 Sigmund Mowinckel, *Religion and Cult: The Old Testament and the Phenomenology of Religion* (ed. K. C. Hanson; trans. John F. X. Sheehan; Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012), 24–28.
  - 5 Whitley R. P. Kaufman, “Karma, Rebirth, and the Problem of Evil,” *Philosophy East & West* 55 (2005): 15–32 (18).
  - 6 The need for clear differentiation of concepts is underscored by how the OT’s creational theology often draws from the same metaphorical field of agriculture that is used to describe karma in Eastern religions. Unlike European languages in which “sowing” and “reaping” lack religious overtones, the same ideas in an Asian language like Chinese evoke the unbreakable link between cause and effect that is characteristic of Buddhism. In the Chinese New Version’s rendering of Hos 8:7, for example, the verbs used for “sowing” (播种, *bo zhong*) and “reaping” (收成, *shou cheng*) are also employed in Buddhist Chinese literature to describe how the principle of karma operates.
  - 7 George R. Hunsberger, “Proposals for a Missional Hermeneutic: Mapping the Conversation,” *Missiology: An International Review* 39 (2011): 309–21.
  - 8 E.g., Jason Hale, *Your Prosperity Blueprint: How to Go From Where You Are to the Level of Success God Intended for You* (New York: Morgan James Publishing, 2012), 45–49; Young Hoon Lee, “The Case for Prosperity Theology,” *ERT* 20 (1996): 26–39 (28); Kenneth Copeland, *The Laws of Prosperity* (Fort Worth, TX: Kenneth Copeland Publications, 1974), 8, 71.
  - 9 J. G. McConville, *Exploring the Old Testament: A Guide to the Prophets* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 260.
  - 10 Contra Shawna Dolansky, *Now You See It, Now You Don’t: Biblical Perspectives on the Relationship between Magic and Religion* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2008), 95–97, who argues that Deuteronomy’s covenant theology of rewards and punishment is itself a form of magic.
  - 11 James A. Fischer, “Notes on the Literary Form and Message of Malachi,” *CBQ* 34 (1972): 315–20 (319).
  - 12 E.g., Bruce C. Cresson, “The Condemnation of Edom in Postexilic Judaism,” in *The Use of the Old Testament in the New and Other Essays: Studies in Honor of William Franklin Stinespring* (ed. James M. Efird; Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1972), 125–48.
  - 13 Daniel C. Timmer, *The Non-Israelite Nations in the Book of the Twelve: Thematic Coherence and the Diachronic-Synchronic Relationship in the Minor Prophets* (Biblical Interpretation Series 135; Leiden: Brill, 2015), 204–05.
  - 14 Andrew E. Hill, ed., *Malachi: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 25D; New York: Doubleday, 1998), 149.
  - 15 Michael B. Shepherd, “Compositional Analysis of the Twelve,” *ZAW* 120 (2008): 184–93 (187).
  - 16 Danie F. O’Kennedy, “The Use of the Epithet YHWH *Seba’ot* In Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi,” *JNSL* 33 (2007): 77–89 (83–84).
  - 17 On the usual focus of a national deity on their own people and territory, see Daniel I. Block, *The Gods of the Nations: Studies in Ancient Near Eastern National Theology* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000), 82–84.
  - 18 Saul M. Olyan, “Honor, Shame, and Covenant Relations in Ancient Israel and Its Environment,” *JBL* 115 (1996): 201–18 (204).
  - 19 Mark S. Smith, *God in Translation: Deities in Cross-Cultural Discourse in the Biblical World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 119–20.
  - 20 L. Michael Morales, *Who Shall Ascend the Mountain of the Lord?: A Biblical Theology of the Book of Leviticus* (NSBT 37; Nottingham: Apollos, 2015), 126.

- <sup>21</sup> Paul G. Hiebert, R. Daniel Shaw, and Tite Tiénou, *Understanding Folk Religion: A Christian Response to Popular Beliefs and Practices* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1999), 73–92.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 83–85.
- <sup>23</sup> Philip M. Steyne, *Gods of Power: A Study of the Beliefs and Practices of Animists* (Columbia, SC: Impact International Foundation, 1999), 97.
- <sup>24</sup> Cf. Eugene A. Nida and William A. Smalley, *Introducing Animism* (New York: Friendship Press, 1959), 21–30.
- <sup>25</sup> P. J. Botha, “Honour and Shame as Keys to the Interpretation of Malachi,” *OTE* 14 (2001): 392–403 (396–97).
- <sup>26</sup> The complementary aspects of Hebrew šēm (“name”) as the objective dimension of a person’s “character” (e.g., Gen 27:36; Exod 34:5–7) and subjective “reputation” (e.g., Gen 12:2; 2 Sam 7:9) are well-discussed by Allen P. Ross, “šēm,” *NIDOTTE* 4:148–50.
- <sup>27</sup> Cf. Innocent Himbaza, “YHWH Seba’ot devient le grand roi. Une interprétation de Ml 1,6–14 à la lumière du contexte perse,” *VT* 62 (2012): 357–68 (364–65).
- <sup>28</sup> Michael Fishbane, “Form and Reformulation of the Biblical Priestly Blessing,” *JAOS* 103 (1983): 115–21 (118–19).
- <sup>29</sup> Botha, “Honour and Shame,” 398.
- <sup>30</sup> Elmer A. Martens, “Intertext Messaging: Echoes of the Aaronic Blessing (Numbers 6:24–26),” *Direction* 38 (2009): 163–78 (167–68).
- <sup>31</sup> E.g., Martin A. Shields, “Syncretism and Divorce in Malachi 2,10–16,” *ZAW* 111 (1999): 68–86.
- <sup>32</sup> E.g., Heinz Streib and Barbara Keller, “The Variety of Deconversion Experiences: Contours of a Concept in Respect to Empirical Research,” *Archive for the Psychology of Religion* 26 (2004): 181–200; Lewis R. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993); John Lofland and Rodney Stark, “Becoming a World-Saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective,” *American Sociological Review* 30 (1965): 862–75.
- <sup>33</sup> On the attractiveness of animism as a functionally oriented worldview, see Marguerite G. Kraft, *Understanding Spiritual Power: A Forgotten Dimension of Cross-Cultural Mission and Ministry* (American Society of Missiology Series 22; Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2003), 59–60; Gailyn Van Rheenen, *Communicating Christ in Animistic Contexts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1991), 233–36.
- <sup>34</sup> Cf. Elie Assis, “Structure and Meaning in the Book of Malachi,” in *Prophecy and the Prophets in Ancient Israel: Proceedings of the Oxford Old Testament Seminar* (LHBOTS 531; London: T&T Clark, 2010), 364–66.
- <sup>35</sup> Beth Glazier-McDonald, “Intermarriage, Divorce, and BAT-’EL-NEKAR: Insights into Malachi 2:10–16,” *JBL* 106 (1987): 603–11 (610).
- <sup>36</sup> Ming Him Ko, “Be Faithful to the Covenant: A Technical Translation of and Commentary on Malachi 2.10–16,” *BT* 65 (2014): 34–48 (42).
- <sup>37</sup> This is the overly mathematical terminology used to describe Deuteronomy’s covenantal ethics by C. H. H. Scobie, *The Ways of Our God: An Approach to Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 196, 205–06, *passim*.
- <sup>38</sup> Kraft, *Understanding Spiritual Power*, 12–19; Steyne, *Gods of Power*, 73–86.
- <sup>39</sup> Ko, “Malachi 2.10–16,” 44–45; John Day, “Hosea and the Baal Cult,” in *Prophecy and the Prophets in Ancient Israel*, 216.
- <sup>40</sup> Markus Zehnder, “A Fresh Look at Malachi II 13–16,” *VT* 53 (2003): 224–59 (234–36).
- <sup>41</sup> Beth Glazier-McDonald, *Malachi, The Divine Messenger* (SBLDS 98; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987), 123.
- <sup>42</sup> The likelihood that the audience’s objections are accurately quoted by Malachi but then infused with new, sometimes ironic, meaning is observed by Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer, “Giving a Voice to Malachi’s Interlocutors,” *SJOT* 19 (2005): 173–92.
- <sup>43</sup> Andrew S. Malone, “Is the Messiah Announced in Malachi 3:1?,” *TynBul* 57 (2006): 215–28; Beth Glazier-McDonald, “MALAK HABBĒRĪT: The Messenger of the Covenant in Mal 3:1,” *HAR* 11 (1987): 93–104.
- <sup>44</sup> Cf. James L. Crenshaw, *Prophetic Conflict: Its Effect upon Israelite Religion* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 31.
- <sup>45</sup> E.g., Sung Wook Chung, “Other Religions,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Evangelical Theology*, ed. Gerald R. McDermott (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 363–64; Brian E. Kelly, “‘Retribution’ Revisited: Covenant, Grace, and Restoration,” in *The Chronicler as Theologian: Essays in Honor of Ralph W. Klein* (ed. M. Patrick Graham, Steven L. McKenzie, and Gary N. Knoppers; LHBOTS 371; New York: T&T Clark, 2003), 206–27.
- <sup>46</sup> Terence Collins, *The Mantle of Elijah: The Redaction Criticism of the Prophetic Books* (The Biblical Seminar 20; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 81; Glazier-McDonald, “Messenger of the Covenant,” 101–03.

<sup>47</sup> Hill, *Malachi*, 281.

<sup>48</sup> See n. 8.

<sup>49</sup> David T. Williams, "The Windows of Heaven," *OTE S* (1992): 402–13 (403–04).

<sup>50</sup> Pamela J. Scalise, "Malachi 3:13–4:3—A Book of Remembrance for God-Fearers," *RevExp* 95 (1998): 571–81 (575–76).

<sup>51</sup> Steyne, *Gods of Power*, 91–99; Nida and Smalley, *Introducing Animism*, 34–35.

<sup>52</sup> J. Robert Vannoy, "Retribution: Theology of," *NIDOTTE* 4:1142–43.

<sup>53</sup> Kelly, "Retribution' Revisited," 213–14.

<sup>54</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 23.