Malachi Commentary

A. Introduction (1:1)
The opening verse establishes that the book is to read as a prophetic announcement, a message from God's prophet. The Hebrew word maššā, typically translated "oracle" also has the sense "burden" or heavy/weighty object. occurs 67 times in the Old Testament. In Mal 1:1, the prophet seems to (1) the burden and responsibility of conveying an ominous word to the people, and (2) the weighty responsibility such a prophetic calling conveys, whether the message is ominous or not. The message is a burden or weight on the shoulders of the prophet.

B. Prophetic Challenge (1:2-4:3)
I. How Have You Loved Us? (1:2-5): The God Who Loves and Hates
Malachi begins with a declaration of Yahweh's love for his people, the only book of the OT or NT to begin with such an affirmation. This love is more than an expression of emotion; above all it is an expression of covenantal relationship. God and his people are bound together in a relationship governed by love. The word is a covenant word, an election word. God chose Israel because he loved her (Deut. 7:6-8).

The affirmation of God's love reveals a complaint or dispute from God's people: "In what way have you loved us?" Their response is a virtual denial of the love of God. The Israelites apparently want a bill of particulars of the love of Yahweh to be paraded before them. This is likely born of their continuing hardships and sufferings. They could not see God's love in the destruction wrought in their land and their long years of captivity. Also, the promises of prosperity were calculated on a vending machine basis. Put in a number of good works and there would be an output of material prosperity. In the absence of such material prosperity, they question God's love. In response, God uses the fate of Esau to illustrate God's love for Israel. "Jacob I have loved but Esau I have hated." God's choosing of the younger brother over the older brother raises the complex question about the nature of God's love, fatherhood, and fairness.

One of the central questions involves the meaning of "love" and "hate" in this text. God's love is not a sweet, syrupy emotional attachment, rather, God's love has to do with his covenant and election purposes. "Chosen" could serve as a synonym here. On the other hand, how should we understand "hate?" It could mean to "love less," not intense dislike. Perhaps we could point to Jesus telling his disciples that unless they hate their parents they cannot be his disciple (Luke 14:26). The easiest understanding of this saying is that Jesus did not mean "hate" in the sense of intense loathing but in the sense of "loving less." More importantly, however, is whether or not the focus is on these two individuals or the nations they represent? Is it personal or corporate? Is this about two individuals, Jacob and Esau, and their eternal destinies? Or, do Jacob and Esau represent nations. The story in Genesis gives us the clues. Esau is identified with Edom, Jacob with Israel (Gen 32:28).
The writer of Genesis makes it plain: the two boys are twins, jostling about in Rebekah’s belly. She asks God, why is this happening? To which God replied, “Two nations are in your womb, and two people from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger” (Gen 25:20-23). This was literally two nations separated at birth. In choosing Jacob over Esau, God was illustrating his choice of Israel, the descendants of Jacob, over the Edomites, the descendants of Esau. This didn’t mean that all Edomites were eternally lost. It just means that these nations were not chosen for the revelatory role in history for which God chose the Israelites. Note Paul’s use of Mal 1:2 in Rom 9:6-13. Ultimately, the sovereign God has mercy on whomever he wants and hardens whomever he wants. Not coincidentally, those who believe make up the “whomever he has mercy on”; those who refuse to believe make up the “whomever he hardens.”

II. How Have We Despised Your Name (1:6-2:9): The God Whose Name Is Great Among the Nations

A. Yahweh Defiled by Polluted Offerings (1:6-14)

1. It Would Be Better to Shut Down the Temple (1:6-10)

The section begins with a widely accepted truth in this culture: sons honor fathers and servants honor masters. A reverence for parents was engrained in Israelites via the fifth commandment (Exod 20:12; Deut 5:16). Yahweh is likely in view in both metaphors. God is both Father and Lord/master (Exod 4:22; Isa 26:13; Ps 123:2). The painful reality is, however, that Israel has disrespected God and failed to acknowledge God’s authority by their actions. Specifically, the priests, the one group that should have known better, are despisers of the name Yahweh. They were in violation of the 3rd Commandment, “You shall not take the name of your Lord, your God in vain.”

The priests were continually bringing contaminated, polluted offerings and placing them on the altar. It was the responsibility of priests to ensure that the offerings brought by the people met the requirements. It was so sickening to God, that Yahweh bemoans that there is no one among the priests “to shut the doors and not light a fire on my altar in vain.”

2. Yahweh’s Name Must Be Honored (1:11-14)

At the present, not even Israel’s offerings were acceptable to God. But the day would come when even the nations would offer pure worship to God. Paul seems to reflect the same anticipation in Phil 2:11, when every knee shall bow and tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord among the nations.

In v.13 we learn that the priestly duties had become wearisome, a bore to the priests. Oh, what a burden worship has become. The joy in performing their duties was lost. They might have continued to look like their ministry mattered to them, but in reality, they had become phonies. The fire they kindle is only on the altar; there is none in their heart. V. 14 invokes God’s curse on those who try to substitute a blemished animal (see Deut 27:15-26). The basis for the curse is Yahweh’s kingship and the necessity that his name is reverenced among the nations.
B. Disrespectful Priests Rebuked (2:1-9)
Malachi confronts the priests with the consequences of a curse by portraying Levi as the model ancestor, followed by a statement defining the role of the ideal priest and also of priestly corruption.

1. Blessings Turned into Curse (2:1-3)
Malachi makes use of a judgment oracle that involves giving proper honor and respect to Yahweh’s name. And if they did not, God promised to “curse your blessings.” But what does this vague threat mean?
--God would take away their material blessings.
--They would forfeit the blessings of God’s covenant with the Aaronic priests, namely peace (Num 25:12-13).
--God would take away their ability to bear children.
--God would turn the blessings that the priests pronounced on worshippers at the temple (Num 6:23-27) into curses.
--A combination of all four.

*I will rebuke your offspring*
Note the textual variant in 2:3. The LXX has “I will cut off your arm,” probably not a literal threat but rather figuratively to render the priest powerless to reach out his arm and extend the blessing. The MT, on the other hand, has “I will rebuke your offspring.” Central to this curse is the reality that the priestly office was hereditary (Num 3:5-10). Thus, the blessing of sons and the carrying on of the priestly heritage is threatened.

*I will spread dung on your faces*
*I will remove you from my presence*

2. Levites as Ideal Ministers (2:4-9)
The covenant with Levi is a reference to the Levitical responsibilities described in Deut 18:1-8. In payment for their service in the sacrificial system and in worship, they would be fed from the sacrifices. They would serve in the name of Yahweh, but they would have no territorial land that would be theirs as an inheritance. Their duties included assisting the priests, singing (1 Chron 9:33) and baking (1 Chron 9:31-32).

In vv. 5-7, Levi is presented as an ideal priest in both speech and lifestyle. Levi’s ministry represented what a priest’s ministry should be. Their lips should guard knowledge and people should seek instruction from them. They should be the messengers of the Lord. That is, they are bearers, revealers, and interpreters of divine revelation. The priests in Malachi’s day, the descendants of Aaron, have:
(1) Turned from the way; (2) They caused many to stumble by their teaching of the Torah; (3) They violated the covenant with Levi (see 2:4).

Conclusion:
a. The gift matters to God. The people are bringing inferior gifts to the priests, and the priests are allowing them to get away with it. There is an implicit demand that we should give our absolute best to God. A New Testament parallel is the story of the widow’s mite (Mark 12:41-44//Luke 21:1-4). In that scene, Jesus rebuked the priests for stealing rather than giving their best. And so it is here. Yahweh would
rather shut down the whole sacrificial system than allow inferior offerings be made there that profane God’s name.
b. The name of Yahweh must/will be acknowledged among the nations. Meanwhile, religious leaders use their position and authority to benefit themselves. They have replaced God’s agenda with their own.

III. Why Are We Unfaithful to God and to One Another? The God Who Hates Divorce (Malachi 2:10-16)

A. God Detests Interfaith Marriage (10-12)

In every other section of Malachi, the oracle begins with a declarative statement, but here it begins with three rhetorical questions. The first two questions act as a couplet and express the same idea: God is father of the Israelites and he called them into being. The people owe their existence to him. If God is their father, then they share a common heritage. Thus, the third question, “Why are you unfaithful to your brothers and sisters and thereby profane/defile/violate the covenant of the fathers? In their marital practices they are violating the covenant God made with Moses at Sinai. This is a reminder that our relationship with others impacts our relationship with God. The terms of the covenant God made with Moses bound them not only in loyalty to God, but to one another.

Over against the one true God who is Father stands a foreign god and her worshippers. If an Israelite joins with a woman who worships another God, then they join another family, one where God is not Father. The issue here is not marrying a person of another ethnicity. The problem is not that the woman is a foreign woman. The problem is that she is the daughter of a foreign god. The punishment for marrying a “daughter of a foreign god” is exclusion from the “tents of Jacob,” that is, the people of Israel. The expression “tents of Jacob” occurs only three times in Scripture (Gen 31:33; Num 24:5; Jer 30:18). Most importantly is the reference in Gen 31:33.

B. God Detests Divorce (13-16)

Regardless of how many tears you might cover the altar with, and no matter how noisy your wailing, God will not accept your offering. God has not interest in grandiose displays of emotion in worship when a man is unfaithful to his wife. Since God instituted marriage, God is present at the ceremony and witness of the joining together of two people. V. 14 emphasizes the covenant nature of marriage. Marriage is NOT a civil arrangement. It is a binding agreement that takes place with God as witness. And since in marriage, the two become one (Gen 2:21-24), God hates divorce. Sadly, the sense of marriage as a lifelong commitment seems like such an antiquated notion. “To have and to hold as long as we both shall live” has been replaced with “as long as my spouse meets my needs and I am happy and fulfilled.” God hates divorce; and so should we.
IV. How Have We Exhausted God with Our Words? The God Who Will Make Things Right (2:17-3:5)

The fourth unit in Malachi, and the most familiar, takes up the enduring question of God’s justice in light of the apparent triumph of those who do evil. It is, in effect, as if evildoers are good in God’s eyes.

A. Complaint of the People: Malachi 2:17

This section opens with an indictment: “You have wearied Yahweh with your words.”

1. Example one of their “wearying” words and attitude:

“Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the Lord” calls into question the most basic attribute of God, that he is good and just.

2. The second example of wearisome words is the question, “Where is the God of justice?”

Justice, in this context, means that God will punish evildoers and vindicate the righteous. Although this could be a legitimate expression of longing/lament, in context it seems more like a taunt.

B. Warning: The Day of the Lord is Coming (3:1-5)

This is the first reference to the Day of the Lord in Malachi, a theme that persists throughout the Book of the Twelve. Whether it is the “day of the Lord,” (18x), “on that day,” (208x) or “the day of darkness and gloom” (Zeph 2:2), it is a coming day when God will intervene in the world and bring his justice fully and harshly. It will be a time of judgment for many, but it will also be a time when God purifies his people. See Joel 2:1-3; Amos 5:18-20; Zeph 1:7.

Though the threat of the Day of the Lord casts a dark shadow over God’s people, there is hope.

V. How Do We Return? The God Who Desires to Bless (3:6-12)

In light of the impending Day of the Lord, and the devastating judgment associated with the arrival of the God of justice, the people could lose hope. Malachi now offers hope: God’s people can repent and God’s presence and blessing can return.

A. Assertion One: God and God’s People Are Consistent (Mal 3:6-7)

The primary assertion Malachi makes is that God does not change. The people had questioned God’s justice, thereby implying that God changed, since he had been a God of justice. God does not change in his being, character, essence, etc. And yet, God can be moved by prayer and can change his mind in response to repentance. What is central here is the consistency of Yahweh in his justice and the consistency of his people in their disobedience. The thing that holds the two ideas together is the call to repentance in 3:7: “Return to me and I will return to you, says the Lord.”

B. Assertion Two: You Are Robbing God (3:8-9)

Malachi takes the opportunity to challenge the commitment of the people to their covenant obligations by raising their failure to bring the whole tithe, and, in effect, doing the unthinkable: They are robbing God.
As a result of robbing God, they were “cursed with a curse.” This is the third reference to cursing in Malachi (1:14; 2:2).

-- The severity of the curse was evident in the economic and social conditions of the people living around 450 B.C. It is clear from 3:11 that locusts were destroying the produce of their soil. The vine in their fields was barren. On top of the crop failure, drought, and locust invasion, the taxation they were required to pay the Persian government would have been overwhelming.

-- The scope of the curse was “the whole nation.” No one was exempt. Interestingly, the other three references to “nation” in Malachi refer to pagan nations (1:11, 14; 3:12). Perhaps Israel’s failure to keep up their end of the covenant placed them at risk of becoming nothing more than a pagan nation themselves.

C. The Imperative: Bring the Full Tithe to the Storehouse and You Will Be Blessed (3:10-12)
The bringing of the full tithe was a concrete action of repentance. The full tithe would involve both agricultural goods, livestock, and harvest. It was to be brought to the “storehouse,” literally in Hebrew, the “house of supplies.” There was a room or chamber that was part of the temple complex where goods were stored.
The invitation from God to “put me to the test” is rare indeed. In fact, in almost every instance, testing God is something evildoers do.
The only place where God says to test me is over tithing. In this one area, God says to test me. God is challenging them to test his willingness and ability to bless, rather than to curse them. If the people will repent and show the concrete evidence of their repentance, Yahweh will restore their land.

If the people will show the fruit of their true repentance and bring the full tithe into the storehouse, Yahweh will open the “windows of heaven.”

VI. Is It Useless to Serve God? The God Who Remembers His People (3:13-4:3)
The final argument in Malachi begins with an indictment similar to the charge in 2:17. The people are accused of slandering Yahweh’s name. Specifically, they have spoken harshly about Yahweh by returning to the question of God’s justice. How is it, in the world governed by the Yahweh there is such violence, poverty, crime, conflict, grief, death, and innumerable injustices

A. Return to Theodicy: The Question of God’s Justice (13-15)
The last accusation against the people is the charge by Yahweh that their words have been harsh against him. In typical fashion, rather than accepting responsibility, the people question Yahweh’s accusation: “How have we spoken against you?”

1. They claim that there is no profit in following Yahweh
2. They have confused material prosperity with blessing.

They live not by the credo, “blessed are the meek. Theirs is “blessed are the arrogant,” who stand in opposition to God. The wicked put God to the test, but without the invitation God gave to those who repent (3:10). The result: rather than curses and judgment, they fare better than the righteous.
B. Comfort for Those Who Fear the Lord (3:16-4:3)

1. Comfort in the present: God hears the cries of his people (3:16). He knows their struggles. They do not pass unnoticed. In fact, there is a book of book of remembrance so that Yahweh is reminded. The exact phrase “book of remembrance” appears only here in Scripture, but the idea of a heavenly book does appear.
   a. A book that describes the future of a person’s life including their number of days. (Ps 139:16).
   b. A “book of life” where the names of God’s people over against the dead are written (Ps 69:28; Phil 4:3; Heb 12:23; Rev 3:5).
   c. A book of remembrance. This book records the obedient deeds of individuals as well as their suffering and hardship. It is a book that ensures things will be made right. It is a book that shows the distinction between God’s obedient people and the ungodly (Rev 20:12).

2. Comfort in the Future: God Will Vindicate His True People and Destroy the Wicked (3:17-4:3)
Not only will the wicked be punished, but also God will vindicate his people. The survival and prosperity of evildoers will no longer stand as evidence against the justice of God.

C. Conclusion (Malachi 4:4-5)