

Haftarat Toledot תולדת

Torah: Genesis 25:19–28:9

Haftarah: Malachi 1:1–2:7

The Love of God

General Overview

The book of Malachi is very short, three chapters in the Hebrew Bible and four in the Septuagint, Vulgate, and English Bibles. Because of this brevity, it is in order to give an overview of the whole book, rather than only the verses of the haftarah, which are 1:1–2:7.

The prophecies contained in this book are mostly words of rebuke. The prophet warns the returned exiles of Judah of several things. First, he has stern words for the *kohenim*, the priests. They have abused the sacrificial system, according to chapter one. In chapter two, we find that although they are to be the teachers of the Torah among the people of Israel, their teaching has not been correct. Also, in chapter two, there are rebukes for men who are putting their wives away and marrying foreign wives in their place. Finally, in chapter three, Malachi presents us with some future prophecy. He tells us that soon Messiah will come and that Elijah will precede His coming.

The designated section of our haftarah is part of the first section of Malachi's prophecy. It consists of a rebuke to Israel for not believing that God loves them, followed by a section warning the kohenim that they are offering unacceptable sacrificial animals on the holy altar. Amid these exhortations is a short passage where the acceptable worship of the remnant from among the nations is compared to the unacceptable worship being conducted in Israel.

Connection to the Parasha

Parashat Toledot contains the story of the battle for the birthright between Jacob and Esau. Esau was the first born of the twins and entitled to the family inheritance, but he sold it to Jacob. However, when Isaac, their father was about to die, that sale apparently did not matter. Isaac, soon to die, was going to bless Esau and confer the birthright to him. It was at this point that their mother, Rivkah interfered and successfully finagled blind Isaac to lay his hands of blessing on Jacob, her favoured son. This, of course, embittered Esau against Jacob.

In the end, the Torah relates how Jacob inherited not only the family fortunes, but also the promises given to them by God.

But, what did God think of all of this? Our haftarah, Malachi 1:1–2:7 provides us with God's view of the passing of the covenant from Isaac to Jacob. The Holy One's position is found in the opening verses when He states, "Jacob I loved and Esau I hated." Accordingly, these verses provide us with the connection to the Torah portion.

Exposition

Just before the prophet discusses some of the matters that needed attention among the descendants of those Judeans who had returned from the exile, he opens with a paragraph denouncing the pride of Esau / Edom. In doing so, he provides us with a far-reaching comment on the nature of God's love for His own as opposed to how He relates to those who are not the chosen ones. With this introduction in mind, the outline for this haftarah will follow the contents as they unfold in the text. Hence, we will examine:

Introduction

- I. The Love of God
- II. The Offerings
- III. The Priests
- IV. The Nations

In this excerpt from Haftarat Toledot, we will focus on the section, The Love of God.

I. The Love of God

This passage opens by informing us of the usual information that is somewhat standard for the prophets: the nature of the prophetic message, the name of the prophet, the origin of the prophecy, and the destination of the message.

A. The Origin of the Prophecy

Malachi, as a true prophet from God, is careful to tell us that although he is the writer, the words are from the Holy One Himself. This indicates that the prophecy contained therein is revelation from God. As such it should be treated with the utmost respect. Whatever theology or directives the book reveals, therefore, are directly from the Lord and should be received with humility and unquestioned acceptance.

B. The Destination of the Message

Curiously enough, we read that the message of Malachi is directed to Israel. The reason that this is rather odd is because Israel was supposed to have been lost and assimilated throughout the ancient Near East by the Assyrians in 722 BCE. By the term "Israel," we are referring to the northern kingdom consisting of ten tribes living north of Judah and Benjamin. The southern kingdom was known by the name of "Judah" because Judah was comprised of the larger of the two tribes (Judah and Benjamin). The Babylonians in 536 BCE took the Judeans captive. Accordingly, the Judeans returned to the land after the Babylonian exile was over.

People began to call the Judeans by a shortened version of the term, "Jews." The same type of pattern follows also in the Hebrew. Thus, the people of Judah were once called *beit yehudah*, "the house of Judah" — יהודי בית, or *bene yehudah*, "The sons of Judah" — יהודה בני. Then, after the exile the names were changed to

forms like these: *hayehudi*, “the Jew” — היהודי or *yehudim*, “Jews” — יהודים. Hence, today we are commonly called “Jews” or “the Jewish People.”

As we can see, it was not common to refer to the descendants of Jacob after the exile as Israel. There might be a good reason that the Holy One chose to do so with the last of the biblical prophets. Some people often refer to the ten tribes of Israel who were scattered by the Assyrians in 722 BCE as “The Lost Tribes” of Israel. Many were, indeed, scattered throughout the ancient Near East. However, does that mean that they are lost?

To answer that question, we must first consider the fact that not all were dispersed out of the Land. For example, 2 Chronicles 30:11 informs us that at the time of King Hezekiah of Judah, there were some Israelites from Asher, Manasseh, and Zebulun who came to Jerusalem. Who knows how many more of the people of the northern ten tribes of Israel were intermixed with Judah and were preserved through the exile in Babylon? Thus, by referring to these postexilic people in Jerusalem, as Israelites, Malachi was telling us that there still remained in the midst of the Judean remnants those from the northern ten tribes.

In short, there still remained people from all of the twelve tribes of Israel, the nation still existed and was in fact, in tact. Therefore, we agree with Moore’s conclusion,

The addressing of the prophecy to Israel proves that the distinction between the Ten Tribes and Judah was obliterated, and the whole nation was supposed to have returned, in the persons of those who actually did immigrate.¹

C. The Name of the Prophet

Strange as it may seem, despite the fact that “Malachi” appears in most English translations, we really do not know for sure who was the writer of this book. The word “Malachi” in Hebrew is מלאכי. It can mean “my angel,” “my messenger,” or the “messenger of the Lord.” The reason for the difference is that the final *yod* (י) can be understood either as the pronominal suffix “my,” or as an abbreviation for the tetragrammaton YHVH יהוה. Moreover, the noun *malach*, מלאכי, may either be rendered, “messenger” or “angel.” Thus, any of these possibilities and their subsequent translations are acceptable.

In addition, the name Malachi appears nowhere else in Scripture, and critical scholars seriously question whether Malachi is a proper name at all.

Furthermore, the Septuagint and the Targum, the two oldest translations of the Tanakh from the Hebrew, render the word *malachi* not as a name, but as an office. In fact, the Targum of Jonathan added after “Malachi” the words “whose name was Ezra the scribe.”²

In light of all this, we should not be dogmatic or insistent that the name of the writer is called “Malachi.” Perhaps Targum Jonathan is correct by saying that Ezra is the messenger of God who wrote this book. However, since we have taken the names of all of the other biblical prophets literally and have not translated them, and in light of all of the historical information provided above,

perhaps Malachi is the author's real name. In truth, we just do not know for sure. Therefore, the careful Bible student should not be dogmatic at this point and leave much room for divergence of opinion.

D. The Nature of the Prophetic Message

The word Malachi used to describe his message is, in the Hebrew, a *masa* מַסָּא. It is often translated as "burden." According to commentator T. V. Moore,

The word "burden" is the motto that describes its character. It is always prefixed to prophecies of a threatening character, and seems designed to indicate the fact that, like some dark cloud, heavy with its fury, these prophecies are surcharged with the wrath of God, and hang ready to pour their dreadful contents on those against whom they are directed³

Moore said it all! Let us now look at just the beginning of the contents of that dark cloud of God's impending wrath against those who ignore His words.

I. The Love of God

Before the Holy One embarks on His case against Israel, He is careful to reassure Israel of His unfailing love toward them. According to his characteristic literary style of a question and answer format, Malachi poses an objection to God's love for them. We cannot determine for certain, but perhaps he is merely echoing what the people were saying and/or thinking. Perhaps they may have been thinking, "How can God love us when He did all of what He did to our nation? God dispersed most of the northern kingdom. He exiled the southern kingdom — both to foreign lands. Moreover, He destroyed the Temple and took away our kings. And now, here we are back home, yet in much poverty and with sorrowful memories of what happened to our forefathers:"

God's response to this objection is, at once, greatly reassuring and tremendously puzzling. We shall explain.

In order to assure Israel of His love for them, the Holy One reminds them that their forefather, Jacob was a twin brother with Esau. Being brothers,

it would therefore have been supposed that the posterity of both the Israelites and the Edomites would be treated alike by God.⁴

Instead, however, God says to Israel in Malachi 1:2–3, "Jacob I loved and Esau I hated." As proof for this love for Israel over Esau, the text continues to explain that God turned Esau's inheritance into a wasteland, they will be called "The Wicked Land;" they will always be under the wrath of the Lord (Malachi 1:3–4).

Both geography and history attest to this description of Esau's inheritance. Rather than "flowing with milk and honey" possessing lake and river, fertile farmlands and wooded highlands, the land of Edom was, indeed, a waste-land with a desert inhabited by jackals. Moreover, the Nabataeans eventually dispossessed them of their lands in the fourth century BCE. The Edomites were then forced to move westward to the southern part of Judah, which later became known as Idumea.⁵

The crux of the issue of God's treatment of the Edomites and the children of Jacob is all tied up in the phrase that speaks about love and hate. How are we to understand this statement? There are several possibilities.

1. The first way to understand these words is to know that God does not really hate Esau. When compared to how much He loves Israel, God's love for Esau seems like hatred.

This viewpoint sounds rather emotionally appealing. After all, who can ever think of God actually hating someone? Yet the text in Malachi does not really give us this option. The words love and hate are the direct opposite of each other, in Hebrew and in most other languages, "and this meaning must be retained here."⁶

2. A second way of looking at these words, love and hate in reference to Jacob and Esau, is to understand them to mean that God loves Israel in all of the senses of the word and truly hates Esau in all of the senses of that word.

This is how many commentators understand these words. Along these lines, many commentators explain these concepts "love" and "hate" in terms of electing love and electing hate. In other words, God chose to love Israel before the earth was even formed. In fact, according to this viewpoint, the words "love" and "election" are almost synonymous. When God chose someone, such as Jacob, it was Him placing His love on that person. Conversely, when God did not choose to place His electing love on a person or nation, it was the same as God placing His hate on the person or nation.

Hence, by loving someone, God was choosing to lavish that person with His grace and favour, despite the fact that the person (or nation) did not deserve it. In the Brit Hadasha, this is usually used in terms of granting one eternal salvation. In fact Paul uses it precisely in that manner in Romans chapter nine. There the rabbi compares God's love for Jacob with His love for the individual chosen one who would inherit eternal salvation. On the other hand, Shaul also compares God's hate of Esau with His rejection of those whom he has chosen to not inherit eternal salvation from sin.

Thus, according to this view, when God said He loved Jacob, it was not a loved based on any merit. It was an electing love based on God's own agenda and criteria. Likewise, when He said that He hated Esau, it meant that He was not going to choose Esau. He would, rather, let Esau simply live out his natural inborn rejection of God and suffer the appropriate eternal consequences.

3. There is a third possibility of interpretation that we should consider. It is based partially on possibility number two. God's use of the words "love" and "hate" refer to His covenantal relationship with Jacob and Esau. According to this viewpoint, the word "love" is equivalent to saying, that God has established His covenant with Jacob. He has chosen to enter into a personal relationship with Jacob and His descendants.

There are obvious benefits to this relationship. There are also heavy consequences to this covenantal relationship. However, according to His

covenantal love, no matter what Israel would do to warrant even the harshest of those consequences, God would never sever His relationship with them.

This does not mean, however, that every single Israelite would be automatically covenantally related to God, thereby in a proper spiritual relationship with Him. Each one had to make that personal choice for himself. Yet, as a nation, there are certain other covenantal benefits.

Conversely, the word “hate” is equivalent to saying that God has not chosen to enter into a covenant relationship with Esau. He has rejected Esau as a love partner. Hence, we can say that “rejection” is the same as hating. Esau and his descendants do not receive the manifold benefits of a covenantal relationship. That, however, does not mean that every individual Edomite is prohibited from being covenantal related to God. That also is a personal choice. It does mean that as a nation, Edom is under the wrath of God because he chose not to enter into a covenant with them.

A Tough Choice

It is difficult to choose which viewpoint is the correct one. To make things worse, not even all of the possible understandings of this phrase are listed in this commentary, there are more.

The personal opinion of this commentary writer is that numbers two and three are the most reasonable explanations for this difficult phrase. It seems that Keil and Delitzsch are accurate when they state,

The verbs: באה, to love, and שנא, to hate must not be weakened down into loving more and loving less, to avoid the danger of falling into the doctrine of predestination.⁷

Shaul’s use of this phrase in Romans is further proof that a stark literal contrast is meant here. God chose some to be in a covenant relationship. This choosing was equivalent to His loving them. This love was based solely on His mercy, because they did not deserve it. On the other hand, according to the Shaul, God also chose others to not be in such a covenant relationship with Him. He merely left them to their own natural vices. They, in turn would not choose God because they are unable to do so.

In terms of the opening verses of Malachi, Moore, perhaps states it best when he remarks that instead of rebuking Israel right off, God acts toward them,

in accents of the softest tenderness though the reproaching tenderness of love. It is like the language of some weeping parent, who seeks to woo back a prodigal child, by recalling to his memory the love that has been lavished upon him.⁸

Edom has always been a persistent enemy of Israel. The enmity began with Amalek (an Edomite) and continued throughout their centuries down to the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. Because Edom is not in the covenant, the Holy One announces to them in Malachi 1:4, that even if they attempt to rebuild what God demolished, it will be fruitless, for He will again destroy it.

This destruction of the Edomite plans would be a testimony to Israel who would see it with your own eyes and say, “Great is the Lord — even beyond the borders of Israel.”

¹ T.V. Moore, *Haggai & Malachi*, 109.

² Hobart E. Freeman, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophets*, 350.

³ Moore, op. cit., 109.

⁴ C.F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. 10, 430.

⁵ Robert Alden, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 7, 709.

⁶ Keil and Delitzsch, op. cit., 430.

⁷ Ibid, 430.

⁸ Moore, op. cit., 110.