

# C. J. H. Wright's "Ethical Triangle" and the Threefold Structure of Malachi

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It has become almost axiomatic in Malachi studies that the book comprises six speeches or "disputations" and two appendices (4:4,5-6; Heb 3:22,23-24) that may or may not have been added later.<sup>1</sup> The disputations are identified by the prophet's declaration or charge of wrongdoing, followed by his hearers' objection introduced by *wa'amartem*, "but you say," and then the prophet's elaboration and argument.<sup>2</sup>

Speech #1—1:2-5	Yahweh's love
Speech #2—1:6-2:9	Unfaithful priests
Speech #3—2:10-16	Divorce
Speech #4—2:17-3:5[or 3:6]	Divine justice
Speech #5—3:6-12	Tithe
Speech #6—3:13-4:3 [Heb. 3:13-21]	Day of judgment
Appendix #1—4:4 [Heb. 3:22]	Observe the Law

<sup>1</sup>On the appendices cf. A. E. Hill, *Malachi: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. AB (N.Y.: Doubleday, 1998) 363-66. He notes that the integrity of these verses "was questioned as early as Wellhausen...and is now widely understood as an editorial summation of Malachi's messages appended to the book as a postscript" (p. 364). It is also regarded by many as an editorial link between the Book of the Twelve or the entire Prophetic corpus and both the Torah (3:22) and the Former Prophets (3:23-24).

<sup>2</sup>The primary argument for Malachi's identification as "disputation speech" comes from E. Pfeiffer ("Die Disputationsworte im Buche Maleachi," *EvT* 19 [1959]: 546-68), who identified six such disputation speeches in Malachi: (1) 1:2-5, (2) 1:6-2:9, (3) 2:10-16 (excluding vv. 11-12 as a later addition), (4) 2:17-3:5, (5) 3:6-12, and (6) 3:13-21 (Eng., 4:3; the last three verses of the canonical book, 4:4-6 in English, are excluded as a later addition). He calls the three stages in the form *Behauptung*, *Einrede*, and *Begründung*. H. J. Boecker prefers the term "discussion speech" ("Bermerkungen zur formgeschichtlichen Terminologie des Buches Maleachi," *ZAW* 78 [1966]: 78-80; see also G. Wallis, "Wesen und Struktur der Botschaft Maleachi," *BZAW* 105 [1967]: 229-37). Disagreement exists over how Malachi's disputations relate to those of the other prophets (cf. A. Graffy, *A Prophet Confronts His People: The Disputation Speech in the Prophets*, *Analecta Biblica* 104 [Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1984], 2-23; D. F. Murray, "The Rhetoric of Disputation: Re-examination of a Prophetic Genre," *JSOT* 38 (1987): 95-121), but no essential disagreement has existed on the structural significance of the form in Malachi. J. M. O'Brien's view is superficially different, preferring the term "accusation" to "disputation," but the result is essentially the same (cf. *Priest and Levite in Malachi*, SBLDS 121 [Atlanta: Scholars, 1990] 63): Malachi comprises five "accusations" (1:6-2:9; 2:10-16; 2:17-3:5; 3:6-12; 3:13-21) plus a "prologue" (1:2-5), a "final admonition" (3:22), and a "final ultimatum" (3:23-24). See the critique of O'Brien in Hill, *Malachi*, 31-33.

Appendix #2—4:5–6 [Heb. 3:23–24] Coming of Elijah

This reality is so blatantly obvious to some that no alternative is considered.<sup>3</sup> Yet inconsistencies and problems with this approach have long been noticed.<sup>4</sup> For example, Judah is quoted thirteen times in Malachi, not just six, and not just at the beginning of the so-called oracles. Although “oracles” one, four, five, and six begin with a statement by Yahweh or the prophet followed by a question from Judah, oracles two and three begin with a statement and question (or vice versa) by Yahweh or the prophet followed by a counter-question from Judah. The second and fifth oracles are more complex, with Judah responding to Yahweh’s answer with a second question (introduced by a second *wa’āmartem*; cf. 1:7; 3:8). Judah is also quoted two more times in 1:12–13 of the second unit, introduced by *be’ēmārkem*, “when you say [lit., “in your saying”]” and *wa’āmartem*, “and you say.” There is also another Judah quote in 3:14 of the sixth oracle (introduced by *’āmartem*).<sup>5</sup> After a brief sur-

<sup>3</sup>E.g., R. B. Chisholm, Jr., *Handbook on the Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 477–83; J. G. McConville, *Exploring the OT: A Guide to the Prophets* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002) 260–65; M. A. Sweeney, *The Twelve Prophets*, Berit Olam (2 vols.; Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier, 2000) 2:716–17; D. Stuart, “Malachi,” in *The Minor Prophets: An Exegetical and Expository Commentary*, ed. T. E. McComiskey (3 vols.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998) 3:1247–51.

<sup>4</sup>On some of these see M. H. Floyd, *Minor Prophets: Part Two*, FOTL 22 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 564–66. Following a brief review of Pfeiffer, Boecker, Wallis, Graffy, and O’Brien, he concludes (pp. 564–65): “Comparison of the units on the basis of assertion plus question-and-answer format eventually breaks down because these common factors can differ in function from unit to unit...Although O’Brien has refuted Pfeiffer’s claim that the assertion plus question-and-answer format is the definitive factor for identifying the genre of Malachi’s individual units as disputations, she continues to share his assumptions that a similarly shared common format provides a basis on which to delimit the individual units, and that they must all thus belong to one and the same genre (pp. 80–81). Because of the limitations that are still evident in O’Brien’s much more nuanced attempt to work with these assumptions, however, the assumptions themselves appear to be dubious.” The attempts of Lescow and Krieg (no works cited) to circumvent these problems “by supposing that there was originally a pristine ideal form to which all the heterogeneity secondarily accrued,” he says, also fail (pp. 565–66), as does Petersen’s more flexible use of “diatribe” in part because he retains the same units as Pfeiffer (p. 567).

<sup>5</sup>The third “oracle” is particularly distinctive in that the divine statement extends over four verses, 2:10–13, before Judah responds. When they do respond, it is not to the entirety of God’s speech but only to the last part. A similar but less striking variation occurs in the fifth unit if it begins with 3:6. A feature that causes the so-called second oracle to stand out is its length (Hill explains the length of this oracle as owing to the “privileged position” of its priestly audience [*Malachi*, 173]) leading some to break with the traditional divisions and see 2:1–9 as a separate oracle (P. A. Verhoef, *Haggai and Malachi*. NICOT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987], 162) or to join it to the third oracle in 2:10–16 (W. Kaiser, *Malachi: God’s Unchanging Love*, 17), leaving it without the formal marking as an oracle. Another problem with the form-critical analysis is that it tends to lose site of the book’s unity, treating it as just a set of six loosely connected oracles. R. L. Alden, for example, judged that “Malachi did not start with an outline. Instead he moved from topic to topic and occasionally went back and picked up an idea touched on earlier in the book” (“Malachi,” in EBC [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985], 7.708).

vey and critique of all the major proposals since Pfeiffer, M. H. Floyd concludes that in view of this “impasse” the assumption that Malachi comprises a series of six oracles identifiable by the stylistic feature of statement-question-answer “must now be abandoned.”<sup>6</sup>

Floyd’s alternative structure is to identify two main sections following the introduction in 1:2–5: 1:6–2:16 containing two speeches about profaning the cult, and 2:17–3:24[4:6] containing two speeches about Judah’s cynicism.<sup>7</sup> The problem with this analysis is that it makes a major division at 2:17 in the middle of what I consider to be a unified discourse. I believe there are in fact three main sections in Malachi corresponding to three main themes in the book.<sup>8</sup>

Discourse #1—1:2-2:9	Priests Must Honor Yahweh with Pure Offerings & True Instruction
Discourse #2—2:10-3:6	Judah Must be Faithful to One Another & Deal Justly
Discourse #3—3:7-4:6	Judah Must Reverently Return to Yahweh with Tithes & Remember His Law

Malachi’s dialogic device is primarily rhetorical rather than structural. It serves mainly to make vivid the charges against Judah by letting the readers hear the offensive words from their own mouths. I arrived at my structural conclusions on the basis of a textlinguistic analysis of the grammatical and semantic structure of the book, but I have recently enlisted the aid of an unwitting and perhaps unwilling accomplice in C. J. H. Wright.

In his first book on OT ethics published 20 years ago, C. J. H. Wright declared his agenda “to provide a comprehensive framework within which Old Testament ethics can be organized and understood”<sup>9</sup> and by that means to release “the ethical relevance and power of the Old Testament.”<sup>10</sup> His conviction is that ethics cannot be derived from the OT piecemeal (“quoting random texts that seem to be relevant”<sup>11</sup>) but as a systemic whole. Recognizing that ethics and theology are inextricable, his program begins by outlining “the basic framework of belief that lies behind the moral teaching of the Old Testament.”<sup>12</sup> Wright presents that basic framework as what he calls an “ethical triangle” with a theological angle, a social angle, and an economic angle. In other words, Israel’s ethics grew out of (1) the nature of *God* and their rela-

<sup>6</sup>Floyd, *Minor Prophets*, 567.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 568.

<sup>8</sup>E. R. Clendenen, “The Structure of Malachi: A Textlinguistic Study,” *Criswell Theological Review* 2 (1987) 3–17; idem, “Old Testament Prophecy as Hortatory Text: Examples from Malachi,” *Journal of Translation and Textlinguistics* 6 (1993) 336–41; idem, “Postholes, Postmodernism, and the Prophets: Toward a Textlinguistic Paradigm,” in *The Challenge of Postmodernism*, ed. D. S. Dockery (Wheaton: Bridgepoint, 1995) 135–39.

<sup>9</sup>C. J. H. Wright, *An Eye for an Eye: The Place of Old Testament Ethics Today* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1983), 9.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 16.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 13.

tionship to him, (2) their identity as a *people* and their relationships and responsibilities to one another, and (3) their relationship to the *land*, which represented their material environment and possessions. The parallel I discovered with Malachi is that these are the exact themes I had found in the three discourses and in the same order—God, people, and land. My purpose here is to use Wright’s ethical triangle to discuss the theology and structure of the Book of Malachi.

### 1. The Theological Angle

The first step in building an OT ethical triangle is to establish the theological angle. Ethics must begin with who God is and who I am in relation to Him. Wright explains that “Old Testament ethics are God-centred in origin, in history, in content and in motive.”<sup>13</sup> In the first place, ethical instruction in the Bible does not depend on “blind obedience” but is based on the principle that “God acts first and calls people to respond.”<sup>14</sup>

Malachi demonstrates this principle in the opening paragraph: “I have loved you” (*’ahavfi ’etkem*). Malachi points to a historical event of the past, to God’s choosing Jacob over Esau and to his consequent faithful treatment of Israel/Judah in spite of their wickedness contrasted with his just treatment of Edom for their wickedness. Just as Israel’s afflictions had not been accidental or merely the work of men, the same can be said of Edom’s destruction. God had cursed Edom forever as a demonstration of his just administration over the entire world (1:4,5). But whereas they would become known as *gěvûl riš’â*, “a territory of wickedness” because of God’s justice (1:4), Israel would be known throughout the world as *’eres hēpeš*, “a land of delight” (3:12). This was not because they had pleased God (although they eventually would), but because God was faithful—“Because I, Yahweh, have not changed, you descendant of Jacob have not been destroyed” (3:6, HCSB). The survival of Israel’s relationship with Yahweh “depended totally on his faithfulness and loyalty to his own character and promises, not on their own success in keeping the law.”<sup>15</sup>

Like a Pauline epistle, the book of Malachi begins in the indicative mood before moving to the imperative. Biblical faith includes both, but obedience is always required as a response to what God has already done. As Wright

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 15. He rightly considers the subject matter to be not just Israel’s ethical understanding, but the ethics divinely revealed in the OT. See also idem, *Walking in the Ways of the Lord: the Ethical Authority of the Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995) 111.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 23. The other side of this fact, however, is that Yahweh’s faithful sovereignty would eventually bring about his people’s conformity to his law (Jer 31:33).

explains, “God did not send Moses down to Egypt with the law already tucked under his cloak.”<sup>16</sup> Rather, the giving of the Law is prefaced by “You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself” (Exod 19:4).

Second, OT ethics was founded on God’s sovereignty over history, which should have enhanced Israel’s motive for obedience. This was not only manifested in redeeming his people and judging their enemies in the past, but in disciplining his people in the present. Israel’s bitter attitude toward God shown in their opening question in Mal 1:2 (“How have you loved us?”) and throughout Malachi demonstrates that they were suffering and considered Yahweh to blame.<sup>17</sup> They were whining because God was not responding favorably to their offerings (2:13). Unable to recognize their own corruption, they saw their current economic and social troubles as a sign of God’s unfairness or unfaithfulness. They deserved divine blessings, they thought, but were receiving divine afflictions instead. Ignoring their own sins and aggravated by the sins of others, either within or around Judah, which they perceived were going unpunished, they were complaining of divine injustice. It appeared that “all who do evil are good in the eyes of Yahweh” (2:17; cf. 3:14–15), implying the corollary that they, on the other hand, were being ill treated. If this is not so, they said, then “Where is the God of justice?” That is, why does he not act (cf. Isa 40:27)?<sup>18</sup> Malachi’s audience had concluded, in effect, that God was either unjust or negligent—either way, he was not being faithful to his covenant.

Yahweh never denies in Malachi being the immediate cause of Judah’s troubles, but he places the blame on their shoulders. He was Israel’s “Father” in that He had begotten them, and thus He became their Master (1:6; cf. 2:10). It was on that basis that he demanded *kāvōd* and *mōrāʾ*, “honor” and “fear.” The priests were charged with failing to respond in this way to God’s provisions and blessings at his “table” (1:7). Their carelessness in teaching God’s ways truthfully (2:6-7) and in overseeing Israel’s worship had so corrupted the

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Hag 1:6,9–11; 2:16–19; Neh 9:32–37. The interrogative word “how” (*hammeh/bammâ*, lit. “by what?”) occurs 29 times in the Hebrew Bible, more frequently in Malachi (6x) than in any other book except Judges (8x). In Malachi these obtuse and obstreperous people ask “How have you loved us?” (1:2), “How have we shown contempt for your name?” (1:6), “How have we defiled you?” (1:7), “How have we wearied him?” (2:17), “How are we to return?” (3:7), and “How do we rob you?” (3:8). Their other questions are similar: “Why [*ʾal-mâ*] [do you not accept our offerings]?” (2:14) and “What [*mâ*] have we said against you?” (3:13). In each case Judah’s question is not just for information (as in 2 Sam 21:3) but contains an element of complaint and disputation.

<sup>18</sup> The common rendering of *ʾōr*, as “or” joining two quotations of the people suggests that these are two alternatives. People were saying either one thing or the other. It is more likely that the *ʾōr* should be rendered “or else” (with NAB, JPS, Verhoef) and be considered part of the one quote. In this case it is equivalent to *ʾōr ʾēn* (“but if not,” Gen 42:16; 1 Sam 2:16; cf. 1 Kgs 20:39; Isa 27:5).

sacrificial system that it was an insult to God. Their treatment of his blessings gave them no right to ask for or expect God's favor (1:9). In fact, God announced that his pleasure in them was over, and their continued rituals were *ḥinnām*, "useless" (1:11). Malachi indicates that the priests had already begun experiencing the effects of Yahweh's "curse" on them (2:2). We are not told the exact nature of their judgment,<sup>19</sup> but v. 9 clarifies that they had already begun to be "despised and humiliated before all the people." Their failure to honor Yahweh was resulting in their loss of honor.

But Yahweh's rebuke and discipline of the priests was in order that his covenant with the priestly tribe of Levi should continue (*lihyôt bē'rîfî 'et-lēwî*, 2:4; cf. 3:3-4). This covenant was not a conditional contract, but a grant. Yahweh had promised "life and peace" (*haḥayyim wəḥaššālôm*), "and I gave them to him." It was in response to Yahweh's covenant and his blessings that the Levites had initially feared him and trembled at his name (2:5). They had been faithful as his messengers (2:7), but their priestly descendants had not. Nevertheless, Yahweh's control of history meant that his covenant with Levi had not been annulled any more than had his covenant with Jacob. He would "purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver" so that they would present "offerings to Yahweh in righteousness," and Judah's offerings would "please Yahweh as in days of old and years gone by" (3:3-4).

Yahweh's promise of a future redemption for the righteous is another aspect of his sovereignty over history that is foundational for OT ethics. Strikingly in Malachi, it is the nations who are first mentioned as objects of redemption.<sup>20</sup> The Gentiles, who had not had the biblical covenants and the long history of God's faithfulness to them, who had not been the recipients of God's special love since the time of Abraham, and of God's instruction since the time of Moses (cf. Eph 2:12), would nevertheless one day recognize the greatness of Yahweh's name and lift it up in praise and honor. (1:11).<sup>21</sup>

Third, OT ethics was God-centered in content. The shape of OT ethics was largely determined by God's character. As he is not only faithful but diligent and persistent in his relationships (2:4; 3:6,17), he expects that same behavior of his people in their relationships (2:10,14). As his love is equitable and impartial toward all his people, he expects his people to be impartial in their

<sup>19</sup>Malachi 2:2 says literally "I will send on you the curse," apparently an allusion to the covenant curses of Deut 28:15-68, which soberly warned Israel that the consequence of disobedience would be God's blocking every normal artery of blessing and his opening the floodgates of disaster. The term כְּלָמָה, "the curse," occurs elsewhere only in Deut 28:20; Prov 3:33; 28:27; and Mal 3:9. Deut 28:20a reads lit. "Yahweh will send on you the curse, the confusion, and the rebuke on all the work of your hand that you do."

<sup>20</sup>See also 1 Kgs 8:41-42; Ps 86:9-10; Isa 2:2-3; 19:19-25; Jer 3:17; 16:19-20; Amos 9:12 [cp. Acts 15:17]; Mic 7:17; Zeph 2:11; 3:9; Zech 2:15 [Eng. 11]; 8:20-23; 14:16; Rev 21:24; Tob 13:11; 1 Enoch 90:30-36.

treatment of others (2:9; 3:5).<sup>22</sup> As he is holy, his people must be holy (Lev 11:44-45; 19:2; 20:26; 21:8; Matt 5:48; 1 Pet 1:15-16; cf. Eph 5:1), and “God’s own holiness is thoroughly practical,” including generosity, justice, integrity, considerate behavior, impartiality, and honesty.<sup>23</sup> It was precisely because Israel during Malachi’s time had lost sight of what God had done for them that they were failing to obey his law. They had lost not only the motive but also the model for obedience.<sup>24</sup> Wright explains that this is an important reason idolatry was so destructive to Israel, because a different “god” resulted in a different ethic.<sup>25</sup> This is why the ethical triangle must begin with the theological angle and why Malachi begins with a focus on how God was being viewed, treated, and portrayed by Judah’s teaching leadership.

## 2. The Social Angle

The faithfulness Yahweh had demonstrated to Israel, his love for his people in spite of their rebelliousness, should have inspired similar faithfulness in their relationships with each other (cf. Matt 18:22–35). But they responded with treachery. The next stage in building the Old Testament’s ethical triangle is to establish the social angle. God’s plan of redemption did not just involve the rescue of individuals and their transport to heaven. Rather, it involved the formation and redemption of a community through which God would bring

<sup>21</sup> Some have attempted to interpret 1:11 and 14b as pointing to something true in Malachi’s day, often arguing for a universalistic perspective in the book (also see comments at 1:5 and 2:10). Y. Kaufmann cites some (Wellhausen, Marti, Sellin, Horst, Kittel, Torrey, Lindblom, Oesterley-Robinson, Margolis, Segal) who have taken the verses as “acknowledgement of the ‘monotheism of the pagan faiths’” and that “idol worship is really worship of one God” (Y. Kaufmann, *History of the Religion of Israel* [trans.; N.Y.: KTAV, 1977], 4:442–43). Besides absurdly contradicting much of the rest of the Old Testament as well as the thrice repeated reference to “my name” in 1:11 itself and the apparent rejection of pagan religion in 2:11, this interpretation violates the structure of Malachi’s argument, in which Gentile worship of Yahweh must be an assumed fact acknowledged by all his hearers. It would seriously weaken his argument regarding the strikingly antithetical and foolish nature of Judah’s careless worship if the premise were such a new, highly debatable (even heretical) assertion. It would also be totally illogical and utterly confusing to the readers how pagan worship in the name of pagan gods in pagan temples could be “pure” and acceptable to God, while Judah’s own sacrifices to Yahweh in the Jerusalem temple were “useless” (v. 10). Malachi’s supposed universalist perspective is also at odds with the declaration in 1:4 that Edom was “a people always under the wrath of Yahweh” and with the commitment to the Law of Moses in 4:4 [Heb. 3:22]. See also J. G. Baldwin, “Malachi 1:11 and the Worship of the Nations in the Old Testament,” *TynBul* 23 (1972): 122. See also Achtemeier, *Nahum-Malachi*, 177f; Glazier-McDonald, *Malachi: The Divine Messenger*, 55–61; G. P. Hugenberger, *Marriage as a Covenant* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994), 39.

<sup>22</sup> Wright, *An Eye for an Eye*, 26–32.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 27, based on Lev 19.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, 29, who cites Isa 1:2-4; 5:1-7; Jer 2:1-13; 7:21-26; Hos 13:4-6; Mic 6:3-5.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

global blessing and reverse the curse of Babel. This is why “so much of [the Old Testament’s] ethical thrust is necessarily social.” 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.”<sup>26</sup>

God had purposed that Israel should be a kingdom of priests to glorify him among the nations (cf. Exod 19:6; Rev 1:6). Although during the biblical period they mostly failed at this,<sup>27</sup> the OT nevertheless describes the kind of society they were supposed to be and how they missed this ideal.<sup>28</sup> Although the social angle of the ethical triangle is not out of the picture in Mal 1:2-2:9, it is particularly in view beginning in 2:10 (“Don’t we all have one Father? Didn’t one God create us? Why then do we act treacherously, each against his brother, so as to profane the covenant of our fathers?”). The relationship of individual Israelites to one another was grounded in their common relationship to God as their Father. The dual concepts of God as Father<sup>29</sup> and Creator, while not synonymous, should be understood as complementary (cf. Isa 64:8). The “one another” in v. 10b refers to participants in “the covenant of our fathers,” and thus the people of Israel. The fatherhood of God in the Old Testament is an expression of the unique and exclusive relationship the Lord established with

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 34-35.

<sup>27</sup> Malachi shows God demonstrating his glory to Israel through the nations rather than through Israel to the nations. Cf. 1:5,11,14.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Wright’s discussion of Israel in *An Eye for an Eye*, 40–45. Although God’s purpose to make himself known and worshiped among the nations would not be thwarted, he would do it differently than Moses may have expected. R. L. Saucy shows from Ezek 36:23 (“I will honor the holiness of My great name, which has been profaned among the nations—the name you have profaned among them. The nations will know that I am Yahweh”—the declaration of the Lord GOD—“when I demonstrate My holiness through you in their sight”); cf. also Jer 16:14–20) that Israel will continue to serve as God’s revelatory instrument in that “Gentile recognition of Israel’s God” will be brought about by “the vindication of the name of God through the restoration of Israel under the new covenant” (*The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993], 123).

<sup>29</sup> The “father” has often been interpreted as Adam, Abraham, or Jacob. This interpretation apparently led to the reversing of the clauses in some mss of the LXX to place first the reference to God (A. S. van der Woude, “Malachi’s Struggle for a Pure Community: Reflections on Malachi 2:10–16,” in *Tradition and Re-Interpretation in Jewish and Early Christian Literature*, ed. J. W. van Henten, et al. [Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1986], 67). The clauses’ parallel structure, their order in the MT, and the antithetical “daughter of a foreign god” in v. 11 argue for the identification of “one Father” and “one God.” Cf. also M. E. Tate, “Questions for Priests and People in Malachi 1:2–2:16,” *RevExp* 84 [1987]:401; G. P. Hugenberger, *Marriage as a Covenant: A Study of Biblical Law and Ethics Governing Marriage Developed from the Perspective of Malachi*, VTSup 52 [Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994], 40; P. A. Verhoef, *The Books of Haggai and Malachi*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 265.



Israel by his sovereign grace in choosing them in Abraham, making them a people in Egypt and freeing them from slavery, then forming his covenant with them at Sinai (cf. Exod 4:22–23; Isa 44:1–2; 63:16; Hos 11:1; John 8:41).<sup>30</sup> Israel is God’s son not because of adoption but because he brought them into existence as an nation (note the conception and birth image of Num 11:12).<sup>31</sup>

The theme of Yahweh as Israel’s father runs through Malachi’s prophecy. It is implied in the opening declaration of God’s love for Jacob (1:2), then used in 1:6 to rebuke priestly carelessness—“If I am a father, where is the honor due me?” It is alluded to in 3:17 in a promise of God’s future compassion on Israel—“I will spare them, just as in compassion a man spares his son who serves him” (cf. 2 Cor 1:3). Here in 2:10 Yahweh’s fatherhood is recalled and used to rebuke unfaithfulness, echoing Deut 32:3–6. Whereas in Deut 32:6 and in Mal 1:6 the message regards proper response to God as one’s Father/Redeemer, here the message regards proper treatment of fellow Jews as one’s spiritual siblings. The phrase usually translated “with one another” in v. 10b is literally “a man with his brother.”<sup>32</sup> The Bible consistently assumes that ill-treatment of a brother is particularly heinous. The charges and commands of 2:10–3:6 are based in part on the relationship shared by the people of Israel as the offspring and creatures of the one God. Realizing that God brought them into existence as a united whole in a covenant relationship to himself should have produced faithfulness not only to him, but also to one another. Their unity should have motivated mutual understanding, caring, and support. As 1 John 5:1b declares, “Everyone who loves the father loves his child as well.”

<sup>30</sup> See also Deut 1:31; 8:5; 14:1; 32:5–6, 18–20; Ps 103:13; Prov 3:12; Isa 1:2; 30:1, 9; 43:6; 45:11; 63:8; 64:8; Jer 31:9, 20; Hos 1:10; Rom 9:4. Note Jer 3:4, 19–22 combines the images of Israel as unfaithful son and as unfaithful wife. On God as Israel’s father see D. McCarthy, “Notes on the Love of God in Deuteronomy, and the Father/Son Relationship between Yahweh and Israel,” *CBQ* 27 (1965): 144–47; G. Fohrer, *History of Israelite Religion* (N.Y.: Abingdon, 1972), 81; P. A. H. de Boer, *Fatherhood and Motherhood in Israelite and Judean Piety* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1974), 14–25.

<sup>31</sup> C. J. H. Wright, *God’s People in God’s Land: Family, Land, and Property in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids/Exeter: Eerdmans/Paternoster, 1990), 16–17. Cf. also de Boer, *Fatherhood and Motherhood in Israelite and Judean Piety*, 23.

<sup>32</sup> The expression יְכָלֵךְ אִישׁ אֶת אָבִיו (‘‘each/one with his brother; NIV ‘‘with one another’’) is often used idiomatically (with various prepositions besides אֶת) of individuals other than brothers. So the NIV may be right in not stressing the meaning here (but cf. Jer 23:35; 31:34), although it does fit the context. Note the similarity between יְכָלֵךְ אִישׁ אֶת אָבִיו here and יְכָלֵךְ אִישׁ אֶת רֵעֵהוּ (‘‘each/one with his friend’’; NIV ‘‘with each other’’) in 3:16. The former construction (with only slight variation) is also found in Gen 26:31; 37:19; 42:21, 28; 43:33; Exod 16:15; 25:20; 37:9; Lev 25:14; 26:37; Num 14:4; 2 Kgs 7:6; Ezek 4:17; 24:23; 33:30; Joel 2:8; Mic 7:2; Zech 7:9, 10. The latter construction is also found in Gen 11:3, 7; 15:10; 31:49; Exod 18:7; Judg 6:29; 7:22; 10:18; 1 Sam 10:11; 14:20; 20:41; 2 Kgs 3:23; 7:3, 9; 2 Chr 20:23; Esth 9:19, 22; Isa 13:8; 41:6; Jer 23:27, 30; 34:15; 36:16; Jonah 1:7; Zech 3:10; 8:16, 17.

The common practice of separating 2:10–16 from 2:17–3:5 or 3:6 as two separate oracles misses the coherence of 2:10–3:6 in the theme of faithfulness and justice for one’s spiritual siblings. Verse 10b is a general charge against Judah for their treachery against fellow covenant members. This general reference to treachery against “one another” is first and most prominently made specific in the issue of marital violation in 2:11–16, culminating in the charge of injustice against one’s wife. But other expressions of treachery are included before this second discourse closes.

In Mal 2:17 the topic of the book appears to change: “You have wearied Yahweh with your words. ‘In what way have we wearied Him?’ you say. It is when you say, ‘Everyone who does wrong is good in Yahweh’s eyes, and by them He is pleased. Or else, where is the God of justice?’” But in fact the topic is still the same. The audience’s complaints about injustice in 2:17 and the prophetic announcement of coming judgment in 3:1–6 are closely related to the theme of unfaithfulness found in 2:10–16. The link can be found not only in the “one another” of 2:10b but also in the term *ḥāmās* in v. 16, commonly rendered “violence” but best understood as “injustice.”<sup>33</sup> Judah’s attitudes toward Yahweh surface in the words Malachi perceptively and dramatically places in their mouths in 2:17. They were justifying their own lack of just behavior by pointing to Yahweh’s lack of justice. Not only had they been committing treachery against their wives and others, but 3:5 charges they had also been practicing sorcery (probably to harm others; cf. Ezek 13:18,20), adultery,<sup>34</sup> swearing to a lie [*šeqer*] (again probably to harm

<sup>33</sup> According to H. Haag, although all *ḥāmās* “is ultimately directed against Yahweh” (cf. Ezek 22:26; Zeph 3:4), it is used of “cold-blooded and unscrupulous infringement of the personal rights of others, motivated by greed and hate and often making use of physical violence and brutality” (*TDOT*, “חָמָס *chāmās*,” 4:480,482). See also I. Swart, “In Search of the Meaning of *ḥamas*: Studying an Old Testament word in Context,” *Journal for Semitics* 3 (1991): 160-61.

<sup>34</sup> The common view that sexual relations between a married man and an unmarried woman was not condemned is based on an argument from silence and on the assumption that Israelite marriage law and custom would have followed that of the surrounding cultures, in which adultery was forbidden primarily because it involved infringement of a husband’s rights and property. Against the view that the O.T. condemned adultery because it involved the infringement of property rights, C. J. H. Wright (*God’s People in God’s Land*, 201–2) notes that this assumption would make illogical the death penalty for both parties (Why destroy the property?). He also points out that characteristically “the death penalty was not applied to offenses involving property” (e.g., see Lev 19:20). Elsewhere he explains that the common translation “bride-price” for *ḥatun* “is very misleading in giving rise to the idea that marriage in Israel was solely a matter of purchase.... This view, and its oft-repeated correlates, that wives in Israel were chattel property and that adultery was simply a property offense, cannot be supported from a careful study of the laws and narratives about wives in the OT” (“Family,” *ABD*, 2.761–68). The biblical evidence may be misleading because of our modern assumption that there was a significant group of unmarried women in Israelite society. Even the “prostitute” is often said to be married, and marriages usually took place soon after puberty. Although “adultery” is commonly used of the marital infidelity of a wife or of her lover, a married man’s visit to a prostitute also seems to involve adultery in Jer 5:7–8.

others; cf. Lev 6:2-5; 19:12), oppressing widows and the fatherless, extorting wages, and oppressing resident aliens.<sup>35</sup> As Yahweh had been a “witness” to the marriage covenants which they broke (2:14), he was also a witness (literally “a hurrying witness”) of these crimes of injustice and would come “swiftly” to vindicate those who had been wronged. Judah’s blindly hypocritical desire for justice would be satisfied when Yahweh would come against all those in Judah who practiced treachery and oppression of the weak.

In 2:10b Judah’s unfaithfulness is said to profane or violate Israel’s covenant with God, just as the priests’ behavior was violating (or corrupting) the levitical covenant (2:8). Thus violation of social (horizontal) responsibilities of the covenant amounts to violation of the religious (vertical) responsibilities. Failure to love one’s “neighbor” evidences failure to love (and fear) God. These two dimensions of Judah’s sinful behavior receive separate focus in 2:11–16. Verses 11–12 focus on the vertical aspect of Judah’s unfaithfulness. By “marrying the daughter of a foreign god” they had committed a “detestable” act (*tô‘ēbâ*, an “abomination”), which “profaned” (the same verb *hālal* as in v. 10) Yahweh’s sanctuary and invited disaster. Such unfaithfulness to God also involved a horizontal dimension in that it introduced a spiritually destructive element into the covenant community. Verses 13–16 then focus on the horizontal aspect of Judah’s unfaithfulness—the breaking of marriage covenants. But this had a vertical dimension as well in that God was “witness” to those covenants.<sup>36</sup> Judah’s vertical responsibilities are again in view in 2:17–3:4 as they charge Yahweh with injustice and he responds with a commitment to purify the people and their worship. Then the discourse closes with the horizontal dimension again as Yahweh’s purification is said to include judgment against Judah’s treacherous behavior (3:5–6). Not only does Yahweh appear here in his role of Defender of the defenseless and Helper of the helpless, invisible but powerful witness of every injustice; he also watches over covenants made before him and judges those who break vows.

This concluding list of sins builds to a climax in contempt for the Lord. As failure to fear the Lord had resulted in religious activity that actually insulted him (1:6–14), so here it resulted in wickedness and injustice toward the help-

<sup>35</sup> As A. H. Konkil points out, the *gēr* “enjoys the rights of assistance, protection, and religious participation. He has the right of gleaning (Lev 19:10; 23:22), participation in the tithe (Deut 14:29), the Sabbath year (Lev 25:6), and the cities of refuge (Num 35:15). His participation in religious feasts assumes the acceptance of circumcision (Exod 12:48; cf. Deut 16:11, 14). He may bring offerings and is obligated to the regulations of purity (Lev 17:8–16). There is legislation for religious offenses (Lev 24:22), such as blasphemy of the name of Yahweh (Lev 24:16) or idolatrous practice (Lev 20:2). The sojourner is under divine protection (10:18; Ps 146:9); Israelites must love the alien as themselves (Deut 10:19), for that is what they themselves were. In daily life there was to be no barrier between the alien and the Israelite” (*NIDOTTE*, 1:837–38).

<sup>36</sup> Such structural unity argues strongly against those who would simplify the passage by either excising verses or by an interpretation that eliminates the horizontal element.

less. In fact, according to Isaiah 1:13–17 (cf. Isa 10:1–3; Jer 7:11), if Israel’s temple worship had been meticulous, it would still have been meaningless and even detestable in view of the absence of the essential ethical component which included justice for the fatherless and the widow. The connection between the theological and social angles was a vital one.

### 3. The Economic Angle

The third step in building the OT ethical triangle is the economic angle, which is concerned with Israel’s attitudes toward and treatment of their material possessions. This is likewise Malachi’s primary concern in the final discourse (3:7–4:6 [Heb. 3:24]). The focus in the third division is clearly on the economic angle. To Judah’s question of feigned innocence in 3:8, “How shall we return?” the Lord might have responded by pointing again to Israel’s insulting so-called worship, their treachery against one another, their profaning the Lord’s sanctuary by intermarriage with pagan idolators, or their toleration or practice of sorcery, adultery, perjury, and economic exploitation of the defenseless. Instead, he brought to their attention another area in which their rebellion against God was manifesting itself—the withholding of tithes.<sup>37</sup>

The focus of the economic angle is the land, which was “*not* just a neutral stage where the drama unfolds” but “a fundamentally theological entity.”<sup>38</sup> The OT refers to “the land” over a thousand times, and the vast majority of these references are to the land of Canaan, the land that God promised the fathers, the land he gave Israel, the land where he would bless his people. How Israel regarded and treated the land and its produce was a central feature of their responsibilities under God’s covenant.

Although God gave Israel the land as their inheritance, they were to live there in dependence on him: “the land is mine and you are resident aliens and tenants with me” (Lev 25:23).<sup>39</sup> One reason for this was the sinful human tendency to disconnect the gift from the giver (Deut. 6:10–12). W. Brueggemann pointed out that “the land, source of life, has within it seductive power. It invites Israel to enter life apart from covenant...Israel does not have many resources with which to resist the temptation. The chief one is memory.”<sup>40</sup> So if they should be tempted pridefully to say, “My power and the strength of my

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<sup>37</sup> Against the majority, M. A. Sweeney begins the so-called fifth speech at 3:8. The fourth speech, he says, is an accusation of wearying Yahweh and a summons to return (2:17–3:7). But that invents a hiatus in the middle of a pseudo-dialogue between the prophet and the people and begins a new speech with the answer to the question concluding the previous one (*The Twelve Prophets*, 2.722).

<sup>38</sup> Wright, *Eye for an Eye*, 50.

<sup>39</sup> See Wright’s discussion of the verse in *God’s People in God’s Land*, 58–64.

<sup>40</sup> W. Brueggemann, *The Land* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 53.

hands have produced this wealth for me,” they were to remember that it was Yahweh their God “who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your forefathers, as it is today” (Deut 8:17–18). How they regarded and treated the land would show whether they acknowledged his lordship over them, their dependence on him, and their gratitude toward him. This acknowledgement was to be expressed in Israel’s festivals, especially Firstfruits, Weeks, and Tabernacles (Lev 23:9–22,33–43), in the weekly Sabbath observance of rest (Exod 20:8–11; Deut 5:12–15),<sup>41</sup> in the observance of a Sabbath year (Exod 23:10–11; Lev 25:1–7,18–22) and of the year of Jubilee (Lev 25:8–17,23–55), and in their sacrifices and offerings, especially the consecration of the firstborn (Exod 13:11–16; 34:19–20; Num 18:15–17), and in the tithe. These were not only acknowledgements, however, but also reminders. Moses told Israel, “Eat the tithe of your grain, new wine and oil, and the firstborn of your herds and flocks in the presence of Yahweh your God at the place he will choose as a dwelling for his Name, *so that you may learn to fear Yahweh your God always*” (Deut 14:23).

The land and its fruits were to be a reminder of Israel’s dependence and Yahweh’s dependability. “He was a God *worthy* of obedience; his response to human behavior would be consistent and dependable, not a matter of arbitrary whim. He could be pleased, but not humoured.”<sup>42</sup> The emphasis on the tithe, then, in Malachi’s final discourse is directly connected to the issue of contempt for Yahweh in the first two discourses, especially to Judah’s questioning of divine justice.

According to my understanding of Malachi’s threefold structure, the third division is marked off by the use of the verb *šûb* “return” in 3:7 (twice) and 4:6 [3:24] (“He will *turn* the hearts of the fathers to their children”).<sup>43</sup> The order of semantic elements in this division (command–motivation–situation–motivation–command) is altered from the pattern in the first two divisions (motivation–situation–command–situation–motivation) to begin and end with commands. The result is that the book concludes with the command to remember the law. The situation element is made prominent by placing it in the center of the division. It also is given the longest speech of Judah in the book, which affords deeper insight into the people’s sinful attitudes that called for Mala-

<sup>41</sup>R. de Vaux calls the Sabbath “a tithe on time” (*Ancient Israel* [N.Y.: McGraw-Hill, 1961], 480). It was thus an acknowledgement that all one’s time belonged to Yahweh. Cf. also R. R. Ellis, “Divine Gift and Human Response: An Old Testament Model for Stewardship,” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* X.X (December, 1994): 10.

<sup>42</sup>Wright, *Eye for an Eye*, 51–53, citing 53.

<sup>43</sup>The verb’s only other use in Malachi is in 1:4, where Edom says literally, “we will return and build.” Its use with Edom as the subject may be a foreshadowing of its later application to Judah since the focus in 1:3–4 is on a contrast between Edom and Judah. Whereas Edom will be unable to return, being “a people always under the wrath of Yahweh,” Judah is later commanded to return spiritually and is threatened with cursing if they refuse.

chi's prophecy. The general effect of the rearrangement of semantic elements in this last division is that it stands out as the most prominent of the three, forming a climax to Malachi's prophecy. Also, while the explicit commands of the first two divisions are negative because Judah was guilty of active disobedience, those of this division are positive because Judah was guilty of passive disobedience. The overall effect is "Stop doing these things and begin doing this."

The situation in the final discourse is that Judah has ceased bringing their tithes to the sanctuary out of thankfulness to God for his blessings. They have in fact concluded that God has ceased to bless obedient faith. They are exhorted here to "return" to Yahweh by remembering the Law of Moses and bringing their tithes and other contributions. C. J. H. Wright argues that one's attitude toward material possessions is a kind of thermometer that measures the health of one's relationship with God and with other people (see Neh 5:1–13; Matt 6:24).<sup>44</sup> This is why "failure to honour God in the material realm cannot be compensated for by religiosity in the spiritual realm."<sup>45</sup> This insight may suggest the relationship between Malachi's three addresses concerned with vain offerings (1:2–2:9), treachery in relationships (2:10–3:5), and the withholding of tithes (3:6–4:6 [3:24]). One's health and wholeness as a child of God is determined first by one's attitude toward and relationship with God, thus the theological angle; second by one's attitude toward and relationship with others, thus the social angle; and finally by one's attitude toward and use of one's possessions, the economic angle.

Thus, whereas the focus of Malachi's first address is on the theological angle, the social angle (i.e., the priests' poor and prejudicial instruction that "caused many to stumble," 2:6–9) and the economic angle (i.e., the best animals withheld from God, 1:8, 13–14) enter as well. Likewise, the second division's focus on the social angle does not eliminate the theological angle (desecrating the sanctuary, 2:11; regarding God as unjust, 2:17; the need for righteous offerings, 3:4) and the economic angle (corruption and oppression, 3:5) from the prophet's attention.

The third and final discourse begins with the command to return to Yahweh by bringing the tithes and contributions. This makes explicit the relationship between the theological and economic angles. The final refrain of the theme of divine justice and faithfulness in 3:13–4:3 [Heb. 3:21] also returns to the theological angle. Judah has been withholding "the whole tithe" because of their claim that "it is useless to serve God" (3:14).

Furthermore, the social angle is implied in the reference to the tithe as "food in My house" (3:10). The food was not for God but for the levitical

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<sup>44</sup>Wright, *An Eye for an Eye*, 59–62.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*, 60.

priests and the landless poor in Israel. The command is for Judah to “bring the whole tithe into the storehouse.” The phrase “the whole tithe” is almost identical to that which occurs in Lev 27:30—“*Every tithe* of the land’s produce, grain from the soil or fruit from the trees, belongs to Yahweh” and Num 18:21— “I have given the Levites *every tithe* in Israel as an inheritance.” But an even closer parallel is found in Deut 14:28—“At the end of every three years, *bring the whole tithe* of that year’s produce and store it in your towns” (similarly 26:12).<sup>46</sup> Immediately following in Deut 14:29 is the purpose—“so that the Levites (who have no allotment or inheritance of their own) and the aliens, the fatherless and the widows who live in your towns may come and eat and be satisfied, and so that Yahweh your God may bless you in all the work of your hands.” This is clearly the background for the twin purposes of “food” (or “nourishment”) in Mal 3:10a and divine blessing in vv. 10b–12.<sup>47</sup>

The book of Malachi begins with a focus on what God had done in the past—“I have loved you.” It ends with a focus on the future. Yahweh declares that a historical day is coming on which “all the arrogant and everyone who commits wickedness will become stubble” (4:1 [3:19]). But Malachi also assures those in Israel who fear Yahweh that they are his *segullâ*, his “special possession.” He is preparing a day when they will be abundantly and compassionately rewarded for their faithfulness (3:17). They will be healed and restored to joy and “will go out and playfully jump like calves from the stall” (4:2 [Heb. 3:20]). They will also “trample the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day I am preparing” (4:3 He 3:21]). This future dimension heightens the ethical impact of the book. Right behavior is grounded in the redemptive dimension as response of gratitude consistent with what God has done in the past. It is also grounded in the eschatological dimension as confidence that the God who began his work of righteous redemption will complete it, eliminating evil and vindicating the righteous, establishing justice and peace. God’s faithful love in the past as elaborated in 1:2–5 and the coming day of Yahweh announced in 3:16–4:6 together were to be the motivating factors for all the exhortations in the book.

The eschatological aspect of God’s activity in history on the one hand, in judgment and also in redemption, and the past redemptive aspect on the other hand, were the two ends of God’s sovereign work of design. “The combination of these two poles of Israel’s historical faith gave immense ethical impor-

<sup>46</sup>In Lev 27:30,32; Num 18:21,28 the phrase is כֹּל מַעֲשֵׂר, “every tithe/tenth.” Malachi adds the article and the definite object marker: אֵת כֹּל הַמַּעֲשֵׂר, “all the tithe/tenth” or “the whole tithe/tenth.” The phrase in Deut 14:28; 26:12 differs from Malachi only in the absence of the article, which in fact is missing from Mal 3:10 in DSS 4QXII<sup>a</sup>.

<sup>47</sup>The Aramaic Targum renders “and there shall be provision for those who serve in my Sanctuary” (see also 2 Chr 31:4–10). K. J. Cathcart and R. P. Gordon, *The Targum of the Minor Prophets*. The Aramaic Bible 14 (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1989) 237.

tance to the present. What I do here and now matters because of what God has done in the past and what he will do in the future.”<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup>Wright, *An Eye for an Eye*, 26.