

MALACHI 1:11 AND THE WORSHIP OF THE NATIONS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT*

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‘For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name is great among the nations, and in every place incense is offered to my name, and a pure offering; for my name is great among the nations, says the Lord of hosts’ (RSV).

On the face of it this verse appears to express divine approval of heathen worship, and indeed this is the way in which it has been taken by the majority of interpreters during the last hundred years. J. M. P. Smith may be regarded as typical: ‘The view that this statement reflects the author's conviction that the gods of the heathen were only so many different names for the one great God and that the nations were therefore in reality worshipping Yahweh finds many supporters.’¹ In a footnote he names as supporters F. Hitzig, J. Wellhausen, C. C. Torrey, W. Nowack and K. Marti, the last and latest of whom was writing in 1910. More recently many others have endorsed this interpretation, including, surprisingly, Jewish writers. J. H. Hertz, the late Chief Rabbi, paraphrases the verse ‘Even the heathen nations that worship the heavenly hosts pay tribute to a Supreme Being, and in this way honour My name; and the offerings which they thus present (indirectly) unto Me are animated by a pure spirit, God looking on the heart of the worshipper.’² Rabbi Eli Cashdan comments ‘There is the magnificent recognition by Malachi that all sincere heathen worship is in reality offered to the one God of all the earth (i:11). This sublime thought is characteristic of the universalism of Judaism and was a theme later developed by the Rabbis.’³

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¹ ICC, *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi, Jonah*, T. and T. Clark, Edinburgh (1912) 31

² J. H. Hertz, *The Pentateuch with Haftorahs* I, O.U.P., London (1929) 474 f.

³ E. Cashdan, *The Twelve Prophets*, Soncino, London (1948) 336.

Among more recent Christian writers R. H. Pfeiffer remarks on Malachi's 'religious liberalism unparalleled in the Old Testament'.⁴ R. C. Dentan sees originality and greatness in Malachi's 'magnificent and unparalleled assertion that all true worship, even that of the heathen, who think that they are worshipping other gods, is really offered to Yahweh, who is the God not only of Israel but of the whole earth',⁵ and W. Neil says, 'We may be grateful to this unknown author . . . for his daring and, for those times, astounding recognition that worship offered in sincerity and truth under the auspices of any religion whatsoever is in effect offered to the one true God (*cf.* Acts 10:35).'⁶

The purpose of this paper is to re-examine this interpretation of Malachi 1:11 to see (a) whether it is consistent with Old Testament teaching as a whole on the subject of the worship of the nations and (b) whether it is consistent with the prophet's teaching in the rest of Malachi. Finally we shall take a fresh look at the text and its interpretation.

A. OLD TESTAMENT TEACHING ON THE WORSHIP OF THE NATIONS

The one full-scale picture of heathen worship in the Old Testament is that of the Melkart prophets on Mount Carmel (1 Ki. 18:19-46), an incident that demonstrates conclusively the distinction between Melkart and Yahweh. Elijah could confidently challenge the Melkart prophets to worship and pray in any way they wished, for he knew there would be no response. וַאֲיִן קוֹל וַאֲיִן עֲנָה וַאֲיִן קָשָׁב 'There was no voice; no one answered, no one heeded' (1 Ki. 18:29). The ridicule of Elijah in likening Melkart to a human being who needed to be excused and take time off made a mockery of divinity. It was not simply that Melkart had no jurisdiction in Israel's territory, but that he had no power at all. He was not. Yahweh by contrast had the very elements under His control. Moreover He spoke to Elijah in such a way that Elijah knew Yahweh as 'the living God', in the execution of whose commands Elijah constantly

⁴ *Introduction to the Old Testament*, A. and C. Black, London (1952) 613.

⁵ *Interpreter's Bible* Vol. VI, Nelson, London (1956) 1120.

⁶ *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (1962), Article 'Malachi'.

risked his life. All this was the background to his prayer 'that this people may know that thou, O Lord, art God' **הָאֱלֹהִים** (verse 37).

Is there any evidence that Malachi regarded Elijah's ministry as unenlightened? Does he suggest that if Elijah had lived in a later age he would have regarded Melkart as equivalent to Yahweh and the Tyrian way of life as acceptable to God? If the last three verses are an integral part of Malachi's book, the prophet envisages Elijah continuing his uncompromising stand for exclusive witness to the one true God, and the answer must be in the negative.

By the time of Solomon the J writer had seen that the incomparability of Yahweh was bound up with His jurisdiction over all the earth which He had made (Gn. 2:4b). As Creator of all things He was in complete control, 'Lord of all the earth' (Gn. 19:5). He demonstrated the fact by His miracles in Egypt 'that you may know that there is no one like the Lord our God' (Ex. 8:10; 9:14). For Israel the law of Moses was dogmatic. They were to have no other God but Yahweh on pain of death (Ex. 22:20). Joshua contended that the choice before Israel was Yahweh or none (Jos. 24:15). Though he appeared to put a choice before the assembly it was Hobson's choice, for the gods of the region beyond the River and the gods of the Amorites he dismissed with scorn.

It is from certainty of the incomparability of Yahweh that intolerance of other gods arises in the Old Testament. They are of human manufacture (Ex. 20:4), according to Isaiah 'nothings', 'little tin gods' **אֱלֹהֵי יָדִים** (2:8, 18), and according to Jeremiah mere breath **הַהֶבֶל**. Ezekiel's favourite term **גִּלְגָּלִים**; 'roundish objects' is no more complimentary, and the word 'abominations' 'detestable things' **שִׁקְוֹצִים** (Dt. 29:17; Is. 66:3; Je. 4:1; Ezk. 20:7) even less so. Strange gods are even referred to as **שִׂדִּים** 'demons' (Dt. 32:17; Ps. 106:37) but the Old Testament nowhere suggests that there is any power to fear from heathen deities. To quote H. H. Rowley on the subject of idols: 'there is no reality corresponding to these symbols, since Yahweh is God alone. There is no spirit inhabiting the idol. It is merely a piece of wood or metal.'⁷

⁷ H. H. Rowley, *The Missionary Message of the Old Testament*, Carey Press, London (1944) 50.

It must be conceded that these comments on heathen worship are made in the context of rebukes to Israel for abandoning Yahweh. When oracles are addressed to other nations they too are rebuked, but not because they worship idols. Amos condemned the nations on the grounds of inhuman conduct, not of idolatrous worship (Am. 1:1-2:3). Nineveh was due to perish because it was full of lies and booty (Na. 3:1); Obadiah knew that Edom's pride and cruelty would be its downfall (Ob. 1, 3, 4). The longer oracles of Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel are equally emphatic that destruction is coming on the nations because of their moral failure, the prime symptom of which is arrogance (Is. 13:11; 16:14; 23:9; Je. 46:8; 48:7; 49:16; Ezk. 28:2f.; 29:2; 31:10). Worship is mentioned only incidentally in order to point out that, when judgment falls, idols will be of no help. The subject of Old Testament teaching on the worship of the nations requires much fuller treatment than can be given here, but I venture to suggest that heathen worship is condemned when it is adopted by Israel and that the subject is scarcely touched on in relation to other nations.

To summarize, Old Testament writers are consistent in pouring scorn on heathen worship, but their purpose is to encourage Israel in godliness rather than to condemn as fools the nations round about. From amongst other nations a capacity to recognize the light was granted to Rahab (Jos. 2:9 f.) and to Ruth (Ru. 1:16 f.), to heathen sailors and to the inhabitants of Nineveh (Jon. 1:16 ; 3:7 f.), but these were all in contact with God's servants and learned of Him through them. There is simply no evidence in the Old Testament either for or against the existence of individuals who found God apart from the revelation made to Israel, unless it is in this verse in Malachi. The quotations above, with their stress on the originality of this verse in Malachi, are sufficient proof that the interpretation they represent is not found in the Old Testament as a whole.

B. ATTITUDE TO OTHER NATIONS IN MALACHI

That the popular interpretation of Malachi 1:11 is inconsistent with the teaching of the book as a whole has long been conceded. Elsewhere the author takes a particularist rather than a

universalist stance. He proclaims the election of Jacob and the repudiation of Esau (1:2), and he will have no intermarriage between Israel and 'the daughter of a strange god' (2:11). If he had believed that other nations, in worshipping their own gods, were unwittingly worshipping Yahweh, he could not have objected to intermarriage.

One way of accounting for the inconsistency has been to argue that 1:11 is an intrusion into the book from another source,⁸ but in the absence of any textual evidence for such an argument, this view must be a last resort when all other possibilities have failed. Another way has been to regard the statement as a kind of prophetic hyperbole, intended 'to confound the religious authorities at Jerusalem'.⁹ R. H. Pfeiffer thinks that 'the author would undoubtedly have repudiated the implications of this utterance in a calmer and more reflective mood'.¹⁰ According to Johannes Blau the verse is meant 'to accentuate the faithlessness of Israel: compared with Israel, the heathen are upright worshippers of Yahweh. We must, therefore, be cautious about any declaration of positive meaning'.¹¹ Here the argument is that the prophet's words are not to be taken too literally. There is an element of hyperbole reflecting passionate feeling which goes beyond the facts. But to maintain that the prophet would not have stood by his statement if pressed is a dangerous assumption which cannot be allowed unless it proves clearly impossible to take the prophet literally.

It might be thought that the words 'Have we not all one father? Has not one God created us?' (Mal. 2:10) support the universalist outlook alleged for 1:11, but the application is to condemn intermarriage on the ground that it betrays the covenant. It is clear, therefore, that the writer was thinking in national and covenant terms, which were particularistic and not universalistic. In short, there is nothing in the rest of the book to support the interpretation that heathen worship was in reality offered to the God of all the earth.

⁸ So F. Horst, *HAT* (1964) 265-267; K. Elliger, *ATD* (1967) 194, 195; C. Kuhl, *The Prophets of Israel*. Trans. R. J. Ehrlich and J. P. Smith, Oliver and Boyd, Edinburgh and London (1960) 167, 168.

⁹ R. Martin-Achard, *A Light to the Nations*. Trans. J. P. Smith, Oliver and Boyd, Edinburgh and London (1962) 46.

¹⁰ *Op. cit.*, 613.

¹¹ J. Blau, *The Missionary Nature of the Church*, Lutterworth, London (1962) 142.

C. A FRESH LOOK AT MALACHI 1:11 AND ITS INTERPRETATION

It now remains to examine the words of our text and to make a re-appraisal of its meaning. It comes in the second oracle (1:6-2:9), which follows a similar structure to the first (1:2-5). The Lord makes an assertion which is questioned and then extended. A line of action is recommended, and a confirmatory sign given. In the first oracle this sign will consist in seeing Edom's attempts to rebuild frustrated, an event which will lead men to say 'Great is the Lord, beyond the borders of Israel!' (verse 5). Of necessity this sign is future. In the second oracle to goad the priests into a new reverence and acceptable worship the affirmation is 'For I (am) a great King . . . and my name (is) feared among the nations' (1:14). Clearly there is timelessness in the statement that God is a great king, but the absence of a verb leaves open the possibility of an eschatological and therefore future fulfilment of the second clause. The point is important because of the close connection between and 1:14. The use of the phrase 'from the rising of the sun to its setting' in the Psalms (Pss. 50:1; 113:3) and in Isaiah 45:6; 59:9 is in contexts which look towards an eschatological demonstration of the Lord's person to the whole inhabited earth. Attempts have been made to limit the reference here to Jews of the Dispersion¹² or to Jewish proselytes,¹³ but neither interpretation does justice to the obvious meaning of this phrase. The prophet has in mind, not exceptions or limited groups, but large numbers, scattered over the earth. This phrase confirms that the verse is orientated to the future.¹⁴

The question as to the tense which should be used in translating verse 11 arises because in Hebrew the verb 'to be' is not expressed, and the English 'is offered' represents a Hebrew hoph'al participle. The translators of AV, RV chose the future tense, whereas RSV and more recent versions have preferred the present. This is not the place for technicalities of Hebrew grammar, but it is necessary to demonstrate that it is nothing exceptional for the participle to bear future sense. The most

¹² So W. E. Barnes, *CB* (5957); H. Ewald; von Orelli.

¹³ J. M. P. Smith, *ICC* (1912) 35; D. R. Jones, *TBC* (1962); B. Duhm; H. Haller; J. W. Rothstein.

¹⁴ So Th. Chary, *Aggie-Zacharie Malachie*, Gabalda, Paris (1969) 242.

recent treatise on the subject so far as I know is that of William F. Stinespring, 'The Participle of the Immediate Future and Other Matters Pertaining to Correct Translation of the Old Testament'.¹⁵ 'My first contention is that the use of the so-called participle (usually active) in biblical Hebrew and Aramaic as a pure verb (hence no longer a participle in function) to express the immediate future is recognized by the grammarians but often neglected by the translators.' Among the grammarians Gesenius—Kautzsch—Cowley puts as the third usage of the participle 'to announce future actions or events . . . but especially often . . . if it is intended to announce the event as imminent... or at least near at hand (and sure to happen)'.¹⁶ The use of the participle to express the future is an extension of its use to express the present, which is looked upon as already beginning to accomplish the event. In Malachi 1:11 the prophet may well have sensed that there were individuals among the nations who, aware of something of the greatness and goodness of God, despised popular pagan religion even while taking part in its ritual, and were feeling after the unknown God. But the day when the nations would acknowledge the greatness of God's name was surely still future.

There are two other factors which militate against the view that heathen worship offered to other gods was looked on by the prophet as offered to Yahweh. In the first place he lays great stress on the *name*. Four times in verses 11 and 14 the Lord speaks of His name. As is well known, the name in Hebrew thought stood for the character, and Yahweh of hosts would not give His name to another (Is. 48:1 1). It was a scandal that Israel's priests had despised His name (Mal. 1:6) but it would surely be unthinkable that He should be identified with the gods of the nations. Secondly, the sacrificial language indicates that the prophet was speaking of non-blood sacrifices, for while *מִזְבֵּחַ*, 'is made to smoke' could refer to the burnt offering as well as to incense, *מִקְטָר*, with its close connection to *מִקְטָר* 'altar of incense' (Ex. 30:1) establishes that incense

¹⁵ In H. T. Frank and W. L. Reid (Ed.), *Translating and Understanding the Old Testament, Essays in Honour of H. G. May*, Abingdon Press, New York (1970) 64-70.

¹⁶ Gesenius—Kautzsch—Cowley, *Hebrew Grammar* 359-360. So also Ronald J. Williams, *Hebrew Syntax: An Outline*, University of Toronto Press (1967) 42, who puts this usage second out of ten; Paul Jouon, *Grammaire de l'Hébreu Biblique*, Pontifical Biblical Institute, Rome (2nd 1947) 339; G. Bergsträsser, *Hebräische Grammatik II* (Verbum, Leipzig (1929) 72.

is meant. It is just possible that already incense stood for prayer. But the prophet goes on to speak of pure offerings, and in choosing to use the word טָהוֹר 'pure' he selected a word never used elsewhere of offerings, and which means morally, physically and ceremonially pure. This is clear from its use in Psalm 51:12 (EVV 10) 'Create in me a clean heart, O God' (*cf.* Pr. 22:11; Ec. 9:2; Jb. 14:4, etc.). At their best the Levitical sacrifices were said to be תְּמִים 'whole'. The nations could hardly have attained to a perfection in worship which was never attained by Israelites at their best, and indeed became possible only through Christ.

How the 'pure offering' is to be made is not disclosed, but Malachi saw it as part of the picture of the end times. Elijah was about to come and prepare the way for the great and terrible day of the Lord (4:5, 6), when Israel would be in danger of losing her privilege to many among the nations. His hope was that Israel would be provoked into repentance by those who were no people, and begin again to take seriously the greatness of the Lord's name before it was too late.

In conclusion, I find myself asking whether Malachi, a post-exilic prophet, was really weighing up the other religious systems which he had come across and saying magnanimously that they were all so many equally good ways to the one God, or whether nineteenth- and twentieth-century theologians, thinking this way themselves, have read their own universalist thoughts into the words of the prophet. For too long 'incorrect eisegesis has been permitted to dominate correct exegesis', to borrow a phrase from H. M. Orlinsky.¹⁷ My contention is that the prophet was thinking of an imminent future event, which was certain to happen. While the use of the present tense in English may be defended, it would be less misleading if the future tense were used. Thus understood the teaching of Malachi 1:11 is not inconsistent with the rest of his book nor with that of the rest of the Old Testament.

¹⁷ In H. T. Frank and W. L. Reid (Ed.), *Translating and Understanding the Old Testament*, 207.