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Haftarat Toledot: “For He is a Messenger of God”: Malakhi’s Prophecies to a Despairing People

THE LAST PROPHET?

Was Malakhi Israel’s last prophet? The official answer in many traditional sources is “yes” (see e.g., *Tosefta Sotah* 13:3; *Yoma* 9b; *Sanhedrin* 11a). However, there are three considerations that require further examination.

The fact that Malakhi is positioned last in *Trei Asar* does not prove that the book’s historical time period is later than all the other books in *Navi*. *Trei Asar* is not necessarily arranged in chronological order and *Malakhi* may have been placed last by the Men of the Great Assembly (see *Bava Batra* 15a) for literary-thematic reasons.

Our commentators explore the issue based on the textual evidence. Ibn Ezra (on *Malakhi* 1:1) quotes an anonymous commentator who believed that Malakhi lived in the Assyrian period, at least two centuries before Chaggai and Zechariah. The book’s opening verse states that Malakhi prophesied to “*Yisrael*” (*Malakhi* 1:1) and that term often refers to the Northern Kingdom of Israel, which was exiled by the Assyrians in 722 bce.

Ibn Ezra and later commentators reject this claim on the grounds that Edom functioned as a nation until after the destruction of the First Temple, whereas Malakhi’s opening prophecy is predicated on the historical reality that Edom had been destroyed (*Malakhi* 1:2–5). “*Yisrael*” in 1:1 can refer to Jews from the Southern Kingdom, and Ibn Ezra cites examples to support his claim.

Radak, Abarbanel, and Mordechai Zer-Kavod (*Da’at Mikra*) adduce evidence that Malakhi in all likelihood was the last prophet in *Trei Asar*. Unlike Chaggai and Zechariah, Malakhi presupposes a Temple already standing. Since Edom existed as a nation at least until the destruction of the First Temple, Malakhi must have prophesied when the Second Temple already was completed.

Moreover, Malakhi battled against intermarriage, as did Ezra and Nechemiah. Nechemiah enacted a covenant for people to observe *ma’aserot* (*Nechemiah* chs. 10, 13) and Malakhi similarly criticized the Jews’ laxity in tithing (*Malakhi* 3:8–12). Finally, Malakhi does not mention the Davidic kingdom, possibly indicating that there no longer was such a kingdom or even a promising descendant such as Zerubavel.¹³⁷ While it cannot be proven that Malakhi was the last of *Trei Asar*, it appears likely that he was.

Even if Malakhi were the last prophet mentioned in *Tanakh*, perhaps there were other prophets after him who did not compose canonical books. There is no categorical statement in prophetic literature declaring that prophecy formally ended that is comparable to the Torah’s assertion of Moshe’s unsurpassed prophecy (*Devarim* 34:10).¹³⁸ The lack of prophetic books after *Malakhi* does not prove that prophecy itself stopped. Because of the lack of any empirical evidence, we must rely on rabbinic tradition that prophecy ceased with Malakhi.¹³⁹

¹³⁷. Mordechai Zer-Kavod, *Da’at Mikra: Malakhi in Trei Asar* vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1990), introduction, 3–8.

¹³⁸. Nechemiah relates how some of his enemies pretended to be prophets in order to mislead him (*Nechemiah* 6:7–13). He saw through their evil scheme and ignored them. However, he reports that it was because he was perceptive, not because he knew categorically that there was no more prophecy.

¹³⁹. For a survey of rabbinic sources and additional references, see Hayyim Angel, “The End of Prophecy: Malakhi’s Position in the Spiritual Development of Israel,” *Conversations* 9 (Winter 2011), 112–118; reprinted in Angel, *Creating Space between Peshat and Derash: A Collection of Studies on Tanakh* (Jersey City, NJ: KTAV-Sephardic Publication Foundation, 2011), 146–153.

We must also ask if “Malakhi” was the prophet’s first name, or an appellation? The name is unique in *Tanakh*, and means “My messenger.”¹⁴⁰ However, God did not dictate the book’s superscription. Furthermore, *Malakhi* 3:1 uses the term “*malakhi*,” likely referring to some messenger that God will send to redeem Israel in the distant future.¹⁴¹

Although the majority view posits that Malakhi was the first name of the prophet, there are minority views that identify him with other known figures. In *Megillah* 15a, there are attempts to identify Malakhi with Mordechai, and then with Ezra. The *Targum* also refers to our prophet as Ezra. In the Septuagint, the first verse reads the Greek equivalent of “*be-yad malakho*” – “in the hands of [God’s] messenger.” These minority views notwithstanding, *Tosefta Sotah* 13:3, *Sanhedrin* 11a, *Yoma* 9b, and nearly all later commentators assume that the prophet’s name was Malakhi.¹⁴²

OVERVIEW OF MALAKHI

Likely living a generation or two earlier than Malakhi, Chaggai and Zechariah envisioned a great state of potential for their generation. There was hope for Zerubavel to be the redeemer and for God’s presence to be fully manifest. Unfortunately, these visions of hope were not fully realized as a consequence of the spiritual failure of the people (*Berakhot* 4a). Two leading rabbinic explanations for this unfulfilled prophetic potential are the fact that most Jews failed to return to Israel when given the opportunity (*Yoma* 9b; *Kuzari* II:24), or assimilation and intermarriage (*Ma’amar Ha-Mizbe’ach Ba-Zohar*, *Cheilek Ha-Shematot*, p. 86, #226; Rashi on *Yechezkel* 43:11).¹⁴³

Malakhi responded to a grim reality. The people were poor, Judea was a tiny vassal state in a mighty Persian Empire, and most Jews remained in exile. There did not appear to be any respite from their downtrodden state, and there no longer was a Davidic figure such as Zerubavel to inspire hopes for a renewed monarchy.

Despair from political and economic suffering contributed to feelings of rejection from God (*Malakhi* 1:2–5). The priesthood was corrupt and brought inferior offerings (*Malakhi* 1:6–2:9). People intermarried for upward social mobility and because they felt that Israel no longer had a special role in history (*Malakhi* 2:10–16). People cut corners in tithing (*Malakhi* 3:8–12). Even God-fearing people were losing hope and wondering why they should remain righteous when they continue to suffer, whereas those who betray the Torah become wealthier (*Malakhi* 2:17–3:7; 3:13–21).

God and Malakhi needed to respond, and did, emphasizing that while it is true that God’s Presence was not overtly manifest, God still watches and cares for His nation. Israel’s very existence is a tribute to God’s love of Israel. Jews should be faithful to the Torah to preserve their identity and hope for future. In a distant future, all the wrongs will be righted and redemption will come. These are very sobering responses, especially when contrasted with the imminent messianic optimism of Chaggai and Zechariah.

ISRAEL’S SURVIVAL PROVES GOD’S LOVE

Malakhi is structured in a dialogue or “catechetical” format. Rashi, Radak, R. Eliezer of Beaugency, and Mordechai Zer-Kavod explain that these are not transcripts of dialogues between the prophet and his people. Rather, it is a rhetorical device that reflects the sentiments of the people.

I have shown you love, said the Lord. But you ask, “How have You shown us love?” After all – declares the Lord – Esav is Yaakov’s brother; yet I have accepted Yaakov and have rejected Esav. I have made his hills a desolation, his territory a home for beasts of the desert. If Edom thinks, “Though crushed, we can build the ruins again,” thus said the Lord of Hosts: They may build, but I will tear down. And so they shall be known as the region of

¹⁴⁰. See, for example, *Chaggai* 1:13; *Divrei Ha-Yamim Bet* 36:15–16, where prophets are referred to by the word “*malakh*.”

¹⁴¹. *Shemot Rabbah* 32:9 links this *malakh* to the angel that had accompanied Israel throughout her history. Rashi, Radak, R. Eliezer of Beaugency, and Mordechai Zer-Kavod agree that this is a reference to a metaphysical angel. Other commentators link this *malakh* to Eliyahu the prophet who is mentioned in 3:23–24. See Kara, Ibn Caspi; cf. *Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer* 29.

Abarbanel is concerned about messianic interpretations, whether metaphysical or as referring to Eliyahu. How would a distant messianic redeemer answer the people’s questions now? He concludes that “*malakhi*” in 3:1 actually refers to our prophet Malakhi, who will answer their questions.

However, Malakhi was *there*, and did not clear a path for the *Shekhinah*, nor smite evildoers, nor answer the people’s questions about fairness other than saying that ultimate justice will occur only in the future. It appears, therefore, that the majority view is correct, and 3:1 is a long term prediction of redemption rather than Malakhi himself being that messenger of comfort.

¹⁴². Mordechai Zer-Kavod (*Da’at Mikra: Malakhi*, introduction, 7) posits that Malakhi probably was a shortened form of Malakhyahu, similar to Uri = Uriyahu; Zikhri = Zekharyahu.

¹⁴³. For discussion of the non-fulfillment of messianic prophecies, see Hayyim Angel, “Prophecy as Potential: The Consolations of Isaiah 1–12 in Context,” *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 37:1 (2009), 3–10; reprinted in Angel, *Revealed Texts, Hidden Meanings: Finding the Religious Significance in Tanakh* (Jersey City, NJ: KTAV-Sephardic Publication Foundation, 2009), 117–126.

wickedness, the people damned forever of the Lord. Your eyes shall behold it, and you shall declare, “Great is the Lord beyond the borders of Israel!” (*Malakhi* 1:2–5)

Israel felt rejected by God. God responds that unlike Edom that had been permanently destroyed, Israel was rebuilt and lives on (Radak). Malakhi’s message is similar to the talmudic understanding of why the Men of the Great Assembly were called “great.” They understood that God can be called “awesome” even when Israel is downtrodden in exile, since Israel’s very survival is miraculous:

God performs awesome deeds, since were it not for the fear of Him, how could one nation persist among the nations! (*Yoma* 69b)

CORRUPTION OF THE PRIESTHOOD AND ESAV

The primary section of the *haftarah* is a lengthy condemnation of the corrupt priesthood. Rather than living up to God’s covenant with the tribe of Levi, they lead Israel away from God. They also do not appear to realize that they are disgracing God.

A son should honor his father, and a slave his master. Now if I am a father, where is the honor due Me? And if I am a master, where is the reverence due Me? – said the Lord of Hosts to you, O Priests who scorn My name (*bozei shemi*). But you ask, “How have we scorned Your name?” (*Malakhi* 1:6)

Malakhi condemns the Priests who bring defective offerings and do not consider their actions a form of wrongdoing. Perhaps they rationalized by saying that the people were poor so they could not afford the highest quality animals. Regardless, God did not approve of these rationalizations. It is preferable to bring fewer offerings of the highest quality than numerous low-quality offerings. By acting as they do, the Priests despise God’s name.

Rashi on *Bereishit* follows a midrashic reading that connects the two sections of our *haftarah*.

Yaakov then gave Esav bread and lentil stew; he ate and drank, and he rose and went away. Thus did Esav spurn the birthright (*va-yivez Esav et ha-bekhorah*). (*Bereishit* 25:34)

Observing that Esav’s despising of the birthright (“*va-yivez Esav*”) employs the same root word as Malakhi’s description of the priesthood in his own day (“*bozei shemi*”), Rashi (on *Bereishit* 25:31, 34) quotes *midrashim* that suggest that Esav rejected his birthright because he did not want to be involved in the priestly service.

This reading is not *peshat* in *Bereishit*, where the birthright is a far more expansive blessing. However, Rashi’s comment links the two sections of our *haftarah*. In the first section (*Malakhi* 1:2–5), God stresses His eternal love for Israel while He has rejected Esav-Edom. In the following section, Israel’s Priests despise God through their deficient offerings (*Malakhi* 1:6–2:9).

By linking the passages, this criticism becomes a subtle threat to Israel. They now are despising God as Esav did when he sold his birthright to Yaakov. God rejected Esav as a result. Similarly, God is outraged at Israel’s spurning her birthright – the Temple sacrificial order. By associating the birthright of Yaakov and Esav with offerings in the Temple, Rashi’s midrashic reading captures Malakhi’s message that God’s loving relationship with Israel is eternal, yet Israel always is accountable to God and the Torah.

UNDOING THE PRIESTLY BLESSING

Unless you obey and unless you lay it to heart, and do honor to My name – said the Lord of Hosts – I will send a curse and turn your blessings into curses. (Indeed, I have turned them into curses, because you do not lay it to heart.) (*Malakhi* 2:2)

Abarbanel, Malbim, and Mordechai Zer-Kavod identify linguistic ties to the Priestly Blessing throughout the section of Malakhi’s condemnation of the priesthood. Instead of serving as conduits for Divine blessings, the Priests bring curses upon the people. Michael Fishbane summarizes the allusions as presented in the chart below¹⁴⁴:

בְּרַכְּךָ ה' וְיִשְׁמְרֶךָ:	כִּי שִׁפְתֵי כֹהֵן יִשְׁמְרוּ דַעַת (ב:ז) אֲשֶׁר אֵינְכֶם שֹׁמְרִים אֶת דְּרָכֶי (ב:ט)
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¹⁴⁴. Michael Fishbane, “Form and Reformulation of the Biblical Priestly Blessing,” *JAOS* 103 (1983), 115–121.

<p>יָאֵר ה' פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ וַיִּחַנְךָ: וְלֹא תֵאֵירוּ מִזְבְּחֵי חֲנֹם (א:י) וְשַׁלַּחְתִּי בָכֶם אֶת הַמֶּאֲרָה וְאֲרוֹתַי אֶת בְּרוּכֹתֵיכֶם (ב:ב)</p>	<p>וְעֵתָה חָלוּ נָא פָנָי אֵלַי וַיִּחַנְנוּ מִיָּדְכֶם הַיְתֵה זֹאת (א:ט) וְלֹא תֵאֵירוּ מִזְבְּחֵי חֲנֹם (א:י) וְשַׁלַּחְתִּי בָכֶם אֶת הַמֶּאֲרָה וְאֲרוֹתַי אֶת בְּרוּכֹתֵיכֶם (ב:ב)</p>
<p>יֵשָׂא ה' פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ וַיִּשָּׂא לְךָ שְׁלוֹם: הַקְרִיבֵהוּ נָא לְפָסְתֶךָ הִרְצֵךְ אוֹ הִישָׂא פָנֶיךָ (א:ח) הַיֵּשָׂא מִכֶּם פָּנִים (א:ט) וְזָרִיתִי פָרֶשׁ עַל פָּנֶיכֶם פָּרֶשׁ חֲגִיכֶם וְנִשְׂא אֶתְכֶם אֱלֹוִי (ב:ג) בְּרִיתִי הַיְתֵה אִתּוֹ הַחַיִּים וְהַשְׁלוֹם (ב:ה) בְּשְׁלוֹם וּבְמִישׁוֹר הִלֵּךְ (ב:ו) וְנִשְׂאִים פָּנִים בַּתּוֹרָה (ב:ט)</p>	<p>יֵשָׂא ה' פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ וַיִּשָּׂא לְךָ שְׁלוֹם: הַקְרִיבֵהוּ נָא לְפָסְתֶךָ הִרְצֵךְ אוֹ הִישָׂא פָנֶיךָ (א:ח) הַיֵּשָׂא מִכֶּם פָּנִים (א:ט) וְזָרִיתִי פָרֶשׁ עַל פָּנֶיכֶם פָּרֶשׁ חֲגִיכֶם וְנִשְׂא אֶתְכֶם אֱלֹוִי (ב:ג) בְּרִיתִי הַיְתֵה אִתּוֹ הַחַיִּים וְהַשְׁלוֹם (ב:ה) בְּשְׁלוֹם וּבְמִישׁוֹר הִלֵּךְ (ב:ו) וְנִשְׂאִים פָּנִים בַּתּוֹרָה (ב:ט)</p>
<p>וַיִּשְׂמוּ אֶת שְׁמִי עַל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֲנִי אֲבָרְכֶם: הַפְּהִינִים בּוֹזֵי שְׁמִי (א:ו) גְּדוֹל שְׁמִי בְּגוֹיִם (א:י) וַיִּשְׂמוּ נוֹרָא בְּגוֹיִם (א:יד) וְאִם לֹא תִשְׂיֵמוּ עַל לֵב לְתַת כְּבוֹד לְשְׁמִי אָמַר ה' צָבָאוֹת וְשַׁלַּחְתִּי בָכֶם אֶת הַמֶּאֲרָה וְאֲרוֹתַי אֶת בְּרוּכֹתֵיכֶם (ב:ב) וּמִפָּנָי שְׁמִי נִחַת הוּא (ב:ה)</p>	<p>וַיִּשְׂמוּ אֶת שְׁמִי עַל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֲנִי אֲבָרְכֶם: הַפְּהִינִים בּוֹזֵי שְׁמִי (א:ו) גְּדוֹל שְׁמִי בְּגוֹיִם (א:י) וַיִּשְׂמוּ נוֹרָא בְּגוֹיִם (א:יד) וְאִם לֹא תִשְׂיֵמוּ עַל לֵב לְתַת כְּבוֹד לְשְׁמִי אָמַר ה' צָבָאוֹת וְשַׁלַּחְתִּי בָכֶם אֶת הַמֶּאֲרָה וְאֲרוֹתַי אֶת בְּרוּכֹתֵיכֶם (ב:ב) וּמִפָּנָי שְׁמִי נִחַת הוּא (ב:ה)</p>

ISRAEL FAILING AS A LIGHT UNTO THE NATIONS

For from where the sun rises to where it sets, My name is honored among the nations, and everywhere incense and pure oblation are offered to My name; for My name is honored among the nations – said the Lord of Hosts. But you profane it when you say, “The table of the Lord is defiled and the meat, the food, can be treated with scorn.”...For I am a great King – said the Lord of Hosts – and My name is revered among the nations. (*Malakhi* 1:11–14)

With brutal irony, Malakhi contrasts other nations’ revering God and Israel’s despising God. Were the pagans in Malakhi’s time truly serving God? The Talmud (*Menachot* 110a) suggests that even polytheists recognize one main deity over their other gods. Unbeknownst to them, this chief deity can be viewed as our God. Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Rambam (*Guide* I:36), Radak, Abarbanel, and Malbim accept this general concept as well.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁵. For applications of this verse in the context of rabbinic thinkers finding precedent to respect all people, see Alan Brill, *Judaism and Other Religions: Models of Understanding* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

Malakhi's condemnation reverses the "Chosen People" idea. Israel is supposed to serve God and set an example as a light unto the nations (*Yeshayahu* 42:6). Instead, pagans are coming closer to God in some manner whereas Israel has failed as a priestly nation (*Shemot* 19:6).¹⁴⁶

THE IDEAL VISION FOR THE FUTURE OF THE PRIESTHOOD

Know, then, that I have sent this charge to you that My covenant with Levi may endure – said the Lord of Hosts. I had with him a covenant of life and well-being, which I gave to him, and of reverence, which he showed Me. For he stood in awe of My name. Proper rulings were in his mouth, and nothing perverse was on his lips; he served Me with complete loyalty and held the many back from iniquity. For the lips of a priest guard knowledge, and men seek rulings from his mouth; for he is a messenger of the Lord of Hosts. (*Malakhi* 2:4–7)

Rather than stopping with a condemnation of the priesthood, Malakhi exhorts them by reminding them of their ideal mission. The tribe of Levi had been faithful to God dating back to the Golden Calf episode. They were designated as the tribe that would lead the Temple worship and serve as teachers of Israel. Only a generation or two earlier, Yeshua was the High Priest and was a faithful servant of God alongside Zerubavel.¹⁴⁷

Malakhi uses the expression "*ki malakh Hashem Tzeva'ot hu*" – "for he is a messenger of the Lord of Hosts." Priests are expected to serve as a bridge between God and Israel, and Israel is to serve as a bridge between God and humanity. When those roles are fulfilled, God's Name is sanctified. *Chazal* extended Malakhi's exhortation to the priesthood to all teachers of Israel:

Said R. Yochanan: What does the text mean, "For the lips of a priest guard knowledge, and men seek rulings from his mouth; for he is a messenger of the Lord of Hosts"? [It means that] if the Rabbi is like a messenger of the Lord of Hosts, they should seek the law at his mouth; but if he is not, they should not seek the law at his mouth. (*Mo'ed Katan* 17a)

The *haftarah* concludes on this note, reminding all future generations that the Torah demands the highest religious and ethical standards from its representatives. Although prophecy officially ceased with Malakhi, the Torah lives on, transmitted by teachers who serve as God's messengers.

¹⁴⁶. For further discussion of the Biblical conception of Chosen People, see Hayyim Angel, "The Chosen People': An Ethical Challenge," *Conversations* 8 (Fall 2010), 52–60; reprinted in Angel, *Creating Space between Peshat and Derash*, 25–34.

¹⁴⁷. *Ezra* 10:17–19 reports that the children or grandchildren of the High Priest Yeshua intermarried during Ezra's time.