




Altar pollution in Malachi: An exploration on the violation of Leviticus' ritual traditions (Leviticus 1–7) in Malachi 1:6–10

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Abstract

The article, through a literary and theological approach, explores the distinction between the ritual texts' explicit assertions in Leviticus (relative to specific ritual texts in Leviticus 1–7), and the ritual practices reflected in Malachi 1:6–10, on the one hand, and the basic socio-economic reason for the violation of specific ritual requirements and the ethical and theological implications of such violation, on the other hand. Malachi 1:6–10 contains both poetic and prose layers on the cult of the criticised members of the post-exilic community of the Book of Malachi. The poetic section (vv. 6–9) presents Yahweh's unfavorable disposition towards the sacrificial cult, mostly in the form of interrogations, and the prose part (v. 10), bluntly highlights Yahweh's outright displeasure over the polluted offerings that are being brought to him. The exploration reveals that the tacit collaboration and encouragement of wrongdoing by both the priests and the people, constitutes a glamourisation of the elimination and rejection of the rituals of the cult. Consequently, the article offers profound insight into ritual performance in Malachi 1:6–10 by identifying the prominent creators of the violations, and it underscores that the performance of the cultic rituals should satisfy the most rigorous cultic and/or ethical demands, no matter what the socio-economic situations of ritual practitioners.

Keywords: Leviticus, Malachi, altar pollution, priestly traditions, ritual texts and practices

Introduction

Within the category of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament scholarship and throughout the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, one finds numerous references to sacrifices and offerings in the religious life of ancient Israel at both the national as well as in individuals lives, during the 1st and 2nd Temple periods (Milgrom, 1991:133–489; de Vaux, 1997: 415–456; Brueggemann, 1997:666–668; Anderson, 1999:116–121; Hrobon, 2010:7). In spite of the fact that the basics of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament sacrifice are largely borrowed from neighboring culture and parallel practices in surrounding nations and cultures (perhaps as food for the gods) (cf. Stem, 1999:246), ancient Israelite sacrifices that are offered to Yahweh are to be understood theologically according to Yahweh's particular character, and also according to the unique covenantal relationship that He has enacted with Israel his people (Brueggemann, 2002:182). Nicolaidis, (2010:2), asserts that in Deuteronomy 7:6 God states that "Thou art a holy people to the Lord thy God." God had a perfect plan for creation, in which He included a nation which He established apart as his chosen 'people' – the nation of Israel.

Although the major responsibility for the performance and maintenance of the offerings and/or rituals was the prerogative of the priests (Barton, 2007:111–112; Hrobon, 2010:7), we find that in Malachi, the priests are explicitly criticized especially with regard to the manner with which they carry out their priestly, food-related sacrificial duties (Rooke, 2016:89). This particular unit



of oracle (Malachi 1:6–10) highlights layers of both poetic and prose elements of Yahweh's disapproval of the cult of members of the post-exilic community of the Book of Malachi. In the poetic layer (vv. 6-9), Yahweh's dissatisfaction is presented mainly in the form of interrogations, and the prose part (v. 10), bluntly states that Yahweh is not satisfied and will not accept the contaminated foods being brought to him. This silent complicity of the priests was in clear contradiction of the essential Mosaic Law that Yahweh is given the very best in worship.

Whilst the prophetic critic of the cult gives the negative impression that cultic rituals were morally outrageous (cf. Isaiah 1:11–14; Lafferty, 2010:13), the essential purpose of such prophetic announcement was to stir people out of their weariness and equip them to address the critical question of whether Yahweh's love and honor is adequately respected in their community. Clearly, ritual for rituals sake was pointless (cf. 1 Samuel 15:22). However, if the individual brought an offering and/or sacrifice with a repentant, healthy, merciful and ethical attitudes and a heart full of praise, the whole experience was an exciting moment of worship (cf. Psalm 4:5; Wolf, 1976:69–70). In the following sections of this article, attempt is made at exploring ritual traditions in Leviticus, especially those that specify types and requirements (cf. Leviticus 1–7), examines Malachi's critique of flawed cultic practices that constitute pollution of Yahweh's altar (Malachi 1:6-10), and concludes with a synthesis of the socio-economic conditions that aided the development and the ethical and theological implications of such violations.

Ritual Traditions in Leviticus 1–7

Rhetorical analysis of rituals and ritual texts in the book of Leviticus obviously has implications not only for the form and contents of the book, but also for understanding the later history of the rhetoric of ritual traditions, priesthood, of offering and sacrifice, and, especially, of scripture as a whole. In his attempt to navigate a distinction between text and ritual, Watts (2007:29) remarks that '*texts are not rituals and rituals are not texts . . . what a ritual meant to ancient people is not necessarily an answer to the question of how and why the ritual functioned within ancient society.*' The noteworthy inference that one can make from Watts is that, the description provided by a text about ritual does not necessarily imply the meaning and function of ritual.

As the third part of the Pentateuch, the book of Leviticus begins with a long description of various sacrifices (Wenham, 1995:75–76) that are performed in the Holy Place of the tabernacle; which was essentially the focus of the last chapters of Exodus (cf. Exodus 25-40) (Longman & Dillard, 2007:81). The early chapters of the book of Leviticus (cf. Leviticus 1–7) contain texts that prescribe and describe ritual precision at the temple altar, and on compliance with the Law of Moses. These texts are 'shaped not only to instruct worshipers and priests on how to perform various offerings, but also to persuade them to do exactly as these texts stipulate and to accept these texts as the ultimate authority for such ritual performances' (Watts, 2007:80). The initial episode sets the scene at the Tent of Meeting, where Moses is believed to have received instructions from God on how the Israelites should act as a people in community: 'The LORD said to Moses' (1:1). According to Watts,

The narrative framework, however, that casts Leviticus 1–7 as divine prescriptions delivered through Israel's paradigmatic lawgiver, Moses, highlights the persuasive intent behind this text's formulation as it stands. The narrative frame depicts this material as oral instruction. Like all the other instructions and laws in the Pentateuch, these chapters portray themselves as speeches. God is the speaker, as in most of Exodus 20 through Numbers. The immediate audience is Moses, but he is told to repeat these instructions to the people of Israel (Leviticus 1:1–2; 4:2; 7:23, 29). (Watts, 2007:46)



Although its priestly character is debated at some points (see Levine, 1974:xxviii; Wenham, 1981:6–15; 1995:75–76), nevertheless its emphases on sacrifice as formal worship during the Old Testament period are of the most striking significance for contemporary reflection on the symbolism of ritual acts in worship. The book tells how a sinful people could approach a holy deity and how they could live holy and acceptable lives. In the following paragraphs, a relative analysis and discussion of the rhetoric of Leviticus 1–7; around the dual subject matters of offerings and the people (1:2–6:7), and regulation for priests (6:8–7:38). The explorative analysis covers kinds of offering, type of the animals, duties of worshipper, and duties of priest (cf. Watts, 2007:93).

The offerings and the people (Leviticus 1:2–6:7)

Leviticus begins with a general introduction to offerings and sacrifices which are inconceivable in worship. The descriptive listing of offerings and sacrifices in these texts are not exhaustive, and the listing bears the stamp of the common sacrifices that worshiper in Israel would have repeatedly offer to Yahweh. Clearly, five kinds of offerings are delineated here in this section (1:2–6:7): burnt offering (1:2–17); grain offering (2:1–16); fellowship/well-being/peace offering – probably a covenant meal (3:1–17); sin offering (4:1–5:13); and guilt offering (5:14–6:7) (see, Longman & Dillard, 2007:83; Sprinkle, 2015:6–43). Prominent among these offerings is the *עֹלָה* (burnt offering – 1:3), which is considered to be the paradigmatic offering in the HB/OT for Israel's cultic worship (Watts, 2007:63). Whilst the *עֹלָה* does not originate in Leviticus (cf. Genesis 8:20), it is however, regulated in Leviticus (Heesterman, 1993:100). It is designed to be offered at regularly scheduled times (Coggins & Shane, 1984:316), 1 and in collaboration with other sacrifices (Detienne & Vernant, 1989:71). The specific to the *עֹלָה* textual unit (1:3–17) is well thought-out on the systemic basis of 'more-expensive bulls (vv. 3-9), to medium-expensive sheep/goats (vv. 10–13), to less-expensive birds (vv. 14–17)' (Sprinkle, 2015:7). These were usually perfect males; the most common were year-old male lambs.

The procedure for bringing and offering individual's burnt offerings is clearly articulated in Leviticus 1:3ff: The worshipper brought an unblemished male animal from the flock to the sanctuary. He/she laid his hand on its head to indicate that it was offered on his/her behalf and that its acceptance signified his/her acceptance (Milgrom, 1991:176). The sacrifice is then killed, skinned and cut it into pieces. The priests took the blood and sprinkled it around the altar, and burned the pieces of the sacrifice on the altar (Sprinkle, 2015:8). Furthering explanations for *עֹלָה* priority, Watts remarks that the *עֹלָה*

. . . exemplifies the temple cult of the priests, apart from the lay people's participation in it, as pure gift to the deity devoid of almost any profit to the priests. The implication of its rhetorical prominence then is that the *עֹלָה* represents the purist form of divine service (Watts, 2007:71).

In the sequence of instruction about offerings, the instruction about grain (or cereal) offering (2:1–16) follows the *עֹלָה* (burnt offering) probably because of the fact that it could serve as the poor worshipper's *עֹלָה* (burnt offering) (Sprinkle, 2015:12). The common term for such offerings is *מִנְחָה* which is often translated as 'tribute' (cf. Judges 1:13, 17–18; 2 Samuel 8:6; 1 Kings 4:21). These were offered as tribute, in acknowledgment that everything comes from Yahweh, the sovereign LORD of the covenant. The description of the sacrifice is divided into three categories: uncooked grain offering (2:1–3); cooked grain offering (2:4–10); and other types of grain offering (2:11–16) (Longman & Dillard, 2007:87).

Leviticus 3 continues Leviticus 1–7's ritual instructions at the tabernacle. Here, the fellowship/communion/peace offering (*שְׁלָמִים*) is the only animal sacrifice that has no atoning value. According to Sprinkle (2015:18), "Its purpose is not to atone for sin but to deepen a person's relationship with God by expressing gratitude to God for various blessings." The form of this offering is similar to that for the burnt offering (*עֹלָה*), though in the case of the fellowship/peace offering (*שְׁלָמִים*), Yahweh, the priest and the worshipper all shared in the



animal. The part that is due Yahweh (3:3–5, 16) was burned on the altar, the priest received the breast and thigh (cf. Leviticus 7:3 1–34), and the rest was eaten by the worshipper and his family. Animals permitted for these sacrifices were: cattle (3:1–5), sheep (3:6–11) and goat (3:12–17) (Longman & Dillard 2007:87). In Leviticus 7:12–16, one finds three types of the fellowship offering (לֶחֶם) that are offered with slightly different rules: thank-offerings, votive offerings, made in fulfillment of a vow and freewill offerings. These offerings are associated with the covenant and probably included both thanksgiving to God and the renewal of covenant vows (cf. Exodus 24:5; Deuteronomy 27:7; 2 Samuel 6:17–18; 1 Kings 8:63–64) (Milgrom, 1991: 217–225; Averbeck, 1999: 135–143).

The fourth offering in a series of offerings found in Leviticus 1:1–6:7 is the sin offering (חַטָּאת) (4:1–5:13). The offerer would place their hands on the sacrificial animal to symbolically transfer all their sins onto it. Thus since sin is a pollution that offends Yahweh, the sin offering is a remedy for it. The passage is structured from weightier to less weighty persons and/or groups; the important the person and/or group, the more expensive the sacrifice and the deeper the holy place the blood was taken (Sprinkle, 2015:24–25). This sacrifice is for: the priest (4:3–12), the Israelite community as a whole (4:13–21), the Israelite community leader (4:22–26) and the Israelite layperson (4:27–35) (Longman & Dillard, 2007:88). The blood of the sacrificed animal was also deposited in the sanctuary in order to to purify it

Whilst Leviticus 4 introduces the ritual of the sin offering, Leviticus 5:1–13 clarifies specific cases where the sin offering is required. In 5:1–6, three cases illustrate the type of condition that might require a sin offering: sins of omission, offences due to accident or negligence, and rash or impulsive acts. Leviticus 5:7–13 then makes accommodation for the poor by allowing them to substitute either birds or grain offering in place of the normal female goat or lamb for the sin offering (Sprinkle, 2015:32).

The fifth and final offering in the series of offerings found in Leviticus 1:1–6:7 is the guilt offering (עֲוֹן - 5:14-6:7). This offering is meant to address offences against holy things, whether done directly to desecrate a holy thing (5:14–19), or by swearing a false exculpatory oath, thereby profaning the name of God (6:1–7) (Sprinkle, 2015:32). This then allowed a sinner make restitution for sins committed by him or her against fellow human beings and God, and to show the seriousness of such transgressions. The offering requires an additional payment of 20 percent that makes up for the offence (Longman & Dillard, 2007:88). These categories of sacrifices can be distinguished at two levels: the first three that reached their respective climax with the implicit impact that they have on Yahweh; namely, that when these offerings are offered and accepted, they become ‘an aroma pleasing to Yahweh’ (burnt offering - 1:9, 13, 17; grain offering - 2:2, 9, 12; 6:15, 21; and peace offering - 3:5, 16). Although in the last two offerings, the phrase that has implicit bearing on Yahweh: רִיחַ נִיחֹחַ לַיהוָה (‘an aroma pleasing to Yahweh’) appears in 4:31, however, by juxtaposition, a peculiar phrase appears recurrently in the narrative instructions of the last two offerings: ‘So the priest shall make atonement for them/him, and they/he shall be forgiven’ (NASB, 6 references to sin: 4:20, 26, 31, 35; 5:10, 13 and 3 references to guilt: 5:16, 18; 6:7). The last two offerings developed their climax by indicating their implicit impact on the worshipper(s) who gave the offering: ‘he/they shall be forgiven.’

The regulation for priests (Leviticus 6:8-7:38)

Whilst Leviticus 1:2-6:7 focuses on the five essential offerings from the general Israelite’s community point of view, Leviticus 6:8-7:38 zero more specifically on the priests: Aaron and his sons” (6:9, 25). The passage gives prominence to the portions of the sacrifices and/or offerings that are to be given to the priests. The noteworthy emphasis of the passage is that, since the priests help people to worship, they deserve the privilege of material support. This perspective not doubt has been the practice of most modern day Churches were pastors serve as priest. As men under Yahweh’s authority, their priestly duties were to be carried out for the benefit of the people. With respect to the burnt offering, they were charged with the



responsibility of maintaining a relationship with Yahweh by keeping the fire burning at the altar, until the entire sacrifice is consumed. They are expected to be faithful behind the scenes to guarantee Yahweh's forgiveness and their continual accessibility to Yahweh, on behalf of the people (cf. 6:8–13).

Leviticus 6:14–18 reaches back to the grain offering of Leviticus 2, by summarizing how the offering is presented (6:15), and inserting the regulation about the consumption of the left-over by the priests. The grain offering of the priest or simply "the ordination offering" characterizes the sub-unit of Leviticus 6:19–23. Here, by their peculiar priestly ordination, they are to be remarkable models to the people, through their obedient example of giving offerings to Yahweh. Leviticus 6:24–30 reinforces the core theme of Leviticus 4, namely the sin offering, as the priests eat a portion of the offering to demonstrate Yahweh's acceptance (Lev 6:26, 29). Here, the most important issue for the priests is the task of taking sin seriously; that is, keeping Yahweh's holiness in sharp focus, through prayer as they ask for Yahweh's forgiveness. The privilege of all atonement for sin should not be taken for granted and undervalued (Leviticus 6:27–28). Leviticus 7:1–10 articulates instructions concerning the restitution offering or the guilt offering described in Leviticus 5:14–6:7. Since Yahweh's intention is to deal with sin, the priests have the exclusive privilege of eating part of the sacrifice, and the blood therein is treated as most holy. The instructions in this passage imply that the priests, who are under Yahweh's authority had the privilege of giving hope to penitent worshippers; of reconciling man to God and man to man, and of pronouncing forgiveness that helps transgressors to handle their guilt with hope.

The sub-unit (7:11–36) recapitulates the subject of Leviticus 3 on peace offering, and describes the respective priestly responsibilities. Three types of peace offerings are described here: thanksgiving offering (vv. 12–15), votive (vow) offering (v. 16), and freewill (voluntary) offering (v. 16). The unit elaborates on the gracious privileges of the priests, that is the part of the offering they are to consume (vv. 28–36), and accentuates the priestly responsibility of ensuring that worshippers are ceremonially pure to participate in the fellowship, in addition to safeguarding the purity of the meal consumed. Non-compliance automatically results to being "cut off" from the community (v. 21). Whatever the penalty of being 'cut off' was, the priests had the responsibility of declaring and enforcing the discipline. The last two verses of the unit (Leviticus 7:37–38) list once again the various offerings that are prescribed for the Israelite's community under Yahweh, and which they practiced in the tabernacle as a closing summary. The offerings describe the multifaceted relationship Yahweh's worshippers had with Him.

Malachi 1:6–10 and the Rhetoric of Altar Pollution

Malachi 1:6–10 is part of the second and largest unit of Malachi's disputations (O'Brien, 1990: 49; Hill, 1998:26; Clendenen, 2004:227) specifically directed at the priesthood for encouraging inappropriate sacrifices (1:6–2:9). According to Espinoza Pereda,

The start of this unit is marked by an asyndetic clause with a prominent subject, due to inversion. There is also a change to an explicit second plural addressee, the priests (1:6gh). This block is formed by three text-units: 1:6a-1:8h, 1:9a-14g, and 2:1a-9c (Espinoza Pereda, 2024:49).

The rhetorical engagement reveals that the priest who had the privilege knowledge of the Law, and who were expected to follow the regulations for ritual purity at the altar of Yahweh, were accused of presenting defective animals such that their political appointees will not accept. In the poetic section (vv. 6–9) Malachi presents Yahweh's dissatisfaction with the priests mainly in the form of questions. Yahweh's indictment of the priests starts off with an accusation of contempt for His altar. By using the familiar metaphor of societal relationship 4 (1:6), Malachi describes very specifically what their violation is, namely disrespect, contempt, and dishonor for Yahweh's name.



The indictment, 'O priests who despise my name; priests who do not honor and glorify Yahweh as their father, and who have no respect or fear for Him as their master,' is so depressing. It suggests that the priests who were expected to teach Yahweh's covenant community the requirement of Yahweh's worship after the exile, and to turn them away from sin unto Yahweh, have failed in their priestly responsibility and example (cf. Malachi 2:7; Zevit, 2006:207). By the particular example of the priest who were leading the community to disrespect Yahweh, and as it were in the first disputation oracle (1:2–4) where the community asked how Yahweh had loved them, so here the priests, on account of extreme insensitivity to their sin of contempt, are contesting the accusation against them, 'How have we despised you name?' (1:6).

The rest of the poetic section elaborates the accusation against the priests by highlighting how they were defrauding Yahweh in the sacrificial offerings, by giving approval to second- rated, and polluted food upon Yahweh's altar (1:7; cf. Verhoef, 1987:214; Hugenberger, 1998:883). As if this indictment is not enough to provoke the priests' repentance, and being quick to deny the charge against them ask, 'In what way have we defied you?' (1:7). Their question indicates very pointedly that it is not unblemished for them to realize that to offer defiled food upon Yahweh's altar indicates profaning Yahweh's name and that in itself, serves as a strong and sufficient motivation for their indictment (cf. 1:6; Weyde, 2000:123).

In view of the priests' attitude towards Yahweh's reputation at His altar, Malachi switches his attention to their failure in priestly duties, and as authorized functionaries in the sacrificial worship at the Temple. The prophet did not give up in presenting informed answers to their second interrogation: By saying, 'Yahweh's table deserves no respect' (1:7). Whilst the priests may not have said this audibly, their lived actions and attitudinal expressions were obvious makers to this prophetic submission. Rather than considering the performance of cultic rituals as an undeserved privilege, they consider it as a cheerless, miserable, and unpleasant profession. Malachi neatly points out how the priests have despised and profaned Yahweh's name:

They are accused of offering defiled food (1:7); they offer improper animals for sacrifice (1:8). These include animals that are blind, lame and sick; the deity wishes that they no longer kindle fire upon the altar vainly (1:10); the deity will not accept *minḥāh* from them (1:10). (O'Brien, 1990:30)

This development is clearly a fundamental violation of ritual traditions in priestly laws of Leviticus (Leviticus 1; 2:3,10; 6:9 11, 19, 22; 22:17–25) and Deuteronomy (Deuteronomy 15:19–23) that stipulate specific conditions regarding animals for the sacrificial cult – animals free from defects and blemishes (cf. Schuller, 1996:859; Stuart, 1998:1300). Whilst the priests are reprimanded for their failure, the entire Israelite community was also guilty for their choice of presenting second-rated animals for offering and/or sacrifice at the temple.

Consequently, in the prose section of the indictment (1:10), Yahweh threatens to terminate and/or get rid of the temple sacrifices altogether. If the blemished offerings, the blind, sick, or lame animals will not guarantee favourable results when offered to their Persian governor, what would make them ever imagine that Yahweh will accept them from their hands, and graciously confer blessings on them (1:9) (Nogalski, 2011:1003). To summarize Yahweh's complete displeasure Malachi expresses a personal wish on behalf of Yahweh: "I wish there was one among you who would close the doors and so stop the pointless lighting of fire on my altar? I am not pleased with you,' says the LORD of hosts; I have not found any acceptable offerings from your hands" (1:10). Yahweh's desire indicates a very negative impression about the priests; they were unfaithful, disobedient, disrespectful, and immoral. It serves a strong elaboration of their indictment (Weyde, 2000:141).

To discontinue with profaning Yahweh through polluted sacrifices, and pointless lighting of fire at Yahweh's altar, it is better to close admission of ritual practitioners into the venue of



sacrificial worship (Weyde, 2000:143). The crux of the matter is simple; Yahweh has no interest in worthless worship.

Pointers to Malachi's Ritual Violation and Altar Pollution

The relationship between priests and altar services is one that lies at the heart of Malachi's ritual rhetoric (Watts, 2000:209; O'Brien, 2004:315; Coggins & Hans, 2011:199; LeCureux, 2012:207). Malachi addresses the issues of ritual violation and altar pollution, chiefly focusing on the inappropriate sacrifices that are being offered by the priests and people of Israel as a whole. What could have been the reasons for this violation? To understand the pointers underlying these religious malpractices, one can imagine two overlapping conditions; on the one hand is the hard economic reality faced by the people on their return from exile, and on the other hand is the relegation of priestly duties and responsibility.

At their return from exile, the Yehudites living in the Second Temple Period (Carter, 1994:106-145; Dempsey, 2000:139; Lipschits, 2003:323-376; 2005:261-271; Kessler, 2010:309-351) had become highly disillusioned to the extent that the priests, by their deficiencies and malpractices, in teaching and sacrificial services, have actually caused a crisis for the community (Bramer, 2011:158). Malachi addressed a community that was under socio-economic depression and discontentment (Assis, 2010:355–356; cf. Boloje & Groenewald, 2014: 2–3). One of the hard realities the community faced was the pressure and resistance from surrounding hostile immigrants who could not allow them to appropriate their family rights and privileges for support and sustenance (Albertz, 2003:121; Hill, 2012:34). Ezra makes an astonishing remark about hostile foreigners' resistance:

Then the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah, and frightened them from building, and hired counselors against them to frustrate their counsel all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia. (Ezra 4:4–5).

The hopeless situation the people inherited on their return could not help them to cope with the depressing and gloomy world of economic reality (Clendenen, 2004:214). At their return, the expectations regarding the awaited Messianic Age (cf. Ezekiel 34:13, 23–24; Haggai 1:6, 11; 2:7, 9, 18–19; Zechariah 8:9–11) had crashed on the rock of lived reality. Hard economic situations and scarcity of resource; of living in the state of rebuilding that included restoring their homes, farms, and the Temple, could have caused the people to present flawed or second-rated animals for sacrifice, since they were unable to afford their best. Decline in agricultural productivity might have impacted the quality of the animals available for the sacrificial offering. Thus as the land could not yield much produce, poor harvest and its subsequent impact on livestock production and quality would result to fewer resources to spare at the hand of the people, and offering less than acceptable sacrifices.

Such unfavorable economic situation may have created class disparity among people as the opulent individuals might have had the privilege of presenting better animals, whilst the less fortunate one in the population would have had no option than to offer blemished or sick animals. This might have no doubt created a sense disparity in the religious life of the people, and with such class disparity, religious faith was practiced in an unenthusiastic atmosphere (Assis, 2010:356). Again, exposure to foreign cultures and religious fatigue could have caused a radical decline in meticulous devotion to Jewish religious traditions and ritual practices. Assis (2010:365) notes that, a society that cannot allow itself to stumble in despair and disappointment, will no doubt, 'adjusts ideologically to conform to new realities and situations, if you will, to make a virtue out of necessity.' The idealization of cultural influence and general fatigue or disillusionment with religious practices might have resulted to lack of enthusiasm and the negligent attitude toward the quality of sacrifices at the sacrificial cult.



At the priestly layer of the text, one can image the corruption and neglect by the priests. As individuals with the privilege of serving as informed and faithful custodians and transmitters of the accumulative religious tradition and rules of conduct (cf. Nelson 1993:88), they are expected to function as regulators of the religious life of the community. That the priests were saddled with the responsibility of teaching and/or providing moral instruction to ancient Israelite community is well attested to in the HB/OT (Tiemeyer 2006:113ff). In the priestly material of Leviticus, one finds the charge to teach: 'You are to carefully make a distinction between the holy and the common, between the unclean and the clean, and you must teach the Israelites all the decrees the LORD has given them through Moses' (Lev 10:10-11). Although, Ezekiel predicts a time when coming destruction will cost the priests their instructional ability (7:26), this responsibility of instruction in the priestly text of Leviticus is reinforced in Ezekiel 44:23. As a priest, Ezra is reported to have resolved to seek instruction and diligently observe the Law of Yahweh, and to teaching its decrees and legal decisions in Israel (Ezra 7:10).

In Malachi, the priests' complicity in accepting and encouraging offerings and/or sacrifices that were below standard of acceptability, points most probably to corruption that developed among them on account of their loss of spiritual zeal and personal economic disadvantage. The priests seem to have been more concern about their welfare than safeguarding religious traditions. The accusations of regarding Yahweh's altar as defied, of considering their food related service at the altar as unpleasant and tiresome, their inadequate compensation, and of accepting and presenting unacceptable offerings, show signs of dereliction of duty, and corruption of office.

One can conveniently trace the lack of ministerial oversight of the priests to one basic theological slip, namely; their understanding of Yahweh did not correspond to the reality about Yahweh as a God of love but also as a God of wrath. They failed to recognize Yahweh's position, person, and power; as father, master, and the great King over all the earth. Their theological malaise and distortion resulted in their complicity with the people who were at the mercy of hard economic realities and who obviously lacked moral guidance in ritual matters of the sacrificial cult.

Synthesis and Conclusion

In Malachi 1:6-10, the prophet unmasks ritual violations, altar pollution, corruption and sins of ritual practitioners. The text establishes a tacit complicity and encouragement of wrong doing by both priests and people, a collaborative endeavor that constitutes a glamour of rejection and abolition of the cult altogether. The brunt of the indictment is placed on the shoulder of the priests who had the privilege oversight of ritual traditions and temple worship. They are interrogated and indicted for the material substances and approach in which they offer sacrifices to Yahweh. Whilst Malachi's ritual practitioners are obviously at the mercy of hard economic conditions, the failure of the priest to uphold religious traditions heightens the level of complicity. Thus socio-economic satiations and negligence of the priests collectively provide a backdrop to the ritual violations and altar pollution addressed in Malachi 1:6-10.

Malachi accentuates the necessity for genuine, sincere, heartfelt devotion, and the proper observance of religious traditions despite socio-economic challenges. He called and challenged both the priests and the people to honor Yahweh with their best, reflecting true devotion and respect. For Malachi, anything less than the best of offerings is an insult on Yahweh's person, position, and power; an affront that will incur terrible consequences. Malachi's indictment of the priests serves to stimulate communities of Yahweh's worshippers to make a conscious, deliberate, and critical self-evaluation towards mutual responsibility and accountability (Schuller, 1996:862). The text remains profoundly timeless and invites ritual practitioners to genuine reverence and proper worship practices that honor Yahweh's holiness and covenant relationship with His people.



Endnotes

1 According to Coggins and Shane (1984:316), the הָעֶרְבָּה regulated periods are, daily (morning and the evening), on each Sabbath day, at the start of each month, during Passover on the 14th day of the 1st month, at the feast of trumpets, on sacred day in the 7th month, and for the celebration of the new moon.

2 Sprinkle (2015:7) notes that, “every ‘you’ in this section (though not vv, 1–2) is literally ‘he’ or ‘his’.” However, “the NIV adjusted the renderings for gender neutrality since women could also offer the various sacrifices (cf. female Nazirites [Numbers 6:2, 12–15]).”

3 The verb means to ‘miss’ a target (cf. Judges 20:16) or ‘fail to reach’ a goal (Isa 65:21), or ‘miss or veer from’ a path (Proverbs 19:2). Religiously, to sin is to deviate from God’s norms (Sprinkle, 2015:24).

4 ‘A son honors his father and a servant his master. But if I am a father, where is my honor? And if I am a master, where is my respect?’ This is what the LORD of hosts says to you, O priests who despise my name. But you say, ‘How have we despised your name?’ (1:6).

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