

FIRE IN GOD'S HOUSE: INFLUENCE OF MALACHI 3 IN THE NT

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It has been argued by D. E. Johnson that the fiery judgment afflicting the readers of 1 Peter is described in terms and imagery drawn from the prophecy of Malachi.¹ The present article examines another NT passage—1 Corinthians 3—in which the Church is tested by a judgment of fire.

I. SIMILARITIES BETWEEN 1 PETER AND MALACHI 3

The main exegetical points of Johnson's article may be summarized as follows:

The sufferings of the Church are discussed in 1 Pet 1:6–7 under the metaphor of fire. As metal is refined by intense heat, so the quality of these Christians' faith is tested by trial in order that it may be more clearly evident on the day of Christ.

The description of the Church as *oikos*, God's "house," a metaphor developed especially in 1 Pet 2:4–10, connotes the idea of the Church as God's temple or sanctuary. Translation in terms of "household" or "family" of God is inappropriate.

The two ideas above converge in 1 Pet 4:12–19. The Church is undergoing fiery trial, by which its members are tested. The word used is *pyrōsis*, and this represents a judgment beginning from the *oikos tou theou*.

It is in 4:12–19, in particular, that imagery from Malachi is employed: (1) Fire comes to the temple of God, for judgment but also for cleansing, testing and purification (Mal 3:2–3; 1 Pet 4:12); (2) this fiery testing is indicative of the presence of God, who comes to prove and cleanse his dwelling place (Mal 3:2–3; 1 Pet 4:14); (3) judgment that begins in the temple of God as a refining process will move outward into the world, destroying all evildoers (Mal 3:19; 1 Pet 4:17–18).

The way in which the material from Malachi is employed invites the readers of 1 Peter to perceive themselves as God's new temple and to view their sufferings in that context as indications of divine presence and cleansing power in their midst. The writer's pastoral intention is to assure and encourage a tried Church. They should not fear that God has abandoned

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¹ D. E. Johnson, "Fire in God's House: Imagery from Malachi 3 in Peter's Theology of Suffering (1 Pet 4:12–19)," *JETS* 29 (1986) 285–294.

them. Rather, they should be confident in God's gracious and glorious presence with them and persist in trust and good works.

II. EXEGETICAL DIFFICULTIES PRESENTED BY MALACHI 3

(1) Verse 1 uses three personal titles: "my messenger," "the Lord you are seeking," "the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire." Are these three different ways of referring to the same character, or are two of the titles to be linked in one character with the third denoting someone else, or are there three characters involved? R. T. France argues that all three denote one and the same person, a messenger sent by Yahweh.² But a more widely favored exegesis identifies the second title as a reference to Yahweh himself, with the first-named being sent by Yahweh as a preparer of the way.³ Some scholars go on to read the third title too as a designation of Yahweh. He is the "messenger of the covenant" who comes to forge a new covenant bond with his people.⁴ This would then lead to an identification of Yahweh himself as the one who comes to the temple and whose presence there is like a refining fire. Certainly Johnson makes this identification.⁵ It is also favored in the present article.⁶

(2) Is Malachi 3 describing a series of judgments, related in the purpose of God but chronologically sequential, coming one after another? Or is it offering a variety of descriptions and affirmations about the nature and results of a single act of judgment, taking place at one time? The refining presence of vv. 2-3, the sure testimony against evildoers in v. 5, the sparing of the God-fearers in v. 17, the visible distinction between righteous and wicked in v. 18, the coming day of fire in v. 19, the joyous liberty of God's worshipers in v. 20—how much of this is to be read as simultaneous, different ways of describing the same thing, and how much of it is intended as a sequential account of separate stages in God's judicial process? The exegesis adopted by Johnson perceives at least two separate stages in the account, but with an integral connection between them: The initial purifying process applied to the Levites (vv. 1-4) is followed by a movement outward to those who have rejected God's covenant (from v. 5).⁷

² R. T. France, *Jesus and the Old Testament* (London: Tyndale, 1971) 91-92.

³ J. G. Baldwin, *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi* (Tyndale Old Testament Commentary; London: Inter-Varsity, 1972), 242-243; B. Glazier-McDonald, *Malachi: The Divine Messenger* (SBLDS 98; Atlanta: Scholars, 1987) 128-142; P. A. Verhoef, *Haggai and Malachi* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 287-290.

⁴ The exegetes named in n. 3 unite in distinguishing the third-named figure, "the messenger of the covenant," from the first-named, "my messenger." They vary, however, in their assessment of the relationship between the third figure and Yahweh: Glazier-McDonald favors identity, Baldwin offers an exegesis in terms of God's angel, and Verhoef states that "as elsewhere in the OT . . . 'the angel of the Lord' is both identified with and distinguished from God" (*Haggai* 289).

⁵ Johnson, "Fire" 288.

⁶ In relation to the third-named figure, I am persuaded by the arguments of Glazier-McDonald, *Malachi* 132-133.

⁷ Johnson, "Fire" 288-289.

It is not wholly clear in Malachi that there is an intended time-lapse dividing these two stages. Nor does Johnson claim this, although he certainly shows how the Malachi account allows Peter to speak of his readers' sufferings as a first stage in God's work of judgment, with a wider judicial work in the world yet to come.⁸ Separation of the Malachi account into two sections, with the division between vv. 4 and 5, is an insight that will be pursued in the present study.

(3) What are the consequences of the judgment? What is the effect of the fire in the various places where it burns? In vv. 1–4 it is depicted as a powerful and painful process, but one ultimately therapeutic in its intention and results. It purifies, the end effect being service and devotion that bring pleasure to God. By contrast, in vv. 5 and 17–19 God's judgment is discerning, discriminating, and eventually destructive against those who resist God. It assesses rather than transforms, punishes rather than purifies. It weighs human worth, and rather than cleansing the unworthy it crushes them. In vv. 1–4 we find a purifying judgment, sanctifying the worship of God's people. In the later verses God's judgment examines human life with searching insight and saves or destroys according to what is found.

III. SIMILARITIES BETWEEN 1 CORINTHIANS 3 AND MALACHI 3

(1) The church at Corinth is called the temple (*naos*) of God (in 3:16 explicitly, and note also the building imagery through vv. 9–15). The opening verses of Malachi 3 likewise deal with activity in God's temple, affecting the sons of Levi, who belong to that temple.

(2) As the church in God's temple, it is also God's dwelling place. The presence of God is intrinsically bound up with the use of the temple image. In 1 Cor 3:16 we read that "the Spirit of God dwells in you." In Mal 3:1–3 God (or possibly one intimately linked to God and wielding divine power and agency) comes to sit among the temple community.

(3) Mention of temple imagery and divine presence leads on to consideration of the purity of those who form the temple community. B. S. Rosner argues in some detail that 1 Cor 3:16–17 anticipates in brief and summary form the much longer and more explicit discussion of church discipline in 5:1–13.⁹ Certainly 3:17 affirms that God's temple is holy and that God will be vigilant to punish any who destroy that temple, who violate the purity required of God's holy community. Similarly in Mal 3:2–3 the very presence of God (or God's agent and representative) within the temple conveys a burning and penetrating concern for the purity of the place, evoking awe and dread in those who meet his coming.

(4) An important theme of both passages is that the coming judgment will distinguish and discriminate between the valid and the ineffectual in

⁸ *Ibid.* 292.

⁹ B. S. Rosner, "Temple and Holiness in 1 Corinthians 5," *TynBul* 42 (1991) 137–145.

service offered to God. In the Corinthian church, with its factions and rivalry, Paul warns that the Christian worker must build on the one true foundation and build with care (3:10–11), for “the day will disclose . . . what sort of work each one has done” (3:13). Only the Lord’s coming will bring everything to light and make clear the true worth of each person’s ministry (4:5). Likewise in Malachi 3, addressed to a community divided in its loyalties and diluted in its commitment, the coming judgment of God (3:5) will show a clear distinction between those who serve God and those who do not (3:18).

(5) In both passages the instrument of divine judgment is described in terms of intense heat (1 Cor 3:13–15; Mal 3:2–3). This is what will discriminate and discern the quality of the varied services offered to God.

(6) Both passages refer to silver and gold (1 Cor 3:12; Mal 3:3) as well as to stubble (1 Cor 3:12; Mal 3:19).

IV. POSSIBLE DEPENDENCE OF 1 CORINTHIANS 3 ON MALACHI 3

Can we argue that the imagery and conceptual framework of Malachi 3 have been knowingly and deliberately employed in the shaping of Paul’s teaching at this point? I am inclined to think that the cumulative weight of the individual comparisons listed above, if they are regarded simply as points of comparison, falls short of proof. The ideas are too general, too widely accessible in the Jewish religious heritage, for their presence—even in combination—to suffice as evidence that Paul has drawn them from this particular OT text.

It may be, however, that the case is stronger than this, that we have more than merely a collection of points of comparison. It is also possible to suggest a line of influence that explains the combined presence of these individual similarities in terms of dependence on Malachi 3. That is through John the Baptist. Jesus named John as the preparatory messenger of Mal 3:1 (Matt 11:10; Luke 7:27). John spoke of coming fiery judgment, also teaching that Jesus would baptize with the Spirit and fire (Matt 3:10–12; Luke 3:9, 16–17). It seems, then, that John drew upon the imagery and language of Malachi 3 in shaping his own message. He accepted and shared Jesus’ designation of him as the preparatory messenger and thus allowed the teaching of Malachi 3 to form his understanding and expression of the events for which he was to prepare the people.

Two strands emerge from John’s ministry, drawing on the prophecy of Malachi in contrasting and complementary ways. On the one hand, John refers to Jesus baptizing with the Holy Spirit and with fire. This may be understood as pointing to the purging and purifying presence of the Holy Spirit, refining but not ultimately destructive—indeed, leading to salvation and blessing for the repentant people of God. In relation to Malachi 3, this aspect of John’s message draws particularly on vv. 1–4. On the other hand, John speaks of decisive and divisive judgment to be carried out by Jesus, of discrimination and separation between wheat and chaff, of the

gathering of the wheat and the burning destruction of the chaff. In relation to Malachi 3, this may reflect especially vv. 5 and 17–21.¹⁰

There is thus available to the NT Church a reading of Malachi 3 and of its fiery imagery in relation both to the refining presence of the Holy Spirit and to the coming final judgment. It is reasonable then to postulate that NT Christians might have reflected upon Malachi 3, in fuller detail than is recorded in the gospel accounts of John's message, and allowed it to influence their understanding of two theological realities to which it points. In this way Peter echoes the chapter as he offers his readers an understanding of God's presence and purpose in their trials. This accords with Johnson's analysis and picks up primarily the first aspect of John's message noted above. Paul, too, writes in terms that reflect the chapter's influence. He refers primarily to the discriminating effect of God's judgment, the final and decisive assessment of each person's work, and the need for holiness and purity in the face of God's coming. This echoes the second theme of John's teaching.

V. CONCLUSIONS

If the above line of thought is correct, then Malachi 3 has offered two rather different lines of interpretation to the NT writers. It contributes to two different kinds of pastoral exhortation addressed to two different situations. The hypothesis has been offered that this originates in the preaching of John, who appropriates two aspects of the teaching of Malachi and uses them to describe two elements in the work of Jesus. It is likely that the two elements of Malachi's prophecy corresponded originally to two phases—or, at any rate, two aspects—in the judgment process envisaged by the prophet. There may thus be proper exegetical coherence in these two different applications. There is theological coherence as well.

In 1 Peter, God's fiery judgment is actually present. It proves and purifies the Church. Its coming among them is painful but not spiritually threatening. It does not call into question the validity of their Christian service but is rather to be understood in terms of assurance, confirming their identity as the holy community of God. By contrast, in 1 Corinthians there is a final quality about the fire. It is yet to come, at the *eschaton*. Its prospect acts as warning to the Church to build and serve in a way that will stand the test. For those whose work is unworthy, the fire is threatening rather than therapeutic.

Yet these two kinds of judgment belong together. Each is reflected in the other. The trials of the Church within time, as experienced by the

¹⁰ This contrasts somewhat with J. D. G. Dunn's reading of John's message (*Baptism in the Holy Spirit* [London: SCM, 1970] 8–14). Dunn interprets John's prediction in terms of one single baptism in Spirit-and-fire, to be endured by all humanity, destructive for the unrepentant but refining for those who do repent. Though helped by Dunn's work, I have suggested that John's words invite interpretation in terms of two different though related fiery realities: (1) the refining presence of the Spirit and (2) the final judgment of the *eschaton*.

communities addressed in 1 Peter, will test the quality of ministers' work. Thereby they will be a meaningful anticipation of the final verdict, as described in 1 Corinthians, that the *eschaton* itself will disclose. Equally, the *eschaton* will carry no threat for the Christian whose life and service are well founded, who has already been refined and proved, who has persisted in faith and holy living through the trials of the years. Both present and final judgment express the fiery testing of God. Present judgment tries, but also assures, the Church in the here and now. The prospect of its full eschatological realization warns but need not threaten. God comes to purify the community of the new temple in refining judgment that anticipates, that heralds, that points forward to his final assessment of human work and worth.