CHAPTER ONE

THE INTERPRETATIVE CONTEXT OF MALACHI 2:10-16

As indicated in the Introduction, Mal. 2:14 is perhaps the chief pillar of the traditional identification of marriage in the Old Testament as a covenant: “You ask, ‘Why does he not?’ Because the LORD was witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant [ין הָרָתַּם].” Serious objections to this identification, however, have been raised by a number of scholars who prefer a reference to a figurative marriage, whether between Israel and Yahweh (I.G. Matthews, F.F. Hvidberg, A. Isaksson, and others); or between Israel and the covenant (C.C. Torrey, B. Vawter); or between the priests of Malachi’s day and the original priestly community (G.S. Ogden).1

Even among scholars who accept a reference to a literal marriage in Mal. 2:10-16, some have argued that the covenant mentioned in the expression יִנַּהֲרֹתַם (lit., “and the wife of your covenant”) has nothing to do with the marital relationship as such, but merely designates the wife as a member of the same covenant community as her husband. In other words, “covenant” in this context refers to Israel’s covenant with God, not to a marital covenant between the husband and his wife.2

The arguments used to support these two distinct interpretative options overlap at significant points, and so for convenience it will be useful to consider them together. In the next chapter we shall focus on arguments

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1 In addition to J. Milgrom, who holds that יִנַּהֲרֹתַם in Mal. 2:14 is used only as a “literary metaphor” (Cult and Conscience, 133ff.), a symbolic view has been supported by C.C. Torrey, “The Prophecy of ‘Malachi’” (1898); H. Winckler, “Maleachi” (1901); A.C. Welch, Post-Exilic Judaism (1935); I.G. Matthews, “Haggai, Malachi” (1935); F.F. Hvidberg, Weeping and Laughter in the Old Testament (1962) 120-123; A. Isaksson, Marriage and Ministry in the New Temple (1965) 27-34; B. Vawter, “The Biblical Theology of Divorce” (1967); G.W. Ahlstrom, Joel and the Temple Cult of Jerusalem (1971); M. Greenberg, Ezekiel 1-20 (1983); G.S. Ogden, “The Use of Figurative Language in Malachi 2:10-16” (1988); and J.M. O’Brien, Priest and Levite in Malachi (1990).

2 Cf., e.g., K. Marti, Das Dodekapropheton (1904); O. Isopescul, Der Prophet Malachias (1908); W. Nowack, Das kleinen Propheten (1922); E. Sellin, Das Zwölfprophetenbuch (1929-30); B.M. Vellas, Israelite Marriage (1956) 24; A.S. van der Woude, “Malachi’s Struggle for a Pure Community” (1986) 68f.; W. Rudolph, Haggai, Sacharja 1-8, Sacharja 9-14, Maleachi (1976); idem, “Zu Mal 210-16” (1981); A. Tosato “Il ripudio: delitto e pena (Mal 2,10-16)” (1978) 552, n 19 and p. 553; and B. Glazier-McDonald, although Glazier-McDonald accepts an identification of marriage as a covenant in Ezek. 16:8 and Prov. 2:17 (Malachi [1987] 101ff.).

Some interpreters seem to view יִנַּהֲרֹתַם in 2:14 as a reference primarily to Yahweh’s covenant with Israel, but secondarily to the marriage covenant. Cf., e.g., T.V. Moore, A Commentary on Haggai and Malachi (1856) 134; and A.R. Fausset, A Commentary, Critical and Explanatory on the Old and New Testaments (1887) 738.
which rest mainly on evidence adduced from within the book of Malachi itself. Before doing so, however, it will be useful to consider certain matters of introduction to the book of Malachi as a whole in an effort to set our discussion of Mal. 2:14 within a proper interpretative context. In this first chapter, therefore, we propose to consider briefly the date of Malachi; the book's relationship to Ezra, Nehemiah, and the pentateuchal sources; and finally the overall arrangement of the book itself.

1. THE DATE OF MALACHI

Unlike most of the other prophetic books, the book of Malachi offers no explicit indication of the date of its composition. It mentions no datable event nor any contemporary ruler. Moreover, the prophet himself, if "Malachi [מַלאָכְיָה]" is even to be regarded as a proper noun, is nowhere else mentioned — not in Ezra, who mentions Haggai and Zechariah (5:1; 6:14); nor even in Josephus, who mentions most of the major characters of the period. Nevertheless, there appears to be a scholarly consensus that the book of Malachi was composed at some point within the Persian period (515 - 330

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3 It is uncertain whether the mentioned demise of Edom in 1:2-5 should be related to the campaigns of Nabonidus or, as is more generally thought, to the gradual displacement of the Edomites by the Nabataeans and their relocation in southern Judah. Other historical references, such as to the supposed depredations by Arab tribes following the Babylonian downfall, appear less likely. Cf., e.g., J.G. Baldwin, *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi* (1972) 223; P.A. Verhoef, *The Books of Haggai and Malachi* (1987) 203-204; and especially B. Glazier-McDonald, *Malachi* (1987) 34-41. Glazier-McDonald suggests that the Nabataeans may have wreaked their devastation less by military means than by the effects of their grazing herds, destroying previously arable land. Cf. also P.C. Hammond, *The Nabataeans* (1973) 13; and J.I. Lawlor, *The Nabataeans in Historical Perspective* (1974). If the reference is to the displacement by the Nabataeans, unfortunately this cannot be dated with any certainty. For a useful survey of Edom during the Persian period cf. A. Lemaire, "Populations et territoires de la Palestine à l'époque perse," *Transeuphratène* 3 (1990) 31-74, esp. 45-54.


If the meaning of מַלאָכְיָה is felt to be unacceptable, it is possible that it is a hypocorism for מַלְאָךְ, "messenger of Yahweh," on an analogy with יְדֹרָם in 1 Chr. 5:15 and יְדֹרָם in Jer. 36:26) and יְדֹרָם (Num. 34:22; Ezra 7:14 — cf. יְדֹרָם in 1 Chr. 25:4, 13).

5 *Antiquities* 11, iv, i-v, 8. Malachi is mentioned, however, in the second century A.D. book 2 Esdras.