

Reading Scripture with John Calvin: Malachi

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Reading Scripture with John Calvin: Preface and Malachi 1.1–6 (Tuesday, June 28, 2011)

Malachi 1.1–6

[1] A prophecy: The word of the Lord to Israel through Malachi. [2] “I have loved you,” says the LORD. “But you ask, ‘How have you loved us?’ Was not Esau Jacob’s brother?” declares the LORD. “Yet I have loved Jacob, [3] but Esau I have hated, and I have turned his hill country into a wasteland and left his inheritance to the desert jackals.” [4] Edom may say, “Though we have been crushed, we will rebuild the ruins.” But this is what the LORD Almighty says: “They may build, but I will demolish. They will be called the Wicked Land, a people always under the wrath of the LORD. [5] You will see it with your own eyes and say, ‘Great is the LORD – even beyond the borders of Israel!’ [6] A son honors his father, and slaves honor their master. If I am a father, where is the honor due me? If I am a master, where is the respect due me?” says the LORD Almighty.

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COMMENTARY:

Series (re)Introduction

It is a pleasure to bring this series back and present you all once again with discussion of Calvin’s commentary on Scripture. If you have not yet seen this series here on DET, you may want to check the serials index to catch up on previous installments. At present, we have covered the whole of 1 Peter. Now we take a step back to the Old Testament book of Malachi. On to Calvin’s text!

Preface

Calvin’s preface is quite short – only 2 pages – wherein he makes three points. **First**, he discusses the book’s author. Some, he tells us, have understood the author to be an angel since the author’s name is built on the Hebrew word for “messenger”, which is used of angels (much the same happens in NT Greek). Calvin thinks this is “absurd” since God was in the habit at that time of using humans to communicate with his people. He further suggests what I think is an interesting hypothesis, namely, that Malachi was Ezra’s surname. I have not found any discussion of this possibility in the limited exegetical resources on Malachi that I have lying around, but it at least fits with the book’s dating. **Second**, Calvin notes that Malachi is the last prophet both canonically (even though it is not the last book in the MT, it is the last prophetic book) and temporally before Christ. He thinks that this could be the case for one or both of two reasons: God could have been angry with Israel and so withheld communication, and God could have wanted to raise their level of suspense before the coming of Christ. I’ve heard the first of these notions often, and therefore appreciate Calvin’s second option, which fits better with Calvin’s own modes of thinking. **Third**, Calvin gives a paragraph summary of the book which recounts briefly the way in which Malachi berates Israel for its sin and calls them back to loving service of God and neighbor.

1.1

Calvin thinks that the book's opening word, rendered "a prophecy" above, is better translated as "burden" here because "prophecy is not everywhere called a burden; and whenever this word is expressed, there is ever to be understood some judgment of God...[T]his word was regarded as ominous" (461). This sets the stage for Calvin's reading of the whole book, which he understands to be a summons of Israel before "God's tribunal, inasmuch as many sins had again begun to prevail among them."

2-6

The elephant in the room for this set of verses is the doctrine of election. Calvin will treat that in his next lecture. Here Calvin points out that before calling Israel to account, Malachi sets out the benefits that God has given to her. God says first that he has loved Israel and, when Israel questions that love, God reminds her of her lowly and utterly undeserving origins. God might have loved Esau and rejected Jacob, but he did not. It went the other way, and it did so only because of God's decision. Hence Calvin concludes that "the origin of all the excellency which belonged to the posterity of Abraham, is here ascribed to the gratuitous love of God" (465). This pertains, of course, to the question of whether Law or Gospel comes first. That is the main point – here are a few interesting asides.

(1) Calvin here notes that God dealt differently with two children of one family, loving one and hating the other; blessing one and cursing the other. What impact might this have on the tendency in certain Reformed circles to elevate the family as a unity in their ecclesiology? How might it impact the familial aspect of certain Reformed sacramental understandings?

(2) This passage tells us that Caanan was fertile land while Edom was made into desolation. Still, such a distinction seems relativized by the recognition that both Babylon and Egypt were more wealthy, powerful, and fertile still. In response to such a worry, Calvin here severs any straightforward connection between earthly success and one's position with respect to God. He notes that Jerusalem was not a particularly good city – "Jerusalem was not superior to other cities of the land...on account of its situation..." – what made it special was its relationship to God – "...at the same time it excelled in other things, for God had chosen it as his sanctuary" (466). Of course, this has implications for all sorts of Christian thinking from notions of a "Protestant work ethic" (i.e., the practical syllogism) to the Prayer of Jabez to the Prosperity Gospel.

(3) Calvin notes how Edom was made desolate and points out that, while Israel was also made desolate a few times, it was always restored while Edom was not. As he then puts it, "Since then there had been no restoration as to Idumea, the Prophet shows that by this fact the love of God towards Jacob and his hatred towards Esau had been proved" (467). Still, the Herodian line was Idumean. What new light might such a pair of observations cast on the narrative of Christ's passion? Is it one more instance of disgrace being visited upon Edom?

PRAYER:

(Calvin concludes each of his lectures on Malachi with a prayer.)

Grant, Almighty God, that as thou hast not only designed to give us a life in common in this world, but hast also separated us from other heathen nations, and illuminated us by the Sun of Righteousness, thine only-begotten Son, in order to lead us into the inheritance of eternal salvation, - O grant, that having been rescued from the darkness of death, we may ever attend to that celestial light, by which thou guidest and invitest us to thyself; and may we so walk as the children of light, as never to wander from the course of our holy calling, but to advance in it continually, until we shall at length reach the goal which thou has set before us, so that having put off all the filth of the flesh, we may be transformed into that ineffable glory, of which we have now the image in thine only-begotten Son. – Amen.

Reading Scripture with John Calvin: Malachi 1.2–6
(Friday, July 08, 2011)

Malachi 1.2–6

[2] “I have loved you,” says the LORD. “But you ask, ‘How have you loved us?’ Was not Esau Jacob’s brother?” declares the LORD. “Yet I have loved Jacob, [3] but Esau I have hated, and I have turned his hill country into a wasteland and left his inheritance to the desert jackals.” [4] Edom may say, “Though we have been crushed, we will rebuild the ruins.” But this is what the LORD Almighty says: “They may build, but I will demolish. They will be called the Wicked Land, a people always under the wrath of the LORD. [5] You will see it with your own eyes and say, ‘Great is the LORD – even beyond the borders of Israel!’ [6] A son honors his father, and slaves honor their master. If I am a father, where is the honor due me? If I am a master, where is the respect due me?” says the LORD Almighty.

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COMMENTARY:

This lecture is concerned with the doctrine of election, as Calvin promised it would be in the last lecture. He struggles to stick with Malachi’s text, instead reverting frequently to Romans 9-11. There is enough overlap between the passages to justify that move, however. Aside from Calvin’s usual comments when treating this doctrine – admonition against speculation, emphasis on election as the guarantee that God’s grace is free, etc – there are three things here that deserve highlighting.

Four-Step Program

Putting Malachi’s text together with Romans 9-11 and, indeed, the whole scope of the Old

Testament narrative at a very general level, Calvin explicates God’s electing activity as a four-step program. First, God creates humanity, binding them to him in a unique way (i.e., the image of God, souls, etc.). This is a type of divine favor and election since it establishes human beings as better than, say, “asses and dogs” (473). Second, God then selects Abraham and his descendents for special consideration. This is an entirely gracious act given that Israel is precisely the same as the rest of humanity, naturally speaking, and yet they receive special favor. Third, the freedom of God’s grace is further exhibited in that God was not bound to accept all of Abraham’s descendents indiscriminately, but chose Isaac over Ishmael. Fourth and finally, God discriminates further between Jacob and Esau. For Calvin, all this demonstrates that God’s election is always personal and not enacted in virtue of any merit, whether ethical or genetic.

General Vs. Effectual Calling

Calvin’s four-step program also supports the distinction that he will go in this passage to make between general and effectual calling. In this four-step program, there are a number of instances where a promise has been made, only to be followed up on God’s side with further discrimination and promise-making. What Calvin takes away from this is that a difference obtains between a general promise and the actual and effectual work of the Spirit. This comes out when he applies this four-step program to his polemic horizon:

the Papists...estimate faith by external tokens, they haughtily object to us, and say that they are the Church; as though a general promise were sufficient without the Spirit, who is justly called the Spirit of adoption, by whom God seals it within, even in our hearts. (474)

The same logic is clearly at work with reference to the two types of calling. Calvin admits that “God addresses all men generally, ‘Come unto me’ – ‘I am your Father’” (480) but he denies that one properly concludes from this that all are elect. Such a notion is self-evidently false for Calvin since faith is always joined to election (sooner or later), and it is clear that faith does not arise in every bosom prior to death. What accounts for the difference? Particular election, and the derivative concept of effectual calling. So Calvin:

If then it be asked, why some obstinately reject the grace of God, and other embrace it in the spirit of meekness, Paul assigns the reason, and it is this – because God illuminates those who believe, inasmuch as he has chosen them before the creation of the world. It then follows that God so speaks generally, as that the efficacy of the doctrine still depends on his secret good pleasure; for whence is faith, but from his peculiar favor? And why does he not communicate his grace to all? Even because he has not chosen all (480-1).

Dueling Logics

As some of my readers may know, Calvin is of two minds about the order of the divine decrees. Sometimes he sounds like an infralapsarian (creation and fall come before election) and sometimes like a supralapsarian (election comes before creation and fall). This lecture on Malachi is interesting in that it contains both logics. Calvin first sounds infralapsarian when he

argues that election cannot occur with respect to merit (and, consequently, foreknowledge) because election takes place with reference to the mass of perdition, that is, with reference to humanity as fallen and therefore devoid of merit. As Calvin puts it:

Now after the fall of Adam we are all lost. What can then be more foolish and absurd than to imagine that there is some virtue in man by which he excels others, since we are all equally accursed in the person of Adam? ...All are naturally reprobate in Adam and liable to eternal death, and the reason is evident, for nothing is found in men but sin. The foreknowledge of God then cannot be the cause of our election, for by looking on the whole race of man, he finds them all under a curse from the least to the greatest. (477)

But then Calvin turns around a couple pages later and sounds supralapsarian. Whereas before he was rejecting the possibility of foreknowledge playing a role in election, now he is discussing reprobation. He seems to be following his usual infralapsarian logic when the following appears seemingly out of nowhere:

It must still be observed, that the election of God is anterior [ed.: prior to, before!] to Adam's fall; and that hence all we who are rescued from the common ruin have been chosen in Christ before the creation of the world, but that others justly perish though they had not been lost in Adam; because God appointed Christ the head of his Church, in order that we might be saved in him, not all, but those who have been chosen. (479)

I don't know what to make of this, except to say (1) that Calvin's desire to be comprehensibly biblical sometimes pushes him in multiple and conflicting directions, and (2) that his christocentrism (even Muller thinks he has a sort of christocentrism) subtly pushes Calvin in the direction that Barth would later develop.

PRAYER:

(Calvin concludes each of his lectures on Malachi with a prayer.)

Grant, Almighty God, that as thou hast been pleased to adopt us as thy people for this end, that we may be ingrafted as it were into the body of thy Son, and be made conformable to our head, - O grant, that through our whole life we may strive to seal in our hearts the faith of our election, that we may be the more stimulated to render thee true obedience, and that thy glory may also be made known through us; and those whom thou has chosen together with us may be labour to bring together, that we may unanimously celebrate thee as the Author of our salvation, and so ascribe to thee the glory of thy goodness, that having cast away and renounced all confidence in our own virtue, we may be led to Christ only as the fountain of they election, in whom also is set before us the certainty of our salvation through thy gospel, until we shall at length be gathered into that eternal glory which He has procured for us by his own blood . - Amen.

Quick concluding aside: this prayer is interesting for that line in the middle about working to bring together the elect. The reformers don't often give us glimpses in their theology of

something like the church’s missionary task. It is thus noteworthy that Calvin tip-toes into that vicinity here.

Reading Scripture with John Calvin: Malachi 1.6–10
(Thursday, March 07, 2013)

Malachi 1.6-10

[6] A son honors his father, and slaves honor their master. If I am a father, where is the honor due me? If I am a master, where is the respect due me?” says the LORD Almighty. “It is you priests who show contempt for my name. But you ask, ‘how have we shown contempt for your name?’ [7] By offering defiled food on my altar. But you as, ‘How have we defiled you?’ By saying that the LORD’s table is contemptible. [8] When you offer blind animals for sacrifice, is that not wrong? When you sacrifice lame or diseased animals, is that not wrong? Try offering them to your governor! Would he be pleased with you? Would he accept you?” says the LORD Almighty. [9] “Now implore God to be gracious to us. With such offerings from your hands, will he accept you?” – says the LORD Almighty. [10] “Oh, that one of you would shut the temple doors, so that you would not light useless fires on my altar! I am not pleased with you,” says the LORD Almighty, “and I will accept no offering from your hands.”

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COMMENTARY:

Calvin’s discussion of this passage is interesting because it seems to be a bit autobiographical. His primary concern throughout is to explain the logic of how Malachi condemns the priests here. The root problem, as Calvin sees it, is that the priests have been lax in upholding God’s commands concerning right worship of him. Calvin suspects that their motive for sacrificing sub-standard animals, etc, was personal well-being. Placing Malachi’s ministry during the return from exile, Calvin speculates that the Israelites were hesitant to bring forward the best of their animals for sacrifice due to a general shortage of good stock. Concomitantly, the priests accepted sub-standard offerings because they worried that if they did not, they would not be able to survive (remember that the priests largely lived of the people’s offerings). So Calvin concludes:

We now then perceive why the Prophet objects to the priests, that they had called the table of Jehovah contemptible; not that they had spoken thus expressly, but because they had regarded it almost as nothing to pervert and adulterate the whole of the divine worship according to the law, which was an evidence of religion when there was any (491).

How is all this autobiographical? Well, if you know anything about Calvin’s Geneva, you know that he took the “lawful” worship of God very seriously. He chalks the priest’s actions here up to a failure of nerve, and in this statement one can easily hear Calvin’s dedication to avoid their error. Indeed, this is almost a pep-talk to himself and his colleagues, as well as a barb for his opponents:

As [the priests] allowed to others so much liberty, it appeared quite evident that the name of God was but little esteemed by them; for had they possessed true zeal, they would not have suffered the worship of God to be trodden under foot or profaned (485-6).

Of course, Calvin backed such words up with action, refusing to administer the Lord's Supper to certain of the native Genevan political leaders who opposed the Consistory's discipline in face of threats of physical harm. One story goes so far as to say that when certain of these folk stormed the table in an effort to forcibly compel the ministers to serve them, Calvin threw himself on the table, covering the elements, and declared that they would only receive the Supper over his dead body. This cowed the belligerents. Also, one must remember that Calvin and the Genevan ministers went about unarmed in an age when men generally wore (and frequently unsheathed) swords.

Enough of this anecdotal and historical diversion, and back to the text. Calvin raises the not-unreasonable question of why God would be so concerned about the quality of sacrifices when in other places we find statements about the insignificance of sacrifices when compared to practices of justice, for instance. One thinks here of Hosea 6.6, for instance. Calvin's solution is to think in terms of degrees. Whereas in Hosea the sacrifices are lawfully carried out, albeit legalistically, in Malachi they aren't even performed properly. So Calvin:

Had all their victims been fat or well fed, our Prophet would have spoken as we find that others have done; but since their faithlessness had gone so far that they showed even to children that they had no regard for the worship of God – since they had advanced so far in shamelessness, it was necessary that they should be thus convicted of impiety (491).

Hosea takes aim at those are self-satisfied in the propriety of their worship of God, while Malachi goes after those who can't even be bothered to go through the motions properly.

PRAYER:

(Calvin concludes each of his lectures on Malachi with a prayer.)

Grant, Almighty God, that as thou has been pleased in thine infinite mercy not only to choose from among us some to be priests to thee, but also to consecrate us all to thyself in thine only-begotten Son, - O grant, that we at this day may purely and sincerely serve thee, and so strive to devote ourselves wholly to thee, that we may be pure and chaste in mind, soul, and body, and that thy glory may so shine forth in all our performances, that thy worship among us may be holy, and pure, and approved by thee, until we shall at length enjoy that glory to which thou invitest us by thy gospel, and which has been obtained for us by the blood of thine only-begotten Son. – Amen.

Reading Scripture with John Calvin: Malachi 1.11–14
(Tuesday, July 29, 2014)

Malachi 1.11–14

[11] “My name will be great among the nations, from where the sun rises to where it sets. In every place incense and pure offerings will be brought to me, because my name will be great among the nations,” says the Lord Almighty. [12] “But you profane it by saying, ‘The Lord’s table is defiled,’ and, ‘Its food is contemptible.’ [13] And you say, ‘What a burden!’ and you sniff at it contemptuously,” says the Lord Almighty. “When you bring injured, lame or diseased animals and offer them as sacrifices, should I accept them from your hands?” says the Lord. [14] “Cursed is the cheat who has an acceptable male in his flock and vows to give it, but then sacrifices a blemished animal to the Lord. For I am a great king,” says the Lord Almighty, “and my name is to be feared among the nations.”

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COMMENTARY: This has been a hard passage to work through with Calvin, and I feel somewhat at a loss for words. Yes, yes, gentle readers, it can happen even to us theo-bloggers. The precipitating factor here is the big “S” – *supercessionism*. It has always been a peculiar strength of the Reformed tradition that they read, preach, and theologize in, with, and from the Old Testament. But it has also always been a particular danger of the Reformed tradition to adopt crude ways of speaking about the relationship between the Jewish and Gentile forms of God’s covenant community. In particular, they can too easily and reflexively adopt the admittedly widespread view that the Gentile form simply replaces the Jewish form given the latter’s alleged unfaithfulness. This logic has been part of the Christian story for a long time, and is at least partially responsible for the history of Christian persecution of Jews which (hopefully) reached its high water mark in the Holocaust / Shoah.

So all that really puts me off my feed here. You’ll see it come out a bit in the prayer below. So, acknowledging that it is there and that it is a problem, I now intend to ignore it and discuss a couple of other points that Calvin brings out.

Rhetoric

I am increasingly convinced that much of Calvin’s genius lies in his sensitivity to rhetoric. This is a fruit of his humanistic training, of course. We see this at work in the present passage dealing with verse 11. What does it mean that incense and offerings will be made to God in every place? Rather than reading this flatfootedly as indicating that a form of worship of God involving incense and sacrifices will spread over the whole world, which Calvin is predisposed to view unfavorably due to his historical context, he takes a more sophisticated line and recognizes that Malachi here “adopts a mode of speaking common in Scripture” that involves “metaphorical” speech (502). In other words, the important thing being communicated is not what form this true worship will or will not take, but that it will in fact be true worship: “This passage contains nothing else than that the time would come when the pure and spiritual worship of God would prevail in all places.” In paying attention to the rhetorical force of the passage, focusing on the

point being communicated rather than getting hung up on precisely how it is communicated, Calvin stands within the broadest stream of the Christian tradition's practice of scriptural interpretation.

Sign & Reality

One of the recurring concerns in this first chapter of Malachi is how the stipulated worship of God has deteriorated, but in performance and intention. One question that Calvin addresses is why proper performance is so important if true worship of God is a matter of spirit. "Hypocrisy" was a major charge that the Reformation hurled at the Roman church of the time, charging them with being more concerned with performance than intention. The danger Calvin faced was going too far in the other direction, such that regulated performance fell by the wayside in favor of a spontaneous expression of intention. In other words, why should folk still care about keeping their worship orderly and following the lead of the pastors in this regard when externals don't matter? Calvin's answer:

The first piece is that one ought to worship the right way – i.e., the way God tells you to – or not at all. So "the basis of true religion is to know how he is to be worshiped by us" (500). Now, Calvin admits that the external forms are not the essence of worship. As he says, "religion, I allow, does not consist in these things" (506). But it does not exclude them either. The second piece of his argument is that the externals are necessary insofar as they are commanded by God. You have to worship God in the way God wants to be worshiped, and not doing so betrays such a one's deep impiety. "The contempt then of the signs openly showed not only the negligence of the people, but also their contempt of all religion."

PRAYER:

(Calvin concludes each of his lectures on Malachi with a prayer.)

Grant, Almighty God, that since thou dost not keep us at this day under the shadows of the law, by which thou didst train up the race of Abraham, but invitest us to a service far more excellent, even to consecrate ourselves, body and soul, as victims to thee, and to offer not only ourselves, but also sacrifices of praise and of prayer, as thou hast consecrated all the duties of religion which thou requires from us, through Christ thy sion,—O grant, that we may seek true purity, and labour to render, by a real sincerity of heart, our services approved by thee, and so reverently profess and call upon thy name, that really fulfilled in us may that be which thou has declared by thy Prophet—that thy name shall be magnified and celebrated through the whole world, as it was truly made known to us in the person of thine only-begotten Son.—Amen.

Reading Scripture with John Calvin: Malachi 1.14–2.5
 (Friday, September 12, 2014)

Malachi 1.14–2.5

[14] “Cursed is the cheat who has an acceptable male in his flock and vows to give it, but then sacrifices a blemished animal to the Lord. For I am a great king,” says the Lord Almighty, “and my name is to be feared among the nations. [2.1] And now, you priests, this warning is for you. [2] If you do not listen, and if you do not resolve to honor my name,” says the Lord Almighty, “I will send a curse on you, and I will curse your blessings. Yes, I have already cursed them, because you have not resolved to honor me. [3] Because of you I will rebuke your descendants; I will smear on your faces the dung from your festival sacrifices, and you will be carried off with it. [4] And you will know that I have sent you this warning so that my covenant with Levi may continue,” says the Lord Almighty. [5] “My covenant was with him, a covenant of life and peace, and I gave them to him; this called for reverence and he revered me and stood in awe of my name.”

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COMMENTARY: Calvin begins this portion of his commentary by discussing a distinction between internal and external religion, picking up on the idea of a “cheat” or deceiver in verse 14. His reading is that those offering the sacrifices against which Malachi inveighs are attempting to cheat or deceive God, to present the outward appearance of worship in place of the inward disposition of worship. But worship finally comes down to motive: “though they pretended some religion, yet nothing was done by them with a sincere and honest heart; . . . whatever they thus offered was polluted, because it did no proceed from a right motive” (511). This reminds me of Augustine’s point, made in *The Spirit and the Letter* (if my memory serves), that obedience is nothing without love. God may command a certain action, and you may - in theory - perform it perfectly, but it doesn’t count if it proceeds from fear. The most important thing is that one loves God and, after all, love covers a multitude of sins (1 Pt 4.8).

Here’s a quick point just because I find it a little amusing. Calvin does one of his “as though he had said” bits with reference to the last half of verse 14 to explain why Malachi would emphasize God’s greatness here. He paraphrases thusly: “With whom do you think that you have to do?” (512) We might paraphrase today with a more or less vulgar version of, “Who do you think you’re dealing with?” In any case, this marks Calvin consistent desire to promote the sort of respect that he believes we ought to exhibit vis-à-vis our Creator.

Both these themes over into his exposition of 2.2., but they become particularized with reference to God’s word specifically. It is not enough to hear God’s word in a perfunctory or insufficiently serious manner. Rather, God’s word must be heard with fitting respect and openness to their affect: “for God is not heard, if we receive with levity his words, so that they soon vanish away; but we hear them when we lay them on the heart, or, as the Latins say, when we apply the mind to them. There is then required a serious attention, otherwise it will be the same as though the ears were closed against God” (514). It is hard not to make connections here with contemporary North American Christianity where God’s word may be heard in a purely physical manner,

whether through ear or eye, but where one much more seldom finds that those words are laid upon the heart, applied to the mind, or taken with serious attention. If this isn't an argument for the importance of catechesis in the church then I don't know what is. And not only basic or initial catechesis but a self-conscious practice of life-long theological education.

Since we're on the topic of theological education, Calvin turns in his comments on verse 4 to speak of teachers in the church. He begins by comparing kings and teachers, saying that they both easily fall victim to the erroneous opinion that they stand above mere mortals – in other words, they think they're better than everyone else. This is certainly something to keep in mind. But he then pivots and argues that the hierarchy of the Roman church has fallen victim to precisely this danger. Indeed, it has done so to such an extent that “they have dared to bind conscience by their own laws” (519), precisely Luther's complaint in the *95 Theses*.

Finally, and with reference to verse 5, Calvin discusses apostolic succession. On this point I will simply reproduce Calvin's paragraph. Bold is mine, as usual:

The Prophet now proves more clearly how God violates not his covenant, when he freely rebukes the priests, and exposes also their false attempts in absurdly applying to themselves the covenant of God, like the Papal priests at this day, who say that they are the Church. How? because they have in a regular order succeeded the apostles; but this is a foolish and ridiculous definition; for he who occupies the place of another ought not on that account only to be deemed a successor. Were a thief to kill the master of a family, and to occupy his place, and to take possession of all his goods, is he to be accounted his legitimate successor? [Ed. note – sound like *Hamlet* to anyone else?] So these dishonest men, to show that they are to be regarded as apostles, only allege a continued course of succession; **but the likeness between them ought rather to be the subject of inquiry. We must see first whether they have been called, and then whether they answer to their calling; neither of which they can prove.** Then their definition is altogether frivolous.

To expand briefly on this. On the question of whether Roman priests have been called, Calvin likely thinks this can't be proven for two reasons. First, God's call is not demonstrable *per se*. Second, God's call must be ratified by the congregation and this did not happen in the Roman church. On the question of whether they answer to their calling, Calvin does not mean “answer” in terms of hearing the calling and going through the formal motions of response (being ordained, etc.). Rather, and in keeping with his discussion earlier, Calvin has in mind the proper exercise of the ministry to which they are called, and the proper motivation in that ministry. This is obviously missing insofar as the Roman clergy, among other things, “bind conscience by their own laws.”

PRAYER:

(Calvin concludes each of his lectures on Malachi with a prayer.)

Grant, Almighty God, that as thou hast been pleased to choose us as this day thy priests, and hast consecrated us to thyself by the blood of thine only-begotten Son and through

the grace of thy Spirit, - O grant, that we may rightly and sincerely perform our duties to thee, and be so devoted to thee that thy name may be really glorified in us; and may we be thus more and more confirmed in the hope of those promises by which thou not only guidest us through the course of this earthly life, but also invitest us to thy celestial inheritance; and may Christ thy Son so rule in us, that we may ever cleave to our head, and be gathered as his members into a participation of that eternal glory into which he has gone before us. – Amen.

Reading Scripture with John Calvin: Malachi 2.5–9
(Monday, October 13, 2014)

Malachi 2.6–9

[6] “True instruction was in his mouth and nothing false was on his [Levi’s] lips. He walked with me in peace and uprightness, and turned many from sin. [7] For the lips of a priest ought to preserve knowledge, because he is the messenger of the LORD Almighty and people seek instruction from his mouth. [8] But you have turned from the way and by your teaching have caused many to stumble; you have violated the covenant with Levi,” says the LORD Almighty. [9] “So I have caused you to be despised and humiliated before all the people, because you have not followed my ways but have shown partiality in matters of the law.”

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COMMENTARY: Calvin is preoccupied in his commentary on these verses to explain the failings of the priests against whom Malachi’s prophetic word comes and, as the flip-side of that indictment, to sketch a picture of what a proper priestly ministry looks like. Implicitly – and explicitly at various points – this material is a criticism of Roman Catholic clergy. The central factor that Calvin focuses on, taking his cue from the passage, is the teaching office that accompanies proper priestly ministry.

Calvin begins by emphasizing the “mutual” or “reciprocal” (523) character of the covenant made between God and Levi (who stands in for the hereditary line of the Jewish priesthood). Calling back to verse 5, Calvin points out that this covenant was one of “life and peace, because the Levites had found that God was in every respect kind and bountiful, whenever they performed their parts” (523). Things can change, however, if the priests fail to keep their end of the deal. But what does it mean for the priests to do their part? Moving to verse 6, Calvin writes that “the chief duty of a priest is to show the right way of living to the people” (525). This does mean simply living a proper life; rather, “Levi *taught* the people” (my emphasis, 525). To faithfully exercise the office of priest and thereby to maintain the reciprocal covenant with God must include providing instruction to the people. As Calvin elaborates: “nothing is more preposterous, or even more ridiculous, than that those should be counted as priests who are no teachers. These two things are, as they say, inseparable – the office of the priesthood and teaching” (525). This is a clear assault on the medieval *status quo* since the majority of Roman clergy did not teach. Mass would be said in Latin and generally without a homily. If commoners heard sermons, they would have been delivered by members of the different mendicant orders who would travel around

preaching. For his part, Calvin understands preaching and teaching to be the central task given to church leaders.

This emphasis continues in the discussion of verse 7. Calvin understands this verse to mean that the priests' lips should act as a "store-house" of truth, not in the sense that it should stay locked up there but in the sense that everyone comes there to get it. The image that Calvin paints is of a pantry or wine-cellar in the house where victuals are stored by the house's master so that all those in the house can be nourished. Furthermore, this verse speaks of priests as messengers of God. Calvin takes this opportunity to further emphasize that being a priest and engaging in teacher are inextricably linked. Indeed, "it is a monstrous thing when any one boasts himself to be a priest, when he is no teacher" (528).

A negative shift occurs in verse 8, moving from the positive depiction of Levi to the indictment of the priests in Malachi's day. Calvin likewise makes a negative shift. He identifies how verse 8 mirrors in negative fashion what have been said positively about Levi: Levi enjoyed peace and righteousness while these priests depart from the path; Levi turned many from sin while these priests cause many to stumble.

The problem, identified in verse 9, is that the priests had "shown partiality in matters of law" (above trans.). In my mind, given the context of Malachi, this suggests that they did not apply the law equally to all people but perhaps favored the wealthy and oppressed the poor. This would fit with the material at the end of chapter two and beginning of chapter three. Calvin instead argues that the partiality in play here is preference for themselves, that is, the priests have elevated their own status and arrogated to themselves the prerogatives of God: "the priests in vain glorified in the honour of their office, for they had ceased to be priests of God" (529).

I think Calvin gets a little too far from Malachi in this train of thought, but it makes sense in his context. For Calvin, as for Luther, the problem with Roman Catholicism is the way that clergy had taken it upon themselves to bind the people's conscience with laws and observances, purgatory, indulgences, etc., holding one's salvation hostage at gun-point (as it were). As a counterpoint, Calvin and the Reformation maintain that only God can bind consciences and that clergy have only subordinate authority. So Calvin in the present discussion: "Priests are not to abuse their right, as though the highest power were granted to them; for God will not have his Church subject to tyranny, but his will is to reign alone in it through the ministry of men" (530).

PRAYER:

(Calvin concludes each of his lectures on Malachi with a prayer.)

Grant, Almighty God, that since thou has deigned to take us as a priesthood to thyself, and hast chosen us when we were not only of the lowest condition, but even profane and alien to all holiness, and hast consecrated us to thyself by the Holy Spirit, that we may offer ourselves as holy victims to thee, - O grant, that we may bear in mind our office and our calling, and sincerely devote ourselves to thy service, and so present to thee our efforts and our labours, that they name may be truly glorified in us, and that it may really appear that we have been ingrafted into the body of thy only-begotten Son; and as he is

the chief and the only true and perpetual priest, may we become partakers of that priesthood with which thou hast been pleased to honour him, so that he may take us as associates to himself; and may thus thy name be perpetually glorified by the whole body as well as by the head. - Amen

Reading Scripture with John Calvin: Malachi 2.9–12
(Wednesday, November 12, 2014)

Malachi 2.9–12

[9] “So I have caused you to be despised and humiliated before all the people, because you have not followed my ways but have shown partiality in matters of the law.” [10] Do we not all have one Father? Did not one God create us? Why do we profane the covenant of our ancestors by being unfaithful to one another? [11] Judah has been unfaithful. A detestable thing has been committed in Israel and in Jerusalem: Judah has desecrated the sanctuary the LORD loves by marrying women who worship a foreign god. [12] If anyone does this, whoever he may be, may the LORD remove him from the tents of Jacob – event though he brings an offering to the LORD Almighty.

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COMMENTARY: Calvin picks up in this, his 175th lecture on the minor prophets, right where he left off in the previous lecture—i.e., with (at least) one eye firmly fixed on the Roman church and its failings. Here he anticipates ways that the Roman clergy might try to wriggle out of the censures that Calvin laid upon them in his previous discussion of Malachi’s second chapter, namely, that they might try to distinguish their priesthood from the ancient Jewish priesthood. But, Calvin argues, insofar as it can be distinguished the Roman priesthood comes off as inferior to the ancient priesthood and therefore the censure still applies to them on the logic that censure of a superior form of priesthood must necessarily include censure of inferior forms. Here is how Calvin wraps up (more or less):

We therefore in short draw this conclusion—that what we read here of the Levitical priests not only applies to the Papal priests, but also bears with much more force against them; for they have no hereditary honour, their calling is not true or legitimate, and they cannot be counted the pastors of the Church; on the other hand, they deprive Christ of his honour, yea, they daily sacrifice and slay him. We hence conclude that they ought by no means to be suffered in the Church, for the covenant of God ought to remain inviolable; and what is it? that they keep the law of God in their mouth, and be his messengers and interpreters. (538)

Moving on to verse 10: this is a really interesting verse. If you look at the translation above, it is clear from the given capitalization that the translators think you should read “Father” as referring to God. Calvin argues that Abraham is the proper referent. Thus the passage would suggest first that those addressed are all members of one people defined (as appears toward the end of the verse) by the covenant. It is then within this context that reference is made to God as the

common creator. Calvin reads this as a reference primarily to God’s creation of Israel as God’s special people, that is, as a reference to God’s election of Israel. So far, pages 539–40.

For my money, Calvin is right to prefer Abraham as the referent for “father.” And while I see what he is doing with the bit about the creator, I’m not particularly excited by it. It seems to me that what we have here is a clear indication that appeal to God as creator happens from within the covenantal context, not from outside of it. (On a related note, see this post about Paul M. van Buren.) In other words, it is only because the people in question share Abraham as a father as those within the covenant that it makes sense to talk about the affirmation that they are also created by the same God. The point is that this creator God is the same God that they have to do with in the covenant, and that the covenant funds their thinking about this God as the creator. So Calvin missed a neat opportunity here, although I’ll have something to say about how he picks up the general idea later on.

Moving to the end of the verse, we have also the question of how this unfaithfulness or false dealing between members of the covenant community fits into the picture. Calvin says: “the Jews are here condemned, because they were not only perfidious to God, but also fraudulent as to their neighbors” (541). And this fraudulent dealing with the neighbor is also understood to be a betrayal of the covenant. Calvin missed another great opportunity here. And in fact the translation given above brings this out better insofar as it suggests that this breakdown in relationship between members of the covenant community is causally related to the “perfidity” exercised in relation to God. Calvin might have said that this breakdown in love of neighbor is ingredient to the breakdown in love of God (to structure things by the twofold commandment), rather than simply suggesting that in this case you have a seemingly unrelated breakdown on both sides.

I know that I’ve dwelled longer than usual on a single verse, and this post is long enough already. If you want to see more you’ll have to go read Calvin for yourself which, at the end of the day, is seldom a bad idea. But I promised to mention where Calvin picks up on the idea that one can only think of God from within the covenant. This is finally the depth-grammar of the anti-speculative impulse in Calvin’s theology, and he gives vent to it toward the end of his discussion of verse 10. He continues to miss the specific connection to how we think about God as creator, but otherwise he well brings out the point. Here’s a quote, and with this I close (bold is mine):

Some, passing by all means, seek to fly upwards to God; and so they entertain many vain thoughts and devise for themselves many labyrinths, from which they never emerge. We see how many fanatics there are at this day, who proudly speak against God’s word, and yet touch neither heaven nor earth; and why? because they would be superior to angels, and do not acknowledge that they need any helps by which they might by degrees, according to their weakness, ascend up to God himself. **Now this is to seek God without the covenant or without the word. This is the reason why the Prophet here unites father Abraham to God himself;** it was done that they Jews might know that they were confined by certain limits, in order that they might in humility make progress in God’s school. (542)

PRAYER:

(Calvin concludes each of his lectures on Malachi with a prayer.)

Grant, Almighty God, that as we are so inclined to all kinds of wickedness, we may learn to confine ourselves within the limits of thy word, and thus restrain all the desires of our flesh; and that whatever Satan may contrive to draw us here and there, may we continually proceed in obedience to thy word; and being mindful of that eternal election, by which thou has been pleased gratuitously to adopt us, and also of that calling by which thy eternal election has been confirmed, and by which thou has received us in thine only-begotten Son, may we go on in our course to the end, and so cleave, by persevering faith, to Christ thy Son, that we may at length be gathered into the enjoyment of that eternal kingdom which he has purchased for us by his blood. – Amen.

Reading Scripture with John Calvin: Malachi 2.13–16

(Tuesday, December 16, 2014)

Malachi 2.13–16

[13] Another thing you do: You flood the LORD’s altar with tears. You weep and wail because he no longer looks with favor on your offerings or accepts them with pleasure from your hands. [14] You ask, “Why?” It is because the LORD is the witness between you and the wife of your youth. You have been unfaithful to her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant. [15] Has not the LORD made the two of you one? You belong to him in body and spirit. And why has he made you one? Because he was seeking godly offspring. So be on your guard, and do not be unfaithful to the wife of your youth. [16] “I hate divorce,” says the LORD God of Israel, “and I hate it when people clothe themselves with injustice,” says the LORD Almighty. So be on your guard, and do not be unfaithful.

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COMMENTARY: Calvin continues his hammering on the priests. Although vs. 13 seems to have the whole people in view, Calvin nonetheless blames the priests because they had lead the people astray. This is compounded in that the priests had compromised the institutional worship of God, so the people had no way to reestablish the proper relationship with God. “It was to be ascribed to the priests that no one could from the heart worship God, at least with a cheerful and willing mind; for God was implacable to the people, because the only way of obtaining favour under the law was when the priests . . . humbly entreated pardon in the name of the whole people. But how could God attend to the prayers of the priests when they had polluted his altar by the filth of wickedness” (550)? While Calvin does not make the connection explicitly, it is certain that he understands this situation as analogous to that in his own day with reference to the Roman clergy. He certainly made a lot of this comparison in the previous sections.

Vs. 14 brings up the question of spousal relationships. To begin he has to explain why the text

would single out this issue when talking about Israel’s failings. To that end, he reads it as though Malachi singles out this one example from a long list of the people’s failings. To this end Calvin uses his fun rhetorical device: “as though he had said, ‘Your hypocrisy is extremely gross; but, to omit other things, by what pretext can you excuse this perfidy—that there is no conjugal fidelity among you? . . . There is then no ground for you to think that you can escape by evasions, because this one glaring vice sufficiently proves your guilt’” (552).

Calvin has a lot of traditional baggage in his thinking about spousal relationships, but he makes a number of good points once you get past the patriarchal way that he couches / words them. Consider, for instance, the first line of vs. 15. The rendering given above follows Calvin’s interpretation, but the text itself requires interpretation. Calvin has to argue that it should be understood in terms of the unity between spouses, such that God makes them a single entity. (Coincidentally, along the way he gives a glimpse into his own developing interpretation of the passage.) So, Calvin explains “that man with the woman is called one.” But even more, Calvin describes the personhood of a man as incomplete without being joined with the personhood of a wife: “So also when we come to individuals, the husband is as it were the half of the man [i.e., the singular unity of human being], and the woman is the other half” (557). As far as Calvin is concerned, one cannot be truly male or female without having your being as such completed through relationship with your gendered opposite. Whatever criticisms we would level at this from our current socio-historical vantage point, the truth of the matter is that Calvin here provides women in the marriage relationship with quite a bit more theological weight than they were accustomed to have.

What about folks who are single? This was an important question for Calvin because he was single when he wrote this commentary. As far as I can tell, he lectured through Malachi in the late 1550s (1558/9-ish) and he had been a widower since the death of his wife Idelette in 1549. So Calvin clarifies: “I speak of the ordinary state of things; for if any one objects and says, that bachelors are not then complete or perfect men, the objection is frivolous: but as men were created, that every one should have his own wife, I say, that husband and wife make but one whole man” (557).

So, to recap: Calvin’s thinking about marriage and gendered relationships is severely problematic by today’s standards but—in his context—he had a higher estimation of the importance of women and wives than did many.

Moving on. Calvin concludes by addressing divorce in vs. 16, and this provides him with the opportunity to make a distinction between what is “desirable” and what is “possible”: “It is indeed desirable, that no vice should be tolerated; but we must have a regard to what is possible” (559). This is a deeply pastoral point for Calvin and is tied up with the practice of church discipline in Geneva. He was always concerned to discern not only what *should* be the standard for Christian life, but also what it was *possible* to enforce. This leads Calvin into a discussion of why it is better to permit divorce than it is to practice polygamy. His reasoning comes down to the idea that the latter causes deeper pain and suffering for the man’s first wife: in polygamy “the husband impurely connects himself with another woman, and then, not only deals unfaithfully with his wife to whom he is bound, but also forcibly detains her: thus his crime is doubled. . . . And when any one introduces a harlot [i.e., second wife], how can a lawful wife bear such an

indignity without being miserably tormented” (560)?

PRAYER:

(Calvin concludes each of his lectures on Malachi with a prayer.)

Grant, Almighty God, that though we daily in various ways violate the covenant which thou hast been pleased to make with us in thine only-begotten Son, we may not yet be dealt with according to what our defection, yea, the many defections by which we daily provoke thy wrath against us, do fully deserve; but suffer and bear with us kindly, and at the same time strengthen us that we may persevere in the truth and perform to the end the pledge we have given to thee, and which thou didst require from us in our baptism, and that we may each of us so conduct ourselves towards our brethren, and husbands towards their wives, that we may cherish that unity of spirit which thou hast consecrated between us by the blood of thine own Son. – Amen.

Reading Scripture with John Calvin: Malachi 2.17–3.3
(Tuesday, May 26, 2015)

Malachi 2.17–3.3

[17] You have wearied the LORD with your words. “How have we wearied him?” you ask. By saying, “All who do evil are good in the eyes of the LORD, and he is pleased with them” or “Where is the God of justice?” [3.1] “I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,” says the LORD Almighty. [2] But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner’s fire or a launderer’s soap. [3] He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the LORD will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness.

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COMMENTARY: In finishing up chapter two, Calvin fixates on the logic at work in the imagined responses on the part of the Jewish leadership to the criticisms made by Malachi. They claim that either God approves of those who do evil—i.e., those who afflict the Jewish people and that Malachi claims as agents of divine judgment—or that God is absent. Furthermore, Calvin understands them to imply by this charge of God’s absence that God in fact does not exist: “they intimate that there is no God, for he cannot exist without exercising judgment” (563). Calvin follows up with this a few pages later, giving the Jewish leaders some credit for this line of thinking insofar as it is true “that there is no God, except he be the judge of the world; for he cannot divest himself of his office without denying himself” (566). This language of “office” puts me in mind of the *munus triplex* - the threefold designation of Christ’s office as “prophet,” “priest,” and “king” that was central to Calvin’s christology and became something of a defining feature of Reformed theology. In Calvin, then, we get a very close identification between God

(and Christ's) being and God's (and Christ's) roles, or tasks, or functions, so much so that these functions become the expressions of God's being to such an extent that to deny the function is to deny the being.

But, of course, God has not ceased to function as the world's judge, and so God has not ceased to exist. On Calvin's reading, the Jewish leaders imagined here make the regrettable mistake of thinking that just because God isn't seen to punish their enemies, it means that God has ceased to act as judge. In fact, Calvin reads Malachi as asserting that God maintains God's office of judge precisely by judging these Jewish leaders. So Calvin concludes this line of thought by saying: "We hence learn that they did not complain through zeal for what was right, but because they would have God bound to them to undertake their cause like earthly patrons" (565). Of course, this mistake continues to be frequently made even in our own time.

Calvin's comments on the first verses of chapter three have failed to inspire me. Suffice it to say that Calvin understands the "messenger" in verse 1 as Jesus (via a connection to David, who is a "type" of Christ [569]), he reads Malachi as speaking ironically in suggesting that the Jewish leaders desire his arrival [570], he conceptualizes the distinction between the godly and the ungodly both in terms of the former desiring Christ's coming [571] and in terms of the former being purified by the fire of God's judgment while the latter are simply consumed [573].

PRAYER:

(Calvin concludes each of his lectures on Malachi with a prayer.)

Grant, Almighty God, that since we are by nature so prone to rash judgment, we may learn to submit to thee, and so quietly to acquiesce in thy judgments, that we may patiently bear whatever chastisements thou mayest daily allot to us, and not doubt but that all is done for our wellbeing, and never murmur against thee, but give thee the glory in all our adversities; and may we so labour to mortify our flesh, that by denying ourselves we may ever avow thee to be the only true God, and a just avenger, and our Father, and that thus renouncing ourselves, we may yet never depart from the purity of thy word, and be thus retained under thy yoke, until we shall at length attain that liberty which has been procured for us by thine only-begotten Son. – Amen.

Reading Scripture with John Calvin: Malachi 3.4–8 (Tuesday, October 06, 2015)

Malachi 3.4–8

[4] [A]nd the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the LORD, as in days gone by, as in former years. [5] "So I will come to put you on trial. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers, against those who defraud laborers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive the foreigners among you of justice, but do not fear me," says the LORD Almighty. [6] "I the LORD do not change. So you, the descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed. [7] Ever since the time of your ancestors you have turned away from

my decrees and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you,” says the LORD Almighty. “But you ask, ‘How are we to return?’ [8] “Will a mere mortal rob God? Yet you rob me. “But you ask, ‘How are we robbing you?’ “In tithes and offerings.”

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COMMENTARY: There are three themes or units in Calvin’s commentary on this passage that jumped out at me, so I want to highlight those for you, gentle readers.

(1) In the previous section, Calvin elaborated at some length concerning the attitude that Malachi finds in the religious establishment of his day. As I outlined there, such people believe God had given up his being as judge because God is not obviously punishing the people that the establishment see as their enemies. Calvin reads Malachi as suggesting that God maintains God’s office as judge precisely by judging these leaders. All this comes back again in the context of verse 5, where God indicates that he will come to judge his people and their leaders. Calvin gives us some great language here: “They expected God to be to them like a hired soldier, ready at hand to help them in any adversity, and to come armed at their nod or pleasure to fight with their enemies: this they expected; but God declares what is of a contrary character,—that he would come for *judgment*.” And judgment of whom? “They indeed wished God to put on arms for their advantage, but God declares, that he would be an enemy to them” (576). **Far from coming to support the religious *status quo* and its perpetrators by judging those that such structures themselves judge, God will come to judge precisely those who take upon themselves the task of passing judgment. Those who claim and assert that God is on their side, those who act in the name of God but nonetheless against God, will be the ones to receive God’s judgment.** This reminder is as important today as it was in Calvin’s (and Malachi’s) time. And note well that verse 5 goes on to say that when God comes, God will come quickly . . .

(2) If the members of the religious establishment expect God to act as their mercenary and be on their side, but they are mistaken, this raises the question of whose side God does in fact support. Continuing with verse 5 provides an indication: God is on the side of those that the religious establishment has defrauded: those who oppress workers, widows, orphans, foreigners, and the otherwise unjust. If Calvin had written what I’m about to show you in the last few decades, rather than centuries ago, I imagine that labels such as “preferential option for the poor” and “liberation theology” would attach themselves to his position.

For the orphans, widows, and strangers, we know, are under the guardianship and protection of God, inasmuch as they are exposed to the wrongs of men. **Hence every one who plunders orphans, or harasses widows, or oppresses strangers, seems to carry on open war, as it were, with God himself, who has promised that these should be safe under the shadow of his hand.** (578)

But Calvin doesn’t stop there. He returns to the theme in the context of verse 8 and its comments about robbing God with reference to “tithes and offerings.” Calvin understands this as evidence of how “openly sacrilegious” (585) the majority of folks had become insofar as “every one, bent on their own profit, neglected the temple and the priests.” But this neglect has a wider aspect as well insofar as “a part [of the harvest, the wealth produced by the community] also was required

for the poor.” The consequence of all this means that depriving the needy of the support that they need amounts to withholding from God. Calvin concludes his commentary on this passage with the following, which is another word that we need to hear today (bold is mine as usual):

But we know that other sacrifices are now prescribed to us; and after prayer and praises, he bids us to relieve the poor and needy. **God then, no doubt, is deprived by us of his right, when we are unkind to the poor, and refuse them aid to their necessity.** We indeed thereby wrong men, and are cruel; but our crime is still more heinous, inasmuch as we are unfaithful stewards; **for God deals more liberally with us than with others, for this end—that some portion of our abundance may come to the poor;** and as he consecrates to their use what we abound in, we become guilty of sacrilege whenever we give not to our brethren what God commands us; for we know that he engages to repay, according to what is said in Prov. Xix. 17, “He who gives to the poor lends to God.”

(3) Verse 6 is a bulwark of the doctrine of immutability, i.e., the idea that God is unchangeable. This doctrine is intended as a comfort: since God cannot change, God will always be the highest being and – this is the critical bit – therefore able to save his people. Now, the interesting thing to me here is what Calvin does with this statement. In the theological tradition there is a tendency to interpret this notion of immutability as pertaining to God’s being: the divine being is defined by certain attributes (such as omnipotence, infinity, absolute goodness, etc.) including the attribute of immutability, which safeguards the rest by ensuring (or reiterating) their eternal persistence. But Calvin does not take this approach. Rather than emphasizing the unchangeableness of God’s being, Calvin stresses the unchangeableness of God’s will: this passage means “that God continues in his purpose, and is not turned here and there like men who repent of a purpose they have formed, because what they had not thought of comes to their mind, or because they wish undone what they have performed, and seek new ways by which they may retrace their steps. God denies that anything of this kind can take place in him” (579). The relationship of will and being, of course, is an intricate (and complicated) one. But I find it interesting (and perhaps revealing, or at least suggestive) that Calvin reaches for the one and not the other category here.

PRAYER:

(Calvin concludes each of his lectures on Malachi with a prayer.)

Grant, Almighty God, that since thou has been pleased to choose us as priests to thyself, not that we may offer beasts to thee, but consecrate to thee ourselves, and all that we have,—O grant, that we may with all readiness strive to depart from every kind of uncleanness, and to purify ourselves from all defilements, so that we may duly perform the sacred office of priesthood, and thus conduct ourselves towards thee with chasteness and purity; may we also abstain from every evil work, from all fraud and all cruelty towards our brethren, and so to deal with one another as to prove through our whole life that thou art really our Father, ruling us by thy Spirit, and that true and holy brotherhood exists between us; and may we live justly towards one another, so as to render to each his own right, and thus show that we are members of thy only-begotten Son, so as to be owned by him when he shall appear for the redemption of his people, and shall gather us into his celestial kingdom.—Amen.

[Ed. note: I find it incredibly fitting and satisfying that an installment of this series should mark the 1000th post here at DET. It has been quite a run, and "digital theology" has changed quite a bit in the meantime. But we're still here reading, thinking, and writing about theology.]

Reading Scripture with John Calvin: Malachi 3.9–15 (Monday, October 26, 2015)

Malachi 3.9–15

[N.B. I've always used the TNIV in this series. That began more or less on a whim and I just stuck to it. However, I'm switching to the NRSV now.]

[9] You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me—the whole nation of you! [10] Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing. [11] I will rebuke the locust for you, so that it will not destroy the produce of your soil; and your vine in the field shall not be barren, says the LORD of hosts. [12] Then all nations will count you happy, for you will be a land of delight, says the LORD of hosts. [13] You have spoken harsh words against me, says the LORD. Yet you say, "How have we spoken against you?" [14] You have said, "It is vain to serve God. What do we profit by keeping his command or by going about as mourners before the LORD of hosts? Now we count the arrogant happy; evildoers not only prosper, but when they put God to the test they escape."

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COMMENTARY: Calvin begins his commentary on these verses by highlighting the point that everything that happened to Israel, the curse that is lamented here, happened to them because they deserved it. And Calvin extends the category of *whodeserved* it beyond simply the leaders of the religious establishment, which had been his focus in previous sections of the commentary. Now the issue is that the nation as a whole, or at least a vast majority of it, was guilty and deserved this curse. But what were they guilty of? "They trifled with God" (588) through the combination of withholding a portion of their tithes but acting as though they had given the whole. This is, in Calvin's view, theft – and theft from God.

This is where things get interesting, though, and this ties in with the last installment of this series where we saw Calvin speaking very much like a liberation theologian. Calvin recognizes that God doesn't need food. These tithes are not supplying God's necessities, seeing as how God has no body and no necessities. So why the tithes, and why their importance? "Now as God needs not meat and drink . . . and as men in their grossness are ever prone to superstitions, he substituted the *priests* and the *poor* in his own place" (589; emphasis added)!!! In other words: God knows that he needs to have his people give a tithe of their goods to remind them where they come from and who they properly belong to, but God doesn't want them thinking that God needs these things, so God has priests and the poor stand in God's place as recipients of what is

owed in grateful obedience to God! This puts me in mind of Matthew 25.40...

But this is only Calvin’s warm-up act, as it were, because the real theme of his commentary on these verses is the doctrine of providence. We see already that God, as it were, hides behind the priests and the poor. By giving to them, you give to God. Calvin goes on to talk about how God also hides behind natural processes. When verse 10 mentions God opening the windows of heaven, for instance, Calvin gives a long discussion on natural processes and how God works through them. Here is one quote where he pulls it together: “Though then rain descends naturally, we are yet reminded here that God sends it” (590). Note well: Calvin assigns two different causes to the rain – a natural cause, and the divine cause. Rain comes both through the immanent world system of cause and effect, the usual operation of the cosmos; and, rain comes because God sends it. What we have here is a gesture toward a non-competitive account of divine and human action, an account that Calvin sometimes struggles toward articulating in his *Institutes* (in my humble opinion). This sort of an account is, in my view, the heart of a properly functioning doctrine of providence.

As is his wont, and perhaps his strength on this doctrine, Calvin gives insight in his commentary on the practical value of the doctrine of providence. Sounding a note that he sounds often, Calvin articulates his conviction that the doctrine of providence is a comfortable doctrine, one that bolsters faith in God as a celestial parent looking out for you. “God shows here, that he takes constant care of us, and every day and every night performs the office of a good and careful head of a family, who always watches for its benefit” (592). I find this to be an interesting disconnect from the other practical consequence of providence that Calvin highlights in this passage (and elsewhere). Later he says that “in the service of God the chief thing is this—that men deny themselves and give themselves up to be ruled by God, and never raise a clamour when he humbles them” (596). Calvin’s ideas about what it means to be a caring head of a family are clearly different from our own. But he goes on concerning the last part about not raising a clamor. The reason why some people do raise such a clamor is “because they did not consider in how many ways they had provoked God’s wrath, and”—and this is the shocking bit—“what just and multiplied reasons he has for chastising his people, *even when they do nothing wrong*” (emphasis added). I suggest that Calvin let his rhetoric get away from him here, unless he has in mind original sin. But on the next page he suggests that what he really means is “even when we haven’t done anything wrong *as far as we are aware*,” or some such.

PRAYER:

(Calvin concludes each of his lectures on Malachi with a prayer.)

Grant, Almighty God, that since we continue to afford many and various reasons to induce thee to withdraw thy blessing, and to show thyself displeased with us, —O grant, that we may patiently bear thy scourges, by which thou chastisest us, and also profit under them, and so contend with all our depraved affections and the corruptions of the flesh, that we may become partakers of thy paternal kindness, which thou offerest to us, and also so taste of thy goodness, which in innumerable ways is manifested towards us, that it may keep us in the pursuit of true religion; finally, may our tongues be consecrated to magnify thy judgment and to celebrate thy justice, that whatever happens to us, we

may always serve thee through our whole life as our Father, and declare also thy goodness towards us, and confess that we are justly punished whenever thou visitest us with severity, until we shall at length reach that blessed rest, which is to be the end of all our evil, and an entrance, not only into life, but also into that full glory and happiness, which has been procured for us by the blood of thine only-begotten Son.—Amen.

Reading Scripture with John Calvin: Malachi 3.15-17
(Monday, January 04, 2016)

Malachi 3.15–17

[15] “Now we count the arrogant happy; evil-doers not only prosper, but when they put God to the test they escape.” [16] Then those who revered the LORD spoke with one another. The LORD took note and listened, and a book of remembrance was written before him of those who revered the LORD and thought on his name. [17] They shall be mine, says the LORD of hosts, my special possession on the day when I act, and I will spare them as parents spare their children who serve them.

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COMMENTARY: To begin this section of his exposition, Calvin takes a backwards look to the hypocrisy that he has been expounding – by way of Malachi – for some time. I mention it again, however, because he has a great line in his description here. While hypocrites may appear to be upstanding, moral, good, etc., it is all an act: “they have only the guise or *mask of religion*” (italics mine; 598)! And this is not the last memorable line that Calvin provides in this section of his commentary. Calvin’s point here, of course, is that the sort of behavior and worship that is pleasing to God is motivated by love rather than fear or self-serving calculation.

The second great line comes in his discussion of verse 16. Calvin takes the mention of those who “revered the LORD and thought on his name” here as evidence that Malachi’s “doctrine had not been without fruit” (602). This is an interesting line in itself because most folks these days (I suspect) do not think of doctrine in these terms. That is, we don’t think of doctrine as the sort of thing that bears fruit. But for Calvin, proper teaching about God has consequences in life. (On this point, see the discussion of Calvin in Ellen Charry’s *By the Renewing of Your Mind*.) But this fruit is not the result of creaturely activity or power; it is the result of God’s action. Then comes the line: “we are by nature slothful and tardy, until God as it were *plucks our ears*” (italics mine)! What a great image – there we are, lazy, perhaps napping, and God walks by and flicks us on the ear to wake us up and get moving. And how does God do it? Through doctrine, perhaps? One thinks of Romans 12.2.

The theme of hope also plays an important role for Calvin here, especially in connection with verse 17. God makes a promise in this verse to the remnant mentioned in verse 16, but this promise goes against their experience of the world. That is, their position has not changed concretely even if God has made this promise. Calvin writes, “When therefore se seem to serve God in vain, let us know that the obedience we render to him will come to an account, . . . though

he may not immediately stretch forth his hand to us” (605). The promise is there to engender hope and trust, and that is necessary because there is a delay between the faithfulness of the remnant and God’s intervention on their behalf. This gap requires that hope be joined with patience—“the Prophet in these words exhorts us to patience” (606)—so that faith can be given primacy over sight, as it were: “let us then arm ourselves for this contest, and be satisfied with the inward testimony of the Spirit, though outward things do not prosper” (607–08).

Finally, the “practical syllogism” (the idea that it is possible to be confident of your election based on evidence of grace in your life) kept tugging at the back of my mind while reading this section. For instance, Calvin say “it is an evidence of true repentance” when one works to bring one’s friends to repentance (603). Then, when discussing the last half of verse 17, where God promises to spare the remnant identified in verse 16, Calvin identifies two aspects of this promise. First, those “who remained alive would render obedience to God, by which they would prove themselves to be children indeed, and not in name only” (608). Here again, as with the earlier line quoted, we seem to have actions of obedience identified as ways to secure confidence of one’s salvation. However, Calvin’s second aspect undermines this: “God would *forgive* them, that is, . . . he would exercise pardon in receiving their services, which could not otherwise please him” (italics Calvin’s) His point here is that even if obedience indicates one’s soteriological status, that obedience never secures that status. And furthermore—and this is the key bit—that obedience is never unambiguous. Calvin goes on to disparage those “sophists” who “daringly prattle about merits” because “even when we devote ourselves with all possible effort and zeal to God’s service there is yet something always wanting” (609). An honest self-examination of the sort that Calvin recommended in his previous section of commentary, where he exhorted his readers to remember that God always has plenty of reasons to “chastise” believers, even if those reasons aren’t obvious to them.

PRAYER:

(Calvin concludes each of his lectures on Malachi with a prayer.)

Grant, Almighty God, that as Satan strives to draw us away from every attention to true religion, when things in the world are in a state of disorder and confusion,—O grant, that we may know that thou carest for us; and if we perceive not this by what we find in the world, may we rely on thy word, and doubt not but that thou ever watchest over our safety; and being supported by this confidence, may we ever go on in the course of our calling: and as thou hast deigned to make us partakers of that evidence of thy favour, by which we know that we are reconciled to thee in thine only-begotten Son; and being thus made his members, may we never hesitate cheerfully to offer to thee our services, however defective they may be, since thou hast once promised to be a propitious Father to us, so as not rigidly to try what we offer to thee, but so graciously to accept it, that we may know that not only our sins, which justly deserve condemnation, are forgiven and remitted to us, but that thou also bearest with our infirmities and our defects in our imperfect works, that we shall at length receive the reward which thou has promised, and which we cannot attain through our merits, but through the sanctification of thy Spirit, and through the sprinkling of the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ.—Amen.

Reading Scripture with John Calvin: Malachi 3.18–4.2
(Tuesday, February 02, 2016)

Malachi 3.18–4.2

[18] Then once more you shall see the difference between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve him. [4.1] See, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble; the day that comes shall burn them up, say the LORD of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. [2] But for you who revere my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall.

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COMMENTARY: Calvin begins this portion of his commentary by reprising the discussion with which he concluded the previous portion, and which I highlighted in the last installment of this series, concerning the question of merit. He summarizes succinctly: “We saw in the last lecture that no works of the faithful please God, except through a gratuitous acceptance: it hence follows, that nothing can be ascribed to merits without derogating from the grace of Christ.” But what comes out here more so than in his previous discussion, is that Calvin regards this as a hermeneutical point, i.e., it explains how different sorts of biblical statements can fit together. So Calvin (again): “We now see how these two things harmonize—that reward is promised to works, and that works themselves deserve nothing before God; for though God can justly reject them, he yet regards them as acceptable, because he forgives all their defects” (610).

The last installment of this series also highlighted Calvin’s discussion of hope, and the idea that faith involves patience during the gap or delay between God’s promise and its fulfilment. In this way faith also means persisting in trust of God when experience or outward appearances suggest that this is fruitless. But for those who persist in this hopeful faith (or, faithful hope?), Calvin points out that verse 18 includes the promise that “experience will then at length teach you” what you have heretofore believed in spite of experience to the contrary (611).

Continuing with verse 18, Calvin notes the parallel between those who are righteous / just and those who serve God, and those who are wicked and do not serve God. He then makes the penetrating application: “there is no justice where there is no obedience rendered to God” (613). This is a typical Calvin point, but there are other places in his work where I have encountered this sentiment (though I can’t think of where off the top of my head right now) where he has more clearly taken the next step and reversed it to say something like there is no obedience rendered to God where there is no justice. But Calvin does not take such a step this time, instead doubling down: “We must then always come to this,—that men must obey God, if they desire to form their life aright.” Talk about a missed opportunity.

This is something of a random comment, but Calvin takes up the issue in connection with verse 1 of God’s timing for the execution of judgment, and it made me think of the college admission process. Some institutions do what is called “rolling admission” where applications are processed and acted on continuously; other institutions (and this was more common in past

decades) had particular admissions periods and deadlines. Calvin makes the point that God works more like the latter than the former: “God does not execute his judgments in an even or a continued course, but that he has a fixed time, now for forbearance, then for vengeance, as it seems good to him” (616).

Finally, I want to highlight some larger bits of Calvin’s interpretation of verse 2 specifically relating to his identification of Jesus Christ as “the *sun* of righteousness” and as “the sun of *righteousness*” (repetition is mine, as is emphasis on “sun”):

The meaning . . . of the word sun, when metaphorically applied to Christ, is this,—that he is called a sun, because without him we cannot but wander and go astray, but that by his guidance we shall keep in the right way. . . . Christ then daily illuminates us by his doctrine and his Spirit; and though we see him not with our eyes, yet we find by experience that he is a sun. (618)

He is called the sun of *righteousness*, either because of his perfect rectitude, in whom there is nothing defective, or because the righteousness of God is conspicuous in him: and yet, that we may know the light, derived from him, which proceeds from him to us and irradiates us, we are not to regard the transient concerns of this life, but what belongs to the spiritual life. The first thing is, that Christ performs towards us the office of a sun, not to guide our feet and hands as to what is earthly, but that he brings light to us, to show the way to heaven, and that by its means we may come to the enjoyment of a blessed and eternal life. We must secondly observe, that this spiritual light cannot be separated from righteousness; for how does Christ become our sun? It is by regenerating us by his Spirit into righteousness, by delivering us from the pollutions of the world, by renewing us after the image of God. (618–19)

PRAYER:

(Calvin concludes each of his lectures on Malachi with a prayer.)

Grant, Almighty God, that as thou hast appointed thine only-begotten Son to be like a sun to us, we may not be blind, so as not to see his brightness; and that since he is pleased to guide us daily into the way of salvation, may we follow him and never be detained by any of the impediments of this world, so as not to pursue after that celestial life to which thou invitest us; and that as thou hast promised that he is to come and gather us into the eternal inheritance, may we not in the meantime grow wanton, but on the contrary watch with diligence and be ever attentively looking for him; and may we not reject the favour which thou has been pleased to offer us in him, and thus grow torpid in our dregs, but on the contrary be stimulated to fear thy name and truly to worship thee, until we shall at length obtain the fruit of our faith and piety, when he shall appear again for our final redemption, even that sun which has already appeared to us, in order that we might not remain involved in darkness, but hold on our way in the midst of darkness, even the way which leads us to heave.—Amen.

Reading Scripture with John Calvin: Malachi 4.3–6
(Monday, March 14, 2016)

Malachi 4.3–6

[3] And you shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet, on the day when I act, says the LORD of hosts. [4] Remember the teaching of my servant Moses, the statutes and ordinances that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel. [5] Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and horrible day of the LORD comes. [6] He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse.

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COMMENTARY: As Calvin finishes up the last few verse of Malachi, and I in turn finish up the last few pages of Calvin’s commentary, there are three things that I would call your attention to, gentle readers.

First, Calvin gets quite a bit of mileage out of verse 4. One of the points he makes pertains to the importance of the Torah / law, delivered by Moses, and of the relation of the prophetic tradition to the law. His presupposition is that there is a gap in the prophetic office, so to speak, such that God does not speak through prophets between Malachi and John the Baptist. Given this, verse 4 becomes an instruction for how Israel should persist in their faithfulness to God in the interim, i.e., they should attend to the law: “Malachi, in order to keep the Jews from wandering, and from departing from the pure doctrine of the law, reminds them that they were faithfully and constantly to remember it” (624). Calvin then raises the rhetorical question: why mention only the law? Why not also instruct them to attend to the prophetic teaching? Answer: “the prophetic office was not separated from the law, for all the prophecies which followed the law were as it were its appendages; so that they included nothing new, but were given that the people might be more fully retained in their obedience to the law. . . . [T]he Prophets were the interpreters of Moses” (ibid). So, by recommending attention to the law Malachi also recommends attention to the prophets since, insofar as the prophets provide interpretation of the law, it is impossible for one to attend to the law without hearing the prophets. And this raises implications for our own time, giving the overwhelming concern for justice that comes out in the prophetic tradition in ways that aren’t necessarily obvious in the “statutes and ordinances” (as verse 4 puts it)—those “statutes and ordinances” are properly understood vis-à-vis the prophetic concern with justice!

Second, we have an excellent example of Calvin’s rhetorical reading of scripture in this passage. Calvin’s rhetorical analysis has long been one of my favorite features of his thought, although at times I wish he had more consistently deployed it. But he brings it out here in connection with verse 5, and returns to it with reference to the last clause of verse 6. What are we to do with all this talk of a “great and horrible day of the LORD,” of with this threat of striking “the land with a curse”? How does this mesh with the idea, which Calvin everywhere maintains, that God’s providence should be thought of in fatherly terms? How does this mesh with the idea of peace and joy found in Christ? Calvin tackles this head on with rhetorical analysis, and a little of what we might today call “victim-blaming” thrown in:

Though then Christ calmly presents himself, as we have before observed, and as soon as he appears to us, he brings an abundant reason for joy; yet the perverseness of that people was such as to constrain the Prophet to use a severe language, according to the manner in which God deals daily with us; when he sees that we have a tasteless palate, he gives us some bitter medicine, so that we may have some relish for his favour. Whenever then we meet with any thing in Scripture tending to fill us with terror, let us remember that such a thing is announced, because we are either deaf or slothful, or even rebellious, when God kindly invites us to himself (628–29).

If the sloth of our flesh keeps us back, let even this threatening stimulate us (631).

In other words, these sometimes terrifying threats are there to get our attention when we are otherwise too distracted to pay proper heed to God's kind offer of forgiveness. And notice, too, that Calvin's rhetorical analysis is really an analysis of God's rhetoric—i.e., the way that God speaks and acts (by way of the authors of scripture but also in the Christian's experience) to produce a certain effect in people. And this effect is to bring people to God. Finally, notice that this bit of rhetorical analysis is undertaken in order to show the unity of God as testified to in Malachi with the God revealed in Jesus Christ.

Third, we have here evidence of what I increasingly think of as Calvin's soteriological concentration. The rhetorical analysis above is entirely soteriological in focus; by which I mean, Calvin there analyzes how it is that God moves people toward faith. And this has been the case in each of the times that I've encountered memorable instances of Calvin's rhetorical analysis. We see this also in Calvin's discussion of the argument in his commentary on Romans—where he calls “justification by faith” “the main subject of the whole Epistle” (Calvin, *Commentary on Romans*, xxix). This is especially significant insofar as Calvin seems to have modelled many editions of his *Institutes* on the structure that he found in Romans. And here in verse 6, the conclusion of the book of Malachi, we have an astounding statement: “the turning of the heart is God's peculiar work, and still more, it is more peculiarly his than his other works” (629). Woah! God's work as savior is more properly God's work than God's work as creator, providential sustainer, etc. Or perhaps the better way to put it would be to say that in God's saving work we meet with the core of God's character (given things Calvin says in the *Institutes*, I highly suspect that he would want to distinguish here between what he calls God's “character” and God's being), and all the rest is organized around that. Do we see here the enduring influence of Luther?

PRAYER:

(Calvin concludes each of his lectures on Malachi with a prayer.)

Grant, Almighty God, that as nothing is omitted by thee to help us onward in the course of our faith, and as our sloth is such that we hardly advance one step though stimulated by thee,—O grant, that we may strive to profit more by the various helps which thou hast provided for us, so that the Law, the Prophets, the voice of John the Baptist, and especially the doctrine of thine only-begotten Son, may more fully awaken us, that we may not only hasten to him, but also proceed constantly in our course, and preserve in it

until we shall at length obtain the victory and the crown of our calling, as thou hast promised an eternal inheritance in heaven to all who faint not but wait for the coming of the great Redeemer.—Amen.

So, that's it. Another unit of the Reading Scripture with John Calvin series is in the books. Here's what I can't say and what I can say at this point. I can't say what the next book to be tackled will be. And I can't say that because I can't say when or whether this series will continue. It takes a lot of time and energy, and it may be that time and energy is best spent in other ways for the foreseeable future. I can say, however, that this series is one of the things that I'm most proud of on DET. And it is the series that I have most enjoyed over the years. It is also the series through which I have learned the most, and which has borne the most fruit in my own thought. So I may return to it in the future. Who knows? All that I can say for sure at this point is this: Calvin has worn me out—I need a break!