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THE PRIESTS AND THE DESCENDANTS OF LEVI IN THE BOOK OF MALACHI

ABSTRACT¹

The article argues that the phrase “the descendants of Levi” in Mal 3:3 includes both priests and Levites and that the author of the book of Malachi was an inspired temple preacher, or writer, who probably belonged to the ranks of priests or Levites. He was a voice of the late 5th century, who with prophetic authority, like his predecessors, the earlier prophets, among others criticised the priests’ misconduct of the sacrificial cult (Mal 1:6–2:9). For this reason, he rejected the offerings. The failure of the priests corrupted the whole sacrificial cult including those responsible for it, the descendants of Levi, who for this reason had to be purified. The message related in Mal 3:1-4 conveys that YHWH’s coming messenger will carry out this purification. Then the descendants of Levi will conduct the sacrificial cult in accordance with the regulations of the law, as in the days of old.

1. THE PROBLEM

In Mal 3:1–3, it is predicted that the LORD will send his messenger to prepare the way before his coming. This agent is also called the messenger of the covenant,² and the passage relates that he will “purify the descendants

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2 It has been much discussed whether the three titles in Mal 3:1 refer to the same agent or to different agents of YHWH; the identification of “my messenger” with

[Heb. sons] of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness”, alternatively: “right offerings to the LORD” (v. 3).

Who are these descendants of Levi? The question arises because the phrase “the descendants of Levi” occurs only here in the book of Malachi, and one has the impression that it refers to, or is at least related to, the priests who, in Mal 1:6–14(–2:9), are severely criticized for not having conducted the sacrificial cult in accordance with the law. If there is a relationship, why are the priests called the descendants of Levi in 3:1–3 but not in 1:6–2:9, which applies the term “priests” (1:6; 2:1)? Is the difference only due to a variation of terminology, thus being a sign of vocabulary richness in the book of Malachi?³ Or does “the descendants of Levi” refer to other temple personnel than the priests, presumably the Levites – and if so, what is the implication of such reference as regards the relationship between priests and Levites? Does it reflect a tension between them, and does the different terminology perhaps indicate that the Levites will *replace* the priests in their cultic duties? Moreover, can either solution say anything about the author of, or the voice behind, these passages? These questions shall be discussed in this article.

2. ORIENTATION IN RESEARCH: TWO VIEWS ON THE DESCENDANTS OF LEVI

In the harsh criticism of the priests’ conduct of the offerings and in the following announcement of punishment against them (Mal 1:6–2:9), the priests are contrasted with Levi of the past, with whom God made a covenant of life and well-being. Levi, it is maintained, revered God, gave true instruction, walked with God in integrity and uprightness, and turned many from iniquity. In contrast to this ideal, the addressed priests are accused of having turned aside from the way, of having caused many to stumble by their instruction, and of having corrupted the covenant of Levi (Mal 2:4b–6, 8).

One implication of this comparison is that the addressed priests are viewed as being included in God’s covenant with Levi. Their failure and their negligence in their duties as priests are underscored by the references to how a priest *should* carry out his tasks: “For the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and people should seek instruction from his mouth”

“the messenger of the covenant” has found rather wide support, see Meinhold (2006:260–261); Snyman (2006:1031–1044); Kessler (2011:228–233).

3 On vocabulary richness in the book of Malachi, see von Bulmerincq (1926:426–432); Hill (1998:412–414).

(Mal 2:7). Since the criticized priests are included in the covenant with Levi, it can be argued that the descendants of Levi, who will be purified and refined according to Mal 3:1–3 are the same as – or at least are to be found among – these priests.

This interpretation of the descendants of Levi has long since found many supporters in research, and it also occurs in the most recent commentary on the book of Malachi, by Rainer Kessler, who emphasizes that the phrase in question only refers to the priests, and does not include the Levites as the *clerus minor* of the temple personnel (Kessler 2011:167-169, 236-237). Consenting to this view, Joachim Schaper contends that external evidence for it occurs in Ezek 44:13, which commands that the Levites (cf. v. 10) shall not come near (*ngš*) to YHWH to serve as priests; it is the privilege of the priests alone to come near to minister to YHWH (vv. 15–16; Schaper 2004:181).

Another argument in favour of this interpretation of Mal 3:3 may be that in Deuteronomy the phrase “the descendants [sons] of Levi” is applied to the priests (Deut 21:5; 31:9)⁴ and this usage may have exerted an influence on Mal 3:3, since there is no doubt that the traditions in Deuteronomy were known to the author(s) of the book of Malachi.⁵ The message conveyed in Mal 3:3, then, is that the sacerdotal priests, who in Mal 1:6–2:9 are accused of having polluted the offerings, will be purified and again be qualified for their service and rightly be called “the descendants of Levi” (Graf Reventlow 1993:153).

Schaper also tries to identify the voice that expresses the criticism against the priests in Mal 1:6–2:9: The criticism, he contends, cannot come from Levites, since there is no indication that the book of Malachi differentiates between priests and Levites. Rather, it comes from priestly circles and indicates a rift in the Jerusalem temple priesthood: Some priests did not toe the line of the high priest; they were a small group of dissident priests whose views differed from those propagated by the major works of Judaeian religious literature in the exilic and post-exilic periods. These dissident priests were traditionalists with exacting standards in their cultic practice and they held a more or less Deuteronomic view of the priesthood. They opposed current practices of high-ranking temple personnel in Jerusalem and were responsible for the harsh criticism of their colleagues, of which we are informed in Mal 1:6–2:9. To advocate his interpretation, Schaper refers to Neh 13:4–14, where we read that Nehemiah criticized the

4 On these two texts in Deuteronomy, see Christensen (2001:457); Nelson, (2002:256, 358-59).

5 One example of such knowledge is the reference in Mal 3:5 to the hire workers, the widow, and the orphan.

priest Eliashib in Jerusalem for the favour he showed to his relative Tobiah, and that Nehemiah also remonstrated with the officials about the neglect of the Levites and replaced these leaders with the priest Shelemiah, the scribe Zadok, and Pedaiah of the Levites (Schaper 2004:180-181, 185-187).

However, the view that the descendants of Levi in Mal 3:3 belong to the priestly ranks has not remained unchallenged in research. Its opponents contend that this phrase more probably refers to Levites, since it is not used in Mal 1:6–2:9. Moreover, those who advocate this interpretation refer to the fact that the priests, in some other exilic and post-exilic texts, are called the descendants of *Aaron*, and not of Levi.⁶ It follows that if the phrase in question in Mal 3:3 refers to Levites, it indicates that a purification and refinement of the Levites will take place. Moreover, this view on the Levites may reflect a rivalry between them and the priests, and the Malachi passage thus predicts that the Levites will be upgraded to a higher rank than they had before: They will, on the arrival of YHWH's messenger, be given the priestly duty and privilege of presenting offerings to YHWH (v. 4), which means that they will be equated with the priests, or perhaps even replace them. Paul D. Hanson, who holds this view, argues that the promise in Mal 3:3–4, as well as the accusations and the announcement of punishment in Mal 1:6–2:9, bears witness to a struggle between apostate Zadokite priests and others, presumably Levites; the latter tried to restore the temple service on the basis of an earlier ideal from the days of old, from former years (Mal 3:4).

The textual basis for this suggested rehabilitation of the Levites can be found in Deuteronomy, in passages such as Deut 33:8–11, in which the Levites are described as placing burnt offerings on YHWH's altar, and in Deut 18:1–8, which says that YHWH has chosen Levi and his sons to minister in the name of YHWH for all times. Hanson contends that in the book of Malachi, the priests and the Levites (i.e., the descendants of Levi) are actually in bitter tension and that the book reflects P's distinction between priest and Levite but does not support P's agenda, which is to promote a differentiation between two distinct classes of cultic personnel (as also Ezekiel does). The book of Malachi reflects instead an earlier ideal, which is expressed in the two passages in Deuteronomy. Also Mark J. Boda suggests, on the basis of Mal 2:4b–6, that "the legitimacy of at least the present ruling priestly families is in jeopardy", and that "others

6 E.g., Num 25:6–13. On this passage; see further the analysis below. The above-mentioned interpretation also finds support in the fact that for instance Neh 12:23 and several passages in the book of Chronicles apply the phrase "the descendants of Levi" to the Levites; see our comments on these passages in the analysis of Mal 3:3 below.

who share Levitical lineage may have an opportunity to take over what was originally Aaronide/Zadokite privilege”.⁷

Thus, we are faced with two quite different interpretations of the phrase “the descendants of Levi” in Mal 3:3–4: The one argues that it refers to the priests who are harshly criticized in 1:6–2:9 (e.g. Kessler; Schaper) and that its occurrence in the promise in 3:1–4 implies that the priests will be purified and thus again will be qualified for their duties; there is no indication that the Levites are included in that phrase (Kessler) and the voice behind these passages belongs to dissident priests (Schaper). The alternative view contends that the two Malachi passages reflect a struggle between Zadokite priests and Levites; the latter are harshly attacking the apostate priests and they predict that the descendants of Levi, who are the Levites, will replace the priests in the sacrificial cult. The Malachi passages thus reflect Levitical interests (Hanson; Boda).

Is it possible to go a step further and decide on these quite different views; can we find arguments that substantiate either of them? Or is there a third solution to the problems in question? In search of an answer, it may be fruitful first to examine what YHWH’s covenant with Levi in the past (Mal 2:4b–6) refers to, and ask: Who are included in it? Was it only a covenant with the priests? Or was it a covenant with the Levites? Or did it include both of them? Second, since the book of Malachi presumably originated in the 5th century BCE or perhaps later,⁸ we should also look closely at other postexilic literature and ask how they describe priests and Levites, in order to see whether these sources can shed light on the terminology and the interpretation of the Malachi passages in question.

3. THE COVENANT WITH LEVI

Since no account of a covenant with Levi by YHWH is explicitly related in other biblical traditions, the meaning of the phrase “my [YHWH’s] covenant with Levi” in Mal 2:4b has been a much-debated issue in research.⁹ One view suggests that it depends upon the blessing of Levi by Moses related in

7 Hanson (1986:253-283); Boda (2012:17, and same page note 13). Weyde (2000:303-304) held a similar view, but modifies it in the present article, see below.

8 Cf., e.g., Steck (1991:196-198 et passim), who contends that the book of Malachi exhibits three main layers, which can be related to different periods of postexilic times, from the 5th to the 3rd or 2nd century BCE. See also Meinhold (2006:XI-XVI), who gives an excellent survey of what he regards as the *Grundform* of the book of Malachi and the assumed-later additions to it. For a different interpretation, see Kessler (2011:76), who contends “dass wir in der Maleachi-Schrift eine einheitliche Dichtung vor uns haben”.

9 See the survey of interpretations in Kessler (2011:168-169).

Deut 33:8–11, the idea of a covenant with Levi being rooted in verses 9–10: “They kept your covenant. They teach Jacob your ordinances, and Israel your law; they place incense before you, and whole burnt offerings on your altar.” This passage presents a dual function of Levi and his descendants, namely teaching and sacerdotal activities, as does the Malachi passage with regard to the priests (Mal 1:6–14; 2:1–3, 8–9). If Levi in Deut 33:8–11 is interpreted in a narrow sense as referring only to the ancestor of the Levites, the passage could serve to legitimize the functions of the Levites in the cult, either by giving them the same rights and duties as the priests have to teach the law and present offerings, or by even favouring the Levites and promoting them to a higher rank by claiming that only they should be in charge of these tasks. Supporting the latter interpretation, which would be in agreement with Hanson’s mentioned above, one could argue that the phrase “the descendants of Levi” in Mal 3:3 refers to a promotion of the Levites: They will replace the priests in their function as responsible for the instructions on the law and the conduct of the sacrificial cult.

Another interpretation, however, argues that the background should be sought in Num 25:6–13, which says that Phinehas, a descendant of Aaron (vv. 7, 10), was granted a “covenant of peace” by YHWH, which “shall be for him and for his descendants after him a covenant of perpetual priesthood” (vv. 12–13). It is this privilege that is echoed in the phrase “covenant of peace” (NRSV: “covenant of well-being”) in Mal 2:5. This view can find support by other arguments as well: In both passages the priestly covenant extends to the offspring (Num 25:13; Mal 2:3); moreover, Phinehas turned back (*hēšīb*) YHWH’s wrath from the Israelites (Num 25:11), whereas Levi turned (*hēšīb*) many from iniquity (Mal 2:6). The priestly line thus goes back to Aaron, who himself was a Levite and was descended from the house of Levi (Exod 2:1ff; 4:14; 6:16–26). This genealogy may explain why Mal 2:4b–6 presents YHWH’s covenant *with Levi* as a model for *the priests*, who are accused of having broken that covenant (vv. 8–9; cf. 1:6–14). Being the descendants of Levi (Mal 3:3; cf. Deut 21:5; 31:9) and having part in YHWH’s covenant with him, all priests were obliged to give true instruction (Mal 2:6, 8; cf. Hag 2:11–13), and they receive the promise that YHWH’s messenger will purify them and after that they will present offerings to YHWH in righteousness, as in the days of old (Mal 3:3–4).¹⁰ Thus, *Levi* was an ideal priest, who had been granted a covenant with YHWH, and the Malachi passage emphasizes the postexilic view that the entire priesthood was subsumed under the genealogy of Levi as its first ancestor; all priests had to claim Levitical descent, in order to be accepted for their office, which was related to their duties at the sanctuary and the altar, the “priestly duties” (Num 18:5, 7). The stipulations in Numbers 18

10 Cf. Fischer (2007:68): Mal 3:1–4 foresees a restoration of the functions of the priests.

make a sharp distinction between priests and Levites with regard to their ranks and tasks and the passage in Mal 2:4b–6 may presuppose the difference.

This interpretation can explain why reference is made to a covenant with the ancestor *Levi* in Mal 2:4b–6, and not with the priest Phinehas, which might have been expected in light of the terminological similarities with the account in Num 25:6–13. “Levi” in the Malachi passage is a generic term, which means that YHWH’s covenant of peace with Phinehas (Num 25:6–13) was more than a covenant only with him; it included both his predecessors beginning with the ancestor Levi and all his descendants, the priests, who like Phinehas were descended from him. Similar links between an ancestor and his descendants and vice versa can be found in the references to Esau and Edom in Mal 1:2–5, as well as in Jer 49:10 and Obadiah 6. The meaning and function of the reference to Levi in Mal 2:4b–6 suggested by this interpretation can, in fact, also find support in Deut 33:8–11, if Levi in this passage is understood as a reference to the ancestor of the priests and not of the Levites. This interpretation of the Deuteronomy passage is possible, since Levi is elsewhere portrayed as the ancestor of Aaron and the priests.

A third solution to the question of background contends that the passage in Mal 2:4b–6 depends on both Deut 33:8–11 and Num 25:6–13. One argument in favour of this is that the terminological similarities pointed out above suggest that the description of YHWH’s covenant with Levi in Mal 2:4b–6 may seem to integrate these two passages into a distinctive portrait of the ideal priest. A possible implication of this interpretation is that the reference to Levi and to YHWH’s covenant with him includes not only the ancestor of the priests but also the ancestor of the Levites; both priests and Levites are the descendants of Levi.

Is this broad interpretation of the Malachi passage likely? The evidence from Jer 33:18–22 may suggest that the answer is yes. This passage relates a promise in which no sharp distinction exists between priests and Levites, since it refers to the Levitical priests as sacerdotal priests (v. 18), to YHWH’s covenant with these priests (v. 21), and to the priests and the Levites as YHWH’s ministers: Both are ministering to him (vv. 21–22). Jer 33:18–22, it seems, has the potential to provide a link between the above-mentioned traditions about Levi and the Levites in Deut 33:8–11 on the one hand and the traditions about the priests in Numbers 18 and 25 on the other. Thus, the Jeremiah passage may have paved the way for interpreting YHWH’s covenant with Levi in a broad sense: It included both priests and Levites. One cannot exclude the possibility that the passage

in Mal 2:4b–6 provides an example of such interpretation,¹¹ and in this regard there are points of similarity with how the term “covenant” is used in the report in Nehemiah 13: There, the priests’ failure in marital affairs (v. 28) defiled not only the priesthood but the Levites as well: It “defiled *the covenant of the priests and the Levites*” (v. 29; my emphasis).

4. THE DESCENDANTS OF LEVI IN MAL 3:3 AND OTHER POSTEXILIC TEXTS

Having suggested three possible interpretations of the phrase “YHWH’s covenant with Levi” in Mal 2:4b–6, we now turn to our second question above: Can the description of the priests and the Levites in other postexilic biblical literature shed more light on the terminology and the interpretation of the Malachi passages in question and thus help us to decide which of the three views is the most plausible? The above evidence from Neh 13:28–29 may seem to favour the third one, but do other texts point in the same direction?

If we take our point of departure in Mal 3:3, we see that the purification of the descendants of Levi is expressed by several verbs, among others the root *ṭhr* (*pi’el*). Neh 12:30 applies the same verb (*hitpa’el*) in the report that the priests and the Levites purified themselves, and it uses the noun of the same root relating that priests and Levites performed the service of purification (v. 45). Moreover, according to 1 Chr 23:28, one of the duties of the Levites was the cleansing (purification) of all that is holy. The examples show that the temple staff – both the priests and the Levites – were responsible for the purification in the temple and that this duty is expressed by the same word in these texts. We also learn, from 2 Chr 29:15, 16, 18, that the priests and the Levites, during the cult reform of King Hezekiah, performed the act of purification. The verb *ṭhr* is applied in these verses as well, as it is in the report of the next cult reform, which took place during the reign of King Josiah (2 Chr 34:3, 5, 8). The terminology is significant, since the parallel accounts in 2 Kings 18 and 23 make use of other terms. The emphasis on the purification by these temple officials reflects the

11 Cf. Weyde (2000:185), further Frevel (2007:90), who correctly emphasizes “den midraschartigen Umgang des Maleachibuches mit den Pentateuchtraditionen”. Moreover, “[die] Schriftgelehrtheit des Maleachibuches” means that one should not look for a text containing the words “covenant” and “Levi” in order to find the background of the phrase “the covenant with Levi”, because the phrase probably alludes to and combines several traditions. Kessler (2011:169) and Meinhold (2006:147, 149) hold a similar view: they emphasize that YHWH’s covenant with Levi in Mal 2:4b–6 should be interpreted in light of a broad “Traditionszusammenhang”.

obligations they had according to the priestly laws (Exod 29:4, 19–21; P; Num 8:5–22; P).

These examples show that the Priestly source as well as Nehemiah and Chronicles prefer to use the root *thr* to express the idea of purification by – and of – both priests and Levites. We add that the reference in Mal 3:4 to the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem provides another link to the same and other postexilic literature: The phrase “Judah and Jerusalem” occurs in Ezra 2:1; 4:6; 5:1 (Aram.); 7:14; 9:9; 10:7, and in Chronicles it is used far more often than in the parallel accounts in the Deuteronomistic History (e.g., 1 Chr 5:41; 2 Chr 20:5, 17, 18, 20; 24:18). Moreover, the phrases “the days of old” and “former years” in Mal 3:4b may refer as far back as to the years in the wilderness when God made his covenant with Levi. One argument for this interpretation is that the phrase “the days of old” has such reference in Isa 63:9, 11, where it is explicitly connected to the time of Moses (v. 11; Weyde 2000:302). Thus, also this phrase in Mal 3:4b may provide a link to the wilderness period, as does the description of Levi in Mal 2:5–7.

With regard to the phrase “the descendants (sons) of Levi”, which Deuteronomy, as mentioned, applies to the priests (Deut 21:5; 31:9), we should add that in Chronicles and Nehemiah the same phrase refers to *the Levites* (Neh 12:23; 1 Chr 5:27; 6:1; 9:18; 12:27; 23:24, 27), and that these books make a distinction between the Levites and the priests (cf. also Neh 12:7–8, 22).

In other words, the traditions which presumably were available for the author of the book of Malachi show that the phrase “the descendants of Levi” had the potential to be applied with different meanings; it could refer either to priests or Levites or to both categories of the temple personnel of that time. In the analysis of Mal 2:4b–6 above, we found that YHWH’s covenant with Levi may have the same references.

The above-mentioned passages in Nehemiah and Chronicles relate that both priests and Levites, on some occasions, were in need of purification. This need corresponds to the information conveyed in Neh 13:4–14 as well: The priests and the Levites had neglected their duties and were rebuked for their failures (vv. 7–9, 11–13). For this reason they had to be purified (v. 22; cf. vv. 28–30). All these examples show that the purity of the temple personnel, of both priests and Levites, was a condition for the temple service in postexilic times.

The evidence from these texts as well as from Deuteronomy suggests that the phrase “the descendants of Levi” in Mal 3:3 can be interpreted in different ways: It may refer to the priests or to the Levites, or it may include

both categories and thus be a comprehensive phrase. The texts also agree that these temple servants had to purify themselves in accordance with the requirements of the law before performing their duties in the cult.

In light of this postexilic literature, it may seem most plausible that the phrase “the descendants of Levi” in Mal 3:3 may have a broad meaning: It includes the priests and the Levites; both categories of the temple personnel were in need of purification.¹² In fact, this interpretation is the most likely when the implications of the priests’ misconduct of the sacrificial cult, for which they are criticised (Mal 1:1–14) are taken into consideration: Their acceptance of animals with a blemish polluted not only the offerings but also the temple personnel including the Levites. The priests’ disobedience to the law thus had severe consequences for the service of the Levites: they were disqualified for their duties.

Only a purification of both priests and Levites would make it possible for these temple servants to conduct the sacrificial cult in a way that was accepted by YHWH; only through purification could they present offerings to YHWH in righteousness as their predecessors had done in the days of old – in the wilderness. The promises in Mal 3:3–4 do not aim at replacing priests with Levites, nor do they seem to reflect a rivalry between these temple officials. It is more appropriate to say that the phrase “the descendants of Levi” in Mal 3:3–4, against the background of Mal 2:4b–6 and other postexilic traditions, has a comprehensive meaning: It *includes priests and Levites*; both had to be purified in order to conduct the sacrificial cult. This interpretation does not necessarily imply that the Levites will be upgraded to sacrificial priests; it only suggests that the criticism of the priests’ conduct of the cult had consequences, which required a comprehensive restoration of the cult and its personnel, both priests and Levites.

As observed above, the phrase “the descendants of Levi”, in other literature, may refer either to the priests (Chronicles/Nehemiah) or to the Levites (Deuteronomy). This dual reference can explain why it is applied in Mal 3:3: It had the potential to refer to both categories – priests and Levites – and in the Malachi passage it probably conveys this broad meaning. The phrase itself expresses the consequences of the criticism of the priests: The whole temple personnel were in need of purification.

12 Cf. similarly Meinhold (2006:272).

5. THE VOICE BEHIND THE CULT CRITICISM AND THE PROMISE OF PURIFICATION

If we now return to Schaper's theory, it is of interest to note that his suggestion that dissident priests were responsible for the harsh criticism of the priests, which is related in the book of Malachi, includes reflections on the authorship of the book as a whole. From a methodological point of view, his considerations on this matter are not surprising since Schaper, on the basis of this book's characteristic structure, argues that the six so-called discussion words (*Diskussionsworte*) in it are likely to be of literary origin, and that (only) significant departures from the recurrent pattern in the six units may indicate later hands.¹³ From this point of departure, he contends that the author(s) and redactor(s) responsible for the book of Malachi were antagonists of the Zadokite priests. Demonstrating their exegetical skills, these antagonists could only have been found among priests and Levites; and since the Levites, according to Schaper, must be discounted as the authors, we are left with the priests, or more precisely with a small group of dissident priests who, then, also criticized the Zadokite priests for their misconduct of the offerings: "It is tempting to identify them with the people behind the book of Malachi" (Schaper 2004:187, cf. 182, 186).

It is not difficult to agree with the Schaper when he contends that the six discussion words, in their present shape, are of literary origin and may stem from the same author(s), apart from some significant departures from their recurrent structure.¹⁴ But are these authors to be found among dissident priests who opposed their colleagues? First, it is difficult to find any sign of a rift in the Jerusalemite priesthood in the passages we discussed above. Rather, the priests seem to be criticized *en bloc*. Schaper refers to Neh 13:4–14 to substantiate his view, but this passage does not seem to reflect any rift or any internal struggle or tension among the priests, and it does not seem to provide a strong argument for the existence of dissident priests in the priesthood in postexilic Jerusalem. Nor does it necessarily reflect a rivalry between the priests and the Levites. The passage only relates that the governor Nehemiah, as the leading official, replaced some leaders with others, who included representatives of different elite groups: a priest, a scribe, and a Levite.

Second, there is no indication that the other passages in the book of Malachi originated among opponents of the priests; only some of the topics

13 Schaper (2004:177). Schaper also refers to a widespread scholarly agreement on this demarcation, among others to Meinhold (2006).

14 His view is consistent with what we suggest below, namely that the voice behind (or the author of) the six discussion words in the book of Malachi was a priest or a Levite.

related in them seem to be of special significance to the temple personnel including priests and Levites, such as the tithes and the offerings (Mal 3:8; cf. Neh 13:10–14), and perhaps the case of divorce and mixed marriages, which is related in Mal 2:10–16, although it is a matter of debate whether the criticism made in this passage addresses the priests or the people or both.¹⁵

Is it, then, possible to say anything about the “voice” behind the harsh criticism of the priests and the promise of purification of the descendants of Levi in the book of Malachi? Some formal characteristics of the book may provide interesting suggestions.

First, in Mal 1:1 the formula “the word of YHWH to Israel by (lit. “by the hand [of]”) Malachi” occurs, and it is not followed by a verb. This mode of expression is frequently used in Chronicles as well, among others in passages where it is missing in the parallels in the Deuteronomistic History, which, in such cases, makes use of other terms and expressions: 1 Chr 11:3 (“according to the word of the LORD by Samuel”)/2 Sam 5:3 (no parallel); 2 Chr 33:8 (“... and the ordinances given through [=by] Moses”)/2 Kgs 21:8 (“... and according to all the law that my servant Moses commanded them”); 2 Chr 34:14 (“the book of the law of the LORD given through [=by] Moses”)/2 Kgs 22:8 (“the book of the law in the house of the LORD”); 2 Chr 35:6 (“according to the word of the LORD by Moses”)/2 Kgs 23:21 (“as prescribed in this book of the covenant”).

Second, in the book of Malachi we never find so-called intermediary formulas, such as “the word of YHWH/God came to ...” and “YHWH spoke to ...” By comparison, the book of Chronicles does not apply such formulas to speeches given by priests, Levites or other messengers, but only to speeches by prophets of the past, such as Nathan, Shemaiah, and Gad.¹⁶ In light of these similarities one may ask whether the mode of expression in Mal 1:1 reflects the terminology and the ideological world of the book of Chronicles and indicates that the voice behind the message in the following passages can be found among priests and Levites. When suggesting this possibility we should remember that the Targum identifies the messenger referred to in Mal 1:1 with Ezra the scribe. Although there is no indication of such identification, neither in this book nor in other biblical

15 In assumed-contemporary literature in the Hebrew Bible, the problem of divorce and mixed marriages concerns both the temple personnel and the people (Ezra 9–10; Neh 13:23–30). Frevel (2007:90–92) argues that the problem of mixed marriages in Mal 2:10–16 should be interpreted against the background of the narrative in Genesis 34: Levi and Simeon prevented a case of mixed marriage; thus, the covenant of Levi in Mal 2:4b–6 also (Frevel emphasizes “auch”) has a connection to the problem of mixed marriages in 2:10–16.

16 1 Chr 17:3; 21:9, 19; 2 Chr 11:2; 12:7; cf. 33:10. Cf. Schniedewind (1995:62–66).

literature, the evidence from the Targum is interesting, since Ezra also was a priest and an expositor of the law (Ezra 7:11–12; Nehemiah 8). Our observations above may at least indicate that the voice behind the Malachi passages was a priest or a Levite. It points in the same direction that he interprets the law, as these temple servants should do (e.g., Mal 1:6–14; 2:10–16; 3:5, 10).

Third, priests and Levites are presented in Chronicles as having both prophetic and scribal functions; they are described in prophetic categories: The spirit of YHWH come upon them and they also perform their duties with prophetic authority by using prophetic speech forms in their speeches (2 Chr 20:14–17; 24:20–21; cf. 19:8; 35:3; Neh 8:7–8).¹⁷ These characteristics may explain why each of the six discussion words in the book of Malachi, after an introductory declaration by the “voice” and a response or objection by the addressees, are composed of speech forms that are mainly characteristic of *prophetic speech*, such as words of salvation and punishment (Mal 1:2–5; 3:17–21), accusations (Mal 1:6–14), announcements of punishment (2:1–9), a so-called proof saying (*Erweiswort*, 2:1–4), and motivated exhortations and admonitions (2:13–16; 3:6–12).

Last but not least, there is, in all the discussion words, a remarkable frequency of formulas marking divine speech, which are well known from other prophetic books and are applied to legitimize the words of the prophets. Thus, the voice behind (or the author of) the six discussion words in the book of Malachi – whether he was a priest or a Levite – criticizes the priests’ conduct of the offerings with prophetic authority. With the same legitimacy he predicts that the temple personnel, “the descendants of Levi”, who probably include priests and Levites, will be purified and again bring offerings to YHWH in righteousness.

6. CONCLUSION

Thus, we arrive at the conclusion that the voice behind – or the author of – the passages in the book of Malachi may have been an inspired temple preacher or writer, who probably belonged to the ranks of priests or Levites, and conveyed his message with prophetic authority. He was a voice of the late 5th century,¹⁸ who, like his predecessors, the

17 See further Blenkinsopp (1990:307-315); Mason (1990:64-68, 79-83).

18 Cf. the date of the book of Malachi suggested by Schaper (2004:178-179, 186). This date is also probable in light of the similarities between the Malachi passages, the passages in the book of Chronicles and the book of Nehemiah which we observed above.

prophets in pre-exilic times, criticised the cult practices of the priests. His predecessors criticised the sacrificial cult of not being accompanied by social justice (Isa 1:10–17;¹⁹ Amos 5:21–24[–26]). We do find similar reasons for the rebuke of the cult in the book of Malachi (Mal 3:5; cf. 2:10–16²⁰), but the main argument for it in this book is the priests' misconduct of the cult (Mal 1:6–2:9). For this reason, the cult was corrupt and the offerings were rejected. This affected not only the priests, who had corrupted the covenant of Levi; the consequences of their failure were fatal for the whole sacrificial cult including the Levites. Therefore, the descendants of Levi, who included both priests and Levites, had to be purified. The message in the promise related in Mal 3:1–4 conveys that YHWH will send his messenger; he will purify them and only after their purification will the priests and the Levites present offerings to YHWH in righteousness, as they had done in the days of old, in the wilderness.

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- 19 It is beyond doubt that the passage in Isa 1:10–17 belongs to the editorial framework of the whole book of Isaiah. It is therefore a matter of discussion whether this passage was a part of the Isaiah traditions as early as the 5th century BC. However, one may assume that the editors related the message in it to the message of the prophet Isaiah. On these problems, see Beuken (2003:60–61, 66).
- 20 In Mal 2:10–16, YHWH's rejection of the offerings is explained by the intermarriages and divorces that take place among the addressees, who may include the priests, if the criticism in this passage alludes to Num 25:7–8, which is possible. These verses relate that Phinehas, the priest, reacted strongly against marriage between an Israelite and a Midianite woman. For this reason, YHWH granted him and his descendants after him his covenant of peace, a covenant of perpetual priesthood (vv. 12–13). In Mal 2:10, the phrase “profane the covenant of our ancestors” may allude to that covenant and thus indicate that the priests have profaned it through intermarriage. On this problem, see Fischer (2007:64; cf. 65, note 13).

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