

ADULT BIBLE STUDY

SPRING 2020

Laura Brenneman

# Justice and the Prophets

BIBLICAL SURVEY

# Justice and the Prophets

This study focuses on justice as presented in Scriptures from the prophets and from 1 Corinthians on Easter Sunday. The prophets communicated God's will to the people. They called for repentance and justice.

In Unit 1, *God Requires Justice*, the prophets issue God's call for justice in the conduct of human affairs. Amos, Habakkuk, Micah, and Malachi convey that the laws of God require justice for the poor and the oppressed. The sessions from Micah and Malachi are a study of the responsibilities of leaders for practicing justice.

Unit 2, *God Promises a Just Kingdom*, continues a study of God's justice. The lessons for Palm Sunday and Easter examine the promised Messiah as the defender of justice. Esther's triumph is reviewed as demonstrating the prevailing of God's justice. The unit concludes with the LORD's proclamation of the redeemed nation where justice and righteousness are restored.

Unit 3, *Called to God's Work of Justice*, explores ways people are called to participate in God's work of justice. Zephaniah presents both a judgment against the wickedness and injustice of Jerusalem and a vision of restoration. Zechariah calls for a return to God's ways of justice. In Jeremiah, God's rigorous standards for justice are defined, and God's people are given a choice to repent from their injustices by executing justice or facing destruction. Hosea calls the people to love and justice.

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# Leading Justly

*Laura L. Brenneman*

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**UNIT I**  
**GOD REQUIRES**  
**JUSTICE**

**Devotional**  
**Reading**

Psalm 50:1-15

**Background**  
**Scripture**

Malachi 2-3

**Key Verse**

**Malachi 2:2**

"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."

**INTEGRITY IS EVERYTHING**

Religious institutions are not exempt from having corrupt and dishonest leaders, and instances of this can be devastating to a faith community. I recall a situation in a church that I used to attend. One of its prominent members, quite likeable and often in positions of leadership, was also dishonest and misrepresented who he was. Church leadership, when they became aware of it, sought to cover it up. Some members, however, found out about it anyway and, little by little, the church shrank in size. When the man's dishonesty came out, the church split and some of the people stopped attending any church at all. For many of the congregants, it was too difficult to imagine trusting church leaders again after they had attempted to cover for the one member. In an attempt to keep a scandal at bay, the leaders caused a greater wound for the church, not to mention embittering former members by what they saw as hypocrisy of church leaders.

Integrity in leadership matters. This is most starkly apparent when it becomes clear that leaders are dishonest. So, responsibility for maintaining integrity must be a top priority for religious leaders.

<sup>1</sup> “And now, you priests, this warning is for you. <sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> “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. <sup>4</sup> And you will know that I have sent you this warning so that my covenant with Levi may continue,” says the LORD Almighty. <sup>5</sup> “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. <sup>6</sup> True instruction was in his mouth and nothing false was found on his lips. He walked with me in peace and uprightness, and turned many from sin.

<sup>7</sup> “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. <sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> “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.”

<sup>3</sup><sup>5</sup> “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.

<sup>6</sup> “I the LORD do not change. So you, the descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed.”

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## HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS

### Monday, March 23

Psalm 50:1-15  
Offer Sacrifice of  
Thanksgiving to God

### Tuesday, March 24

Leviticus 22:17-25  
Bring Acceptable  
Offerings to the Lord

### Wednesday, March 25

Malachi 1:11-14  
God's Name Is Great  
among Nations

### Thursday, March 26

Malachi 2:10-16  
Be Faithful to  
One Another

### Friday, March 27

Malachi 2:17-3:4  
Messenger of  
Judgment Coming

### Saturday, March 28

Malachi 3:7-12  
God's Blessings  
and Delights Await

### Sunday, March 29

Malachi 2:1-9; 3:5-6  
Leading in  
Troubled Times



## EXPLORING GOD'S STORY AND VISION

Malachi is the last book of the Christian Old Testament and “the seal of the Prophets” in the Hebrew Bible, concluding both the Book of the Twelve (the Minor Prophets) and the whole division of the prophets. No personal information is given about the prophet from the book. The name Malachi means “my messenger,” which may be a literary echo of “my messenger” in 3:1 rather than a personal name. The prophet’s strong critique of the practices of the priesthood indicates that the temple is functioning again after being rebuilt and rededicated in 516–515 BCE. The book also seems to share concerns with Ezra and Nehemiah, probably locating Malachi’s message sometime before Nehemiah’s first arrival in Jerusalem (445–444 BCE).

**Covenant violations.** This book strongly rebukes religious officials, particularly the Levites. That Malachi highlights the covenant that the LORD made with Levi (2:4, 8) implies that he holds the whole line responsible for corruption, not only the line of Aaron (designated as the priests in Exodus 29:9) or Zadok, the preferred priestly line in Ezekiel 44:15. Malachi speaks sharply to the Levites about how they are not honoring God with the way they attend to the altar because he idealizes their role and knows what they *should* be. The lips of the priest should honor God (2:2), preserve knowledge, and teach (2:7). They are called the messengers of the LORD Almighty (2:7).

What are the specific grievances? In 2:9, they are called unfaithful because they are showing partiality in matters of the law. They shouldn’t show favoritism in administration of justice or in worship. From chapter 1, we see that the priests accept and offer animals at the altar that are blemished or diseased, which doesn’t show respect for God. They offer better gifts to the political authorities than to God (1:8). In anger, God declares that it would be better if the temple doors were shut and the altar fires extinguished (1:10). The LORD Almighty vows to rebuke Levi’s descendants and spread offal (the rejected parts) from animal sacrifices on their faces, showing their rejection—they aren’t fit to serve before God (2:3).

**High, holy standards.** This extreme pronouncement may be better understood in light of commandments from Leviticus about what is acceptable and unacceptable priestly conduct (chaps. 21–22). The book of Leviticus addresses how to live with the holy God in their midst, which

is that anyone who approaches God must do so in a state of purity and with the best of one's flock or harvest as a gift. The tabernacle allowed for a place of holiness and the whole rest of the camp could conduct daily activities without the obligation to maintain a constant state of purity. The temple came to serve this function after the Israelite tribes settled in and around Canaan. Similarly, the Levites and priests were to stay in a state of purity—apart from common, regular work—as much as possible so that they could always be ready to do their job, that is, be in the presence of the holy. The animals and all other offerings were also to be of the highest standard because of God's holiness.<sup>1</sup>

Anything less than the priests' personal purity, the sacrifices' wholeness, and proper maintenance of order in the temple made it impossible for true worship to happen. Holiness and impurity cannot have contact. The consequences are deadly (e.g., Numbers 4:15). If the priest, the sacrifice, and the temple are not right—any or all—the offering will not bring the desired effect. Thus, with Malachi, the priests may as well be doused in the impure parts of the animals and removed from the temple because they are already impure and unfit to serve God at this time.<sup>2</sup> The priests have a heavy responsibility to get themselves right so that the people can continue to honor and worship the holy God.

*The relationship between worship and justice.* Malachi's view is that worship and administration of justice are equally weighty, with real-world consequences. No dichotomy exists between "religion as worship and religion as action; between obligations to God and obligations to neighbor; between service and praise."<sup>3</sup> Proper worship honors the holy and sovereign God, who declares that justice in relationships is the proper order of the universe. Improper worship shows that priests do not take God, the Judge, seriously. This is the connection between

*Justice in relationships is  
the proper order of the universe.*

1. See Perry Yoder, *Leviticus*, Believers Church Bible Commentary, 214–25, especially pages 302–04 for the essay on "Holy and Holiness."

2. The Israelite religious system provides for rituals to handle impurity so that a person can regain a pure state and have contact with the holy. By itself, impurity is not a problem; it only is if that person wishes to physically be in contact with the holy. See Yoder's essay on "Pure," 309–10.

3. Eileen M. Schuller, "Malachi." In *Introduction to Apocalyptic Literature; Daniel; The Twelve Prophets*. The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes. Vol. VII. Abingdon Press, 1996, 861.

chapters 2 and 3. Malachi shifts from present-day condemnation of the priests to eschatological visions of the coming judgment of the LORD. The priests are to model right order and right relationship. Instead, their priorities are out of whack; by not bringing the best to God they're showing that they believe that God is not sovereign. If God is not sovereign, why administer the law according to God's priorities? In Malachi's view, their corrupt worship practices unravel the moral fabric of their society.



### LIVING GOD'S STORY AND VISION

Malachi's critique of the priests is particular to a specific context that is not current for either Christians or Jews today. The physical temple in Jerusalem was again destroyed in 70 CE and not rebuilt since. The specific admonition to the Levites and priests of Malachi's day is based on an understanding of holiness that seems far removed from today's understanding. Furthermore, most Protestant groups have some idea of a priesthood of all believers embedded in their theologies. Anabaptists do not share a consensus about what a priesthood of believers is. We hold a mixture of views about believers being empowered by the Holy Spirit to participate in the life and witness of the church, including mutual admonition and group processes of interpretation.

Given this, what does Malachi's vision of an appropriate and acceptable priesthood have to do with us? I think his vision has at least three important implications for contemporary Anabaptists.

**1. *Revering God's sovereignty is shown through obedience*** to what is revealed of God's will. God demands justice in society. We know from the Prophets and many, many other biblical passages that a just society looks like not preferring the rich over the poor in judicial (or any) matters; rather, true justice shows compassion to the more vulnerable members of society.

**2. *Contact with God is holy.*** Being in relationship with God is not like casual dating. Being in contact with God requires reverence and honor. Since a common Anabaptist belief is that it is possible for anyone to have contact with the holy, a proper posture of reverence is necessary for all. I believe this has more to do with having the kind of open earnestness that seeks to know and be directed by God's will rather than with external things, like attire.

3. *Worship, when done in sincerity and with proper reverence for the holy*, is an eschatological act. It unabashedly declares the sovereignty of God. It proclaims that God is the one who sees the world as it is—unjust and unfeeling toward those who are suffering—and that God will not allow it always to be so. Worship declares that God is the judge who brings all people to accountability. True worship calls people to the work of social justice because it announces our belief and hope in the sovereignty of God.

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to the work of social justice  
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sovereignty of God.*

The integrity of leaders is essential.

- » What is your vision for the integrity of religious leaders?
- » What do you do to maintain your integrity?
- » Do you observe spiritual disciplines and practices? If so, how do you think they assist you in maintaining integrity?
- » How do you pray for your religious leaders? Write your prayer and consider sharing it with your group.
- » How does your prayer connect to the passage in Malachi? Where does it differ?
- » In your view, why is (or isn't) the integrity of religious leaders essential?