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# RETHINKING THE DEMARCATION OF MALACHI 2:17-3:5

## ABSTRACT

Demarcating a unit remains important for the interpretation and understanding of the particular unit in a (Biblical) book. In the case of the book of Malachi, the majority of scholars adhere to the traditional demarcation of the fourth unit in the book of Malachi (2:17-3:5). Closer investigation reveals that the matter is not as settled as one might think. Other possibilities are also advocated by scholars. Some regard Mal. 2:17-3:12 as a unit. Another possibility is to regard Mal. 2:17 as a unit on its own followed by either Mal. 3:1-5 or 3:1-12 as a separate unit. A third possibility is to view Mal. 2:17-3:6 as a unit. This paper argues for yet another possibility stretching from Mal. 2:17-3:7a. Arguments for this delimitation are given and the impact this new possibility has on the exegesis and eventual meaning of both Mal. 2:17-3:7a and the following unit (Mal. 3:7b-12) is explored.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The importance of demarcating units or pericopes in the process of exegesis is a point that needs no argumentation. It is taken as a given that a unit or pericope that is subjected to an exegesis will be a properly demarcated one. In classical historical-critical exegesis, one of the focuses of Literarkritik is to establish the beginning and the end of a text (Fohrer 1976:44-47; Labuschagne 1986:112-113). Kaiser (1975:24) remarked, "Die literarkritische Arbeit beginnt, soweit dies erforderlich ist, mit der Abgrenzung ihres Textes." The same can be said of exegetical approaches focusing more on the so-called final form of the text (Richter 1971:67; Utzschneider & Nitsche 2001:59). The proper demarcation of a text co-determines the eventual outcome of an exegesis of a pericope. The importance of the demarcation of a text is underlined by the emergence of a new branch in exegetical methodology called delimitation criticism (Korpel 2000:1-50).

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Demarcating the pericopes or units in the book of Malachi seems to be a settled matter. Virtually all commentaries divide the book in the following six units apart from the heading in Malachi 1:1 and postscript in Mal. 3:22-24: 1. Malachi 1:2-5; 2. 1:6-2:9; 3. 2:10-16; 4. 2:17-3:5; 5. 3:6-12; 6. 3:13-21. There is no disagreement on the extent of Mal. 1:2-5; 2:10-16; 3:13-21 as well as the postscript to the book in Mal. 3:22-24. Opinions sometimes differ mildly on whether Mal. 1:6-2:9 should be seen as one or two units (Mal. 1:6-14 followed by Mal. 2:1-9), but recent literature agrees that Mal. 1:6-2:9 does indeed constitute a unit. Closer investigation reveals that opinions on the fourth pericope of the book (Mal. 2:17-3:5) differ, which of course will also affect the following pericope running from Mal. 3:6-12.

The demarcation of the unit is not the only problem interpreters face when dealing with this pericope. The redaction of the unit is one of the major problems in the history of the interpretation of Mal. 2:17-3:5. In this regard, Mal. 3:1-4 or parts of it is seen as later redactional addition(s) to the original prophesy consisting of Mal. 2:17 and Mal. 3:5. Another problem is the identity of the mysterious figure of the messenger announced in Mal. 3:1 along with the "Lord" (ha'adon) and "messenger of the covenant" that is still a much debated issue in the interpretation of the book (Van der Woude 1981:289-300, Snyman 2006:1031-1044).

## 2. THE TRADITIONAL DEMARCATION: MALACHI 2:17-3:5

The vast majority of commentaries adhere to the traditional demarcation of 2:17-3:5 (Horst 1964:270; Rudolph 1976:277; Elliger 1975:209; Van der Woude 1982:127; Verhoef 1987:283; Reventlow 1993:154; Frey 1963:167; Meinhold 2006:295). The standpoint of Deissler (1988:330) in this regard is not clear. On the one hand, he acknowledges the traditional demarcation of Mal. 2:17-3:5. However, the translation he offers includes Mal. 3:6-12 under one heading, thus leaving the impression that Mal. 2:17-3:12 is a single unit (Deissler 1988:330-334), but in his commentary he treats Mal. 2:17-3:5 and Mal. 3:6-12 as two separate pericopes. Arguments offered to substantiate the traditional demarcation include the following: That Mal. 2:17 should be seen as the beginning of a new unit does not pose a problem. The previous unit comes to a proper close with Mal. 2:16, and Mal. 2:17 begins with the familiar way in which pericopes open in the book of Malachi by posing a statement ("You have wearied the Lord with your words"), followed by a questioning of the statement ("How have we wearied him?' you asked") followed by an elaborate motivation for the initial statement ("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?"). Mal. 2:17 introduces a new theme (the question of the justice of

God) quite different from the previous unit in Mal. 2:10-16 (the question of marriage, divorce and remarriage).

The end of the pericope is seen as verse 5. The verse closes with the well-known “amar YHWH sebao!” saying so often found in the book of Malachi. Furthermore, it seems that verse 5 provides the answer to the initial question posed, “Where is the God of justice (mispat)?” The answer given to this question in verse 5 is that Yahweh will certainly come to judge, and justice (mispat) will be restored. The concept of justice (mispat) is important in this regard. Mispat occurs only twice in the book (Mal. 2:17 and Mal. 3:5 respectively). So, it may be argued that Mal. 2:17-3:5 forms an *inclusio* rounding the unit off (Snyman 1985:50). This echoing of Mal. 2:17 in 3:5 serves as a conclusive argument for the view that 3:5 does indeed mark the close of the pericope (Stuart 1998:1346).

It is also argued that Mal. 3:6 is the beginning of a new pericope.

### 3. ALTERNATIVE PROPOSALS

#### 3.1 Malachi 2:17 and 3:1-5 as two different units (Deutsch)

Deutsch (1987:98-99) holds the view that 2:17 and 3:1-5 represent two different pericopes. According to him, “this verse (Mal. 2:17) deals with one independent topic: that of justice in the community” (Deutsch 1987:98). Mal. 2:17 should be distinguished from the next passage “that follows it, 3:1-5, (which) addresses the same topic but from a very different perspective of hope and promise” (Deutsch 1987:98). Later, Deutsch (1987:99) admitted that the question asked in Mal. 2:17 is answered in Mal. 3:1-5. When he deals with Mal. 3:1-5, the link with the question posed in Mal. 2:17 is once again mentioned. Therefore, it seems that, although Deutsch distinguishes between Mal. 2:17 and Mal. 3:1-5 by treating them as two separate units, he also links them very closely to each other.

#### 3.2 Malachi 2:17 and 3:1-12 as two different units (Willi-Plein)

According to Willi-Plein (2007:265), Mal. 2:17 should be seen as “eine etwas fragmentarisch wirkende Einheit für sich” that finds its place within the dialogical style of the rest of the book. Verse 17a is seen as a “fingierte Zitat”, a kind of prophetic speech that brought the transgressions of the people to light to show what they in fact did; that is, to change ethical norms to their opposite

and then regard them as God's will. Once again, the priests are addressed here and their way of teaching the people the Torah is criticized because it was their teaching that led people to the conclusion that God approves of the deeds evil people do. Those who are accused meet this accusation with a witty and mocking rhetorical question – “Where is the God of justice?” – to state the absence of God in everyday ethical behaviour. The priests, who ought to be the keepers of good advice based on the wisdom of the Torah, do not reckon with Yahweh as the guardian of justice.

In the context of the book as a whole, Mal. 3:1 is an answer to the question put in Mal. 2:17, but the answer given changes the function of the initial rhetorical question to a pressing inquiry with a sincere longing for a discernable demonstration of God's justice. Mal. 3:1 should be seen as the beginning of a new unit that ends with verse 12 because of the setuma at the end of verse 12. It is not clear why Willi-Plein uses the setuma at the end of verse 12 as an argument for taking the extent of the pericope from Mal. 3:1-12 but does not consider the setuma at the end of Mal. 2:16, which makes Mal. 2:17 part of Mal. 3:1-12, according to the division of the setuma.

### 3.3 Malachi 2:17-3:6 as a unit

Some scholars include verse 6 as part of the unit beginning at 2:17. Clearly, the position of verse 6 is debatable. Several older commentaries (Keil; Packard cf Hill 1998:292) opt for a division of Mal. 2:17-3:6. Smith (1980:3, 60), as a representative of one of the older commentaries, does not argue the point at length but simply works with the understanding that verse 6 is part of the unit that begins at Mal. 2:17. Verse 6 provides the actual answer to the problem posed in Mal. 2:17. Yahweh did not lose his interest in righteousness and goodness, as one might conclude from Mal. 2:17. To the contrary, “the moral character of Yahweh remains unchanged” (Smith 1980:66). Interesting enough, this point of view of Smith, dating back to 1912, received support in more recent research on the book of Malachi. Krieg (1993:117-118), Kaiser (1984:88) and Achtemeier (1986:183) are more recent scholars who uphold a demarcation of Mal. 2:17-3:6.

Weyde (2000:316-321) is another recent scholar who has grouped verse 6 with the preceding verses. He based his argumentation on the occurrence of the verbs *snh* שנה and *klh* כלה in verse 6 by comparing them with their respective occurrences in especially the Psalms. Weyde (2000:317-318) argues that the verb *snh* שנה in Psalms 77 and 89 occurs in a context of lamentation. Mal. 2:17b can be interpreted as displaying points of similarity with a lament, as Yahweh is seen as no longer faithful and no more a God of *mispat*. Thus, the inevitable conclusion is that God has changed. The rest of the unit shows

that this is indeed not the case. An announcement is made on the coming of a messenger, and Yahweh himself will draw near to exercise justice (mispat). In fact, Yahweh has not changed, which is the point verse 6a is making.

Weyde (2000:318-320) also investigates the verb used in verse 6b *klh* כלה. When investigating the occurrence of the verb in similar verses (Jer. 5:18; 30:11; 46:28; Ezek. 20:17; Neh. 9:31) in the rest of the Hebrew Bible, Weyde found that the thrust of these verses seems to mean that Yahweh “has not made an end” to his people in the sense that, while he has to execute judgment on his people, limits have been set so that they will not suffer total destruction. Verse 6b wants to get the idea across that, while Yahweh will indeed come to execute justice and by doing that prove that He has not changed, the people addressed will not come to an end because Yahweh has set limits to his acts of judgment. The conclusion drawn from this very careful investigation is that verse 6 belongs to Mal. 2:17-3:5 rather than the following pericope.

### 3.4 Malachi 2:17-3:12 as a unit

Some scholars (Kaiser 1984:17-18; 77-78; Baldwin 1972:245; Hill 1998:291-292; Floyd 2000:612) note a relationship between 2:17-3:5 and the next unit (Mal. 3:6-12), which leads them to the conclusion that 2:17-3:12 actually constitutes one unit. According to Floyd (2000:612), Mal. 3:6 cannot mark the beginning of a new unit because it is subordinate to the foregoing announcement of judgment by the *ki* particle and, with respect to content, it provides an explanation for the foregoing announcement in 3:5. This observation is substantiated further by the fact that the MT marks Mal. 2:17-3:12 with the *parasa setuma* as one single unit.

Kaiser (1984:17-18) sees “much integration” in Mal. 2:17-3:12, since “verse 6 applies as much to 3:1-5 as it does to 3:7-12”; consequently, the unit extends from 2:17-3:12. Baldwin (1972:245) observes that there is a “close connection” between Mal. 2:17-3:5 and Mal. 3:6-12 because they “form a parenthesis between two sermons concerning God’s justice only because He is unchanging in His patient provision of opportunity for repentance”. Although this close connection is recognized, scholars nevertheless maintain the division between these two pericopes.

## 4. A NEW PROPOSAL: MALACHI 2:17-3:7A

A possibility not considered yet is to view 2:17-3:7a as a unit with the following unit consisting of 3:7b-12.

The interpretation of the particle *ki* at the beginning of verse 6 is crucial in the debate on the demarcation of the unit. Scholars are divided into two major

camps in this regard. It is not easy to make a clear-cut decision for either of the two options and in the end it boils down to a matter of choice.

Some scholars who interpret the particle *ki* as having an emphatic or affirmative function rendering it as a particle of asseveration conveying the meaning of “indeed”, “truly” or “surely” (Van der Woude 1982:138-139; Verhoef 1987:299; Petersen 1995:212; Lescow 1993:124; Stuart 1998:1361; Meinhold 2006:300). Once this interpretation is accepted, it is no problem that a unit may begin with a *ki*, since it is interpreted as having an emphatic meaning.

A second line of thought holds that the particle *ki* should be taken in its causative sense, meaning “because” or “for”. Once this interpretation is favoured, the particle *ki* creates an undeniable link with the verses preceding verse 6, which serve as a motivation of the foregoing prophecy on Yahweh’s action that is about to take place. According to Glazier-McDonald (1987:180), the particle *ki* introduces causal clauses assigning reasons for or legitimizing statements, demands or threat made s previously.

It is interesting that Smith (1984:332) acknowledges the connection between verse 6 and the preceding verses due to the particle *ki*, which is interpreted as “because”. Yet he still regards Mal. 3:6 as the beginning of the next pericope. Another scholar who does recognize the close link between Mal. 2:17-3:5 and verse 6 but nevertheless retains the traditional demarcation is Glazier-McDonald (1987:178-179). According to her, the Day of Yahweh imagery in 2:17-3:5 continues in verse 6. Furthermore, verse 6 is the positive affirmation that Yahweh has not changed in his intent to punish the evildoers mentioned in 3:5 (Glazier-McDonald 1987:179). These two examples show that scholars have recognized the close relationship between Mal. 2:17-3:5 and at least verse 6.

Considered in this way, verse 6 provides an additional answer to the initial question: Where is the God of justice? Apart from the fact that an assurance is given that Yahweh will come to act as the God of justice, the answer verses 6-7a give is that he has not changed as some might have thought. He is still the God of justice. As is pointed out in verse 5 and reiterated in verse 7a, the problem lies with the people, the children of Jacob, as they have a long history of going astray and being disobedient to the commands of Yahweh. An interesting twist in meaning is thus created: It is not only Yahweh who has not changed; the people have not changed either. They remain the people who keep on living in disobedience to the stipulations of the covenant. The particle *ki* in verse 6 is indeed an indication that the unit does not end in 3:5 but continues in verse 6. Even if *ki* is considered as an article of asseveration, it will still make good sense in this particular case. Yahweh will come to act as the God of justice, according to verse 5 and, yes, indeed, he has not changed.

The interpretation of the *ki* particle as a causal conjunction cannot serve as the only argument in favour of a fresh demarcation of Mal. 2:17 et seq. Verses 6-7a continue the “*Ich-Rede*” that started in verse 5. In verse 5 it is said Yahweh will draw near to the people to administer justice using first person singular forms. Yahweh continues to speak in verse 6-7a when he says that he does not change and that the people in turn continue to turn away from “my decrees”.

Much Yom-Yahweh imagery is found in Mal. 2:17-3:5, because Yahweh will come to visit the cult and reveal himself to his people. According to Glazier-McDonald (1987:178), the continuation of this imagery can be seen in the first words of verse 6: “I Yahweh”. Furthermore, the term “day” occurring in verses 2 and 4 is taken up in verse 7, creating an interesting word play between the ominous coming of the Day of Judgment over against the days of the people’s apostasy. It is also worthwhile to note that the term “day” does not occur in Mal. 3:7b-12, while the Yom-Yahweh theme returns forcefully in Mal. 3:13-21.

The vocabulary used in 3:7a also points in the direction of the foregoing part rather than the part following 3:7a. The idea of the people turning away from the decrees (plural) may be a reference to the different transgressions mentioned in verse 5 rather than the single transgression of withholding tithes considered in 3:7b-12.

Lastly, verse 7b provides an excellent beginning for a new unit following the style encountered elsewhere in the book (1:2; 1:6; 3:13). In most cases, pericopes in the book (Mal. 2:10-16 being the exception) open with a statement in the form of an “amar Yahweh (seba’ot)” saying, which is then followed by a questioning of the statement (“but you say in what way”, Mal. 1:2; 1:6; 2:17; 3:13), followed then by an elaborate and extensive motivation for the initial statement. If Mal. 3:7b-12 is considered as a unit, it follows this pattern perfectly. When Mal. 3:6-12 is taken as a unit, the pericope confronts the hearers with two different and in fact unrelated statements: the one on Yahweh who does not change and the call to turn to Yahweh in verse 7b. Smith (1980:61) rightly remarks that Mal. 3:7b is the opening of a new phase of the discourse.

This observation that Mal. 2:17-3:7a and 3:7b-12 constitute two units rather than the traditional delineation is not a totally new one. Scholars have long observed the close relationship between verses 6-7a on the one hand and its relationship with the preceding pericope on the other hand. Ridderbos (1935:224) and Van der Woude (1982:138-139) treat verses 6-7a as a unit in their respective commentaries. The structural analysis of Verhoef (1987:297-298) also links Mal. 3:6-7a apart from Mal. 3:7b-9 and Mal. 3:10-12. Revent-

low (1993:154-155) observes that Mal. 3:7b-12 can be viewed apart from the preceding Mal. 3:6-7a.

Van Hoonacker (1908:733, cf. Glazier-McDonald 1987:176) argued for a relationship between Mal. 2:17-3:5 and Mal. 3:6-7a. According to Koenen (1994:61-62), Mal. 3:6-7a should be read together with Mal. 2:17-3:5. He argues that Mal. 2:10 introduces a theme under the "Stichwort" of "Fathers" that is nicely encapsulated in an inclusio with Mal. 3:6-7a where the fathers are mentioned again. Mal. 2:10-3:7a then deals with a theme that can be broadly described as dealing with the sons of Jacob who, although they had the same father, acted unfaithfully towards their fellow brothers and broke the covenant with God as Father. Mal. 3:7b-12 is then quite aptly a call to turn to Yahweh once again.

According to Willi-Plein (2007:266), Mal. 3:1-7a can be viewed as a unit. Mal. 3:7b is the beginning of a new "Gotteswort" that, together with the "Dialogmarkierung", does not have any real relationship with the foregoing part. Willi-Plein (2007:266) further maintains that one either has to view Mal. (2:17) 3:1-7a and Mal. 3:7b-12 as two different units or view Mal. 3:1-12 as one larger unit (the option she prefers).

## 5. IMPLICATIONS OF A NEW DEMARCATION

In the beginning it was said that the demarcation of a pericope co-determines the eventual outcome of an exegesis of a particular unit (Watson 2007:169). The effect of a textual break in a text is that it separates one section of a text from another section (Goswell 2009:89-90). Therefore, the question arises: What are the possible implications when Mal. 2:17-3:7a is treated as a unit? It is obvious that this new proposal will have implications for both Mal. 2:17-3:7a and Mal. 3:7b-12.

### 5.1 Implications for the understanding of Malachi 2:17-3:7a

In 2:17, the righteousness of Yahweh and his willingness and even ability to administer justice is questioned. Implied in this accusation is that Yahweh has changed in this regard. An answer to this question is given in the rest of the pericope. Leaving the possible redactional additions to the text in Mal. 3:1-4 aside for the moment, the question is answered by focusing on two areas in the lives of the people. Their service to the Lord in the temple with the accompanying sacrifices is the first concern of the answer. The problem of inferior sacrifices brought is mentioned earlier (1:6-14), but here, putting that right is seen as part of the execution of Yahweh's justice. This is a surprising



way to treat this concern of the people. When asking about the just actions of God, the people have to discover that God will first come to the temple to investigate the quality of sacrifices brought. The result is that the Levites as the temple staff with the responsibility to oversee the sacrificial practices will have to endure Yahweh's purifying acts in order to restore proper worship. Yahweh will act as a judge where he will sit and execute justice to be served in the temple. What will happen to the Levites is likened to a refiner and purifier of silver and gold, a metaphor that denotes fierce (and fiery!) judgment, but it is also clear that it does not mean total destruction. The outcome of the actions of Yahweh is that sacrifices brought will once more be pleasing to the Lord as they used to be in times long gone by.

The second area where Yahweh's justice will be experienced is on the level of human relationships and social injustices in society. Various abuses are mentioned: sorcerers, adulterers, perjurers, those who oppress the labourers, widows and orphans and those who thrust aside the aliens in society. All this culminates in an attitude of disrespect for Yahweh himself. Two of the abuses are transgressions prohibited in the Decalogue, while the others are dealt with in the legal corpuses of the Torah. It is also interesting that these injustices to fellow human beings are also mentioned in the wisdom literature of the Old Testament. The conclusion is then given in verse 6: Yahweh is still the righteous God who executes justice and has not changed as is implied in the initial accusation. The same holds true for the people because they have not changed either.

## 5.2 Implications for the understanding of Malachi 3:7b-12

In some commentaries, a word-play was detected between Jacob and the notion of robbing God by withholding the tithes from the temple. The verb *qb'a* "Bθ in the meaning of "to rob" is seen as a deliberate word play on Jacob. If the proposal is accepted, that is something that can no longer be maintained. Some scholars suggested that the verb "qb to deceive" must be read following the suggestion by the LXX. This will create a nice word-play on Jacob in 3:6. The suggestion did not find general support, however. Amongst others, it was pointed that it is never said in the OT/HB that man can deceive God (Smith 1980:70, Glazier-McDonald 1987:188, Meinhold 2006:300), although it is possible that a man may rob God. Since it has been argued that 3:6 is part of the previous unit, this suggestion is no longer valid.

The idea of Yahweh not changing and the people not being destroyed is not the focus of what follows in Mal. 3:7b-12. The people are called to repent in a special way by no longer withholding tithes from the temple. Once that has

been done, they may await blessings in the form of rain and abundant crops (Mal. 3:10-12). The problem addressed in this pericope is totally different from the question of whether or not Yahweh has changed.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Over against the traditional delimitation of Mal. 2:17-3:5 and some other proposals made, it was argued that Malachi 2:17-3:7a should be seen as the fourth unit in the book. The argumentation presented can be summarized as follows:

- The demarcation of Mal. 2:17-3:5 is not a matter settled, as one might think. Various alternative proposals have been made.
- The interpretation of the particle *ki* is a key factor in extending the pericope beyond Mal. 3:5. The particle can be interpreted as either an emphatic or affirmative particle or as a clausal conjunction conveying the meaning of “because” or “for”. A choice is made for the latter possibility.
- Considering the “Ich-Rede” in Mal. 2:17; 3:5, it is argued that the “Ich-Rede” is simply continued in verses 6-7a.
- The term “day” occurring in verses 2 and 4 is taken up in verse 7, creating an interesting word play between the ominous coming of the Day of Judgment over against the days of the people’s apostasy.
- The idea of the people turning away from the decrees (plural) reminds one of the different transgressions mentioned in verse 5 rather than the single transgression of withholding tithes considered in 3:7b-12.
- Verse 7b provides an excellent beginning for a new unit following the style encountered elsewhere in the book (1:2; 1:6; 3:13).
- The implications this new demarcation of Mal. 2:17-3:7a and Mal. 3:7b-12 have should be considered.

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