



Texts in Context

Refiner's Fire and Laundry Soap: Images of God in Malachi 3:1-4

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I. TEXTS IN CONTEXT REVISITED

HOW DOES ONE HEAR TEXTS ANEW? MY FIRST NEW TESTAMENT TEACHER, TED Liefeld at the Lutheran seminary in Columbus, frequently wished aloud that he could teach the New Testament to people who had never read it or heard of it—people not contaminated by “knowing” in advance what it says. He longed to help readers find surprise in the text, to make them hear something that evoked a “Wow.” Not always easy with ancient texts, sacred texts, long-interpreted texts.

Many Christians, when they hear “For he is like a refiner's fire,” know not only the words but the tune. The melody to Handel's bass aria comes to them unbidden. Such a combination is so deeply rooted in our minds and souls and tradition that it becomes almost impossible to loose ourselves from the meanings it conveys—even for a moment, even just as an exegetical exercise—and to hear something new. The danger comes not because the tradition is wrong, but because, as Gerhard von Rad so profoundly said, “A ‘sermon’ that simply repeats the tradition is not yet a true sermon.”¹ How does one preach this text when preacher and audience know it so well and in such particular interpretation?

There is no magic, of course, no refined exegetical method (or eschewing thereof) that will invariably produce a perfect (or even adequate) sermon as a white

¹Gerhard von Rad, “Sermon on Isaiah 40:1-8 (15 December 1963),” *Predigten* (Munich: Christian Kaiser, 1972) 129 (my translation).

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precipitate. Still, exegetical study matters—if for no other reason than it slows down our reading. That may be one of the primary values of reading texts in the original languages. For most of us, at least, it takes longer. It requires work. We wrestle with words and syntax and meaning in ways that we are not required to do in our native tongue. Form criticism and the search for chiasms can do the same thing. They help us see something new. And when that happens, even when it is something small, sermons begin to sparkle and people notice.

“Develop the urge to communicate,” admonished my freshman comp teacher, at least once each class period. He was absolutely right. Is there anything more deadly than a sermon delivered by someone who really has nothing to say—no urge, no passion, no news, nothing perhaps but freeze-dried tradition (or worse, not even that)? Some, I suppose, at least have the urge to convert, but often that is more about power than communication, more about manipulation than liberation. How wonderful and perhaps how rare genuinely to share a thought, an idea, a word, to touch another with truth (Truth) and be touched in return. What might the Spirit do with such a moment?

Another way to hear something new is to hear it in a new context—or to take more seriously an old one. Luther argued that one learned to translate by going to the market rather than to the lexicon.² What do words actually mean to people in daily use? Good exegesis and good preaching have always thought about this. Following Schleiermacher, von Rad once suggested that exegesis allows the text to remain relatively untouched in its context and comes to it; preaching, on the other hand, allows the hearers to remain in their context and brings the text to them.³ The distinction may be too neat, and, yes, we have all learned the impossibility of a pure objective exegesis. Still, we can do worse than work at understanding the biblical context. An incarnating God took it with utmost seriousness!

But we can’t stay in the biblical world, because, with rare exceptions, neither we nor our hearers live there any more. So what do words mean now? How do images speak now? Only one who goes with people to the markets and the ball games and the courtrooms and the hospitals can know that. Finally, only pastors called to a place and given to a place can preach well in that place. The call provides the context.

So, there is nothing new in what *Word & World* is trying to do in its Texts in Context feature. What we have come to realize, though, is that we cannot do that

²Martin Luther, *On Translating: An Open Letter* (1530), *Luther’s Works*, vol. 35, ed. E. Theodore Bachman (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1960) 189: “We do not have to inquire of the literal Latin, how we are to speak German....Rather we must inquire about this of the mother in the home, the children on the street, the common man in the marketplace. We must be guided by their language, the way they speak, and do our translating accordingly. That way they will understand it and recognize that we are speaking German to them.”

³Gerhard von Rad, “About Exegesis and Preaching,” *Biblical Interpretations in Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1977) 14-15; see Friedrich Schleiermacher, “Ueber die verschiedenen Methoden des Uebersezens,” *Sämtliche Werke*, part 3, vol. 2 (Berlin: G. Reimer, 1838) 218: “Either the translator leaves the author resting peacefully insofar as possible and brings the reader to him; or he leaves the reader resting peacefully insofar as possible and brings the author to him” (translation by John Steely, in von Rad, *ibid.*)

well while trying to comment briefly on a more-or-less lengthy series of texts. So, we give that task over to the preaching—helps people, who already do it well enough anyway. We will instead work with one text (or maybe two), as a model, a case study, an exercise—a way, we hope, to sharpen our minds, to practice hearing in a new way. We will do that by trying to take seriously both text and context—usually (though not always) a coming pericope text, read in some particular context familiar to the writer(s). Such an exercise will not yield a “product” that is universally applicable. Such is the way of homiletical work. But we hope to engage those preparing to preach in meaningful conversation. We cannot replace the local preacher, but as preachers ourselves we are always willing to be challenged, encouraged, and inspired by the reflections and models of others who themselves seek in a variety of ways to be local interpreters of the gospel. *Texts in Context* will attempt such an exercise.

II. THE MESSAGE OF THE MESSENGER

The Old Testament reading appointed for the Festival of the Presentation of our Lord (February 2) is Mal 3:1-4:

See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.

February 2 does not fall on a Sunday in 1999, but (unless in a fit of relevance your congregation observes Groundhog Day on the Sunday closest to February 2) the text would be usable on the Sunday before or after, or, indeed, on any Sunday in the Epiphany season. It will fit in Advent also and, in fact, is appointed as the Old Testament reading for Advent 2 (Series C).

Handel’s *Messiah* did not invent the christological reading of this text. As the commentaries point out, the synoptic gospels already identify Malachi’s messenger (whom Malachi himself later identifies as Elijah) with John the Baptist (Matt 11:10, 13; 17:9-13; Mark 1:2; 6:14-15; Luke 1:17, 76; 7:27). And the lectionary, by pairing this Old Testament reading with Heb 2:14-18 and Luke 2:22-40 (for the Presentation), interprets Jesus Christ as Malachi’s faithful priest. To hope to hear the text anew in no way dismisses this traditional christological interpretation. The first time around, that interpretation, no doubt, produced its own rather significant “Wow.” Our hope is not to replace the tradition, but to enliven it.

For me—with this text—that happened by coming to Africa (where I write this essay). A radical step, no doubt! Not everyone will be able to duplicate it, but

our task, as readers of texts for others (and not just for ourselves), is to find some way to step outside of the worlds that we know so well (the one outside our window and the one inside our Bible), and to be surprised. Then, seeing anew, we re-enter conversation with the biblical world and the world in which we live in order that our preaching be faithful. Things won't always happen precisely in that order, to be sure. But, somehow, the three-way conversation is what we need—a biblical text with the word of God, a world waiting to hear, and a surprised preacher with something to say.

In Africa, the central images of this text, refiner's fire and launderer's soap, took on new meaning, and my sermon on this text was very different than it would have been at home. In both places, though, I wanted actually to hear what Malachi had to say. That is always important when preaching from Old Testament prophetic texts. Our temptation too often is to tame the texts, to rob them of surprise: "See, here is the prophecy; see, there is the New Testament fulfillment. We who believe this are the ones who understand, the ones who get it right." We are affirmed in that process, but not surprised. So, in whatever world, we need to ask what Malachi ("my messenger") actually wanted to say?

Malachi's book is short. The preacher can read the whole thing, follow the whole argument, in a brief time. It is worth doing. For best effect, read it aloud. (That, too, will slow you down—and add another sense to your appropriation of the text.)

Malachi speaks to a people returned from exile, ensconced in a rebuilt temple, involved in renewed worship. But, alas, genuine renewal, says Malachi, is precisely what this people (and especially their priests) are lacking. Malachi brings Judah and its leaders to trial before a very big and very angry God.

The Lord is angry—not only with Edom (1:4), but with the priests "who despise my name" through impure worship (1:6) and with the people of Judah who "profane the sanctuary of the Lord" by marrying foreigners (2:11). They call evil good; they have become cynical about the presence of God (2:17). Worship, they think, is not for God but for profit, for what you can get (3:14). What good is church if there is no immediately visible pay-off?

The Lord is big—great "beyond the borders of Israel" (1:5), whose name is great "from the rising of the sun to its setting" (1:11), the "great King" of the nations (1:14), the father and creator of all (2:10).

Malachi's point: One messes with a big and angry God at one's peril! In a line at once terrible and poignant, the prophet pleads that "someone would shut the temple doors" (1:10). No worship at all is better than worship done "in vain."

But this big God is a known God, a God of covenant, "of life and well-being" (2:5). So, he will never give up on his people: "For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, have not perished" (3:6). Unwilling to give up on Israel, but unable to condone their impurity and injustice, God himself will cleanse

them. He will send a messenger, “like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap...and he will purify the descendants of Levi” (3:3-4).

Although it often appears that in this age the unrighteous get away with it, finally God will distinguish between the righteous and the wicked. Finally, justice and truth and goodness will matter. Finally, the LORD will wipe out injustice, and “for you who revere my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings” (4:2). God’s ultimate goal—a goal worthy of a God who is at once big and angry and good—is to send Elijah to “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” (4:6).

We can, I suppose, read Malachi with a jaundiced eye—or we can try to put the best construction on it, to read it as scripture. A jaundiced view might speak of a God of petty and arrogant legalism—overly concerned with insufficient tithes and blemished sheep and foreign marriages and divorce, willing to strike down the miscreants who disobey and only then to extend the carrot to those who meekly submit. Shut up, do what you are told, and you’ll get pie in the sky.

But what if tithes and offerings are not to satisfy the appetite of God (Ps 50:10-11) but rather to feed the widows and the orphans (Mal 3:5; cf. Deut 14:27-28)? Then do tithes matter? Are they only about church discipline, or is justice at stake? And what if the unfaithfulness of the leaders has “caused many to stumble” (Mal 2:6-8) and desert the path of “integrity and uprightness”? Then do worship practices or marital practices matter? Are they only about legalities or are they about life? What if God sees a people whom he loves bringing upon themselves the curse of death that comes with disobedience rather than the “life and well-being” he so desperately longs to give them? Then does anger make sense? And what if, in this age, injustice does prevail? Does nothing matter then? Is anything fair game? Are we alone? Is it everyone for herself? Or will somehow, sometime God’s rule of justice and goodness be established? Will that not be good news for the faithful who have striven for good in the face of arrogant oppressors who always seem to come out on top?

Amid the disappointments and cynicism of present reality, Malachi sees, longs for, hopes for, proclaims a world of goodness and purity, where justice finally matters and integrity finally prevails. God is faithful, says Malachi, and will usher in such a world—even if it takes fire and water to get us there.

The New Testament announces that God does just this in the preaching of John the Baptist and the ministry of Jesus. Faithful Christian preachers will want to say the same. But they will need to do it in ways that communicate, in ways that make people pause before this big and lovingly angry God, a God who will never condone but will also never give up, a God of covenant.

III. OF FIRE AND SOAP

In this text, God comes to an unexpecting and largely unbelieving Israel—not altogether good news! There are those, no doubt, who truly “seek” the Lord and genuinely “delight” in him (3:1), though for most these phrases are probably ironic (as they are in Isa 58:2). Still, those who revere God do long for him. And now, says Malachi, God is coming. Is this good news or bad news? Hearers, then or now, can answer only for themselves. No doubt there will be a measure of ambiguity even for believers. God is coming! How wonderful it will be to be in the loving arms of God forever. God is coming? What good news! Let me go out and meet him! But God is coming! How terrible it will be when he finds me not loving my neighbor as I should, not tending the earth as I ought, not caring for myself as I might. God is coming? What bad news! Let me find a place to hide!

God comes like refiner’s fire and launderer’s soap, employing whatever it takes to cleanse and purify God’s people. But are these actually meant as images of God—the refiner and the launderer? Scholars have long disputed the identity of the Malachi’s “messenger,”⁴ but certainly a case can be made that the messenger is none other than Yahweh himself.⁵ It matters little, actually, since in the Bible God’s messengers in human form fully represent God (Gen 18:1ff.). Elsewhere in scripture, God himself is clearly the refiner (e.g., Isa 48:10; Jer 9:7; Zech 13:9). Normally, people must wash their own clothes as an act of purification (Exod 19:14; Lev 6:27 and often). But what if the stain is so great it cannot be removed (Jer 2:22)? Then one can only plead for God’s own washing (Ps 51:2, 7). Malachi promises nothing less. Whereas once the Levites purified themselves (Num 8:21), now God will purify the “descendants of Levi” (Mal 3:3).

It was these images—God as refiner’s fire, God as laundry soap—that took on new meaning for me in Africa. God is a refiner’s fire. As we know, a refinery requires intense heat to burn away the impurities to set free the pure metal. In modern industry, they use a blast furnace—a fire so hot it burns up anything that comes anywhere near it—but we rarely see one. In rural Africa, you sometimes do see men gathered near the villages, stoking and fanning a refining fire, feeling its heat close at hand, knowing the power and danger of its presence with a directness that we moderns rarely experience. God is like that, says Malachi. A blazing fire. Hot and close. Because God is God, to be in God’s presence is always a bit dangerous. No impurity, no sin, no wrong can survive in the presence of God. God will burn away our faults and make us pure—but our sins and faults are part of us. We want to be pure, but we are not sure we want to be changed. Yet when God’s fire burns, all those personal sins that make us harm ourselves and our families and our neigh-

⁴For suggested possibilities, see Pieter A. Verhoeff, *The Books of Haggai and Malachi*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament 47 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987) 287-288.

⁵So, for example, Elizabeth Achtemeier, *Nahum—Malachi*, Interpretation Commentary (Atlanta: John Knox, 1986) 184.

bors are burned away. All those social sins that make people kill and oppress one another will be consumed forever.

The other image used by Malachi in our text is that God is like laundry soap. The point is the same. Both refiner's fire and laundry soap exist to get rid of impurities. Still, the image is different. A refiner's fire is terrifying and untouchable, but laundry soap is close and personal—touching me and my most intimate clothing to make me clean. I realized in Zimbabwe that in that culture—and, no doubt, in biblical culture—a refiner's fire is primarily a male image of industry and power, but laundry soap is primarily a female image of household and intimacy. The gender comparisons are dangerous, of course; but they do still mark traditional cultures. Malachi suggests that God is like the tribal mother washing the family's clothes in a stream; she won't rest until everything is clean and fresh. Hers is a hands-on labor of love, working to make sure that those she cares enough about to touch the dirt of their bodies can be clean and presentable to the world. God is like that, says Malachi—a washer-woman, bent on cleaning up her family. Like fire, laundry soap, too, is a form of tough love. When I was a boy, if my brother or I said a naughty word, my mother still washed out our mouths with soap. She wanted us to be pure. If we got in poison ivy, she washed us with Fels Naphtha. The cure might have seemed worse than the disease! But the point was always love—always an attempt to keep us healthy and pure. God is like that, says Malachi—an African or American mother, keeping her family clean, making her world pure.

As we reflect on these two images, we must remember, of course, that God is one. There are not two gods, one strong and one tender. Nor dare we say that *sometimes* God is male and strong and *sometimes* God is female and tender. God's tenderness is God's strength; God's strength is God's tenderness. The two images come together in God—and in the humans who are made in God's image.⁶ In his oratorio, *Messiah*, Handel used only half our text. The wonderful bass aria stirs us with its power: "For he is like a refiner's fire." And we should be stirred, and struck with awe. But we need also an alto aria telling us that God is like laundry soap. And we will be scrubbed—scrubbed raw, if necessary—but then wrapped in a warm towel.

The *sekurus* (the male "elders" or workers) at Domboshawa House, the ecumenical dormitory in Harare where Luther Seminary students sometimes live, will wash the underclothes of men, but not of women. It is unseemly perhaps, inappropriate, indelicate, maybe even taboo. But African mothers have no such choice. That which others will not touch—the garments soiled by the most direct and most intimate of bodily processes, garments of men and women and children alike—mothers, eager to present their families clean and pure, will wash and dry

⁶In *Handel's Messiah: A Devotional Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978) 23, Joseph McCabe quotes William Temple: "For very love's sake God will be relentlessly stern against all in us that is self-centered; our lower nature and unconverted hearts are likely to think Him cruel.... The love of God is not a sentimental readiness to give us what we want; it is a passionate yearning to raise us to its own likeness."

and hang out and—where there is facility—iron (yes, even the underwear). It is an act of love, an act of intimacy, an act of purity. And it defines God.

IV. MALACHI'S MESSENGER AND JESUS CHRIST

In the Christian canon, Malachi, the last of the prophets, is followed immediately by the gospel message of Jesus. “This juxtaposition,” says W. Sibley Towner, “suggests that in early Christian eyes, the advent of Christ was the first of the culminating events of history promised by the prophet ‘Malachi.’”⁷ With the New Testament, Christian preachers will announce that the coming messenger is John the Baptist and the one pure priest is none other than Jesus himself. To do that well, we will seek a variety of images to describe God’s saving and cleansing work. So, we proclaim, by the power of the Spirit we see Jesus in Malachi’s announcement. But coming from this text we have more to say about Jesus than we had before. If it is true that God was in Christ and that all God’s promises find their yes in him, then the God of Jesus and the work of Jesus include these images of refining and washing.

We will need to find a way to come to terms with the fact that God is a blast furnace, for it is only with such understanding that “What a friend we have in Jesus” remains a surprise. If God is never more than friend, never the awe-ful Other, we will not know Malachi’s God. A character in Don DeLillo’s recent novel *Underworld* worries about our American tendency to remove the secrecy and mystery from everything that matters, like sex and God. God, he thinks, is “a force that withholds himself from us because this is the root of his power.” God is “a secret, a long unlighted tunnel, on and on. This was my wretched attempt to understand our blankness in the face of God’s enormity....We approach God through his unmadeness.”⁸ Not a bad description of the *Deus nudus* (naked God) or *Deus absconditus* (hidden God)—a God we need to recognize in order to appreciate the God of covenant and of Jesus. Contemporary “chatty” worship, says Edward Farley, has lost its sense of sacred presence, of mystery and reverence.⁹ But the Bible has not lost this—nor perhaps have moderns. Maybe that is the reason for the renewed popularity of Orthodoxy (not to mention crystals).

And what if this awesome Other is on his way to meet us? Good news or bad news? The cavalry is coming over the hill, but is it for us or against us? Now we need desperately to know that this is a God of love, of covenant, of life and well-being—truths we can know only through the story of scripture. God remains God as the God of covenant and the God of Jesus, but God turns to us a face of mercy, for it is God’s nature to do that—a merciful nature that nature itself cannot reveal to us, for creation, as another of DeLillo’s characters says, is the source of both “lit-

⁷W. Sibley Towner, “Malachi,” in *The HarperCollins Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version, with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books*, ed. Wayne A. Meeks et al. (New York: HarperCollins, 1993) 1428.

⁸Don DeLillo, *Underworld* (New York: Scribner, 1997) 295.

⁹Edward Farley, “A Missing Presence,” *The Christian Century* (18-25 March 1998) 276-277.

tle green apples and infectious disease.”¹⁰ In the biblical story, in Christ, we learn of the awe-ful mercy of God. And because of his mercy, this God will have us pure. He will refine us. He will wash us clean.

There is even greater surprise in the New Testament, beyond what Malachi could envision. Malachi had already moved from people cleansing themselves to God as cleanser and refiner. The New Testament takes a further step. In Christ, God himself passes through the fire and the water. Second Isaiah looked in that direction when he said, “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through the fire you shall not be burned and the flame shall not consume you” (Isa 43:2). Now, says Malachi, God himself brings his people through the fire and the water in order to make them clean. And, adds the New Testament, we are not consumed—though fire does consume—because Jesus is consumed in our stead. Jesus is now the one who has been “refined as in a furnace” (Rev 1:5). Jesus has passed through the waters “to fulfill all righteousness” (Matt 3:15). In Christ we have been made truly clean, set free from sin to love as we have been loved.

Yes, Christ came to burn away all our impurities—and it pains us to know that our impurities and our failures cost him his life. But his fire is the passionate fire of love. And we can warm ourselves in its glow. Yes, Christ came to wash away our sin—and it pains us to know that he had to wash us with his own blood. But in his tender scrubbing we feel the loving hands of a mother’s care. God’s bathtub is the font, where we can relax safely forever. Christ combines all God’s strength and fire with all God’s love and mercy. We need both to combat the dangers of the world and the sins of our own making. In Christ we have both: fire and heat, soap and water. Strength and love. Oh, yes, come, Lord Jesus. Make us clean. 

¹⁰Don DeLillo, *Underworld*, 237.