

LS — Week 9 Response

The readings this week were revelatory — they revealed an issue I hadn't noticed before and at the same time addressed them in ways I hadn't expected, specifically in terms of the attention drawn to the pericope on Jacob and Esau and the sibling rivalry. When I read Malachi in my teenage years, I was drawn to two aspects: the “dialogue” format where Israel gets to ask, like one of Socrates' interlocutors, questions that always end up incriminating itself; and the poetic imagery at the end (“the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings, and you will leap from the stall like young calves”), the latter partly because it was quoted in my favourite book at the time, *The Book of the Dun Cow*. It had never occurred to me to question the crushing of Edom or the hating of Esau, even though I had heard about the idiomatic usage of “hate” as “love less” because of its use in Luke 14:26 (“Whoever does not hate father and mother...”). These articles showed the inconsistency with the rejection of a brother from a story that, to all appearances, ended with reconciliation.¹ While the proposed solution may be a somewhat stronger claim than can be unambiguously read from the text — that the animosity is really on Israel's part and not God's — it certainly makes for an interesting case. The wrestling motif, with its “blending” of bodies and its simultaneous friendship and enmity, is a fascinating one to link the patriarchal story with the later history of Israel and its neighbours, and I don't doubt that it contains a kernel of truth. Israel as light to the nations has always chafed with the picture of its wars of conquest, and the idea of identifying the Samaritan as a story about the intended role is a tantalizing one. Nations as infighting brothers who all have “one Father” is a powerful metaphor.

Two other moments from Malachi caught my eye on rereading it. One was 2:7: “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.” This foreshadows James 3:1: “Not many of you should become teachers, because we who teach will be judged more harshly,” the reason for which judgement is no doubt the same as in Malachi. In my first year, I went to a custom design printing website and ordered a mug with “We who teach will be judged more harshly” on it to use around the school as a reminder to myself that our words and actions count for more in our role. I seem to recall that it disappeared after a couple of months of hanging around the staff room. Recently I gave a devotion called “teaching ourselves” on this theme — that our lives are one of the types of curriculum we teach.

In Malachi, Levi as the ideal priest spoke no falsehood, while the bad priest “caused the people to stumble” and “showed partiality”. These are two errors we can fall into. I think they arise mainly when we become confident and complacent in our positions of authority, as we noted in our discussion of TMH. Students stumble not only because of intentional manipulation, but also when we fail to recognize the weight of our words and actions and push boundaries. Meanwhile, the Hebrew for “show partiality” is literally “lift up faces”, implying that others are left not lifted up; when we get complacent we risk educating some and abandoning others. I wonder if these mistakes contributed to the falling away of the children of Eli and Samuel. If they stumbled, who caused them to do so? Sometimes we even show the least partiality to our own family and loved ones, sacrificing them in the performance of our duties for a loving public...

¹ That said, the fact that right after their reconciliation, Jacob insists that Esau go on ahead and then lies and goes in another direction instead of following his brother (Gen. 33:12–17) always struck me as a sign of something amiss.

The other verse that caught my eye was Malachi 2:17, in which the Israelites are said to have “weari­ed” God by question­ing cosmic justice. This intrigued me because it seems to be at odds with Job 1:22, where Job “did not sin” by doing the same; with Abraham’s challenge to God in Genesis 18 that we read about earlier; and in general with any discussion of the Problem of Evil. What’s the difference between the Israelites’ “wearying” discourse and Job’s, Abraham’s, and hopefully our own question­ing of apparent injustice? Is it just a matter of heart posture, or is it something about how they discuss it?

I have only an inkling in the suspicion that the Israelites’ statements might be settled, rhetorical observations: “God delights in those who do evil” and “Where is the God of justice?” By contrast, Abraham was talking face-to-face with God and negotiating for the justice he wanted God to enact, and Job repeatedly begged for an audience with God throughout the book. Both of them wanted not to dismiss God but to engage Him in conversation. God is wearied by a shrug and the statement that he is dead, but not by the desire to confront him for justice — if anything, that moves him to respond, as in Jesus’ parable of the persistent widow in Luke 18:1–8.

There are implications for us both as teachers and as employees. The takeaway, stated in modern terms, seems to be that complaint without pursuit of a solution is tiresome. We get fed up when students talk about each other or about teachers behind their backs, but treat the matter as settled rather than as open for conversation. I had a frustrating experience with a student last year where she complained about another teacher and expressed impatience, but resisted my prodding to talk to the teacher about the issues she was having. “I know this teacher. She wants to hear these things. She will work with you,” I said, but got fatalism in response.

Yet we also do the same to students and to our working conditions. Last year a few of us were in the staff room when an administrator made a recommendation about a troublesome student. The moment the administrator left the room, another teacher expressed disagreement with the opinion that had just been shared. A third teacher exclaimed: “Why didn’t you say something, then?” and a healthy discussion of our own fatalism ensued. We often swallow these lumps, whether due to conflict aversion or to a sense that nothing will change anyway. But if we never raise the issue and have the conversation, that’s when it’s guaranteed that nothing will change. And hearing the same complaints about the same problems and people in lunch after lunch certainly is wearying.

As with so many of these lessons, the conclusion is painfully simple, yet one that our lives often demonstrate — no less than the Israelites’ — our need to be reminded of.