

Beyond Male and Female: Same-sex Imagery in Malachi 2

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Abstract: Malachi 2.10-13 is often interpreted as a complaint against idolatry. The passage, however, may also contain an atypical form of the prophetic marriage metaphor, in which God is male and Israel is female. In honor of the work of Dr. Randall Bailey and placing African American biblical hermeneutics in conversation with queer theory and masculinity studies, I propose to read the passage in Malachi 2 as an example of the queering of the heterosexual marriage metaphor. God's personification as male and the lack of Judah's personification as female suggests a same-sex marriage metaphor. My argumentation will be based on the Hebrew text and the application of theory and conclude with implications for the text's use in marginalized communities. If this passage in Malachi 2 need not be read in heteronormative terms, then more opportunities for religious discourse about broader views of marriage and intimacy that are not limited to a gender binary become possible.

Key words: marriage metaphor, queer theory, masculinity studies

1. Introduction

Malachi 2.10-16 easily may be described as the most textually challenging section in the entire biblical book. Unclear words and phrases, sudden pronoun shifts, and the possibilities for literal and figurative readings create those challenges. Scholars often interpret the first half of the passage, verses 10–12, as a prophetic critique of idolatry, but the interpretation may also contain an atypical form of the prophetic marriage metaphor. In texts such as Hosea 2, Jeremiah 2-3, and Ezekiel 16 and 23, God, personified as male, complains about the unfaithfulness of his wife Israel. Malachi 2 seems to suggest that God is the wife, distressed that “Judah has profaned the sanctuary of the Lord...and has married the daughter of a foreign god” (2.11). This is the most common metaphorical reading of the passage, and I repeat it in a recent commentary on Haggai and Malachi. Based on those shifting pronouns and consistent gendering of God in the Hebrew Bible as male, however, the most common reading need not be the only reading.

Placing Mal 2.10-13 in conversation with feminist theory, queer theory, and masculinity studies suggests that the passage may also be read as an example of the queering of the heterosexual marriage metaphor. God's personification as male and the lack of Judah's personification as female suggest a same-sex marriage metaphor. While such an idea might have been impossible in Malachi's post-exilic context, it certainly may be possible in the 21st century. Malachi 2 can be added to a small but growing number of biblical texts that challenge heteronormativity and facilitate conversations about love and intimacy that are not limited to a gender essentialist binary.

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2. Malachi 2 and Queer Theory

In her response essay to the Hebrew Bible chapters in *Bible Trouble: Queer Reading at the Boundaries of Biblical Scholarship*, S. Tamar Kamionkowski writes, “The political and social agenda of bringing down heteronormativity (an agenda that I share) is the primary aim of these authors, and it seems to me that the biblical text and other cultural media are tools, or the means by which the political agenda is addressed” (2011, p. 132). How can this be done, particularly when working with a canon that so often seems to legitimate compulsory heterosexuality? Those who have no interest in Leviticus, for example, will quote Leviticus 18.22 as proof for the “sin of homosexuality.” And prooftexting combined with biblical literalism has historically produced bad outcomes - the history of slavery in the United States is simply one negative result among many. One answer to the question of how to use the Bible in revolutionary ways may be found at the intersection of feminist theory, queer theory, and masculinity studies. As Joseph A. Marchal notes, “Queer studies, then, has deep and significant roots in feminist theoretical work” (2014: 263). By definition, queer theory challenges what is considered “normal” or “natural,” along with the connotations of those words as positive and queer as negative (Marchal, 2014, p. 264). Similar to feminist theory, masculinity studies works against fixed views of gender, recognizing gender as a social construction that can and should be critiqued. Marchal notes that “masculinity studies aims to denaturalize gender, both masculinity and femininity, contesting hegemonic conceptions of masculinity and the accompanying, oppressive views of femininity” (2014, p. 269). Masculinity, however, is not static; there are multiple forms, some of which can become hegemonic and others that can be undermined.

So, a queer reading of the prophetic marriage metaphor in general and Malachi 2 in particular not only resists the heteronormativity seemingly embedded in the metaphor (Macwilliam, 2011, pp. 35–54) but also uses the gendering of God as a way to undermine the metaphor itself. Stuart Macwilliam notes that אהב, to love, when used to describe God’s action towards people, refers almost exclusively to God’s love of men (2011, p. 39). Already, the Hebrew text includes an element of uncertainty regarding sexuality; although the marriage metaphor appears to glorify heteronormativity as natural and divinely sanctioned, the metaphor itself is not airtight, since male Israel is God’s lover. And the Hebrew Bible consistently genders God as male (Macwilliam, 2011, p. 68). As Macwilliam notes, “The fundamental metaphorical gendering of Yhwh is a triumph of gender performativity, and the apparent reluctance to abandon it is a tribute to its effective use of the naturalization process” (Macwilliam, 2011, p. 65). This reluctance is clear in feminist readings of Malachi 2, which are more comfortable personifying God as female than leaving God as male and then wrestling with Judah’s personification as male.

3. Malachi 2 and Feminist Theory

The recognition that the marriage metaphor in Malachi is not like the others does not lead to a challenge of heteronormativity. Gerlinde Baumann calls Mal 2. 10-16 an example of “prophetic marriage imagery” (2003, p. 41), noting that the metaphor has flipped: “In Malachi the gender of the actors has changed: Now it is the male Judah who enters into a marriage with another woman. In this way, on the level of gender roles, the prophetic marriage imagery has been altered by its reception in Malachi: Now it is the male partner, not the female, who has worshiped foreign gods” (2003, p. 215). Judah, seen as male, has betrayed God by marrying “the daughter of a foreign god” (Mal 2.11); the verb באל, to marry, is third person masculine singular. Baumann, borrowing from Abel Isaksson’s 1965 work, concludes that Malachi personifies God as a woman, Judah’s betrayed wife, and notes

“the shift in Judah’s gender and the ‘reversed metaphor’ with YHWH in the female role” (2003, p. 217).

Not everyone, however, accepts the reversed metaphor. Markus Zehnder actually rejects a figurative reading of Mal 2.11 because it “would result in YHWH taking the role of a bride which contradicts the normal reverse order in which Israel is the bride and YHWH the bridegroom (cf. Hos., Jer., Ezek., DtJes)” (Zehnder, 2003, p. 228; emphasis mine). God must remain a man but without interrogating the implications of a male-male marriage metaphor; instead, Zehnder is much more comfortable with a metaphorical reading of Mal 2.13, in which the second masculine plural verbs refer not to men weeping at God’s altar but to women whose husbands have abandoned them (2003, p. 234).

Zehnder, however, is a noticeable exception to the interpretive rule of Mal 2. Writing a chapter four years ago for a book that came out this month, I used other scholars to echo Baumann’s argument about the flipped marriage metaphor, in which the male and female roles are reversed. Julia M. O’Brien argues that Mal 2.11 describes Judah first as female (בגדה) (bagdah, 3rd person feminine singular — “Judah has been faithless”) and then as male (חלל) (hillel, 3rd person masculine singular — “Judah has profaned”). The shift makes Judah the husband and God the wife, reversing the traditional marriage metaphor (O’Brien, 1996, pp. 247–249). David L. Petersen notes that “[YHWH] is here viewed as the spouse of Israel, but this time a female spouse of the male Israel. The gender of the spouses is different from the book of Hosea, in which [YHWH] was the male spouse and Israel the female” (1995, p. 203). Martin A. Shields argues that in Mal 2.10-12’s critique of idolatry, Judah abandons his bride YHWH and marries another goddess instead (1999, pp. 68–69, 72–73, 78).

But a queer analysis calls for the marriage metaphor to be flipped again, and just as Hebrew verbs make Judah a woman and then a man, Hebrew verbs keep God a man and not a woman. With apologies to my 2011 self, I missed this four years ago. Mal 2.11 says that “Judah has profaned the sanctuary of the Lord, which he loves”; the verb for “he loves”, which refers to God, is אהב, third person masculine singular. God remains male in the text, and the scholarly assumption of feminine personification, including my own, is just that, an assumption. If the author of Malachi had wanted to personify God as female, then another verb shift easily could have happened. It didn’t. The insistence upon a flipped marriage metaphor reinforces an expected heteronormativity at the expense not only of the text in question but also of the Hebrew Bible’s consistent gendering of God as male, even when creating metaphors that have nothing to do with marriage. Jeremiah 13 comes to mind, with Israel being described as God’s loincloth, which unfortunately does not serve its proper purpose (13.11). In every use of the word loincloth (אזור) [ezor], however, the reference is to a man. Additionally, Erin Runions, while suggesting that God could be either gender in Ezekiel 16 (pp. 157, 159, 165-166), describes God’s portrayal as a jealous deity and states that God typically is viewed as masculine (2001, pp. 157, 159, 165-166). She suggests that God may be a parent and not a lover and that “such a reading does have the extra-textual effect of challenging the predominant heterosexist reading of the character of [YHWH]” (Runions, 2001, pp. 167). As Jonathan Stökl notes, most Hebrew Bible prophets are male, just like their deity; in the ancient Near East, “there was a common concept...that gods spoke through prophets of the same gender” (Stökl, 2009, pp. 89, 87). Prophets do not marry the deity, which makes the marriage metaphor quite puzzling, especially considering that “marriage in the Hebrew Bible, Mari, and the Neo-Assyrian Empire was defined heterosexually” (Stökl, 2009, pp. 20, 90, 92). Stökl concludes that “Israel’s God, YHWH, was male...[because] in a patriarchal and monotheistic society...such as biblical Israel, the only god is male” (Stökl, 2009, pp. 98–99).

If the God in Mal 2.11 is male, and Judah is male, and the prophet expresses God’s unhappiness about Judah’s new marriage, then God appears as a male lover jilted by his male partner. This does not seem like a

radical argument, since every Hebrew verb has a person, gender, and number; identifying such verbs often feels like playing a game of connect the dots. But the implications of that game could be significant. Marchal writes that “the relation of queer to regimes of the normal and the natural is crucial for the development of queer activism and the parallel forms it takes in the academy” (2014, p. 263). Similarly, Ruth Goldman calls for queer theorists to use their work to benefit the lives of real queer people, regardless of color, class, or sexual orientation (1996, pp. 169-180). What would it mean to use this small passage in Malachi in queer ways?

4. Queer Theory, Feminist Theory, and African-American Biblical Practice

In African American Protestant communities, where the Bible has pride of place, it would perhaps precipitate a rethinking of the opposition to same-sex relationships on the grounds that such relationships are not biblical (<http://conservativetribune.com/black-pastors-threaten>). This will be no easy task, however, particularly in the wake of the Supreme Court’s June 2015 ruling that legalized same-sex marriage across the United States. A recent poll indicates that only 34% of African American Protestants support same-sex marriage. In July, an official Christian Methodist Episcopal Church statement reaffirmed that marriage is between one man and one woman. Same-sex marriages “are contrary to biblical teaching” and church discipline and cannot happen in a CME church, according to the College of Bishops¹. The National Baptist Convention clarified their position after the Supreme Court struck down the Defense of Marriage Act in 2013, writing to their military chaplains in January 2014 that because of Gen 2, the chaplains cannot perform same-sex marriages².

And even looking like you are in favor of the institution can be controversial. Just ask T.D. Jakes, who had to backtrack twice from a HuffPost Live interview that suggested a possible reconsideration of same-sex marriage on his part. Jakes responded on Facebook in August that his pastoral method for LGBTQ people is evolving, but not his theology. He wrote, “My position on the subject has been steadfast and rooted in scripture,” citing 2 Tim 3.16, Eph 5.31, Rom 1.24-29, and Heb 13.4³. The Ephesians text quotes Gen 2.24, a statement about men leaving their parental homes when they marry women; beyond that, the prooftexts become tricky. Hebrews says that extramarital sex is wrong — “Let marriage be held in honor by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled” (Heb 13.4); while the first-century context of the verse certainly fits a heteronormative reading, that reading does not have to apply to the twenty-first century, because the verse itself does not mention anyone’s gender.⁴ The Romans text creates a similar problem, as a student in my independent study course on queer theory pointed out years ago — Paul considers same sex acts as punishment for idolatry. Remove the latter, and you challenge the former. What about LGBTQ followers of Jesus? Can they be called idolaters?

It is Jakes’ reference to 2 Timothy that opens the door a bit more to a reconsideration of same-sex relationships in biblical texts. The verse reads, “All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.” That should include Mal 2.11’s doubly flipped marriage metaphor, adding it to a small number of Hebrew Bible texts that queer theologians recognize as verses that resist

¹ http://www.thecmechurch.org/Announcements/officialstatement_samesexmarriage.htm.

² <http://www.nationalbaptist.com/about-us/position-statements.html>.

³ <http://m.christianpost.com/news/bishop-t-d-jakes-says-he-has-not-evolved-on-homosexuality-and-does-not-endorse-gay-marriage-142427/>.

⁴ Creflo Dollar cites the same verse as proof for his argument that same-sex marriages are wrong, but he uses the Message translation, which adds “wife and husband” to the first part of the verse (<http://www.creflodollarministries.org/BibleStudy/Articles.aspx?id=435>). There is not enough time to talk about the dangers of paraphrasing here, but consider this a ten-second warning against it.

heteronormativity, including 1 Sam 18.1 and 20.17 and 2 Sam 1.26 (the story of the love David and Jonathan had for each other), as well as the bond between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law in the book of Ruth. In the U.S., the Bible has always been the primary source in Christian ethical debates; being mildly aggressive by nature, I am not one to cede ground in my research area unless I have no choice. And in the interests of full disclosure, I chair a Gender and Women's Studies department at a Catholic college and am an LGBTQ ally. Because of my friends, colleagues, and students, plus the climate in which I work, I have a lot of skin in this game.

Even if I didn't, the nasty fight going on within the Church of God in Christ about same-sex relationships and LGBTQ churchgoers should worry everyone. Exactly one month ago, a letter appeared on the COGIC website in response to an ongoing dispute between Elder Earl Carter and Bishop Charles E. Blake. The letter reminded the reader that homosexuality is "sinful and immoral", based on 1 Cor 6.9-11 (the text says that "male prostitutes [and] sodomites", Paul's attempt to include both partners in male same-sex activity, "will [not] inherit the kingdom of God."), so COGIC preachers can speak against same-sex intimacy; however, such preaching cannot be offensive or vulgar. In November 2014, Elder Carter said that he hoped gay men would bleed monthly from their anus, "like a girl"⁵.⁶ The letter condemns the comment as hate speech and degrading to women. Because Elder Carter has not apologized, instead publicly criticizing Bishop Blake, the letter concludes with a petition, calling on him either to stop the criticism or leave the denomination.

Before giving COGIC an unqualified pat on the back, however, two points need to be made. First, the other ministers did not and do not have a problem with the rest of Elder Carter's statements from last November, and that may explain the continued nasty rhetoric in his December 2014 response to Bishop Blake's apology from the previous month. Here is a very, very brief snapshot of Carter's lengthy response: "Well, I found bringing my son to a so called Holy Convocation and being inundated by sissies, homosexuals, gays, down-lows or whatever you choose to call them offensive! Can you imagine coming to the Holy Convocation and having to explain how the effeminate men or homosexuals get to serve, sing, shout and dance without any correction?...That is to say: stay out of the choir, stay away from praise and worship, stay out of the youth departments, and for [heaven's] sake stay out of the pulpit, and please don't even think about serving communion to the Lord's people"⁷. If gay men cannot serve in a COGIC church in any capacity or even praise God, one could easily ask whether they are welcome at all. The answer appears to be no, and Elder Carter is simply taking the COGIC position to its logical conclusion. Interestingly, however, he quotes Mal 2.7-9 as support for his argument, which warns priests that failure to give the correct information to others will bring divine punishment. The proof-text implies that he has the correct instruction. As with all proof-texting, however, it ignores what comes directly after it, which is Mal 2.10-12, complete with that potentially subversive marriage metaphor. It could be entertaining to see Elder Carter wrestle with that.

The entertainment would be short-lived, because of the second troublesome point that the COGIC controversy raises. The petition does not exist because of a concern about the ways in which LGBTQ people are perceived in Elder Carter's preaching. The petition is the result of what, of all things, pimppreacher.com calls a "COGIC coup d'etat" and "Bishop on Bishop crime"⁸. The COGIC letter calls Elder Carter's attack against

⁵ <http://www.cogic.org/blog/church-of-god-in-christ/a-letter-to-the-members-of-the-church-of-god-in-christ-inc/>.

⁶ In a note explaining why Gen 1 cannot be liberative, because of its use against women, Joseph Marchal writes, "Such a stance reflects how queer hermeneutics often are (or at least can be) forms of feminist critique, while further reminding that women are among queer folk, and queer folk are often treated 'as women'" (2014, p. 278).

⁷ <http://exministries.tv/dr-earl-carter-response-to-bishop-blakes-apology/>.

⁸ <http://pimppreacher.com/post/129253458190/earl-carter-manifesto-says-presiding-bishop>.

Bishop Blake “scandalous and deceitful,” “unwarranted, baseless and demonic,” and deplores the fact that the accusations “of immoral behavior” have no foundation⁹. The attacks, however, claim that Bishop Blake engaged in same-sex relationships, or what the trusty pimppreacher.com calls an attack on “Bishop Charles Blake’s manhood”¹⁰. It is the COGIC letter’s silence about the accusations and pimp preacher’s description of them that should give people pause. The almost uncritical dismissal of LGBTQ people as sinful, immoral gender-benders means that the greatest insult you can level against a black male preacher is to imply that he is gay. If such rhetoric and attitudes remain unquestioned, then any apology to LGBTQ people for “extreme” language sounds hollow. On a fundamental level, Elder Carter is only behaving as he has been taught, and COGIC can’t be too surprised if the student eventually turns on the teacher.

5. Conclusion

Even if Mal 2.11 isn’t a doubly flipped metaphor, at minimum you have a gender-bending deity. Those who argue for a reversed marriage metaphor suggest that God is characterized as female, challenging the idea that God must always be the hegemonic male. And if God is male in this verse, and I think “he” is, then he’s not a hegemonic male here either. Instead, God is holding up a small sign to Judah, which says, “Why did you leave me?” The relationship between deity and people has been broken, on the people’s end, and they have chosen someone else, because they can. Divine-human relationships are as messy and complicated as strictly human ones, and they happen regardless of the gender of the parties involved. Part of the reason the marriage metaphor exists is precisely because the prophets are trying to explain the closeness of the relationship between men and their male God, and marriage suggests an intimacy that no other relationship in the ancient world could lawfully have. Today, the call to love God “with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might” (Deut 6.5) refers to anyone who believes in it, as attendance at a Conservative synagogue demonstrates; all present, regardless of gender, recite the passage after one of the chants of the Shema: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord is one” (Deut 6.4 – my translation). One interesting verse in Malachi does not a theology or an ethical revolution make, but that verse is part of the canon, too, and I hope it can at least continue a conversation about why opposing same-sex relationships need not be a litmus test for Christian orthodoxy.

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⁹ <http://www.cogic.org/blog/church-of-god-in-christ/a-letter-to-the-members-of-the-church-of-god-in-christ-inc/>.

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