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THE MEANING AND NATURE OF "THE DAY OF THE LORD" IN MALACHI 4:1-6

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Abstract

The expression, "the day of the LORD" is a notable theme in the prophetic writings. Its usage in Malachi 4:1-6 has generated divisive opinions. It is described as a day of holy war. Some suggests it is a day of judgment, darkness and a time of doom for all nations. The expression has also been taken to mean an immediate historical act of God or Yahweh's ultimate eschatological visitation. However, in the context of Malachi 4:1-6 is the phrase "the day of the LORD" only a reference to a day of divine wrath? Is it local or cosmic, historical or eschatological? It is the concern of this paper to study how the day of the Lord is to be understood in the context of Malachi's eschatology through the exegetical appreciation of the text. The study shows that the day of the LORD is not only for punishment of the wicked but also for the blessing and restoration of the long-suffering righteous(Micah 4:6-8).Thus, the day of the LORD has a singular goal with two sides of a coin–reward for the wicked and reward for the righteous. Hence, Malachi's day of the LORD will bring about the total annihilation of the wicked and total vindication and restoration of the righteous. The study suggests that the day has not been fulfilled. It is apocalyptic and will have a cosmic fulfillment at the end of this world as reechoed in the New Testaments.

Keywords: Meaning, Nature, Lord, Day, Prophet Malachi.

Introduction

The expression, "the day of the Lord" is a notable theme in the prophetic writings. The phrase appears nineteen times in the Old Testament (Mayhue,1985:1.233). "It is the most striking and prominent theme in the Book of the Twelve" (Boloje and Groenewald, 2014:1.53). It is described as "a day of darkness" (Amos 5:18; 5:20 ESV), "a time of doom for all nations" (Ezek. 30:3). It is "a day of judgment" (Oba 1:15), "a day of vengeance" (Jer. 46:10) in which the inhabitants of the land will tremble (Joel 2:1) and "sun will turn to darkness, moon to blood" (Joel 2:31). Isaiah invites people to wail because the day of the Lord is near (Isa 13:6) and it comes with fierce anger (Isa 13:9). Malachi calls it a great and awesome day (Mal 4:5). However, the day of the Lord is not only the day of divine judgment (Mal 4:1) but also a day of hope for those who fear the Lord (Mal 4:2-3). Further, it is believed that the term, day of the Lord, suggests "the special interposition of Jehovah in the affairs of men at important epochs"(Brown, n.d., 417).

There has been a debate on the nature and understanding of the day of the Lord. It is argued that the day of the Lord should be understood in the setting of holy war (Eze 13:5, Jer 46:10 and Zeph. 1:16, Fensham, n.d 91). The seriousness of the day of the Lord is demonstrated on its effects on nature and on living beings. "Its effect on nature is illustrated with concepts as

the changing of sun, moon and stars (e.g., Isa. 13-10, Joel 3:4), dark clouds and darkness (e.g. Ezek. 30:3; Joel 2:1; Amos 5:18-20; Zeph. 1:15) and earthquake (e.g. Isa 13: 13). The effects on living beings are best illustrated by concepts as dread (e.g. in Isa. 2:19; 13:8; Zeph. 1:17) and confusion (e.g. Isa. 22:5)" (Ibid).

In Malachi 4, the prophet mentions the day of the Lord and the circumstances which surround it. The day will burn like oven and those "who do wickedly will be stubble" (v.1) but the righteous ones will "trample the wicked" (v.3). Malachi reminds people to remember the "Law of Moses" (v.4). However, Elijah would be sent before the day of the Lord who "will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers" (v. 6, NKJV).

Scholars' effort has been on interpreting the prophecy of Malachi 4:1-6 (Marfo, 2019: 1.152). There is the need to study the nature of the day of the Lord in the book of Malachi in order to understand the eschatology of Malachi 4:1-6. It is the concern of this paper to study how the day of the Lord is to be understood in the context of Malachi's eschatology for a thorough appreciation of the text. Hence, to understand the nature of eschatology in Malachi 4:1-6, this study will investigate the questions such as; does the day of the Lord in Malachi have cosmic or local fulfillment? Is the day of the Lord a single day event? Is the day of the Lord in Malachi apocalyptic or mere historical? Answers to these salient questions will aid the understanding of the texts.

Meaning of the Day of the Lord

The day of the Lord appears 16 times in the Hebrew Bible. Isa 13,6.9; Ezek. 13,5; Joel 1,15; 2,1.11; 3,4; 4,14; Amos 5,18(x2).20; Obad. 1,15; Zeph. l,7.14(x2); Mai 3,23. It appears in any variation of this wording 15 times more: Isa 2,12; 13,13; 34,8; Ezek. 7,19; 30,3; Zeph. 1,8.18; 2,2.3; Zech. 14,1.7; Lam 1,12; 2,1.21.22 - a total of 31 times.

It is essential to understand the meaning of the expression "the day of the Lord." To this end, the texts in which the phrase appear need to be considered. The *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* defines the "day of the Lord" as "any specific period of time in which the God of Israel intervenes in human affairs to save and judge." (Is 13:6; Ezek. 13:5; Amos 5:18), (Ryken, Wilhoit, Longman III, 1999:196).

It should be noted that different expressions are used for the concept of the day of the Lord. In many instances, it is rendered as "the day of the Lord"[1] (Isa 2:12; 13:6, 9; Ezek. 30:3; Joel 1:15; 3:14 etc), "day of vengeance" (Isa 61:2), "day of the Lord's anger" (Lam 2:22), and "day of his fierce anger" (Lam 1:12).

Mayhue Richard posits that "the DOL is a biblical phrase used by God's prophets to describe either the immediate future or the ultimate eschatological consummation" (Mayhue,1985:1.233).

Characteristics of the Day of the Lord

The first characteristic of the day of the Lord is that it is a day of God's wrath on his enemies. Joel invites the inhabitants of the land to tremble (Joel 2:1) because it is "a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness!" (Joe 2:2) in the same vein, Amos says, "Woe to you who desire the day of the LORD! Why would you have the day of the LORD? It is darkness, and not light." (Amo. 5:18)

According to Zephaniah, the day of the LORD is bitter; it is a day of wrath, distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of clouds and thick darkness. (Zep. 1:14-15). These texts indicate that the day of the Lord will be characterized by trembling, fear, darkness, anguish, and destruction.

However, the day of the Lord is also presented in positive light in some Hebrew texts. For instance, the Prophet Amos presents the day of the Lord as a day of blessing for God's people. It is also a day of physical and spiritual restoration (Micah 4:6-8). Thus, the day of the Lord is characterized by punishment and blessing.

Also, the prophets emphasize the nearness of the day of the LORD. It is often portrayed as being near (Zeph. 1:14; Ezek. 30:3-4; Joel 1:15).

It should be noted that the experience of a city or nation when the day of the Lord comes is akin to what the world will experience at the close of its probation. (Nichol, ed.,1977, 164)

The Time of the Day of the Lord

It should be noted that the context determines whether a particular reference to the day of the Lord has an immediate fulfillment or it is eschatological. There are Hebrew texts which describe imminent day of the Lord while some texts vividly describe future events. For instance, it seems Isaiah 2:10-22 is referring to the future event when God will judge the sinners. Likewise, the day of God's vengeance against all the nations in Isaiah 38:1-8 appear to be eschatological rather than being past. Meanwhile, other texts refer to the day of the Lord which has already been fulfilled either partially or fully (Obadiah 1:15).

Mayhue asserts that every occurrence of the phrase, day of the LORD has to be interpreted in its context in order to discover whether the writer means immediate historical act of God or Yahweh's ultimate eschatological visitation. He opines that the day of the LORD is not limited to a definite time duration. It is only the context which can determine its longevity, even with this, only general approximation can be made. (Mayhue,1985:1.245). He however concludes that the day of the LORD will occur at the end of the millennium.[2] Contrary to Mayhue's position, the *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* states that "the day of the LORD is the time when, historically, the probation of a city or a nation closes, and ultimately when the destiny of all men is forever fixed"(Nichol, 1980:1.164). This position seems to be correct as it considers both the historical and eschatological day of the LORD.

Goal of the Day of the LORD

From the Hebrew texts examined, it appears the day of the LORD has just one goal with two sides of a coin. The goal of the day of the LORD is reward – reward for the evildoers and reward for the righteous. Whether local or universal, historical or eschatological, the day of the LORD is fixed to be a day of God's vengeance (Jer. 46:10), a day to punish the evil doers (Zeph. 1:8-10). Further, the other goal of the day is for restoration of God's people (Micah 4:6-8). It is a day in which the people of God who have been oppressed will be delivered (Ryken, Wilhoit, Longman III, 1999:197).

Malachi announces the "day of the LORD" which shares the same features with the eschatological day of the LORD prophesied by other prophets before him. In addition, he compares two categories of people – those who do wickedly and those who fear the LORD. While the wicked will be stubble (4:1) and become ashes (4:3), the righteous "shall go out and grow fat like stall-fed calves." (4:2).

The Day of the LORD in Malachi 4:1

> For behold the day (is) coming burning like furnace and every proud and all (who are) doing wickedness become chaff. The day coming shall set them ablaze, says the LORD of hosts, which shall not leave for them a root or a branch (WT)

In response to the people's question, "Where is the God of justice?" (Mal 2:17), the prophet gives an assurance that "there is a future day in which God will execute judgment and justice upon all the wicked. This is the "day of the LORD" of Joel 1:15; 2:1; Amos 5:18, 20; Zeph 2:1-3; etc." (Nichol, 4:133).

Commenting on this verse, Boloje and Groenewald explain that the audience of Malachi who once doubted God's justice would on that day admit the difference which between the evil doers and the righteous. More so, the text describes the day of the LORD as "burning like a furnace." This is understood as the degree of the "burning power of God's anger and evil doers would be completely destroyed" (Boloje and Groenewald, 74)

The Fate of the Wicked – Mal 4:1

Malachi is explicit in his description of the reward or fate of the wicked people. The total annihilation is graphically portrayed in different words. The wicked "will be chaff." (4:1a) "The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the LORD of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. (Mal 4:1b). Besides, they shall burn and become ashes (4:3). Becoming "chaff", being set ablaze, having no root nor branch, and becoming ashes imply complete destruction.(Bob Wielenga, 2016:1.50)

It also suggests that the wicked will not be alive and be burning forever. Their destruction will be total and complete and this seems to be eschatological.

The Fate of the Righteous – Mal 4:2

Having described the fate of the wicked, prophet Malachi equally states what happens to those who fear God's name, that is, the righteous. He says, "But you who fear my name the

sun of righteousness shall arise with healing in its wing. You shall go out and spring about like calves in a stall." (Mal 4:2, WT)

The long-suffering righteous ones receive healing from the "Sun of Righteousness." His rising will bring separation between the wicked and the righteous, and will reward them accordingly. The effect of the coming of the "Sun of righteousness" is that the righteous "will go out and playfully jump like calves from the stall" (Marfo, 162). Verse 3 begins with a waw-consecutive וְעַסּוֹתֶם רְשָׁעִים (you shall trample/press/crush the wicked). This indicates a continuation of the experience of the righteous. The object of the verb in וְעַסּוֹתֶם is רְשָׁעִים "the wicked" (Ibid.)

Allusion to the Law of Moses Malachi 4:4

In v.4, Malachi says, "Remember the law of Moses my servant, the statutes and judgments which I commanded at Horeb upon all Israel." The prophet makes an allusion to תּוֹרַת מֹשֶׁה(the law of Moses). Scholars differ on the meaning of the Law of Moses. Among the views are that, it may refer to the book of the covenant in Exodus 20-23, or to the book of Deuteronomy, or to the law book of Ezra, or to the commandments of the LORD in more general terms(Snyman,2020:1.130). Elia Assis explains that

> The command to remember refers normally to acts of God and not to the Torah. Apart from Malachi, only in one other place, in Ex 13,9, do we find the same root referring to the Torah. Why is the verb "to remember" used here rather than the far more usual verb in this context "to observe"? The answer to this question becomes clear once it is understood that one of Malachi's main concerns is the non-qualitative fulfilment of the commandments, particularly sacrilegious, apathetic or neglectful observance, or deception in fulfilling the commandments (Assis, 2011:2.210).

From the immediate and the larger context of the text under study, it appears that since the prophet Malachi has been having disputations against God's people concerning their sins, calling their attention to the Torah they are violating and which will be the standard of judgment before the day of the LORD is appropriate as he is concluding his prophecy.

Intertextuality

It has been established that the concept of the "day of the LORD" is a common theme in the Old Testament especially the Minor Prophets. Joel and Malachi refer to it as a great and awesome day (Joel 2:11 and Mal 4:5), for it is a day God will destroy the sinners in his fierce anger (Isa 13:9; Mal 4:1). It is the day of God's vengeance (Jer. 46:10). The day of the LORD is described as being near (Zeph. 1:14; Isa 13:6; Joel 1:15; 2:1; Oba 15).

In the New Testament, the day of the LORD is mentioned four times. While making reference to the prophecy of Joel on the day of Pentecost, Peter refers to the day of the LORD when "the sun shall be turned to darkness" (Acts 2:20; cf. Rev 6:12-17). Apostle Paul links the day of the LORD to the second coming of Jesus which will be like a thief (1 Thess. 5:2) and Paul affirms that the day of the LORD has not yet come but will be preceded by rebellion and appearance of the man of lawlessness (2 Thess. 2:2-3). Apostle Peter also states that, "But the day of the LORD will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the

heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed." (2Pet 3:10)

From the above inter textual study, it is appears that the phraseology "the day of the LORD" is often associated with judgment and the eschatological usage of it is linked with the second advent of Jesus Christ.

Application

The message of Malachi 4:1-6 is a warning to Christians in the contemporary time. The historical fulfillment of the day of the LORD in the past is an assurance of the eschatological fulfillment of the day of the LORD. This implies that the day of the LORD which has been fulfilled in a local scale is a type of the global fulfilment of the day of the LORD.

This period is the probation time for turning to the LORD "lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction." (Mal 4:6). When that day eventually comes, the wicked will be separated from the righteous (Mal 4:1-3 cf. Matt 25:32-46). The reward will be different as the choices are: While the wicked will become stubble and burn to ashes with no root or branch remaining, the righteous will be restored through the Sun of Righteousness.

The choice being made by people today determines their reward on the coming day of the LORD. That day is a day of vengeance on the disobedient and the day is "near."

Summary

The study has revealed that the concept of the day of the LORD is a thread which runs on the pages of prophetic books especially the books of the Twelve. This study shows that the day of the LORD is a specific period of time when the LORD will intervene in human affairs to judge and save.

This day of the LORD is described as the day of the LORD's anger and day of God's vengeance. God takes vengeance upon the wicked people. Thus, the day is characterized by fear, distress, anguish, bitterness, and devastation.

It is also observed that the purpose of the day of the LORD is judgment. God judges the wicked and the righteous and give them their due reward. So, more than the idea of duration of the day, the bible writer focuses on the purpose of the day which is judgment.

As a warning, the prophet calls attention to the Torah. This is significant as the obedience to it will make one avert the divine vengeance on the day of the LORD. Malachi 4 shows that before the day of the LORD comes, Elijah will be sent to prepare the people so that they will not be destroyed.

Conclusion

The exegetical study of the day of the Lord in the context Malachi 4:1-6 convincingly shows that the phrase should be understood not in the setting of a holy war but a day of God's universal intervention in the affairs of men. As the study shows, it appears the day of the LORD has a singular goal with two sides of a coin. The goal of the day of the LORD is reward – reward for the wicked and reward for the righteous. The wicked get punished while those

who fear the LORD get restored. Hence, Malachi's day of the LORD will bring about the total annihilation of the wicked and total vindication and restoration of the righteous.

Further, the study also suggests that the day has not been fulfilled but will have a cosmic fulfillment at the return of Jesus Christ, as also supported by the New Testament writers. Hence, Malachi's day of the LORD is apocalyptic. It appears to be the same day of the LORD mentioned by the Apostles (1 Thess 5:2; 2 Thess 2:2; 2 Pet 3:10).

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