

ARNOLD ZAWADZKI

John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin

**„I WILL SMEAR YOUR FACES WITH DUNG” (Mal 2:3B):
GOD’S SPEECH TO THE PRIESTS (Mal 2:1-9)
AS A MANIFESTO OF NEHEMIAH’S REFORM
THE CRISIS OF PRIESTHOOD AND THE DEGRADATION
OF THE LEVITES IN THE FIRST HALF
OF THE FIFTH CENTURY BCE***

Key words: Malachi, Levites, priests, secondary priests, Mal 2, degradation of the Levites, Nehemiah’s reformation

1. The problem of post-exile priesthood. 2. Two priestly lines: the Zadokites and the Aaronites (Ezekiel versus Leviticus and Numbers). 2.1. Testimony of the Book of Ezekiel. 2.2. Testimony of the Book of Leviticus. 2.3. The special position of the Holiness Code (Leviticus 17-26). 2.4. Conclusion. 3. The structure and internal dynamics of Mal 2:1-9. 3.1. Frame (Mal 1:6c; 2:9a) – “disregarding priests will be disregarded”. 3.2. Covenant formula – God’s royal and sovereign will. 3.3. Conclusion. 4. Exegetical reading of Mal 2:1-9. 4.1. Introduction by the speaker (Mal 2:1). 4.2. Lamentations: a two-way relationship between God and the sons of Levi in the past and present – Mal 2:5-6.8. 4.3. Conditions/goals of the covenant – Mal 2:7. 4.4. Declaration of publicity/memorialization – Mal 2:4. 4.5. Blessings/curses – Mal 2:2-3. 4.6. Degradation of the Levites – Mal 2:9. 5. Translation of Mal 2:1-9. 6. Is Mal 2:1-9 a manifesto of the reform of priesthood in Nehemiah’s time? 7. Conclusion

The problem of who the priests were in Malachi’s time remains unresolved. Most historians believe that the temple priesthood achieved stability during the Second Temple period only after a prolonged period of rivalry between various priestly factions.¹ If only 30–35 years passed between the rebuilding of the temple and the

* This exegetical essay was published in Polish in *The Biblical Annals* 13/1 (2023) 37–81.

¹ R. Albertz, *Storia della religione nell’Israele antico. Dall’esilio ai Maccabei* (Introduzione allo studio della Bibbia. Supplementi 24; Brescia: Paideia 2005) I-II, 96–97, 492–494; 427–436; R. Nurmela, *The Levites. Their Emergence as a Second-Class Priesthood* (SFSHJ 193; Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press 1998) *passim* (especially 167); J. Blenkinsopp, “The Judaean Priesthood during the Neo-Babylonian and Achaemenid Periods: A Hypothetical Reconstruction,” *CBQ* 60 (1998) 25–43; J. Schaper, *Priester und Leviten im achämenidischen Juda. Studien zur Kult- und Sozialgeschichte Israels in persischer Zeit* (FAT 31; Tübingen: Mohr & Siebeck 2000) *passim* (especially 93–94, 265–275).

time of Malachi, it can be presumed that during his activity this struggle not only did not end, but was just beginning.² The final solution was to come decades later during Nehemiah's reign and leave a lasting imprint on the Jewish priesthood, which in its structure and genealogy remained unchanged until the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 A.D. It is possible (as I will try to show) that Mal 2:1-9 was a manifesto of the priesthood's future reform carried out by Nehemiah, which led to the marginalization of the Levites, relegating them to the level of secondary priests. In contrast, Ezek 44:10-14 and the P texts speaking of priests in Leviticus and Numbers would be the definitive sanctioning of this reform. A new line of priests was elevated to the status of the chief priesthood; depending on the genealogy taken over (invented *ad hoc*?), these could have been Zadokites or Aaronites. Indeed, the problem, as we shall see, is the origin of the priests after the Reform. Indeed, genealogical lines descending from Aaron and Zadok are two possibilities that the Bible presents without taking a clear position on the issue (although the Aaronic texts predominate in number). Moreover, historians hypothesize that the Aaronites operated the sanctuary at Bethel before the end of the Babylonian exile.³ The Zadokites, on the other hand, had always (since the time of David or even earlier?) been associated with Jerusalem. Did both lines descend from Levi? Could only Aaron have claimed such an origin? These are other questions facing the researcher of the Jewish priesthood.

1. THE PROBLEM OF POST-EXILE PRIESTHOOD

It seems that the pre-exile priesthood did not know the division between primary and secondary priests,⁴ since the only priests were Levites חַלְוִיִּים (*hall^hwîyyim* – see

² The rebuilding of the temple was completed in 515 BCE. See J.D. Purvis - E.M. Meyers, „Wyg-nanie i powrót. Od zburzenia Jerozolimy przez Babilończyków do odbudowy państwa żydowskiego”, *Starożytny Izrael. Od Abrahama do zburzenia Świątyni Jerozolimskiej*, wyd. 3 (ed. H. Shanks) (Warszawa: Vocatio 2012) 319–322; A. Piwowar, *Historia Izraela czasów Starego Testamentu. Od patriarchów do podboju przez Rzymian* (Materiały Pomocnicze do Wykładów z Bibliistyki 12; Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL 2013) 189.

³ Moreover, they would be the authors of P, one of the four sources of the Pentateuch. This thesis is years old: it was first presented by R.H. Kennett (“The Origin of the Aaronite Priesthood,” *JTS* 6 [1905] 161–186); see also F.S. North, “Aarons’s Rise in Prestige,” *ZAW* 66 (1954) 194; M. Aberbach, L. Smolar, “Aaron, Jeroboam, and the Golden Calves,” *JBL* 86 (1967) 129–140; A. Rofé, *La composizione del Pentateuco. Un’introduzione* (Bologna: Dehoniane 1999) 81–82;

⁴ A different opinion in J. Wellhausen (*Prolegomena to the History of Israel* [Scholars Press Reprints and Translations Series; Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press 1994] 123–125) and Aelred Cody (*A History of Old Testament Priesthood* [AnBib 35; Rome: PIB 1969] 29–61) following suit; according to them, the division between priests and Levites was the result of Josiah's reform. The Levites were to be “retired” priests of the sanctuaries outside Jerusalem, and their humble service was a consequence of the sin they had committed in serving the “high places” (2 Kings 23:8-9) and temples outside Jerusalem. Ezekiel and P would have reworked this data in terms of the new post-exile conditions. Wellhausen's position is still popular, e.g. R. Abba, “Priests and Levites,” *IDB* III, 876–889 (especially 883); P.J. Achtemeier (red.), *Encyklopedia biblijna* (Warszawa: Vocatio 1999) 669; B.M. Metzger, M.D. Coogan (red.), *Słownik wiedzy biblijnej* (Warszawa: Vocatio 1997) 435. See also W. Zimmerli, *Ezekiel. II. A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel Chapters 25-48* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia, PA: Fortress 1983) 457.

e.g. Jer 33:21-22). Aaron himself was first referred to as a Levite (Ex 4:14 – source JE) and only later as a priest (Ex 38:21 – source P). Moreover, since, after the exile, Malachi and his Deuteronomistic editor still did not know such a division (see Mal 2:1-9; 3:3) and the Levites were considered the only priests, it can be assumed that the Book of Malachi in its canonical form represents an important caesura in the historical development of the Jewish priesthood: it would be not only an important testimony, but even a manifesto advocating the reform of the priests. Nehemiah, who carried out this reform (Neh 10-12), made a clear distinction between priests (sons of Aaron – Neh 10:39; 12:47) and Levites, as evidenced by various lists of the post-exilic population and other passages in the Books of Nehemiah and Ezra (Neh 10:1.29.35.39; 11.3.10.15; 12.1.12.22.23-24.44.47; 13.10-13.29; Ezra 1.5; 2.40.70; 3.8-10.12; 6.20; 7.7; 8.15.18.20.29-30.33; 9.1; 10.5.23). In the aftermath of this reform, the newly constituted priestly community – not being sufficiently entrenched in their function to enjoy sufficient gravity and authority among the people – probably sought deeper legitimacy for their position in earlier traditions and genealogies. Thanks to such procedures, a number of biblical texts that found their way into the canon of the Hebrew Bible were created (or underwent P-editing): passages from the Book of Ezekiel (e.g. Ezek 44:10-14), texts from Leviticus and Numbers (Lev 21-22; Num 8; 17-18; 26; 31; 35), references to David’s ordinances in the Book of Nehemiah (Neh 12:24.45-46) or Ps 135, which adds “the house of Levi” to the classic triad of “the house of Israel,” “the house of Aaron” and “fearing the Lord” (as in Ps 115:9-11; 118:2-4). In the case of Ps 135, it is worth noting that this addition is not only evidence of the Levitical origin of the Psalm,⁵ but by distinguishing between the “house of Aaron” and the “house of Levi,”⁶ it may fit into the strategy of legitimizing the reform of the priests. Since the above-mentioned texts did not develop a single coherent genealogical line for the new priestly class, they must have been the fruit of a spontaneous, grassroots effort without a clear, deliberate strategy, or (as some scholars suggest⁷) evidence of competition between at least two priestly groups clashing for access to the altar in Jerusalem.

If the hypotheses developed by historians about the priesthood of the Second Temple period are correct, Mal 2:1-9 would be the last literary voice on the priesthood of the Levites before Nehemiah’s reform, and would show at the same time its causes and the direction it was to take.

However, before proposing an exegesis of Mal 2:1-9, along with its interpretation and possible conclusions, it is necessary to briefly outline two possible genealogical lines of the post-exilic priesthood – Zadokite and Aaronic – which appear in the Book of Ezekiel and Leviticus, respectively.

⁵ F.-L. Hossfeld, E. Zenger, *Psalms. III. A Commentary on Psalms 101-150* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress 2011) 495: “That the triad ‘house of Israel, house of Aaron, YHWH-fearers’ is expanded in v. 19b [...] to include the group ‘house of Levi’ reveals the milieu, in terms of the history of origins, in which Psalm 135 was created.”

⁶ Perhaps a similar procedure, distinguishing between priests and Levites, is present in 1 Kings 8:4.

⁷ Cody, *A History of Old Testament Priesthood*, 156–166; M. Haran, *Temples and Temple Service in Ancient Israel. An Inquiry into the Character of Cult Phenomena and the Historical Setting of the Priestly School* (Oxford: Clarendon 1978) 84–92.

2. TWO PRIESTLY LINES: THE ZADOKITES AND THE AARONITES (EZEKIEL VERSUS LEVITICUS AND NUMBERS)

Numerous and extensive biblical texts – the Book of Ezekiel (Ezek 40:46; 43:19; 44:15; 48:11), the Book of Leviticus (Lev 8; 21-22) and the P texts from the Book of Numbers (Num 1:47-54; 3-4; 8; 17-18; 26; 31; 35; but also Num 16:10) – confirm that in the post-exile period the division of the priests was an accomplished fact.⁸ On the other hand, establishing a single, consistent genealogical line for them was no longer so simple, and there was no consensus on this issue. On the one hand, the Book of Ezekiel supported the Zadokite line, while on the other hand, the Books of Leviticus and Numbers supported the Aaronic genealogy. However, it does not seem, as some⁹ suggest, that either of these two alternatives reflects the situation of the priests before the Babylonian exile.

2.1. Testimony of the Book of Ezekiel

Ezekiel calls the priests of Zadok's line "priests of the altar" (Ezek 40:46: שְׁמֵרֵי הַמִּזְבֵּחַ מִשְׁמֵרֵת הַמִּזְבֵּחַ *šōm'rê mišmeret hammizbēah*; see also Ezek 44:15-16), and treats the others as secondary "priests of the temple" (Ezek 40:45: שְׁמֵרֵי מִשְׁמֵרֵת הַבַּיִת *šōm'rê mišmeret habbāyit*; see also Ezek 44:10-14).¹⁰ If priesthood in Israel was the prerogative of only the tribe of Levi, both groups had to be Levites. However, Ezekiel emphasizes that the Zadokites have a Levite background (Ezek 40:46: [...] בְּנֵי-צְדוֹק מִבְּנֵי-לֵוִי *b'ne-šāḏōq [...] mibb'ne-lēwī*), and is silent about the Levitical origin of the «non-Zadokites.» What is the reason for this? There can be more than one. First, Ezekiel either takes for granted the Levitical origin of the secondary priests (hence the silence), or he takes for granted the non-obvious Levitical origin of the Zadokites (hence the need for such emphasis to dispel doubts). If the latter was the case, the Zadokites in Ezekiel were ennobled genealogically to justify their claim to the chief priestly office. In other words, the author of the Book of Ezekiel would have given credence to the Zadok line by "plugging" it into the genealogy of Levi (see also Ezek 44:15).¹¹ This is all the more likely because the problem with the Zadokite genealogy is also presented in 2 Sam 8:17 and 1 Sam 22:20: the former text (which seems tainted) says that Ahitub was Zadok's father (as in 1 Chr 5:34; Ezra 7:2), and the latter

⁸ Numbers 8:5-26 confirms that the ritual of consecrating Levites differs from the consecration of priests.

⁹ Wellhausen and Cody, mentioned in note 5, but also W. Baudissin, "Priests and Levites," in *Hastings' Dictionary of the Bible* (ed. J. Hastings) (New York: Scribner's 1902) IV, 72; North, "Aarons's Rise in Prestige," 194.

¹⁰ Zimmerli, *Ezekiel*, II, 368.

¹¹ L.L. Grabbe, *A History of the Jews and Judaism in the Second Temple Period. I. Yehud. A History of the Persian Province of Judah* (LSTS 47; London–New York: Clark 2004) I, 225. "After the return from exile, a tendency emerged for all the priests to be of Levitical descent, and then the Jerusalem Zadokites acquired their lineage from Levi-Aaron" (T. Brzegowy, „Kapłani i lewici w tradycji kapłańskiej (P) Pięcioksięgu”, *CT* 72/3 [2002] 25). It is worth adding that Brzegowy's thesis of the fictitious origin of the Zadokites is based on A. Cody (*A History of Old Testament Priesthood*, 29–61).

says that Ahitub was the father of Ahimelek and grandfather of the priest Abiathar of the line of Levi. 2 Sam 8:17 likewise presents an attempt to “invent” a Levitical genealogy for Zadok, whose origin was unclear. This raises the question of whether, by chance, after Nehemiah’s reform and the demotion of the Levitical priests, the new priestly caste sought legitimacy for its position in the person of Zadok, one of David’s two priests (along with Abiathar), artificially deriving his genealogy from the tribe of Levi. If this was the case, the Book of Ezekiel (and following it, 1 Chr 5:27-41) would have sanctioned the final outcome of Nehemiah’s reform¹² and after the demotion of the Levites, Zadok was chosen as the protoplast of the new post-exilic priestly line. Since his true genealogy was lost in the darkness of history, it was easy to forge a new one: Zadok had the same Levitical lineage as Abiathar, the priest who fell into disfavor with Solomon. This would explain why the Chronicler after Nehemiah’s reformation traces Abiathar’s and Zadok’s origin as descended from Itamar and Eleazar respectively (1 Chr 24:3), the sons of Aaron the Levite (see also Ex 3:14; Num 3:32; 26:60; 1 Chr 5:29). Also, the degradation of Abiathar (1 Kings 1:7; 2:22.26-27) could be a type or prediction of the post-exile degradation of the Levites, and the Levites themselves as secondary priests in the Book of Ezekiel could be the descendants of Abiathar (though this is not mentioned anywhere).

Disregarding 2 Sam 8:17 as a tainted text, Zadok first appeared in the Hebrew Bible in 2 Sam 15:24-36 and, like the once-legendary king-priest of Jerusalem (Gen 14:18-20) Melchizedek, had no genealogy. Was he, too, a king-priest¹³ of Jebust, spared by David and incorporated into the cultic apparatus of Israel’s new capital, as some suggest,¹⁴ giving rise to a later line of priests? Or are Melchizedek and Zadok one and the same person? It is difficult to say. However, at the time of Nehemiah’s reform, the figure of Zadok without a father and mother may have proved convenient for those who aspired to the priestly office after the demotion of the Levites, although they did not have the proper legitimacy certified by pedigree. Zadok provided such legitimacy. This is why Joshua, the first high priest of the Second Temple period, was – through the genealogy of his father, Jehozadak – linked to the line of Zadok (cf. Hag 1:1 with 1 Chr 5:40-41).

¹² Of course, Wellhausen, true to his theory, will argue that Ezek 40-48 only confirms the pre-exile division into the Zadokites and Levites from the time of Josiah.

¹³ H.H. Rowley, “Melchizedek and Zadok (Genesis 14 and Psalm 110),” *Festschrift für A. Bertholet zum 80. Geburtstag* (ed. W. Baumgarten) (Tübingen: Mohr & Siebeck 1950) 461–472; C.E. Hauer, Jr., “Who was Zadok?” *JBL* 82 (1963) 90; Aberbach, Smolar, “Aaron, Jeroboam, and the Golden Calves,” 136. H.R. Weaver (*The Priesthood of Judaism in the Persian Period* [Diss. Boston University Graduate School 1949] 85) in his doctoral dissertation believes that Zadok was a Gibeonite.

¹⁴ H.H. Rowley, “Zadok and Nahushtan,” *JBL* 58 (1939) 113–141; Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*, 176–177; Alberty, *Storia della religione nell’Israele antico*, I, 200–201; L.L. Grabbe, *Priests, Prophets, Diviners, Sages. A Socio-Historical Study of Religious Specialists in Ancient Israel* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International 1995) 61–62; Schaper, *Priester und Leviten im achämenidischen Juda*, 93, 270; though criticized by Frank M. Cross (*Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1973] 209–214) and George W. Ramsey (“Zadok,” *ABD* VI, 1034–1036).

2.2. Testimony of the Book of Leviticus

The P texts view priesthood as the prerogative of Aaron and his offspring (this line seems to be supported by Nehemiah: “And the priest, a descendant of Aaron, shall be with the Levites ...”; Neh 10:39; see also 12:47). Aaron was undoubtedly a Levite (Ex 3:14) and did not need, like Zadok, a “made up” genealogy. However, there are other texts – which were, importantly, subjected to post-exile editing¹⁵ – that look at Aaron with an unfavorable eye: he contributed to the casting of the golden calf in the midst of the Sinai (Ex 32; Deut 9) and spoke out against Moses (Lev 12). If Aaron was indeed the progenitor of the priestly lineage, some post-exilic circles considered him a controversial figure. The friction surrounding his person may be a vestige of the post-exile conflicts that erupted between two groups aspiring to take the place of the deposed Levites: a group of self-appointed priests seeking legitimacy in the invented genealogy of Zadok, and another whose genealogy derived from Aaron was not in doubt (though of course the Levites themselves may also have struggled to regain their former position).¹⁶ However, the attitude of the Aaronites, compromised by their handling of the temple outside Jerusalem, probably at Bethel,¹⁷ made it easier for their opponents to link Aaron’s character to the worship of the calf (see Ex 32:26.28) and weakened the position of his descendants as contenders for the priestly office in Jerusalem after Nehemiah’s reform.

2.3. The special position of the Holiness Code (Leviticus 17-26)

What is worthy of note is the Holiness Code (Leviticus 17-26), which, being close to the environment of the Book of Ezekiel,¹⁸ was originally intended – in its parts pertaining to priests – to regulate the ministry of the Zadokites. However, when subjected to the redaction of P and incorporated into Leviticus, it began to refer to the Aaronites. The ubiquitous introductions such as “speak to Aaron and his sons” (Lev 21:1.17.24; 22:1-2.18) are meant to emphasize that the regulations pertaining to the priests apply specifically to the Aaronites. Thus, the legislation contained in P source, by changing the addressee, may have become a weapon in the battle between the two factions in favor of the Aaronites.¹⁹ But was this really the ultimate purpose of these introductions?

¹⁵ R. Smend, *La formazione dell’Antico Testamento* (Brescia: Paideia 1993) 85.

¹⁶ However, there are those who believe that the phrase “sons of Aaron” is a compromise and includes both Zadokites and Levites; H.G. Judge, “Aaron, Zadok and Abiathar,” *JTS* 7 (1956) 70–74.

¹⁷ The hypothesis that the Bethel sanctuary functioned as a place of Yahwist worship during the Babylonian exile, when the Jerusalem Temple lay in ruins – while supported by many – is not supported by archaeology. See J. Blenkinsopp, “The Judaean Priesthood During the Neo-Babylonian and Achaemenid Periods: A Hypothetical Reconstruction,” *CBQ* 69 (1998) 25–43; J.M. Bos, *Reconsidering the Date and Provenance of the Book of Hosea. The Case for Persian-Period Yehud* (LHBOTS 580; London et al.: Bloomsbury 2013) 71–72, 74 (with note 14).

¹⁸ For a brief overview of theories on the relationship between the Holiness Code and Ezekiel, see Smend, *La formazione dell’Antico Testamento*, 80.

¹⁹ Some do not speak of a battle between the Aaronites and Zadokites, but of their merger, which would be confirmed by 1 Kings 5:27-41: see Brzegowy, „Kapłani i lewicy” 11.

2.4. Conclusion

The post-exile texts that speak of the line of Zadok (the Book of Ezekiel) and the line of Aaron (the Book of Leviticus and the Book of Numbers) present a chaotic picture of the situation and do not allow us to resolve why the figure of Zadok is highlighted at one point and that of Aaron at another. It is possible that the Books of Leviticus and Numbers are not so much concerned with the genealogical lineage of the post-exilic priests as they are trying to root their rights and duties in the Sinai period at the time of Moses, when Zadok was not yet there. This would solve a number of problems and would be the simplest explanation. It is possible, however, that the line of Zadok, which Joshua,²⁰ the first high priest of the Second Temple period (Hag 1:1; 1 Chr 5:27-41) was descended from, was initially dominant (until Nehemiah’s reform), while later the line of Aaron began to strengthen (after Nehemiah’s reform). In other words, at some point the genealogical continuity between the high priests was broken. Proof of this can be found in the fact that the list of high priests in the Book of Nehemiah is too confusing to be reliable. In the Chronicler, on the other hand, one can see a tendency (apologetic one?) to connect the family of Zadok with the family of Aaron, and thus provide genealogical continuity for the high priests of the Second Temple. Indeed, the attempt to reconstruct the list of the first high priests²¹ suggests that the uncertainty of the sources we have in this regard may conceal a dynastic change in the high priestly office. Hence arose the need to find some legitimacy for this fact, which, however, made the matter even more confusing.

Joshua (reasonably certain: Haggai, Zechariah)

Jehojakim (uncertain: Neh 12:10.22; Flavius Josephus)

Eliashib (rather certain: the Nehemiah Memorial)

Jehoiada (uncertain: Neh 13:28; perhaps Neh 12:10.22; Flavius Josephus)

Jehohanan (certain: papyri from Elephantine; perhaps Flavius Josephus)

Jonathan (very uncertain: Neh 12:10)

Johanan (uncertain: preserved coins; perhaps Neh 12:22)

Jaddua (very uncertain: perhaps one surviving coin; perhaps Neh 12:10.22; Flavius Josephus)

Another issue is the Deuteronomic and Deuteronomistic texts (e.g. Deut. 21:5; 31:9; 1 Kings 8:14; 12:31), which, unlike the P texts, do not problematize the origin of the temple priesthood or its internal divisions (and in this sense coincide with Mal 2:1-9), making it clear that only the sons of Levi are legitimate priests (see the expression $\text{הַכֹּהֲנִים הַלְוִיִּים}$ *hakkōh^anīm hall^ewīyyim* in Deut 17:18; 18:1; 24:8; 27:9 referring explicitly to the Levitical origin of the priests without further distinction

²⁰ However, in light of the final conclusions of this article, Joshua’s Zadokite lineage was attributed to him after the degradation of the Levites, for he himself was in fact a Levite (see §6 last paragraph). Indeed, the first high priest after the exile must have opened the only legitimate genealogical line.

²¹ The list of high priests presented follows Lester L. Grabbe (*A History of the Jews and Judaism*, I, 232). In turn, the list of high priests of the entire Persian period proposed by Frank M. Cross (“A Reconstruction of the Judean Restoration,” in *From Epic to Canon. History and Literature in Ancient Israel* [Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press 1988] 151–172) is too hypothetical to be a reliable reference point. See the discussion in Grabbe, *A History of the Jews and Judaism*, I, 232–234.

into the Aaronites or Zadokites; likewise, Jer 33:18.21 probably coming from a Deuteronomistic editor). It is possible that a deeper study of all the Deuteronomistic texts would make it possible to isolate the oldest layers of the tradition, giving a rough idea of the situation of the priests before the Babylonian exile. However, we know that this type of inquiry is fraught with a high risk of hypotheticality. Perhaps the Deuteronomistic authors and editors are trying to distance themselves from the internal problems of the post-exile temple personnel, or to find a compromise between the feuding factions, since each priestly line (Zadokite and Aaronite) must have descended in one way or another, according to tradition, from Levi, the third son of Jacob, born of Leah (Gen 35:23). Perhaps, however, the explanation is much simpler: the Deuteronomistic authors and editors, like Mal 2:1-9, are unaware of the division between priests and Levites, because historically there simply was not one yet. Indeed, it does not appear (as Julius Wellhausen would have it in his *Prolegomena*²²) that such a division was the aftermath of Josiah's reform, which constituted the historical and theological matrix of the Deuteronomistic trend. There is no evidence for this, and the reference to 2 Kings 23:8-9 is too general to confirm it.

In the search for an answer to the question of what was the status of the pre-exile priesthood, it would be helpful to examine the pre-exile JE texts in the Pentateuch or those passages in the Book of Jeremiah that were not subject to Deuteronomistic redaction. However, such a study is beyond the scope of this article.

In light of the information gathered and the dilemmas raised, the exegete and historian of post-exile Judaism cannot fail to notice that the second disputation in the Book of Malachi (Mal 1:6-2:9) – directed against the priests – is the longest surviving text that the Hebrew Bible devotes to the issue of priests before Nehemiah's reform, and, like the Deuteronomic texts, it does not distinguish between priests and Levites.

3. THE STRUCTURE AND INTERNAL DYNAMICS OF Mal 2:1-9

The second disputation in the Book of Malachi²³ is divided into two parts. The first part (Mal 1:6-14) describes the sin of the priests in the context of their worship. The second (Mal 2:1-9), which will be the subject of my subsequent analysis, is God's response to the sin of the priests.

²² Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*, 116–121, 139–140 (especially 118–119). See also footnote 5 and § 6 below

²³ E. Pfeiffer, „Die Disputationsworte im Buche Maleachi. Ein Beitrag zur formgeschichtlichen Struktur,“ *EvT* 19 (1959) 546–568.

3.1. Frame (Mal 1:6c; 2:9a) – “disregarding priests will be disregarded”

Both parts are inscribed in a frame based on the verb הִזְזָה *bāzāh* “to disregard” and on a rhetorically interesting transition from the active *participium* “disregarding” to the passive *participium* “disregarded” (Mal 1:6c; 2:9a). Since such a juxtaposition is used here intentionally, its rhetorical force must be duly highlighted and interpreted in exegesis. For it is possible that this is the first hint of the existence in the Hebrew Bible of a law on the degradation of Levite priests, which became part of Nehemiah’s later reform (Neh 13:22.29; see also Mal 3:3-4).

[...] to you priests **disregarding** (הִזְזָה *bōzē*) my name [...].
(Mal 1:6c)



By my will you have been (will be?) **disregarded** [...] (הִזְזִים *nibzîm*)
(Mal 2:9a)

3.2. Covenant formula – God’s royal and sovereign will

Focusing attention on the second part of the disputation (Mal 2:1-9), it is worth noting that it resembles the covenant formula typical of the Hittite covenants (including those of the Neo-Assyrian period),²⁴ which were also the model for the Sinai covenant. This formula had its components in the following sequence: 1) an introduction by the speaker; 2) a historical introduction showing the earlier history of the relationship between the parties; 3) the terms of the covenant; 4) an acknowledgment that the document signed by the parties was publicly read and, if possible, recorded/memorialized in some form (e.g. on a stone stele); 5) an invocation of God as a witness to reinforce the importance and authority of the covenant; and finally, if necessary, 6) blessings or curses with a description of the appropriate divine action depending on whether the vassal fulfills the provisions of the agreement or not.²⁵

In Mal 2:1-8 (excluding v. 9) virtually all of the components of the covenant formula are present (with the exception of God’s call to witness²⁶), albeit in a different order than in the Hittite paradigm, which exegesis should clarify and interpret.

²⁴ In Mal 1:14, the phrase “I am a great King” is reminiscent of the formula used in the Hittite covenants, see R.L. Smith, *Micah-Malachi* (WBC 32; Waco, TX: Word Books 1984) 311.

²⁵ There is an extensive literature on the Hittite covenants and their influence on the shape of the Sinai covenant. Among the most recent publications on the subject, two are highly recommended: K.A. Kitchen, P.J.N. Lawrence, *Treaty, Law and Covenant in the Ancient Near East* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz 2012) I-III, *passim*; J.H. Walton, *Ancient Israelite Literature in Its Cultural Context. A Survey of Parallels Between Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (Library of Biblical Interpretation; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan 1989) *passim* (esp. 90, 95–109).

²⁶ This should come as no surprise, since God himself is speaking here through the prophet.

Table 1. Covenant formula in Mal 2:1-8 (New King James Version)²⁷

Elements of the Hittite covenant	Mal 2,1-8
Introduction by the speaker	¹ And now, O priests, this commandment is for you (תאזוּהוּ הַמִּשְׁוֵה־חַזְזוֹ'ל) <i>hammišwā^h hazzō'ṭ</i>
A historical introduction showing the bilateral relationship	⁵ My covenant was with him [Levi], one of life and peace, And I gave them to him that he might fear Me; So he feared Me And was reverent before My name. ⁶ The law of truth was in his mouth, And injustice was not found on his lips. He walked with Me in peace and equity, And turned many away from iniquity. ⁸ But you have departed from the way; You have caused many to stumble at the law. You have corrupted the covenant of Levi, Says the Lord of hosts.
Terms/objectives of the covenant	⁷ For the lips of a priest should keep knowledge, And people should seek the law from his mouth; For he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts.
Declaration of publicity/memorialization	⁴ Then you shall know that I have sent this commandment to you (תאזוּהוּ הַמִּשְׁוֵה־חַזְזוֹ'ל), That My covenant with Levi may continue, Says the Lord of hosts.
God's call as witness	—
Blessings/curses	² If you will not hear, And if you will not take it to heart, To give glory to My name, Says the Lord of hosts, I will send a curse upon you, And I will curse your blessings. Yes, I have cursed them already, Because you do not take it to heart. ³ Behold, I will rebuke your descendants And spread refuse on your faces, The refuse of your solemn feasts; And one will take you away with it.

The change in the structure of the covenant formula (see Table 1) and its content indicate that in Malachi we are not dealing with the establishment of a new covenant, but with the enforcement of the provisions of an earlier covenant that has been broken. This would be further confirmed by two elements: the mitzvah (a) and the lamentation (b).

²⁷ The exegetical arguments presented in this article will be the basis for a different translation than the one in the New King James Version (see below §5).

(a) The twofold emphasis on the phrase *hammišwā^h hazzō ’t* (Mal 2:1.4), which, by fleshing out one of a number of provisions of a once-contracted agreement, underscores the categorical nature of God’s decision and the seriousness of the situation of the Levite priests.

(b) The historical introduction showing the bilateral relationship between God and the priests does not go in the direction of establishing a new covenant, but is intended to justify the invocation of the relevant mitzvah by juxtaposing two contrasting attitudes: on the one hand, the former commendable behavior of the priestly lineage of Levi respecting the terms of the covenant, and on the other hand, the current conduct of the Levites which led to the breaking of the covenant (Mal 2:8c: “You have corrupted the covenant of Levi” *šihattem berūt hallēwī*). The juxtaposition of past and present, typical of biblical laments (see e.g. Isa 1:21), gives God the impetus to seek such a mitzvah from among the covenant records as a legal basis for punitive action: “you will be made contemptible” (Mal 2:9a: *w^ggam-’anī nātattī ’et kem nibzīm*).

3.3. Conclusion

Even if the Hittite scheme has not been faithfully reproduced, the use of the covenant formula along with the messenger formula (“said the Lord of Hosts” appears 4 times – Mal 2:2.4.7.8) highlights the divine authority of the speaker, the royal sovereignty of the sovereign God, the power of His will (cf. divine *’anī* in Mal 2:9a), which imposes and enforces conditions and obligations through the mitzvah to confirm the validity of the promise of “life and peace” (*haḥayyim w^hšālôm* – Mal 2:5a.4b).²⁸ It is also worth noting the legislative-prophetic nature of this statement through the use, on the one hand, of the covenant formula, and the fourfold use of the messenger formula and the entire context of the prophetic statement on the other. Malachi as a prophet and legislator mediates between God and the priests, and in such a dual function he resembles Moses. It is possible that this mode of expression is a rhetorical device to establish his credibility vis-à-vis the sinful priests and to put pressure on those who should carry out a thorough reform of priesthood as soon as possible (Nehemiah?).

²⁸ G. Fohrer, *Strutture teologiche dell’Antico Testamento* (BCR 36; Brescia: Paideia 1980) 125–127.

4. EXEGETICAL READING OF Mal 2:1-9

The pattern delineated in the previous paragraph provides a starting point for the exegesis of Mal 2:1-9.

4.1. Introduction by the speaker (Mal 2:1)

וְעַתָּה אֶלְיֶיכֶם הַמִּצְוָה הַזֹּאת הַכֹּהֲנִים

And therefore this mitzva is against you, O priests!

The pericope of Mal 2:1-9 opens with an authoritative introduction of a religious command (הַמִּצְוָה *hammišwā^h*)²⁹ the content of which is not entirely clear (as can be seen in the perplexity of some scholars) as is not clear where the command should be sought: in vv. 2-3, v. 7 or v. 9? Moreover, it is not obvious who is to carry out this command, the priests vis-à-vis God or third parties vis-à-vis the priests. The prepositional phrase אֶלְיֶיכֶם (*'alēkem*) can be interpreted in two ways: as a *dativus* of addressee (“to you”; see below 3.1.1) or as a *dativus* of reference, or possibly a thematic *dativus* with an adversary tinge (“as to you,” “in relation to you,” “about you,” “against you”; see below 3.1.2).³⁰ I will consider both of these possibilities.

4.1.1. The mitzvah – an order addressed to the priests

(אֶלְיֶיכֶם *'alēkem* as the *dativus* of the addressee)

If we understand the mitzvah as a divine command that the priests should carry out, its content would be expressed in vv. 2-3. The indicative pronoun הַזֹּאת (*hazzō 'l*) in the syntagma “this command” hints that v. 1 is directly related to v. 2. However, as a conditional sentence, which, while suggesting what could be the content of the mitzvah (=the necessity of worshiping Yahweh’s name), v. 2 is more of a sanction for breaking the covenant and highlights God’s punitive action. In vv. 2-3, the acting subject is actually God, not man. This, in turn, does not fit the meaning of the noun הַמִּצְוָה (*mišwā^h*), which, deriving from מִצַּוָּה (*šāwā^h*) “to command,” always describes the object of human (rather than divine) action. A mitzvah is a command that God gives to humans to fulfill (see e.g. Gen 26:5; Ex 15:26; 16:28; 20:6; 24:12; Lev 4:2.13.22.27; Num 15:22.31; Deut 5:10; 6:1-2; Isa 29:13).³¹

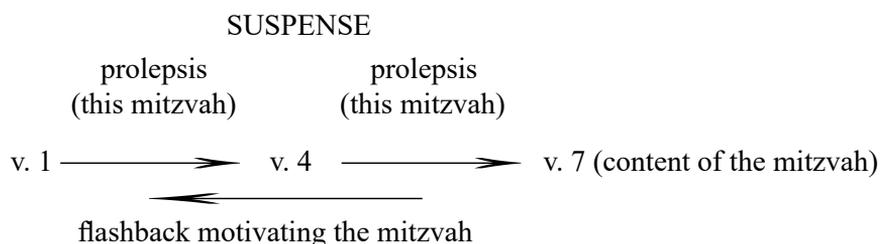
²⁹ Pieter A. Verhoef (*The Books of Haggai and Malachi* [NICOT; Grand Rapids, MI - Cambridge: Eerdmans 1987] 237) does not see the problem and focuses his attention on considering whether the mitzvah in Mal 2:1 means a command expressing God’s judgment, or whether it should be identified with the covenant of Levi. This dilemma finds a solution, as we shall see, in a detailed exegetical analysis.

³⁰ It is worth noting that the Polish translation of the Bible (BT 5th ed.) translates אֶלְיֶיכֶם (*'alēkem*) in v. 1 as the *dativus* of the addressee („to you”), and in v. 4 as the *dativus* of reference („as to you”). This does not seem correct. Since in both cases אֶלְיֶיכֶם (*'alēkem*) is combined with הַמִּצְוָה הַזֹּאת (*hammišwā^h hazzō 'l*), the translation should be identical.

³¹ In the Pentateuch, מִצְוָה *mišwā^h* is always a command from God; see L. Koehler, W. Baumgartner, J.J. Stamm, *Wielki słownik hebrajsko-polski i aramejsko-polski* (Warszawa: Vocatio 2008) I, 585.

It is also worth noting that the information about the issuance of “this” command to the priests is repeated in v. 4, which serves a retrospective function to v. 1, and can be linked to v. 7, in which the content of the command becomes clear: the priest, as God’s messenger, is to guard knowledge and transmit the Torah. Thus, the actual content of the mitzvah to be fulfilled by the priests would only be found in v. 7 (the definitive article of המצוה הזאת *hammišwā^h* would thus be cataphoric). Additionally, it would be highlighted by the positive example of Levi’s conduct in vv. 5-6.

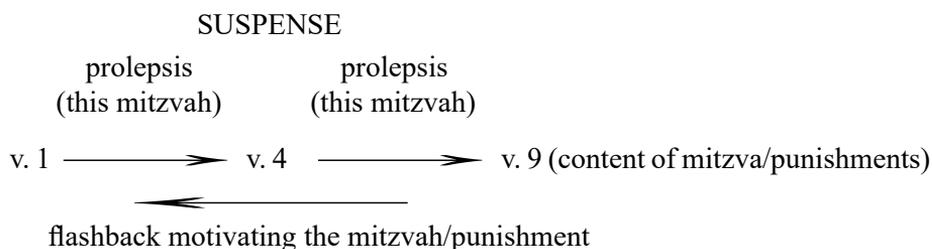
In such a structure, the space between v. 1 and v. 7 would create a rhetorical *suspense* that would sharpen the reader’s attention by prompting them to look for the content of the actual command – המצוה הזאת *hammišwā^h hazzō ‘ī*). The pronoun זאת (hazzō ‘ī), in turn, would be proleptic, “pushing” the reader constantly forward, as it were (vv. 1.4), to find the explanation in v. 7.



While the rhetoric used is interesting, it obscures the picture somewhat and does not include vv. 8-9, excluding them from the logic of the entire pericope. In addition, vv. 8-9 have the character of a punishment (and not a command directed to the priests) and would diverge content-wise from vv. 1-7 if interpreted in this way. So let us consider an alternative option.

4.1.2. The mitzvah – punishment imposed on priests/law about priests (אליכם as *dativus* of reference/ thematic *dativus/adversary dativus*)

If the mitzvah is a decree of God’s punishment to be carried out by third parties on the priests, its content would be expressed in v. 9. And although God speaks in the first person (אני נתתי אתכם נבזים) *‘nī nātattī ‘eḥkem nibzīm*), the etymology and semantic field of the noun mitzvah indicates that God will use other persons (Nehemiah?) to carry out his intention: he will give them a mitzvah – the law about priests – to punish them for their unworthy conduct and violation of the covenant with Levi, according to earlier records.



The above scheme does not differ in the rhetoric used from the previous one (see 4.1.1 above), but it extends to the entire pericope under study (Mal 2:1-9). It reveals its punitive nature and indicates that we are dealing here with a divine decree to bring about the “disregard” of the Levites, i.e. their actual degradation. For this reason, this interpretation will be preferred in this article.

4.1.3. The vocative הַכֹּהֲנִים (*hakkōh^anīm*) and the liturgical context

The definite article next to the vocative הַכֹּהֲנִים (*hakkōh^anīm*) indicates the physical presence of the priests during the ceremonial proclamation of the mitzvah.³² Indeed, the temple liturgy provided for moments when the prophet could speak in full freedom, taking responsibility for the words he spoke (see Am 7:10-13; Jer 7; 26). Thus, we would be dealing with an actual speech that – delivered in a liturgical and sacrificial context in the newly rebuilt Jerusalem Temple – was directly addressed to a specific group of Levites at a specific historical time (thus, not an imaginary group of people or the timeless nature of the accusation delivered). And while we would expect an appositional vocative immediately following אֶלְיָכֶם (*‘alēkēm*), its placement at the end of the verse gives the exhortation an emphatic sound. Similarly, the phrase אֶלְיָכֶם (*‘alēkēm*) itself, interpreted as a *dativus* of reference (or thematic or adversary *dativus* – see 4.1.2), positioned before הַמִּצְוָה הַזֹּאת (*hammišwā^h hazzō’^ṭ*), emphasizes the theme of the mitzvah equally emphatically (“O you/against you is this mitzvah, O priests!”). The tone of the prophetic utterance must have attracted the attention of the Levites present in the temple and gave the prophetic utterance – from the very first words – the character of an accusatory speech.

4.1.4. Adverb וְעַתָּה (*w^o‘attā^h*) and the immediacy/categorical nature of God’s mitzvah

The temporal adverb “and now” וְעַתָּה (*w^o‘attā^h*) often introduces a command that must be fulfilled without delay (see, for example. Gen 20:7; 21:23; 27:3.8.43; 37:20; Num 14:17; 22:6; 24:11; Isa 28:22; 36:8; 37:20; 44:1; 47:8; Jer 18:11; 37:20; Am 7:16; Jon 4:3; Hag 2:4.15). Of the 272 uses of וְעַתָּה (*w^o‘attā^h*) in total in the Hebrew Bible, 206 introduce sentences (verbal or nominal) with volitional meaning, combining with imperative, jussive, cohortative or with participles and verbs in the *imperfectum* with a volitional tinge, or itself becoming a volitional verb of nominal sentences (e.g. Deut 10:12; Judges 20:9; 1 Sam 25:27).³³

In addition, וְעַתָּה (*w^o‘attā^h*) can also be understood as a deictic-consecutive adverb, close in meaning to the participle הִנֵּה (*hinne^h*) “behold” (as, for example, in 2 Sam 7:28; 12:23; 14:15; 15:43; 1 Kings 3:7; 5:18; 12:11; Isa 43:1; 49:5; Jer 27:6; 1 Chr

³² „The article is used to mark a definite addressee, pointing out a particular individual who is present to the speaker and who is addressed in the vocative” (B.K. Waltke, M. O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* [Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns 1990] 247, § 13.5.2c).

³³ In Genesis 3:22, volition is expressed with the conjunction וְעַתָּה with the intentional conjunct כִּי „that it may not.”

17:23.26; 29:13; 2 Chr 7:16; 10:11; 13:8; 28:10), sometimes even combining with it (as in 1 Sam 12:2.13; 24:21; 1 Kings 22:23; 2 Kings 5:6; Jer 40:4; 2 Kings 18:22). הַעַתָּה (*w^o‘attā^h*) would then emphasize the consecutive nature of the verse and link it to the preceding passage. The translation “and therefore” would therefore be justified.

It seems that הַעַתָּה (*w^o‘attā^h*) in Mal 2:1 performs both functions simultaneously: deictic and volitional. Deictically, it directs the prophet’s accusatory finger against the Levites, emphasizing their responsibility for the sins committed by the sacrificers during the sacrifices, which was the subject of the first part of the disputation (Mal 1:6-14). In turn, volitionally, it highlights God’s solemn resolve to degrade the Levites (הִבַּזְתִּי *bāzā^h* “to disregard”; Mal 2:9a). The Polish translation (BT 5th ed.) is unable to render both aspects at the same time, because it will emphasize either the temporal-deictic aspect (“and now behold” with the emphasis that it is happening now in Malachi’s time or very close to it) or the consecutive aspect (“and therefore”). However, in addition, the translation should convey the volitional tint of the prophetic statement.

Either way, הַעַתָּה (*w^o‘attā^h*) marks the transition from the first part of the disputation (Mal 1:6-14) to the second, making Mal 2:1 an expressive caesura that connects the two parts and at the same time separates them. For if the first part (Mal 1:6-14) was addressed to the sacrificers who bring tainted offerings, now – from Mal 2:1 – the prophet addresses the priests who accept these offerings and place them on the altar. He communicates to them a mitzvah that expresses God’s determination to execute punishment without delay on those who disobey his will: “And it is for this reason that immediately upon you (is to be proclaimed/executed) this mitzvah, O priests.” The mitzvah in question here is a *de facto* sentence.³⁴ The pronounced word of condemnation has the character of an event, just like any prophetic word coming from God³⁵: announcing the mitzvah, the prophet simultaneously performs it (from God’s perspective), although historically (from man’s perspective) its performance will be postponed in time. The judgment pronounced is therefore irrevocable. And even though Mal 2:2 seems to introduce a certain conditionality, opening up the prospect of repentance and a change in God’s decision (which will be addressed later in exegesis), Mal 2:1, along with the entire pericope, emphasizes the irreversibility of the punishment that falls on the Levites in the very act of pronouncing judgment. Their degradation, however, will not be annihilation, but, as we shall see further on, purification (“[...] and will cleanse the sons of Levi”; Mal 3:3) and assign them a new role in the religious life of post-exile Judah.

³⁴ H.G. Reventlow, *Aggeo, Zaccaria e Malachia* (Antico Testamento 25/2; Brescia: Paideia 2010) 225.

³⁵ „[...] a word in the Old Testament really is – a personal event to which speaking as well as hearing belongs” (C. Westermann, *Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech* [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox 1991] 93).

4.1.5. Conclusion

“Therefore against you is this mitzvah, O priests!” (Mal 2:1) is a nominal sentence with $\text{הַמִּצְוָה הַזֹּאת} (hammišwā^h hazzō^t)$ as the subject and $\text{אֵלֵיכֶם} (‘alēkem)$ as the predicate. The sentence structure is simple, while the meaning is problematic as it raises a number of questions around the concept of mitzvah: Who is it addressed to? What does it apply to? Does it have a universal dimension or is it narrowed to a specific group of people? The immediate context of Mal 2:1 proves helpful in answering these queries: after the accusatory speech in Mal 1:6-14, addressed to the sacrificers, the prophet holds the priests responsible for abuses in the sphere of worship. Therefore, it is directly to them – caught, as it were, *in flagrante* during a liturgy soiled by unworthy offerings – he proclaims a divine mitzvah, the fulfillment of which will be a *de facto* punishment: the priests will be disregarded (Mal 2:9). The main body of the pericope (Mal 2:2-8) – as we shall see – will be the justification of God’s decision.

The rhetorical devices used – the conciseness of Mal 2:1, the adverb $\text{וְעַתָּה} (w^a‘attā^h)$ with a deictic-volitive tinge, the emphasis placed on the adversary expression $\text{אֵלֵיכֶם} (‘alēkem)$ and the vocative $\text{הַכֹּהֲנִים} (hakkōh^anīm)$ emphasizing the physical proximity between the speaker and the addressees – emphasize the accusatory tone of the spoken words, which sound like a bolt from the blue and allow us to assume that what comes next does not bode well for the Levites: “And now against you is this mitzvah, O priests!” Directness, immediacy and definitiveness characterize God’s decision. There is no appeal from it.

It is worth noting the curious position of the Jerusalem Temple, which is present in Mal 2:1 despite being absent. Its presence is only suggested by the literary context, the article in $\text{הַכֹּהֲנִים} (hakkōh^anīm)$ and the custom that prophets often gave their speeches in it, particularly if they dealt with issues of purity of worship. If this was indeed the case, and Malachi delivers his speech in the temple, it itself appears as a point of convergence of divine holiness and divine wrath, human sinfulness and divine punishment, unworthy sacrifice and prophetic exhortation of sacrificers and priests joined together in a common cultic act. By pinpointing everything in the temple, the prophet wanted to say, as it were, that the quality of Judean life depended on the quality of worship and the priests’ solid fulfillment of the covenant with Levi. The centrality of temple worship in Malachi’s preaching (there will be a similar perspective in Mal 3:1-5) suggests, moreover, that he was close to the priestly environment: he was well aware of the kind of abuses at the time of the sacrifices; he saw the priests’ lack of commitment, their inaction to remove these abuses; he saw the unreformability of the priestly environment, which required radical intervention... but by whom? The human legislator or God (as in Mal 3:3)? The legislative tone already noted in Mal 2:1 also gives much food for thought.

The executor of the command will be someone else: God (as in Mal 3:3: “[...] and he will purify the sons of Levi”) or a human reformer. Thus, in the adverbial expression $\text{הַמִּצְוָה הַזֹּאת} (hammišwā^h hazzō^t)$ there may be a foreshadowing of God’s intervention or a manifesto for the reform of priesthood, which in Malachi’s time was found to be unworthy of its functions. This reform, however, is not intended to abolish priesthood or to combat external factors (as in the pre-exile period with

the influence of Canaanite religion). Its purpose is to uphold the covenant with Levi. It seems, however, that this reform, although already prepared, remains in abeyance for some time to give the priests an opportunity to convert.

4.2. Lamentations: a two-way relationship between God and the sons of Levi in the past and present – Mal 2:5-6.8

בְּרִיתִי הָיְתָה אִתּוֹ הַחַיִּים וְהַשְּׁלוֹם וְאַתְנַם-לוֹ מוֹרָא וַיִּירָאֵנִי וּמִפְנֵי שְׂמִי נִחַת הוּא:
 תּוֹרַת אֲמַת הָיְתָה בְּפִיהוּ וְעוֹלָה לֹא-נִמְצָא בְּשִׁפְתָיו בְּשְׁלוֹם וּבְמִישׁוֹר הָלַךְ אִתִּי וְרַבִּים הָשִׁיב מֵעוֹן:
 וְאַתֶּם סָרְתֶם מִן-הַדֶּרֶךְ הַכְּשִׁלְתֶם רַבִּים בַּתּוֹרָה שְׁחַתֶּם בְּרִית הַלְוִי אֲמַר יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת:⁸

⁵My covenant with him was [a covenant] of life and peace, because I wanted to give it to him. It was also a covenant of the fear of God, that he should honor Me.

And he did indeed bow before My name;

⁶on his lips was true doctrine, and wickedness was not found on his lips; in peace and righteousness with Me he walked, and drew many away from sin.

⁸But you have gone astray, led many astray in the Torah, and annulled the covenant with Levi, says the Lord of Hosts.

Mal 2:5 is a disjunctive verbal phrase, whose “subject + predicate” order places it somewhat off to the side, despite the fact that it weaves it into the logic of the preceding verse. It is positioned as parallel to Mal 2:4, as specifying the cause and effect of the covenant. This highlights the bilateral nature of the relationship described – the expression אִתּוֹ (*’ittō*) “with him” is a deliberate redundancy of the earlier אֶת-לְוִי (*’et-lēwī*) “with Levi” (Mal 2:4) – but more importantly it emphasizes its unique intentionality and efficiency. The hermeneutical key of “gift-task,” in the Bible linked substantively to covenant theology, opens the way for the reader’s proper understanding of God’s intention, which at the level of syntax is, not coincidentally, expressed in two sentences with a *waw consecutivum* conjunctive: the first וְאַתְנַם-לוֹ (*wā’ettⁿnēm-lō*) “because I wanted to give it to him” expresses God’s gift, while the second, וַיִּירָאֵנִי (*wayyîrā’ēnī*) “that he should honor Me” – God’s will imposing a task on Levi. The life of peace and the obligation of fearing God are as if two mutually contingent actions, one of which would invalidate itself if the other ceased to be. This syntactic and theological construction further emphasizes the strictly bilateral nature of the covenant – perhaps even more so than the redundancy mentioned earlier – linking God and Levi in a relationship of mutual trust and mutual obligation.

It is surprising that commentators do not notice the intended symmetry of the two sentences in Mal 2:5aα.bβ (see Table 2: A-B :: A’-B’), each of which (A and A’), while focusing on one covenantal value (living in peace or fear), syntactically connects it with the immediately following *waw consecutivum* (B and B’) to show what God gives to Levi and what he requires. Constructed in such a compact way, the verse leaves no space for a later editor, whose intervention would be to the detriment of Malachi’s refined theological thought and would prevent his sensitivity to linguistic precision from being appreciated. Thus, one can be almost certain that we are dealing here with the prophet’s original sentence.

Table 2. Compositional structure of Mal 2:5-6

A. בְּרִיתִי הַיְהוָה אִתּוֹ הַשְּׁלֹמִים וְהַשְּׁלֹמִים (Mal 2:5α)	
<i>b^o rīṭī hāy^oṭā 'ittō haḥayyim w^ohaššālôm</i>	
– The verb phrase in inverted order (subject + predicate) stands in disjunction to Mal 2:4; it has an epexegetical tinge as it explains the essence of the covenant with Levi.	
B. וְאֶתְנֵם-לוֹ (Mal 2:5αβ)	
<i>wā 'ett^onēm-lô</i>	
– A verb phrase with a <i>vav consecutivum</i> conjunctive dependent on Mal 2:5αα introduces the <u>first purpose</u> of the covenant with Levi: God wants to provide him with a life of peace (gift).	
A'. מוֹרָא [בְּרִיתִי הַיְהוָה אִתּוֹ] (Mal 2:5βα)	
[<i>b^orīṭī hāy^oṭā 'ittô</i>] <i>môrā'</i>	
– מוֹרָא (<i>môrā'</i>) is another predicative describing the essence of the covenant. It is noteworthy that the phrase in Mal 2:5αα, on which the predicative מוֹרָא (<i>môrā'</i>) depends, has been elliptically omitted (hence the square brackets).	
B'. וַיִּירָאֵנִי (Mal 2:5bβ)	
<i>wayyirā 'ēnī</i>	
– A verb phrase with a <i>waw consecutivum</i> conjunctive dependent on Mal 2:5ba introduces the <u>second purpose</u> of the covenant with Levi: God obliges him to fear God (task).	
C. מִכְּפִי שְׁמִי נִחַת הוּא (Mal 2:5bγ)	<i>ūmipp^onē š^omī niḥaṭ hū'</i>
D. תּוֹרַת אֱמֶת הַיְהוָה בְּפִיהוּ (Mal 2:6a)	<i>tōraṭ 'meṭ hāy^oṭā b^opīhū</i>
E. וְעוֹלָה לֹא-נִמְצָא בְּשִׁפְתָיו (Mal 2:6b)	<i>w^o'awlā lō' -nimšā 'yāṭāpšīḥ</i>
F. בְּשִׁלּוֹם וּבְמִישׁוֹר הִלַּךְ אֲתִי (Mal 2:6c)	<i>b^ošālôm ūb^omīšōr hālaḵ 'ittī</i>
G. וְרַבִּים הִשִּׁיב מֵעוֹן (Mal 2:6d)	<i>w^orabbīm hēšīḥ mē'āwōn</i>
– The five verb sentences (C-G) in reverse order show the effects of the covenant in Levi's life: he honored God's name (C); he taught true doctrine (D); he kept his mouth undefiled (E); he remained before God a person of integrity and righteousness (F); he drew many away from sin (G).	

Table 2 shows the syntactic structure of Mal 2.5αα.ββ-2.5bγ.6abcd, helping to see the relationships between the different segments: first, the cross structure, where the first segment (A) corresponds to the third (A'),³⁶ and the second segment (B) corresponds to the fourth (B'), and then the five segments (C-G), which, as disjunctive verb phrases, form a list of actions Levi took to meet the requirements of the covenant. The C-G segments, standing in disjunction to the A-B/A'-B' pairs, have a consecutive tinge, so in translation they could be introduced with “so that...”. The

³⁶ The lack of article with מוֹרָא *môrā'* (which would be required by the symmetry with the predicative הַשְּׁלֹמִים *haššālôm* in segment A) is a signal that מוֹרָא does not form a hendiadys with הַשְּׁלֹמִים and הַשְּׁלֹמִים. Moreover, it may be an indication that we are dealing here with *accusativus adverbialis specificationis* (“The accusative of specification describes a feature of noun in the absolute state: the accusative is indefinite. This accusative is similar to certain genitive patterns”, Waltke-O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 173, § 10.22.2e).

C-G segments are of a sapiential nature.³⁷ Of these, segment F is the most noteworthy, with its motif of walking with God “in peace and righteousness” (Mal 2:6c). This is reminiscent of the intimate and harmonious relationship with God that Enoch (Gen 5:22.24) and Noah (Gen 6:9) enjoyed,³⁸ giving their hearts to him and doing his will. However, in the context of Mal 2:1-9, walking with God additionally means offering ritual sacrifices in a proper and sincere way.³⁹

4.2.1. Is the “covenant with Levi” in Mal 2:5-6 an echo of earlier traditions and historical events?

Malachi presents the covenant with Levi as a historical event, known to the addressee and hence requiring no further description. We, however, do not quite know which covenant might have been discussed here. Let us consider two possible references: the covenant with Phinehas (Num 25:1-13) and the covenant with Levi (Deut 33:8-11).

(a) Covenant with Phinehas (Num 25:1-13)

God made a covenant with Phinehas, Aaron’s grandson (Num 25:12-13), to reward his holy zeal when he resisted the sinners at Baal-Peor with determination (Num 25:1-8). Like the covenant with Levi, it is called a covenant of peace (ברית שלום *b’rît šālôm* – Num 25:12; see also Sir 45:24). Also, the action of Phinehas turning “back [God’s] wrath from the children of Israel” (השיב את-הקמתי מעל בני-ישראל) (*hēšîb ’et-ḥ^amāṭî mē’al bⁿē-yisrā’ēl* – Num 25:11) seems to mirror the action of Levi, who “drew many away from sin” (רבים השיב מעון) (*rabbîm hēšîb mē’āwōn* – Mal 2:6). The verb השיב in the Hifil conjugation appears in both texts.

It is possible that the story of Baal-Peor in Numbers 25, “squeezed” between the prophetic poetry of Balaam (Num 24) and the dry genealogies and legislations (Num 26-36), is the fruit of the later work of the P editor, who reworked for reasons known only to himself the original description of the covenant with Levi, the patriarch of all the Levites, and thus obliquely concealed the original tradition. By changing the name – Levi to Phinehas – he limited the scope of the covenant to the line of Aaron, from whose lineage Phinehas descended. Adapting the earlier tradition in such a way would have fit temporally into the post-exile period, when the Aaronites’ struggle for access to the altar after Nehemiah’s reformation was to flare up, as we hypothesize (see §§ 1-2.4 above). A vestige of an as yet unprocessed, original tradition would be Jer 33:21, which in close juxtaposition mentions the covenant with David alongside the covenant with the Levite priests הלויים הכהנים (*hakkōh^anîm hall^wḥyîm*). From the latter text, devoid of any historical background (for it seems that, as in Malachi, the addressees knew the history of Levi), it is clear that the prerogative of both covenants was an eternal and indissoluble relationship with God.

It is worth noting that the rewarding nature of the covenant with Phinehas is atypical if we contrast it with other covenants mentioned in the Bible. For nowhere (except in this

³⁷ See §§ 4.3.2-4.3.3 below.

³⁸ Verhoef, *The Books of Haggai and Malachi*, 248.

³⁹ Such a reading in S.D. (Fanie) Snyman, *Malachi* (HCOT; Leuven–Paris–Bristol, CT: Peeters 2015) 89.

one case) is the covenant with God a reward earned by the preceding action of man. Instead, it is always described as a gratuitous gift of God, an expression of his undeserved grace and a manifestation of his sovereign initiative, which suddenly and unexpectedly opens up to man – by offering or calling – a space of life shared with God. This theological aspect of the covenant with Phinehas – a very peculiar one that has escaped commentators’ attention – may also be a vestige of the work of the editor, who, betraying himself with an overly superficial or formalistic approach to the essence of the covenant, unwittingly became a witness to his time, when gradually this very approach took root in the Jewish mentality and became the norm during the Second Temple period.

The Deuterocanonical books, influenced by the P tradition, present Phinehas as a man of God who through his zeal earned for himself an eternal priesthood – *ἱερωσύνη αἰωνία* (1 Macc 2:54; see also 1 Macc 2:26; Sir 45:23-26), with which they allude to Num 25:13: „and it shall be to him [Phinehas] and his descendants after him a covenant of an everlasting priesthood (מִן־הַיְהוּדָה קָהֳנָת עוֹלָם *kʰunnaṭ ʿōlām*), because he was zealous for his God.”⁴⁰ Moreover, the atoning sacrifice that this priest made for the sins of the Israelites in Num 25:13 (וַיִּכַּפֵּר *waykappēr*) finds its echo in Sir 45:23 (ἐξιλάσατο).

(b) Covenant with Levi (Deuteronomy 33:8-11)

In addition to the tradition of Numbers 25:1-8 widely documented in the Bible, Deuteronomy 33:8-11 likewise deserves attention. It is a mysterious and, arguably, the oldest text about Levi. Wellhausen places it in the JE source, as do later exegetes (e.g. Hugo Gressmann⁴¹ and Eduard Meyer). According to the hypotheses put forward by these pioneers of Pentateuch exegesis, it was originally supposed to be part of an independent tradition from Kadesh,⁴² to eventually become an integral part of the story of Moses, due to the compilation efforts of the Yahwist and Elohist.

Levi’s blessing here takes the form of a prayer addressed to God. In the first part, it speaks of the patriarch in the singular (Deut 33:8-9a), in the second – in the plural, giving him a collective dimension and making his name a metonymy for the entire generation of Levites (Deut 33:9b-11). The abrupt change in number indicates the presence of an editorial reworking or compilation of two texts of different provenance.⁴³ It is interesting that, unlike the younger Phinehas tradition (though probably, as argued above, hiding the original one from Deuteronomy 33), the covenant with Levi is not a reward for a heroic deed or religious zeal (as in Num25:1-8.11-13).

⁴⁰ The idea of an eternal priesthood is indirectly present in Mal 2:4 in God’s desire for the covenant with Levi to continue.

⁴¹ H. Gressmann, „Sage und Geschichte in den Patriarchenerzählungen,“ *ZAW* 30 (1910) 1–34.

⁴² E. Meyer, *Die Israeliten und ihre Nachbarstämme. Alttestamentliche Untersuchungen* (Halle: Niemeyer 1906) (see especially the first part of „Die Mosesagen und die Lewiten,“ 51–59, 60–71, 72–81, 82–89). It is surprising, however, that Deut 33 does not appear at all in Konrad Schmid’s study (*Literaturgeschichte des Alten Testaments. Eine Einführung* [Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft 2014]). See also Smend, *La formazione dell’Antico Testamento*, 131–132.

⁴³ This is confirmed by Richard D. Nelson (*Deuteronomy. A Commentary* [OTL; Louisville, KY–London: Westminster John Knox 2004] 389): “The shift from the singular language of vv. 8-9a to the plural of vv. 9b-10 suggests a different origin for these respective sections [...]”.

In comparison with Num 25:11-13, it can be seen that in Deut 33:8-11, the author does speak of Levi’s praiseworthy attitude, but in the context of a previously made covenant, which he guarded and did not break even during the Massah trial and the Meribah dispute. The rhetoric based on the play of the Hebrew roots *נסיתו-בַּמַּסָּה* (*nissîṭô-b^ʔmassâ^h*) and *תְּרִיבָהוּ-מֵרִיבָהוּ* (*t^ʔrîḇēhû-m^ʔerîḇâ^h*) in Deut 33:8 intentionally highlights the convergence of the names of the places of trial and dispute with the trial and dispute themselves along with their positive outcomes, letting the reader know that wherever Levi had to face any challenge, he emerged unscathed. Moreover, Levi’s faithfulness to the covenant was also, or perhaps especially, shown in his heroic act when he put his love for God above his attachment to those closest to him – his parents, brothers and children (it seems that the episode in Ex 32:26-29 was built on the basis of Deuteronomy 33:9).⁴⁴ He loved God more than his own offspring. And this love will constitute the most recognizable characteristic of this patriarch in biblical tradition. It is worth noting this uplifting attitude of Levi (later characterizing the radicalism of Jesus’ disciple in Mt 10:37; 12:48; Lk 14:26; 2 Cor 5:16), because for later generations of Levites it will become a positive backdrop against which one of the unpleasant consequences affecting the Levites will resound with great force in Mal 2:3 as a negative counterpart to that exemplary attitude: the fate of the Levites’ offspring will be uncertain („Behold, I will rebuke your descendants” *את-הַנְּרַע* *hinnî gō’ēr lākem ’et-hazzera’*). Juxtaposing Mal 2:3 exegetically with Deut 33:8, the question immediately arises: did the Levites depart from their patriarch’s legacy so much that they began to care only about the welfare of their own family? Did they begin to use God’s service for selfish purposes, forgetting the love of God and fidelity to their calling? It is possible that the „curse of blessing” (Mal 2:2: *אָרוּתִי אֶת-בְּרִכּוֹתֵיכֶם* *’ārôṭî ’et-birkōtêkem*) is also a reminiscence of Deut 33:11: God will no longer protect the Levites from the attacks of their enemies and those who rise up against them. They will be disregarded, losing the protection of the Divine Protector. The road to their degradation will be opened.

The other images in Deut 33:8-11, equally interesting and enigmatic, portray Levi as a privileged person who, through *tummim* and *urim*, could communicate God’s will to the Israelites and settle intricate matters (Deut 33:8). In addition, they depict him in his function as a teacher of God’s commandments (Deut 33:10a) and a sacrificer standing at the altar (Deut 33:8b). Indirectly, the same positive qualities should be present in the Levites in Mal 2:1-9.

⁴⁴ “[...] Levi ha postoposto tutti gli obblighi di lealtà al proprio clan a favore di un legame senza compromessi con Jahvé – in tal modo si può completare in base al senso – un comportamento del tutto straordinario nell’antico Oriente” (G. von Rad, *Deuteronomio* [Antico Testamento 8; Brescia: Paideia 1979] 226–227). Rudolph Smend (*La formazione dell’Antico Testamento*, 85) confirms that Exodus 32 belongs to the younger layer of the Pentateuch: “[...] Aronne è stato aggiunto a testi narrativi antichi. Il racconto dell’adorazione del vitello d’oro (Es 32), proprio perchè Aronne vi gioca un ruolo fondamentale, dovrebbe essere un racconto piuttosto recente.”

**(c) The problem of dating biblical traditions about Levi
and their interrelationships**

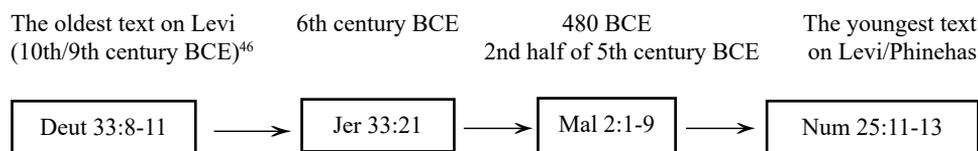
Table 3. Synoptic compilation of the Levi/Phinehas covenant texts in a hypothetical chronological order from the oldest to the youngest (from Deut 33:8-11 to Num 25:11-13). Words in bold and underlined help correlate individual texts (New King James Version)⁴⁵

Deuteronomy 33:8-11 (See also Exodus 32:26-29)	Jer 33:21	Mal 2:2-3.5-6	Num 25:11-13
<p>^{8b}Let Your Thummim and Your Urim be with Your holy one, Whom You tested at Mas-sah, And with whom You contended at the waters of Meribah, ⁹Who says of his father and mother, 'I have not seen them'; Nor did he acknowledge his brothers, Or know his own children; For they have observed Your word And kept Your covenant. ¹⁰They shall teach Jacob Your judgments, And Israel Your law. They shall put incense before You, And a whole burnt sacrifice on Your altar. ¹¹Bless his substance, Lord, And accept the work of his hands; Strike the loins of those who rise against him, And of those who hate him, that they rise not again.</p>	<p>[...] My covenant [...] with David My servant, [...] and with the Levites, the priests, My ministers.</p>	<p>²⁴If you will not hear, And if you will not take it to heart, To give glory to My name," Says the Lord of hosts, "I will send a curse upon you, And I will curse your blessings. Yes, I have cursed them already, Because you do not take it to heart. ³⁴Behold, I will rebuke your descendants And spread refuse on your faces, The refuse of your solemn feasts; And one will take you away with it. [...] ⁵⁴My covenant was with him, one of life and peace, And I gave them to him that he might fear Me.</p>	<p>¹¹Phinehas the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, has turned back (הָשִׁיב). My wrath from the children of Israel, because he was zealous with My zeal among them, so that I did not consume the children of Israel in My zeal ¹²Therefore say, 'Behold, I give to him My covenant of peace; ¹³and it shall be to him and his descendants after him a covenant of an everlasting priesthood, because he was zealous for his God, and made atonement for the children of Israel. So he feared Me And was reverent before My name. ⁶The law of truth was in his mouth, And injustice was not found on his lips. He walked with Me in peace and equity, And turned (הָשִׁיב) many away from iniquity.</p>

Looking at the synoptic compilation of texts that speak about the covenant with Levi/Phinehas (see Table 3), the following conclusions can be drawn. The oldest texts speaking about the covenant with Levi are Deut 33:8-11 and Jer 33:21. Despite being a young text (480 BCE), Mal 2:1-9 still conveys this well-established and, it seems, still living tradition about Levi. Thus, we can surmise with a high degree of

⁴⁵ The exegetical arguments presented in this article will be the basis for a different translation of Mal 2:1-9 than the one in New King James Version (see §5 below).

probability that Mal 2:1-9 is the last text before the decision to demote the Levites and an important testimony of that time, when the tradition of Levi had not yet been reworked in the context of the genealogy of Aaron or Zadok, as evidenced by the later P narrative of Num 25:1-13 along with the dependent deuterocanonical texts (1 Macc 2:26.54; Sir 45:23-26).



If the proposed dating may raise doubts, because – except for Mal 2:1-9 and Jer 33:21 – it is a result of hypothetical discussions among exegetes,⁴⁷ determining which text is earlier and which is later on the basis of an analysis of literary relationships and theological coloring can provide a greater certainty. Thus, the description of the covenant with Phinehas (Num 25:11-13) is of an etiological character.⁴⁸ It traces the origin of the religious institution to the founding event in the desert (Num 25:1-8), when Phinehas received eternal priesthood as a reward for his exemplary attitude. As a result, his descendants now (at the time the text was written) are legitimized as the sole depositories of the post-exile priesthood.⁴⁹ Since this etiological and legitimizing idea clearly comes to the surface in Num 25:1-13, this text should be placed on the timeline later than the other three texts (Deut 33:8-11, Jer 33:21 and Mal 2:1-9), which do not have such etiological and actualizing overtones.⁵⁰ Moreover, if we

⁴⁶ Most exegetes date Deut 33:8-11 to the period between the 10th and 8th centuries BCE – see J.C. Kelly, *The Function of the Priest in the Old Testament* (Pontificium Athenaeum Antonianum. Facultas Theologica - Thesis ad Lauream (/Doctoratum) 242; Roma Pontificium Athenaeum Antonianum 1973) 9; G.B. Gray, *Sacrifice in the Old Testament. Its Theory and Practice* (Oxford: Clarendon 1925) 213; W.R. Smith, A. Bertholet, „Levites,” *Encyclopaedia Biblica* (ed. T.K. Cheyne, J.S. Black) (New York: MacMillan 1902) 2771; Abba, „Priests and Levites,” 881.

⁴⁷ Gerhard von Rad (*Deuteronomio*, 227), speaking of Deut 33:9, rightly notes that “[...] la richiesta di proteggerlo [Levi] contro i suoi nemici, fa pensare che al tempo del detto questo ufficio non fosse ancora tradizionale e [...] non ancora assicurato, ma probabilmente esposto a qualche contestazione.” The antiquity of Deut 33 is confirmed by Rudolph Smend (*La formazione dell’Antico Testamento*, 139): “Una delle fonti più importanti per la nostra conoscenza dell’Israele più antico sono i “detti delle tribù”, riuniti nelle due raccolte delle benedizioni di Giacobbe (Gen 49) e delle benedizioni di Mosè (Deut 33).”

⁴⁸ The etiological intention of P is present in other Pentateuchal texts, such as Gen 35:9-15: Rofé, *La composizione del Pentateuco*, 81. See also Brzegowy, “Kaplani i lewicy,” 9.

⁴⁹ Konrad Schmid (*Literaturgeschichte des Alten Testaments*, 173), speaking of the problems of classifying the traditions contained in the Book of Numbers, considers it very young and a forerunner of Midrashic literature: “Man kann das Numeribuch als Vorläufer der halachischen Midraschliteratur ansehen; es scheint im Sinne eines “rolling corpus” verschiedene Torainterpretationen entwickelt zu haben.”

⁵⁰ In the four-source theory, the etiological or genealogical nature of the texts points to their younger dating and generally to a priestly origin. The younger origin of Num 25:1-13 suggests the formalism of covenant theology (see § 4.2.1a, paragraph 3 above).

consider that all four texts present priesthood very similarly – in the context of teaching God’s truths, faithfulness to God and service at the altar – the difference between them lies in the etiology present in Num 25:1-13. This would confirm that Num 25:1-13 is a later editorial reworking of an earlier tradition.

(d) Final conclusion

To sum up, the Hebrew Bible offers one tradition of the covenant with Levi in three versions: the first and the oldest is Deut 33:8-11; the second, younger of Mal 2:1-9; and the youngest reworked by the P editor in Num 25:1-13. The text in Jer 33:21 is so perfunctory that it does not constitute a separate version, but merely confirms the existence of a pre-exile tradition of the covenant with Levi. Against this background, the pericope of Mal 2:1-9 is unique for two reasons: it certifies that in the early fifth century BCE the pre-exile tradition about Levi was still alive and that, through the fault of the Levites, this tradition was about to change. The Book of Malachi, the last canonical prophetic book, thus bears witness to an important historical turning point in the development of the institution of priesthood: the ancient Levite priesthood as it had formed throughout history would cease to exist (Mal 2:9a).

4.2.2. Breaking the covenant with Levi – Mal 2:8 (Malachi’s times)

The antithetical וְאַתֶּם (*w^a’attem* – „whereas you”) in v. 8 introduces three short sentences accusing the Levites: they went out of their way דֶּרֶךְ (*derek*), made the Torah תּוֹרָה (*tôrā^h*) the place of the fall of many, and destroyed the covenant of Levi בְּרִית הַלְוִי (*b^rit lēwī*). The conduct of the Levites is represented visually in three images full of dynamism: „their own movement,” „pushing someone to lose their balance and fall” and „tearing down a building.” The focal point of the images is first the Levites, then the people, and finally the relationship with God. The sequence of images shows the genesis and development of the situation in which the Levites found themselves: from the abandonment of caring for their own moral life, through the neglect of their obligations to the people, to the destruction of their relationship with God. Malachi sees that the root of the evil that afflicted the Levites was, from the beginning, in themselves, in the improper fulfillment of their duties, which ultimately led them to break their relationship with God. It is noteworthy that the words „way” דֶּרֶךְ (*derek*) and Torah (תּוֹרָה *tôrā^h*) in the Hebrew Bible are synonymous and, being related to the Sinai covenant, they signify moral conduct or precepts to be followed in personal life. In this way, Malachi highlights that the Levites did not care about their own and others’ moral lives. Consequently, by failing to observe the Sinai covenant, they destroyed that unique relationship with God of which they were the depositories through Levi, their patriarch.

Thus, the crisis of the institution of priesthood was not provoked by external factors (e.g. interference of the Persian authorities in the organization of worship⁵¹)

⁵¹ “His [Darius’] interest in religious affairs is demonstrated further by a decree directing Pherendates the satrap in 492/1 B.C. to appoint administrative heads for the temples from a list of priests

or political and social factors (e.g. chaos stemming from different factions fighting for power or its consolidation) that could justify the priests or even reduce them to the role of an unwitting victim of history-making mechanisms over which they had no control. Malachi’s words testify to the opposite: the total responsibility for the situation rested on the Levites. Morally degenerate, they not only destroyed their own authority, but also led to a violation of the social order (see also Mal 3:1-5), the foundation of which was the relationship with God. It is worth recalling here that the covenant with Levi, like the covenant with David, was subordinate to the Sinai covenant, on which the order of the Judean community was based before and after the exile. Thus, in Mal 2:8 we can see indirectly the motif of “covenant within the covenant.” Indeed, in the context of the Sinai covenant, God chose David and Levi, who he made separate covenants with, not to invalidate the one made through Moses, but to strengthen and protect it (cf. Jer 33:21-22).

If the image of „the way” דֶּרֶךְ (*derek*)⁵² as a life lived in accordance with God’s revealed morality in the Sinai covenant seems obvious, the next sentence הִכְשַׁלְתֶּם הַתּוֹרָה בְּתוֹרָה רַבִּים (hikšaltem rabbîm battôrâ^h) is more difficult to interpret.⁵³ The problem is the prepositional phrase בְּתוֹרָה „in the Torah.” The literal translation would be: „you have led many to fall in the Torah.” It seems that the Torah becomes a place not of balance, but – through the sin of the Levites – of its loss and fall. By analogy with Isa 59:14b אֲמַת כַּשְׂלֵה בְּרֶחוּב אֲמַת (kāšlâ bār^hôb ’emet „the truth in the square was shaken”; cf. also Jer 18:15; 31:9) in Malachi’s „the square” where many fell was the Torah. Referring to the root of the verb כָּשַׁל (*kāšal*), the prophet emphasizes that the Levites became מִכְשָׁלִים (*mikšôlîm*) stumbling blocks (Greek σκάνδαλα)⁵⁴ which the people who were supposed to observe the Torah stumbled against and fell (cf. Jer 6:21). One can see here an allusion to social imbalance (Mal 3:5). People failing to observe the Decalogue, moving away from the ideal of God’s revealed morality, of which the Torah was the quintessence, plunge into sins, the most egregious of which are those against social justice (Mal 3:3-5).⁵⁵

The final problem is the image of the „destroyed covenant.” This is a theological issue rather than a philological one. The verb שָׁחַת (*šḥṭ*) that does not appear in the Qal emphasizes mainly physical annihilation (as of mankind during the Flood or as

submitted to him by the priests of Khnum” – Jacob M. Myers, *Ezra-Nehemiah. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Anchor Bible 14; New York: Doubleday 1965) XXIX.

⁵² It is noteworthy that the motif of “going astray” in Mal 2:8 is typical of Deuteronomistic theology (Deut 2:12.16; 11:28; 31:29; Judg 2:17) and also the Psalms (Ps 25:4; 27:11; 119:14), which would confirm the rather widespread thesis of Malachi’s ties to the Deuteronomistic milieu. On this subject, see D. Dogondke, *The Deuteronomistic Character of the Book of Malachi. Theological Implications of Biblical Analysis* (Lingua Sacra. Monographs 3; Warszawa: Verbinum 2013) *passim*.

⁵³ Similar commentaries on Mal 2:8 in D.L. Petersen, *Zechariah 9-14 and Malachi. A Commentary* (OTL; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox 1995) and A. Renker, *Die Torah bei Maleachi. Ein Beitrag zur Bedeutungsgeschichte von tôra im Alten Testament* (Freiburger theologische Studien 112; Freiburg: Herder 1978).

⁵⁴ In Ezekiel, this noun can also mean “motive to sin,” “temptation” (see, for example, Ezek 7:19; 14:3-4.7; 18:30). In contrast, in the LXX מִכְשָׁל (*mikšôl*) is translated as σκάνδαλον.

⁵⁵ Reventlow, *Ageo, Zaccaria e Malachia*, 228.

of cities, e.g. in Gen 13:10), but also moral contamination of man (as in Gen 6:11) or the sacrifice offered (Mal 1:14). In the OT covenant theology, this verb (in negation) is used to describe God's mercy toward man:

[...] A merciful God is the Lord your God, he will not forsake you, will not exterminate (לֹא יַשְׁחִיתֶךָ *w^alō' yašhîtekā*) and will not forget the covenant (בְּרִית *b^rrîṭ*) that He swore to your ancestors (Deuteronomy 4:31)

[...] the Lord did not want to destroy (לֹא שָׁחַת *l^ashašhîṭ*) the house of David for the sake of the covenant (בְּבְרִית *habb^rrîṭ*) [...] (2 Chr 21:7)

So if God, for the sake of the Sinai covenant (but also the Noahide covenant; see Gen 9:15), was not willing to destroy man and showed mercy despite sin, Mal 2:8 suggests that people (here, the Levites) may bring about the destruction/violation/contamination of the covenant, which – while not directly resulting in their annihilation – will lead to a life away from God and His blessing. One may wonder whether this refers to the destruction of the covenant or rather to its ritual contamination. However, with respect to worship, both meanings are synonymous⁵⁶: the defiling of the covenant leads to its annulment and cessation. In other words, the Levites, by destroying/defiling the covenant, will bring upon themselves the punishment of degradation and distancing from the source of blessing, which was the sacrificial altar (Mal 2:8; see also 1:14). However, at the same time, they deprive others of the source of grace and salvation, so the punishment they will experience will be a revelation of mercy toward those who have fallen through the fault of the Levites but for whom God still desires to provide a worthy place of worship of his name to sustain them with his grace and blessing.

Interestingly, in Ex 32:7-8 the syntagma „to stray” (סוּר מִן-הַדֶּרֶךְ *sûr mîn hadderek*) and the verb שָׁחַת (*šhṭ*) in the Piel in the absolute sense of „to embezzle” (without a direct complement) appear together in the story of the golden calf. Is the similar connection in Mal 2:8 an intertextual allusion to the sin of Aaron the priest (and at the same time a criticism of his priestly lineage)? Exegetically, there is no indication of this,⁵⁷ but if it were the case,⁵⁸ the sin of the Levites in the Book of Malachi would be the negative antitype of that of Sinai, which would obviously enhance the rhetorical force of the prophetic speech.

Drawing a succinct picture of the priests in his own time in Mal 2:8, the prophet does not create elaborate descriptions. He does not need to gather evidence to justify his accusation. He knows that his audience is aware of the sins the Levites commit and the abuses they are responsible for. Reality itself testifies against them.

⁵⁶ “Apart from war and power politics, when human beings are the responsible subjects of the verb [שָׁחַת] it refers exclusively to culpable actions contrary to the divine will!” (TDOT XIV, 587–590).

⁵⁷ In Mal 2:8, the verb שָׁחַת *šhṭ* is not used in an absolute sense and refers to the covenant with Levi.

⁵⁸ As suggested by S.D. (Fanie) Snyman (*Malachi*, 92), following K.W. Weyde, *Prophecy and Teaching. Prophetic Authority, Form Problems, and the Use of Traditions in the Book of Malachi* (BZAW 288; Berlin: De Gruyter 2000).

Finally, it is worth noting that God in the Book of Malachi does not speak of putting the Levites to death, but of their degradation (Mal 2:2-3.9) and purification (Mal 3:3: “[...] and will purify the sons of Levi”). This may come as a surprise, since the image of the covenant, which is destroyed *שֶׁחַת* (*šḥt*) like a temple, has its own rhetorical force (as in 1 Cor 3:17, “If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him”⁵⁹) and indicates the irreversible consequences of this fact. However, remaining faithful to the covenant once made, God can rebuild it in an altered form to give the Levites a chance, to establish a new relationship with them and to assign them a different role in the post-exile society, a role by no means less important. If the crisis of authority lies in the fact that the hierarchy of individuals does not correlate with their reputation, then in the case of the Levites God wants to resolve this crisis by explicitly seeking to rebuild their authority and reputation. In the Book of Malachi, God remains a merciful God.

In light of what will happen three decades later, when Nehemiah reforms the institution of priesthood, it can be assumed that Mal 2:1-9 is a historical-theological justification and manifesto of this reform.

4.3. Conditions/goals of the covenant – Mal 2:7

כִּי-שִׁפְתַי כִּהֵן יִשְׁמְרוּ-דַעַת וְתוֹרָה יִבְקָשׁוּ מִפִּיהוּ כִּי מִלְאָךְ יִהְיֶה-צִבְאוֹת הוּא

For the lips of the priest should guard knowledge so that Torah is sought in his mouth, for he is the messenger of the Lord of Hosts

In the context of Mal 2:1-9, the reminder of the conditions/objectives of the covenant has overtones of painful reproach, since the mention of Levi and the priestly ideal is accompanied by the realization that these conditions/objectives are now not being fulfilled. It is interesting that – despite the use of the noun כִּהֵן *kōhēn* – there is no reference to sacrificial worship, but only to knowledge, the Torah and seeking. Thus, the terms of the covenant are not shown holistically (as in Deut 33:10-11). This can be explained in two ways.

4.3.1. Limiting the function of Levites to the prophetic mission – the first postulate of the future reform

The highlighting of Levi’s teaching ministry may be, as it were, a ploy into the future, a projection of the prophet’s desires that in the future reform, which he seeks and which he foreshadows with his preaching, the Levites should be deprived of access to the altar and their priestly function should be limited to one aspect: that of being guardians and interpreters of the Torah.⁶⁰ However, by tying their new mission

⁵⁹ If we were to translate this Pauline phrase from Greek into Biblical Hebrew, it would read as follows: וְאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁחִית אֶת-הַיְכָל אֱלֹהִים הֶעָלְהִים יִשְׁחִית אֹתוֹ.

⁶⁰ It can be said that the priestly service included three aspects: offering sacrifices, giving blessings, and teaching the Torah; see Reventlow, *Aggeo, Zaccaria e Malachia*, 226.

to the covenant, Malachi roots it in an earlier tradition (Deut 33:8-11; cf. also Mal 2:4) and at the same time gives it connotations hitherto unknown.

If a Levite is called a „messenger of the Lord of Hosts” מְלֶאכֶּי הַיְהוָה-צְבָאוֹת (*mal'ak yhwah-š'ḥā'ôl*),⁶¹ and Malachi calls himself so, using this term as an antonomasia of his name hidden from us (cf. מְלֶאכֶּי *mal'ākī* Mal 1:1; 3:1), it is possible that the prophet himself was also a Levite advocating a deeper reform of his own environment. Being messengers of the Lord of Hosts undoubtedly elevates the Levites, demonstrating their new mission in the spirit of ancient prophecy, and provides a positive counterbalance to their degradation when they are not allowed to approach the altar. As messengers, they will become – like the prophets of old – the voice of God Almighty to speak to the people with his power and authority. Thus vindicated by God and endowed with authority, the Levites – after their purification and the expected reform (Mal 3:3-4) – will gain a new social status in the post-exilic community.

What is evident here, on the one hand, is the prophet's concern to emphasize God's will and faithfulness to uphold the covenant with the Levites at all costs (as confirmed by Mal 2:4), and on the other hand, the demand that they suffer the consequences of their sins. In the conditions/goals of the covenant thus presented, there are veiled simultaneously punishment (degradation) and mercy, continuation and discontinuation vis-à-vis the covenant with Levi. Thus, there is no complete break with the pre-exile tradition in Malachi, but it is reworked from the perspective of God's new relationship with the Levites. Deprived of their privileged position at the Lord's altar (chastisement), they will retain their teaching function in the Judean community, taking the place left behind by the prophets (mercy).⁶²

4.3.2. Levites – Old Testament sages?

Another explanation, which does not exclude the first one – for it too may be dictated by a desire to reform priesthood – is that the covenantal terms focused on the teaching ministry of the Levites give it sapiential overtones. The Levite, portrayed as a wise man opening his mouth thoughtfully to guard the knowledge he possesses, and aware that others seek the wisdom of the Torah at his mouth, may be the precursor/protoplast of later sapiential-intellectual currents. The motives of „guarding knowledge,” „guarding the mouth,” „seeking wisdom at the mouth” are typically sapiential.⁶³ Were the anonymous sages who compiled the ancient wisdom

⁶¹ Henning G. Reventlow (*Aggeo, Zaccaria e Malachia*, 226) considers מְלֶאכֶּי הַיְהוָה-צְבָאוֹת (*mal'ak yhwah-š'ḥā'ôl*) to be an editorial addition. However, he does not find convincing arguments for this.

⁶² R.J. Tournay, *Voir et entendre Dieu avec les Psaumes ou la liturgie prophétique du Second Temple à Jerusalem* (CahRB 24; Paris: Gabalda 1988) 19–24. “[...] all'epoca dell'autore [cioè Malachia] la profetia era cessata e il sacerdote sostituiva il profeta nelle sue funzioni” (L. Alonso Schökel, J.L. Sicre Diaz, *I profeti* [Roma: Borla 1996] 1389). A different viewpoint may be found in Ralph L. Smith (*Micah-Malachi*, 318), who believes that if the prophet was the depository of the word revealed by God, the priest is the depository of the Torah; in a similar vein, Verhoef, *The Books of Haggai and Malachi*, 257.

⁶³ What a different picture emerges from the Book of Numbers (Num 1:53; 4:3.30; 8:24-26; 18:1-7; 31:30.47), where the Levites are depicted rather as a military formation guarding the Tabernacle or as a repair crew (Num 4:24-28; 7:5-9); J. Milgrom, “Book of Numbers,” *ABD* IV, 1152.

of Israel in the Book of Proverbs by any chance Levites? Is the author of the Book of Job reflecting on the principle of retribution a Levite engaging in a discussion of the contradictions between life lived and faith professed? And does not Kohelet, whose name indicates the function of convening the holy assembly of Israel (תְּלִיָּה *qōheleṭ* is part Qal act. from לָהַל *qāhal*), who instills knowledge in the people (Ecc 12:9), first ironically present the old man-cynic’s knowledge, ridiculing it – because the contradictions of the life he saw and experienced lead him to conclude that everything is meaningless – in order to ultimately encourage the reader to love the Torah and find joy in the fear of God? In other words, was it not a group of Levites behind the creation of the canonical sapiential literature of the Hebrew Bible? With their sensitivity to the Torah, wisdom, and the need to educate people, they became teachers, which must have sharpened in them a sense of observation of life and social change (cf. Neh 8:7-13; 9:3-5). If this was indeed the case, they established a formation and education center at the Jerusalem Temple in order to get proper education and properly fulfill their office. There is no conclusive evidence for this, but the anonymity of the sages, their social prominence, their ties to Jerusalem, their sense of their own mission, and the literature they left behind indicate that they were quite a large group of people acting from a socio-religious mandate. The only clue linking the Levites to sapiential literature is the collection of psalms of the Korahites and Asaphites, two subordinate Levitical clans according to the list in Num 26:58 and 1 Chr 6:24.⁶⁴ For these and other reasons, the Levite described in Mal 2:7 brings to mind the figure of the Old Testament sage.

4.3.3. Conclusion

Mal 2:7 portrays the Levites in a prophetic-sapiential light. It passes over their obligations to the Lord’s altar to prepare them for the roles of Yahweh’s messengers and wise men that they will play in the post-exile society (Neh 8:7-13; 9:3-5). And while there is no question here of creating a new institution *ex nihilo* (the reference to the tradition in Deut 33:8-11 is obvious here), one can clearly see the historical-theological caesura in the development of priesthood: between what was before in Mal 1:6-14 and what is foreshadowed in Mal 2:1-9. The appreciation of the Levites in a prophetic-sapiential role confirms that the punishment that will befall them will not be destructive, but purifying.

Malachi is aware that the Judean community is on the threshold of a serious socio-economic crisis (Mal 3:5), which in time will deepen the process of its atomization and internal antagonization, exposing it to the danger of disintegration. Therefore, he seeks a way to unify/save it by expanding religious-national consciousness among the poorest people, so that they will feel part of God’s heritage and discover the call to be Israel. In this strategy, the Levites, who were complicit in the situation, will play an important role. After Nehemiah’s reform, they will indeed make an effort to form the community from within. And in this way they will redeem their sins.

⁶⁴ Tournay, *Voir et entendre Dieu*, 19–24.

4.4. Declaration of publicity/memorialization – Mal 2:4

וידעתם כי שלחתי אליכם את המצוה הזאת להיות ברייתי את-לוי אמר יהוה צבאות

You will experience that I sent this mitzvah against you to confirm My covenant with Levi, says the Lord of Hosts

By means of the syntagma המצוה הזאת (*hammišwā^h hazzō 'l*) Mal 2:4 connects analeptically to Mal 2:1 and proleptically to the content of the mitzvah about the priests in Mal 2:9 (see §§ 4.1.2. and 4.1.5. with exegetical justification and description of rhetorical dynamics). In turn, the phrase שלחתי אליכם את המצוה הזאת (*šillahtī 'alēkem 'ēt hammišwā^h hazzō 'l*) „I sent [שלחתי *šillahtī*] against you this mitzvah” refers to Mal 2:2 את-המצוה בכם שלחתי *šillahtī bākem 'et-hammē'ērā*) „I will send [שלחתי *šillahtī*] against you a curse.” The connections between verses 2:1.2.4.9 lead to two conclusions: a) the mitzvah here is a curse (Mal 2:2.4); b) this curse is the disregard/degradation of the Levites (Mal 2:4.9).

The verb שלחתי (*šillahtī*) in Piel, when the subject is God in a punitive action toward man, approaches the Qal form in meaning, but indicates the tremendous energy accumulated in the instrument of punishment, which is released with destructive force: “I threw,” “I threw away,” “I unleashed,” “I sent.”⁶⁵ The instrument of punishment can be God’s wrath itself (Ex 15:7; Ezek 7:3; Ps 78:49; Job 20:23), terror (Ex 23:27), pestilence (Lev 26:25; Ezek 14:19; 28:23; Amos 4:10; 2 Chr 7:13), snakes (Num 21:6; Jer 8:17), locusts (Deut 7:20), curse (Deut 28:20; Mal 2:2.4), fangs of wild beasts (Deut 32:24), lions (2 Kings 17:25.26), enemy troops (2 Kings 24:2), Assyria (Isa 10:6), a consuming fever (Isa 10:16; Ps 106:15), the sword (Jer 9:15[16]; 24:10; 29:17; 49:37), the arrows of famine (Ezek 5:16.17), four calamities (Ezek 14:21), fire (Ezek 39:6; Hos 8:14; Amos 1:4.7.10.12; 2:2.5), a great army (Joel 2:25), flies (Ps 78:45), a man hostile to others (Zech 8:10). Mal 2:4 is one place in the Hebrew Bible where the instrument of punishment which God’s wrath accumulates in to strike the Levites is a mitzvah. This highlights not so much its informative but rather performative nature. The mitzvah is not only a command-information, but also an effective/performative word, affecting the Levites and their loved ones.

The *perfectum inversivum* וידעתם (*wīda'tem*) introduced by means of the conjunctive *waw* emphasizes that God’s action will be such a tangible experience for the Levites themselves (ידע “to know” “to experience”⁶⁶), that it will become a public act – impossible to be hidden – because in this way the affirmation of the covenant with Levi to the entire community of Israel will be accomplished: the Levites will be disregarded before the eyes of all (Mal 2:9). The public nature of this act confirms that Mal 2:1-9 is either a manifesto of Nehemiah’s future reform or a strenuous demand for it. The object of the experience is introduced with the complement conjunct כי *kī*: the Levites will experience the effective action of the mitzvah, the content

⁶⁵ U. Dahmen, «שלח», *TDOT* XV, 67; Koehler – Baumgartner – Stamm, *Wielki słownik hebrajsko-polski*, II, 496–497.

⁶⁶ Koehler – Baumgartner – Stamm, *Wielki słownik hebrajsko-polski*, I, 370-372; *TDOT* V, 449–482.

of which will resound at the conclusion of the pericope in Mal 2:9. Syntactically, וַיִּדְעָתֶם (*wīdā‘tem*) should be understood as the successor (*apodosis*) of the conditional sentence that begins in Mal 2:2, or as the consecutive sentence “then you will experience that...”⁶⁷ The syntax, vocabulary, content and rhetoric of verse 4 are so coherent and well woven into the compositional structure of the pericope of Mal 2:1-9 that not only is it difficult to find editorial additions here, but also – and perhaps primarily – one should appreciate Malachi’s oratorical artistry, refined to the smallest detail.

The final יהוה צבאות אָמַר (*‘amar yhwḥ-š^o bā‘ōt*) “says the Lord of Hosts” appears three times in this pericope (Mal 2:2.4.8) and each time, using God’s favorite title in prophetic literature, it highlights Yahweh’s omnipotence and his determination to act, which becomes a fact in the very act of speaking (see also §4.1.4 above, paragraph four).

Perhaps surprisingly, there is a certain inconsistency in Mal 2:4. How will the affirmation of the covenant with Levi be accomplished if its immediate depositaries – the Levites – are to be cursed/disrespected (Mal 2:2.4.9)? The solution to this problem is found indirectly in Mal 2:5 (see §6) and in Nehemiah’s reform: deprived of access to the altar, relegated to the role of secondary priests, they are given an ennobling mission to become God’s messengers and teachers of the people. The covenant with Levi will thus continue,⁶⁸ although its terms will be narrowed down to one aspect.

4.5. Blessings/curses – Mal 2:2-3

אֲמַר יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת וְשִׁלַּחְתִּי וְשִׁלַּחְתִּי וְשִׁלַּחְתִּי
 בְּכֶם אֶת-הַמְּאָרָה וְאֶרְוִיתִי אֶת-בְּרִכּוֹתֵיכֶם וְגַם אֶרְוִיתִי כִּי אֵינְכֶם שְׂמִים עַל-לֵב:
 הִנְנִי גֹעַר לְכֶם אֶת-הַזֶּרַע וְנִרְיִיתִי פְרִשׁ עַל-פְּנֵיכֶם פְּרִשׁ חֲגִיכֶם וְנִשָּׂא אֶתְכֶם אֶלְיוֹ:²

²Since you do not want to listen and take to heart that you should worship my name, says the Lord of Hosts, I will send a curse upon you and curse your blessings, and I have even already cursed you because you do not take anything to heart.

³Behold, I will rebuke you in your offspring, and I will smear your faces with dung, the dung of your feasts, and it will carry you away with it.

Verse 2 introduces a real conditional sentence (the unreal would be introduced with *lūlē* or *lūlē’*).⁶⁹ The antecedent (*protasis*) is traditionally translated in the future tense (in LXX and Vlg) to make it clear that God’s decision has not yet been made and the Levites may change their behavior („If you do not listen and take to heart...”). Grammatically, this is possible. However, it is also possible to translate the phrase in the present tense with a volitive tinge („If you do not listen and take

⁶⁷ Waltke-O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 636, § 38.2a.

⁶⁸ Friedrich Horst (*Die zwölf kleinen Propheten Nahum bis Maleachi* [HAT 14; Tübingen: Mohr & Siebeck 1964]), changing לְהִיֹּת “to last” into מְהִיֹּת “to cease to exist” (from *privativum*), suggests that the punishment that will fall on the Levites will annul the covenant with Levi. However, neither the textual criticism nor the theology of the Book of Malachi indicate this. The punishment is supposed to lead to the purification of the Levites and to giving them a new function.

⁶⁹ Waltke-O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 637–638, § 38.2e.

to heart.../If you do not want to listen and take to heart...”),⁷⁰ which, it seems, would harmonize better with the context and content of the entire pericope, especially with Mal 1:6c.12-13; 2:1.3-4.9 (cf. Ps 82:5; 1 Sam 21:10). The temporal adverb הַתָּה (*w^eattā^h*) „now” in Mal 2:1, the syntagma הִנְנִי גֵעַר (*hinnî gō‘ēr*) „behold I will rebuke”⁷¹ in Mal 2:3, the phrase אֶת הַמִּצְוָה הַזֹּאת *(šillahtî ‘ēt hammišwā^h hazzō ‘ī)* „I will send this mitzvah” in Mal 2:4 are sufficient to conclude that the decreed punishment is already beginning to be carried out before the eyes of the hearers in the very act of speaking, as it were (see also § 4.1.4 above, paragraph four; § 6, paragraph four).

Verses 2-3 are self-explanatory, and in the scheme of the Hittite covenant would be placed at the end as clauses containing blessings and curses (as in Deut 28:1-14; cf. 28:15-68). Here they are invoked at the beginning to become the legal-theological basis for the punitive action that is already entering the implementation phase.

A few minor semantic and philological problems require attention.

(a) The ending of verse 2 shows the inconsistency between the plural בְּרִכּוֹתֵיכֶם (*birkōtēkem*) „your blessings” with the singular suffix אָרוּתִיָּהּ (*‘ārōtîhā*) „I cursed her,” which the LXX tries to harmonize (ἐπικαταράσσομαι *τὴν εὐλογίαν* ὑμῶν καὶ καταράσσομαι *αὐτήν*). This can be explained by the fact that the Hebrew suffix *femininum singularis* acts here as the indefinite pronoun „it” (as in Gen 15:6; 24:14; 42:36 Isa, 47:7)⁷² and includes in its meaning not only blessings בְּרִכּוֹתֵיכֶם (*birkōtēkem*), but also all the cultic activity of the Levites in the Jerusalem Temple, whose purpose was to worship God’s name. This is confirmed by the final phrase אֵינְכֶם שְׂמִים עַל-לֵב (*‘ēn^okem šāmim ‘al-lēb*) „you do not take to heart” (Mal 2:2c), in which the proximal complement is implicit and needs to be completed with the phrase לְתַת כְּבוֹד לְשְׁמִי (*lātēt kābōd lišmî*) „that you worship my name” (Mal 2:2a). Hence, there is no need to speculate about an editorial correction.

Mal 2:2 offers a reversal of the situation of Balaam, whose curse God turned into a blessing (Num 23:11-12.25-26; 24:10-13).⁷³ This means that God cannot be instrumentalized for one’s own purposes. Changing a blessing into a curse (or vice versa in the case of Balaam) is an enforcement of the second commandment of the Decalogue.

The motif of worshipping God’s name is close to the Deuteronomistic theology, which Malachi identified with.⁷⁴ Thus, if the worship of God’s name is cursed, it

⁷⁰ Waltke-O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 504–505, 509, §§ 31.3b; 31.4h. In turn, the syntagma לֵב עַל לֵב שְׂמִים resembles the similar לֵב עַל לֵב שְׂמִים in Hag 1.5.7; 2.15.18. It is possible that this expression has a literal meaning in Mal 2:2: the priest should write down the words of God on the priestly pectoral used during the performance of holy acts.

⁷¹ “With הַתָּה the participial clause usually describes immediate circumstances [...]” (Waltke-O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 625, § 37.6d).

⁷² “The third-person singular pronoun, masculine or feminine, may serve as a *neutrum* with respect to some vague action or circumstance [...] The feminine is usual [...]. The *neutrum pronoun* is usually feminine” (Waltke-O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 301, 305, 312, §§ 16.3.5c; 16.4f; 17.4.3b).

⁷³ Alonso Schökel, Sicre Díaz, *I profeti*, 1388.

⁷⁴ Alonso Schökel, Sicre Díaz, *I profeti*, 1380; Dogondke, *Charakter deuteronomistyczny Księgi Malachiasza*, 163; Smith, *Micah-Malachi*, 311.

means that not the worship itself (for that would be blasphemy), but the way in which the Levites performed this duty did not correspond to God’s will.⁷⁵ The conclusion that emerges on its own is obvious: the reform of worship is necessary, because the one performed by the Levites offended God’s holiness (cf. Mal 1:10). A religious act must at the same time be a moral act.

(b) The motif of “rebuke in offspring”⁷⁶ in Mal 2:3 is enigmatic. However, if – as argued above in § 4.2.1.b – we bear in mind the commendable attitude of Levi, who put the love of God above the love of his own family (Deut 33:8-11), we can assume that the Levites did not follow the example of their protoplast and did exactly the opposite: they were more concerned with ensuring the livelihood of their children than with serving God. However, it does not seem that this “rebuke in offspring” foreshadowed the extinction of the Levite genealogy.⁷⁷ Perhaps the idea was that after being demoted, the Levites would have fewer children and their economic situation would deteriorate in their old age. Children provided aging parents with an adequate livelihood. However, it is highly likely that the “rebuke in offspring” heralds a dynastic change in the high priest’s office, and with it the entire Levite generation will be removed from the altar to give place to a new dynasty of priests.

(c) „Dung” פָּרֶשׁ (*pereš*) refers to the excrement of sacrificial animals, which, along with their skin, head, legs and innards (Leviticus 4:11-12), should be burned outside the camp as a completion of the ritual of expiation for sins. The symbolism of the liturgical gesture was clear: the burning of the entrails and intestinal contents of the expiatory offering outside the camp visualized to the sacrificer that his sin had been physically eliminated, so that he could stand before God again in moral perfection and participate in Yahweh’s holy assembly.⁷⁸ It is possible that the image has a connection to the so-called Garbage Gate, also known as the Dung Gate (שַׁעַר הָאֲשָׁפֶת) *ša‘ar hā’āšpōt* – Neh 2:13; 3:13.14; 12:31), located near Pool of Siloam and leading from the City of David to the Valley of Hinnom (Gehenna).⁷⁹ Passing through the Dung Gate, a person burdened with impurities would return freed from them, reconciled to God and people. Between 1894 and 1897, two archaeologists, Frederick J. Bliss and Archibald Dickie, conducted excavations at the site, but found only a gate from the Hellenistic times, which appeared to be a reconstruction of one from the time of Nehemiah.

The gesture of „smearing their faces with dung,” which was not removed in the final cleansing ritual outside the Dung Gate, speaks volumes about the Levites’ moral condition. Their sins continue to defile them, and despite the external ablutions and sacrifices offered, they are perfectly visible. This image may also suggest that the Levites did not fulfill the cultic regulations „in righteousness” (cf. Mal 3:3)

⁷⁵ Snyman, *Malachi*, 48.

⁷⁶ The syntax of *accusativus duplex* is present in לָכֶם הִנְנִי גֵעַר לָכֶם אֶת-הַזָּרַע is a *dativus* in the function of *accusativus obiectivus* (“you”), and אֶת-הַזָּרַע is *accusativus adverbialis limitationis* (“in the offspring”).

⁷⁷ This is what Snyman suggests (*Malachi*, 49).

⁷⁸ Reventlow, *Aggeo, Zaccaria e Malachia*, 226.

⁷⁹ R.E. Hayden, “אֲשָׁפֶת,” *NIDOTTE* I, 560.

and did not care enough about the dignity of the holy place by not cleansing it of the uncleanness left by the animals sacrificed in the temple. This is indicated by the nominal apposition: „the dung of your feasts.”⁸⁰ The smearing of animal excrement on the priests’ faces is thus an expression of disrespect and ridicule. Their priestly status is undermined, and they become unworthy to fulfill their sacred duties. On the other hand, the use of blunt language is a reaction to the amorous disappointment and frustration over the priests’ unfaithfulness, and is reminiscent of the language of Hosea, where God, like a panther or bear ready to scratch out the eyes and tear apart the unfaithful bridegroom, acts like a woman betrayed in her feelings, losing control (“So I will be to them like a lion; Like a leopard [...] I will meet them like a bear deprived of her cubs; I will tear open their rib cage, And there I will devour them like a lion [...]”; see Hos 13:7-10).

(d) The last sentence is problematic: *וַיִּשְׂפֹּךְ אֶת־הַרְּשָׁתָאֵם אֶת־פְּנֵיהֶם* (*w^hnāšā’ ’eṣkem ’ēlāyw*). It seems that the Masoretic vocalization (Qal *perfectum* 3 *singularis masculinum*) is not correct.⁸¹ The LXX translates *λήμψομαι* (*indicativus futuri medii*, 1 *singularis* from *λαμβάνω*, -ειν), suggesting that *שָׁפַךְ* (*ns’*) should be vocalized *שָׁפַע* (*nōše’*) as *participium activi* Qal, that is, in symmetry to *רָצַח* (*gō’ēr*), which opened the verse. For both participles the subject would be the suffix 1. *singularis* in *הִנְנִי* (*hinnī*): „behold, I will rebuke (*רָצַח gō’ēr*)”/”behold, I will carry away (*שָׁפַע nōše’*)” (as in the Polish version [BT 5th ed.]). However, the Masoretic vocalization gives food for thought. Where did the Masoretes see the subject *שָׁפַךְ* (*nāšā’*)? There is only one possibility: the subject must have been „dung” (*שָׁפַר pereš* is masculine). The translation would thus be: „and it will take you with it,” „it will carry you with it,” „the dung will consume you” (cf. Gen 13:6). Such a translation is proposed nowhere else but in the Vulgate („[*stercus*] *assumet vos secum*”), but, based on the TM, it is the only one possible, so one has to agree with St. Jerome.

The situation of the Levites is worse than it would seem. Publicly disgraced with their faces soiled with animal feces, they will flow down with them in a swift stream, to find themselves as quickly as possible where they belong – outside the walls of the temple and the city. This image is so powerful that it vividly captures the nature of the Levites’ sin, which effectively and permanently separates them from God and the people, but at the same time – by separating the unworthy priests from God’s service – makes the people themselves undergo purification („Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasant to the Lord, as in the days of old, as in former years”; Mal 3:4). Passing, as it were, through the Dung Gate like animal

⁸⁰ Reventlow (*Aggeo, Zaccaria e Malachia*, 226) regards the apposition as an editorial addition because it is an unnecessary redundancy. It is difficult to agree with him. The editor’s purpose was to introduce some correction, polemic or clarification of the author’s original thought, but certainly not redundancy.

⁸¹ E.g. Wilhelm Rudolph (*Haggai, Sacharya 1-8, Sacharya 9-14, Maleachi* [KAT 13/4; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Mohn 1976] 260) changes *וַיִּשְׂפֹּךְ* into *וַיִּשְׂפַּע* “curse” (as in Num 5:21; Jer 29:18) and translates the phrase as “and he will take the curse against you.” However, this type of change is not supported by textual criticism. In turn, Marvin A. Sweeney (*The Twelve Prophets* [Berit Olam; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press 2000] II, 730) follows the LXX and believes that it is God who will carry them (the priests) to the dung heap.

excrement, the Levites enable the purification of the holy place and the sacrificers. The sin of the people is personified in the Levites, who desecrate God’s name present in the temple (Mal 1:6-14) and are personally responsible for this sin. Therefore, they will never return to God’s altar again. Does this mean that there will be no mercy for them? Willingness to uphold the covenant with Levi (לְהִיזוֹת בְּרִיתִי אֶת-לְוִי) *lihyôṭ b^o rîṭî* *’et-lēwî*; Mal 2:4) and the citation of its terms with the exclusion of those relating to worship (Mal 2:7) indicate that the punishment that will befall the Levites will not annihilate them physically, but will become a prelude to the new function they will receive in the Judean community. A later editorial addition (seemingly of Deuteronomistic provenance) will confirm⁸² that the punishment will resemble the process of melting and purifying silver that the Divine Goldsmith will personally carry out: „and he will purify the sons of Levi [...]” (Mal 3:3). And although it would seem that „shit will remain shit, no matter how much gold we stick in it,” this bizarre transformation is made possible by God’s merciful action. The Levites, though deprived of their position at the altar of the Lord, will become the leaven of God’s new activity among the people – as מְלֻאָכֵי יְהוָה *mal[’]akē YHWH* they will be teachers of the Torah and proclaimers of Divine Wisdom.

4.6. Degradation of the Levites – Mal 2:9

וְגַם-אֲנִי נִתְמַי אֶתְכֶם נְבוֹזִים וְשֹׁפְלִים לְכָל-הָעָם כִּפִּי אֲשֶׁר אֵינְכֶם שֹׁמְרִים אֶת-דְּרָכַי וְנֹשְׂאִים פְּנִים בַּתּוֹרָה
בַּתּוֹרָה

So, by my will, you will be disregarded and will have little importance among all the people, because you do not keep to my ways and do not find pleasure in the Torah

The last verse of the pericope sounds like an irreversible judgment and is a sealing of God’s will. The Divine Self (וְגַם-אֲנִי *w^ogam-’anî* in a clear antithetical disjunction to the preceding verse) emphasizes the gravity of the situation and the commitment to punish the Levites in proportion to their transgressions.⁸³ Indeed, what the priests did to Yahweh will be returned to them. The roles of God and the priests will be reversed. Priests who disregard God’s name (Mal 1:6), his table (Mal 1:7) and sacrifices (Mal 1:12) will be disregarded (see §3.1 above).⁸⁴ One can also see two antithetical symmetries that lead to the formulation of the final accusation (which highlights the conclusive nature of verse 9): „not keeping God’s ways” (Mal 2:9b) alludes to Levi’s „walking with God” (Mal 2:6c). In turn, „not finding pleasure in (teaching) the Torah” (Mal 2:9b) stands in contrast to the „peace and equity” with which Levi led many away from sin (Mal 2:6.8).

⁸² A. Zawadzki, „Mesjaństwo w Ml 3,1-5 i jego deuteronomiczna korekta – studium egzegetyczno-historyczne,” *BibAn* 5/2 (2015) 375–403 (esp. 386–390).

⁸³ The motif of God’s rejection of the priests appears as early as Hos 4:6, and although an intertextual analysis would be advisable, that falls beyond the scope of this paper.

⁸⁴ Snyman, *Malachi*, 93.

The adjective שְׁפִלִים (*š'pālîm*) „small,” „lowly standing” highlights the degradation of the priests no longer vis-à-vis God, but vis-à-vis the people. It does not appear that the prophet is giving this degradation a broader perspective that includes the pagans, as suggested by LXX (εἰς πάντα τὰ ἔθνη „toward all peoples”) and Vlg (*omnibus populis*), even if Mal 1:5.11.14 might suggest it (ignoring the fact that Mal 1:11 is probably an editorial addition). The immediate context (Mal 2:1-9) and the imagery of the covenant with Levi place God's punishment unambiguously within Judah's borders.

The most problematic sentence is נִשְׂאִים פְּנֵים בְּתוֹרָה (nos'e'im pānîm battôrā^h). The idiom נִשְׂאֵ פְּנֵים (nāsā' pānîm) appears here (literally, „to lift [one's] face” but also „to bear [someone's] face”), which in Mal 2:9 – according to most commentators⁸⁵ – would mean „to be biased” (cf. Prov 6:35). The Hebrew Bible does not confirm such a meaning. Rather, the expression נִשְׂאֵ פְּנֵים (nāsā' pānîm) has a positive meaning – „to be kind to someone” (Mal 1:8⁸⁶), „to please,” „to take into consideration,” „to show favor,” „to show respect” (cf. 2 Kings 5:1; Isa 3:3; 9:14; Job 22:8).⁸⁷ Furthermore, the phrase נִשְׂאִים פְּנֵים בְּתוֹרָה (nos'e'im pānîm battôrā^h) in Mal 2:9 is combined with the negation אֵינְכֶם ('ēn'kem) (otherwise *participium* נִשְׂאִים nos'e'im would remain without a subject). Hence, the simplest translation would be „you do not find pleasure in the Torah.” This creates a synonymous parallelism between „not keeping to Yahweh's ways” and „not finding pleasure in the Torah.”⁸⁸ „The way” (דֶּרֶךְ *derek*) and „the Torah” are synonymous (see §4.2.2 above) and are in a close correlation that emphatically shows how the Levites thought about and treated the Torah.⁸⁹

⁸⁵ Verhoef, *The Books of Haggai and Malachi*; Petersen, *Zechariah 9-14, and Malachi*; Weyde, *Prophecy and Teaching*; A.S. van der Woude, *Haggai, Maleachi* (POuT; Nijkerk: Callenbach 1982); A. Deissler, *Zwölf Propheten III: Zephanya – Haggai – Sakharah – Maleachi* (NEchtB 21; Würzburg: Echter 1988); J.G. Baldwin, *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi. An Introduction and Commentary* (TOTC; Leicester: Intervarsity Press 1978); E.H. Merrill, *An Exegetical Commentary. Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press 1994); G.S. Ogden, R.R. Deutsch, *Joel and Malachi. A Promise of Hope – A Call to Obedience* (ITC; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 1987); K. Elliger, *Das Buch der zwölf kleinen Propheten II* (ATD 25/2; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1963); Smith, *Micah-Malachi*; Horst, *Die zwölf kleinen Propheten*; J.M.P. Smith, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Malachi* (ICC: Edinburgh: Clark 1980); P.L. Redditt, *Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi* (NCB; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 1995); Reventlow, *Aggeo, Zaccaria e Malachia*; Rudolph, *Haggai, Sachariah 1-8, Sachariah 9-14, Maleachi*; Sweeney, *The Twelve Prophets*, I, 731. In contrast, Julia M. O'Brien (*Priest and Levite in Malachi* [SBLDS 121; Atlanta: Scholars Press 1990] 145) believes that the priests ceased to benefit other people through their teaching.

⁸⁶ The Greek version of Symmachus translates נִשְׂאֵ פְּנֵים in Mal 1:8 as δυσωπιθήσεται (“it [your face] will be ill seen”) from δυσωπέω, -ειν: see Z. Abramowiczówna, *Słownik grecko-polski* (Warszawa: PWN 1958) I, 627. However, this is an *ad sensum* translation that attempts to convey the force of the rhetorical question in Mal 1:8d.

⁸⁷ Koehler – Baumgartner – Stamm, *Wielki słownik hebrajsko-polski*, II, 30.

⁸⁸ This is what Snyman (*Malachi*) and Beth Glazier-McDonald (*Malachi the Divine Messenger* [SBLDS; Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press 1987]) propose: נִשְׂאֵ פְּנֵים means „to guard” or „to take into account,” i.e. the priests do not refer to the Torah when making decisions, but look only to themselves and their own vision.

⁸⁹ Snyman rightly observes (*Malachi*, 94): “[...] if the meaning of idiom as ‘partiality’ or ‘show fa-

5. TRANSLATION OF Mal 2:1-9

Based on the exegesis, the following translation of Mal 2:1-9 is proposed:

¹And therefore this mitzva is against you, O priests!

²Since you do not want to listen and take to heart that you should worship my name, says the Lord of Hosts, I will send a curse upon you and curse your blessings, and I have even already cursed you, because you do not take anything to heart.

³Behold, I will rebuke you in your offspring, and I will smear your faces with dung, the dung of your feasts, and it will carry you away with it.

⁴You will experience that I sent this mitzvah against you to confirm My covenant with Levi, says the Lord of Hosts.

⁵My covenant with him was [a covenant] of life and peace, because I wanted to give it to him. It was also a covenant of the fear of God, that he should honor Me. And he did indeed bow before My name;

⁶on his lips was true doctrine, and wickedness was not found on his lips; in peace and righteousness with Me he walked, and drew many away from sin.

⁷For the lips of the priest should guard knowledge so that Torah is sought in his mouth, for he is the messenger of the Lord of Hosts.

⁸But you have gone astray, led many astray in the Torah, and annulled the covenant with Levi, says the Lord of Hosts.

⁹So, by my will, you will be disregarded and will have little importance among all the people, because you do not keep to my ways and do not find pleasure in the Torah.

6. IS Mal 2:1-9 A MANIFESTO OF THE REFORM OF PRIESTHOOD IN NEHEMIAH’S TIME?

Against the background of the knowledge we have about Jewish priesthood, the lack of distinction between priests and Levites in Mal 2:1-9 arouses puzzlement among some (for how is it possible that Malachi – living in the 5th century BCE – did not know such a distinction!),⁹⁰ and is ignored by others.⁹¹ Only Julia M. O’Brien

voritism’ is adopted, it means that a totally new argument is introduced at the end of this oracle, and that is highly unlikely.”

⁹⁰ «È sorprendente che i sacerdoti di Malachia vengano collegati con Levi sebbene in età postesilica i sacerdoti (sadociti e aaroniti) e i leviti (il basso clero) costituissero classi separate» (Reventlow, *Aggeo, Zaccaria e Malachia*, 227); see also Redditt, *Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi* and Verhoef, *The Books of Haggai and Malachi*, 245: “[...] our prophet does not distinguish between priests and Levites.” Similarly, Snyman, *Malachi*, 51: “There is no reason to suspect any trace of distinction drawn between priests and Levites, at least in this particular verse [Mal 2:4].” However, Snyman’s position does not seem clear-cut, for on p. 137, with reference to Mal 3:3, he writes: “The Levites clearly refer to the priests and priesthood,” and in the Introduction (p. 7): “The cultic staff consisted of priests and Levites [...]”. Schart, on the other hand, claims that Malachi speaks only of the Levites as secondary priests: A. Schart, “Cult and Priests in Malachi 1:6-2:9,” *Priests and Cults in the Book of the Twelve* (ed. L.-S. Tiemeyer) (ANEM 14; Atlanta, GA: SBL Press 2016) 228.

⁹¹ Albertz, *Storia della religione nell’Israele antico*, II, *passim* (especially 492–494); “[...] no dis-

– without giving a clear conclusion – suggests that Mal 2:1-9 leads to a revision of the generally accepted scheme that has been developed about the Old Testament priesthood.⁹² This generally accepted scheme (the foundations of which were given by Wellhausen in *Prolegomena*⁹³) was best presented by Joachim Schaper in 2000.⁹⁴ It can be described synthetically as follows: At the end of the 7th century BCE, the official Zadokite priesthood supported Josiah's reform and put it into practice. And although the priests of the Yahwist shrines outside Jerusalem (i.e. the Levites⁹⁵) were supposed to have equal rights with the Zadokite priests, this was not the case (contrary to what Deu 18:6-8 says). The Levites were given the status of a secondary priestly class (as 2 Kings 23:9 seems to suggest). When the Zadokite priests from Jerusalem were deported to Babylonia, the Aaronic priests filled the resulting gap and performed Yahweh's worship at Bethel for the Judeans who remained in Palestine. In exile, the process of degradation of the Levites deported to Babylonia deepened. When the Zadokite priests returned from exile, they began to demand that their rights be respected and their access to the altar restored, but were met with resistance from their opponents. The opponents were those Levites who – not having been deported – had established Yahweh's worship in the ruins of the temple and on the outskirts of Jerusalem (in the so-called “high places”), and the priests of Abiathar's line from Anathoth along with the Aaronites from Bethel. They all maintained that the Zadokites' sojourn outside Judah made them unclean. The priestly response to these accusations was Zech 3:1-10, which was meant to convince the people that the new high priest – Joshua from the line of Zadok – would be a worthy, purified person and would enjoy God's approval. The Zadokite priests also had the support of the Persians, for whom worship was one form of political leverage. Despite internal animosities⁹⁶ the Levites and other opponents of the Zadokites cooperated

inction between priests and Levites [...] it seems unlikely to find the expression of such a view [in Mal 2:1-9] at so late a date” (Grabbe, *A History of the Jews and Judaism*, I, 229); see also Grabbe, *Priests, Prophets, Diviners, Sages*, 49.

⁹² O'Brien, *Priest and Levite in Malachi*, 145 (see also 47–48, 111–112). However, O'Brien does not rule out that the problem is literary in nature: indeed, Malachi may have been trying to combine the Deuteronomistic tradition with P. A similar stance is suggested by P.A. Verhoef (*The Books of Haggai and Malachi*, 257). On the other hand, Grabbe (“The Priesthood in the Persian Period: Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi,” *Priests and Cults in the Book of the Twelve* [ed. L.-S. Tiemeyer] [ANEM 14; Atlanta, GA, SBL Press 2016] 154) asserts: “Since no clear distinction [in Malachi – *A.Z.*] is made in the few references to priests, Levites, and ‘sons of Levi,’ she [Julia O'Brien – *A.Z.*] may be correct; however, the book is a very short one. Since priests are also ‘sons of Levi,’ even in sources which separate the Aaronites from the rest of the Levites, the writer of Malachi may be using ‘Levites’ and ‘sons of Levi’ loosely.”

⁹³ Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*, 116–121, 139–140 (especially 118–119).

⁹⁴ Schaper, *Priester und Leviten im achämenidischen Juda, passim*.

⁹⁵ A.H.J. Gunneweg questions the identification of the Levites with the priests of high places (*Leviten und Priester. Hauptlinien der Traditionsbildung und Geschichte des israelitisch-jüdischen Kulturpersonals* [FRLANT 89; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1965] 118–120, 188–203); Menahem Haran (*Temples and Temple-Service in Ancient Israel*, 107) thinks similarly. Such discussions only add to the impression of chaos and hypotheticality of the theories presented.

⁹⁶ M. Smith, *Palestinian Parties and Politics That Shaped the Old Testament* (New York: Columbia University Press 1971) 96–112.

unanimously in rebuilding the temple, because it was in their interest. In Nehemiah’s time, the Levites gained a stronger position, because Nehemiah himself distrusted the priests. So he used the Levites as his allies, making them guardians of the city gates and spies. When Nehemiah briefly had to return to Persia, the Zadokite priests took revenge by not giving the Levites tithes and offerings from the temple, and thus forced many of them to subsist on agriculture (Neh 13:10-13). Upon his return to Jerusalem, Nehemiah remedied the situation by appointing a committee composed equally of priests and Levites to oversee the collection of tithes and the disbursement of temple dues. The fact that Aaron’s line began to dominate at some point may have been caused by the expiration/dethronement of Zadok’s line, or the merger of the two lines, for example by marriage. The text about the degradation of the Levites and on Zadokites in Ezek 44:10-14.15-16 is the final sealing of the division into primary and secondary priests. So much for the hypothetical history of the division of priests into primary and secondary that prevails in modern biblical scholarship.

According to the briefly presented theory, the degradation of the Levites took place before the exile at the time of Josiah’s reform. However, some have cast doubt on this dating,⁹⁷ since it is based only on 2 Kings 23:8-9 (see also the footnote of the Polish version [BT 5th ed.]).⁹⁸ It is strange that in considering the history of the Levites, the text of Mal 2:1-9 is either omitted or perplexing. It is as if to say that since Malachi does not fit into Wellhausen’s theory, all the worse for Malachi. However, such a long post-exile text cannot be ignored on the subject of priesthood, especially since it speaks explicitly and with great emphasis about the degradation of the Levites.

The exegesis conducted in the article provides a number of arguments that Mal 2:1-9 is a manifesto of the religious reform that led to the degradation of the Levites in the fifth century BCE.

- a) The twofold use of the noun *mitzvah* מִצְוָה with the pronoun הָאֵלֹהִים (Mal 2:1.4) has the character of a juridical and concrete command that must be carried out. Such a formula is in keeping with the language of a reformer who, with the authority of God, wishes to carry out the announced reform (see the exegetical justification in §§ 4.1.1-4.1.2).
- b) The *mitzvah* is public, categorical and exceptionally solemn, since it is proclaimed in the presence of the Levites, in the Jerusalem Temple, in a tone typical of official decrees (see the exegetical justification in §§ 4.1.3-4.1.4).
- c) The content of the *mitzvah* is clear, carefully crafted, accompanied by appropriate symmetries and rhetorical devices, and makes it clear what the speaker’s intentions and the fate of the addressees are – Mal 2:2-3.9 (see the exegetical justification in §§ 4.5-4.6).

⁹⁷ “Although there is evidence in the text of disputes between the two groups – disputes that eventually led to the Levites being relegated to lower clergy – it is not so clear when these occurred” (Grabbe, *A History of the Jews and Judaism*, I, 229).

⁹⁸ On a different division into priests and Levites than that presented by J. Schaper (*Priester und Leviten im achämenidischen Juda*), see Smith, *Palestinian Parties and Politics*, 96–112.

- d) The mitzvah addressed to the Levites has a character of a judgment preceded by a short justification, from which there is no appeal – Mal 2:8-9 (see the exegetical justification §§ 4.2.2 and 4.6).
- e) The mitzvah is to be confirmed by an additional public act that will become a tangible experience for the Levites and will affect their lives – Mal 2:4 (see the exegetical justification in §4.4).
- f) The mitzvah toward the Levites has its legal basis in Mal 2:5-6 (see the exegetical justification in §4.2).
- e) The mitzvah provides for legal consequences along with a caveat about the future role of Levites in society – Mal 2:7 (see the exegetical justification in §4.3).
- f) The motif of “rebuking the Levites in their offspring” foreshadows a dynastic change in the office of high priest with the removal of the entire generation of Levi from the altar to give way to a new dynasty of priests (hence the later need for its genealogical legitimization in the Book of Ezekiel and the P texts) (see the exegetical justification §4.5.b).
- i) What is more, the post-dating of Mal 2:1-9 and the Deuteronomistic texts unfamiliar with the division into priests and Levites suggests that the timing of this division should be shifted to the Persian period, contrary to Wellhausen’s hypothesis (see the exegetical justification §4.2.1.c).

It is worth adding to this list of arguments that Mal 2:1-9 fits into the Hittite covenant scheme (see §§ 3.2-3.3 above along with footnote 24), although, as it has been shown, the order of its components has been changed. The curses (Mal 2:2-3) found at the end in the Hittite paradigm as a deterrent against breaking the covenant here are placed at the beginning, to show the causal power of the records there vis-à-vis the Levites’ unfaithful conduct (Mal 2:8). The historical introduction showing God’s bilateral relationship (past and present) with the Levites – found at the beginning in the Hittite scheme to encourage both parties to enter into a covenant – is here moved to a further position (Mal 2:5-6.8) and – in the face of an already broken covenant – takes the form of a lamentation, which is the *de facto* legal basis and justification for God’s judgment.

If Mal 2:1-9 is indeed a snapshot of the historical period (and not merely an attempt to literarily reconcile conflicting traditions⁹⁹), priesthood in the early 5th century BCE was not divided and as a social group bore full responsibility for the degeneration of temple worship. The lack of mention of the high priest in Mal 2:1-9 is also curious,¹⁰⁰ for it suggests that the high priest was part of this group and shared

⁹⁹ See footnote 93. However, some exegetes do not rule out that Mal 2:1-9 may have been a voice of opposition to P or, importantly, a confirmation that the prophet was not yet familiar with the P texts. See O’Brien, *Priest and Levite in Malachi*, 23.

¹⁰⁰ “It is interesting to note that Malachi, like Ezekiel, does not mention the high priest, even though we may assume that a high priest was in office at that time (cf. Neh. 12:10-11)” (Verhoef, *The Books of Haggai and Malachi*, 245).

the same responsibility for the situation since he was unable to prevent it. Therefore, “rebuked in his offspring,” he will be dethroned and his place will be taken by others.¹⁰¹

In light of Mal 2:1-9, the division into primary and secondary priests would have been the fruit of the post-exile reform, which faced abuses after the restoration of the temple and the reactivation of sacrificial worship, but also a potential danger of political destabilization of the province of Yehud, since the temple was an important center of power. Indeed, it should not be ruled out that not only theological and cultic issues but also – perhaps primarily – political and social issues (Mal 3:5) necessitated decisive reform efforts by the priestly community.

If we have sufficient confidence in the historical reliability of Mal 2:1-9, the reform itself and the depiction of priesthood must be placed in the 5th century BCE, yet a more precise dating of the Levites’ degradation is not easy.¹⁰² Therefore, let us consider three options.

- a) It can be surmised that Nehemiah’s arrival in Jerusalem was a turning point not only in the rebuilding of the walls and the material status of the city, but also in social, cultic and political matters. Confronted with abuses in the temple, recognizing the serious repercussions this could have on relations with the Persians, and sensitive to the ritual purity not only of the community but also of the priests (Neh 13:29-30; see also Neh 13:10-12), Nehemiah may have been the one who put Malachi’s demands into practice. It would thus be appropriate to place the degradation of the priests after 445 BCE.
- b) The Book of Nehemiah shows that upon his arrival in Jerusalem the division into priests and Levites was already a fact. Does this undermine option a)? Not necessarily. Perhaps – like Ezek 44:10-16, the P source (and possibly 2 Kings 23:9-10) – the author of the Book of Nehemiah was trying to archaize the changes that had been made and prevent possible future conflicts, precipitating an argument of the next generation of Levites who, on the basis of one text or another, might lay claims to the altar in Jerusalem. This would explain the confusion in the OT regarding the genealogical line of the post-exilic priests (see §§ 1-2.4 above): if the generation of Levi was removed from the altar, new priests recruited from other social backgrounds (which are difficult to identify), needed genealogical legitimacy. The search for the right genealogical line only added to the confusion that prevailed among the biblical texts, but indirectly confirmed that the division of priests was not at all as solidified as Wellhausen’s theory would suggest.

¹⁰¹ The confusion in the sources about the first high priests (see §2.4. above) may be the aftermath of the dynasty change. Eliashib, who certainly was not a Levite, is portrayed as the supposed grandson of Joshua, the first post-exile high priest, and is subordinated to the authority of Nehemiah (Neh 13:28-29; but also Neh 13:4-10).

¹⁰² A very helpful summary of the various datings of *Malachi*’s activities, along with a bibliography, is provided by Andrew E. Hill (*Malachi. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* [AB 25D; New York: Doubleday 1998] 393–395).

c) Assuming that the Book of Nehemiah faithfully describes the historical situation and indeed Nehemiah did not personally bring about the degradation of the Levites, it is noteworthy that – when he arrived in Jerusalem immediately after the reform of priesthood (as we assume in accord with Mal 2:1-9) – he immediately recognized the animosities between priests and Levites. Since for some reason he distrusted the new priestly class, he allied himself with the “wronged” Levites and gave them protection (see Schaper’s reconstruction above). Indeed, the hallmark of Nehemiah’s political behavior was extreme distrust, so he preferred to surround himself with those who not only lacked power, but – most importantly – had to depend entirely on his authority. This also confirms that the situation of the Levites was so labile and precarious that there was a risk that – without proper support – they would be completely removed from any public activities by the new priestly caste (Neh 13:10-11). Such a version of events, however, assumes that the reform of priesthood and the degradation of the Levites took place just before Nehemiah’s arrival, that is between 480-460 BCE.¹⁰³ However, another problem immediately arises: who could have carried out such a reform? Who had such authority to oppose the priests? Apart from Nehemiah, the name of no other reformer is recorded; this would be strange, since within the sparsely populated province of Yehud, with a population of between 20,650¹⁰⁴ and 30,125,¹⁰⁵ the name of an important figure would not have escaped the biblical chroniclers. Thus, it must have been done by the Persians. Indeed, there is a hypothesis about some misfortune that fell on Jerusalem (rebellion against Xerxes in 484 BCE?) and provoked the invasion of the Persians, who destroyed the walls of the city.¹⁰⁶ Depriving the Levites of their power, the Persians introduced a new priestly class into the temple.

To sum up, if we consider Mal 2:1-9 as reliable historical testimony, we have *de facto* two possibilities of dating: a) Nehemiah was responsible for the degradation of the Levites after 445 BCE, or b) the reform of priesthood was enforced by the Persians for unclear political reasons between 480-460 BCE. However, since we have no testimony of such profound interference by the Persians in the organization of religious worship in conquered countries, it seems that the reform was carried out by Nehemiah (although even here we have no direct testimony). It may be supposed that by degrading the Levites, he established a new line of priests, which nevertheless needed archaizing legitimization (which was provided by the P texts and

¹⁰³ This is the view of Douglas Stuart (“Malachi,” *The Minor Prophets. An Exegetical and Expository Commentary*, 3rd edition [ed. T.E. McComiskey] [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic 1998] 1324).

¹⁰⁴ So estimates Charles E. Carter (*The Emergence of Yehud in the Persian Period* [JSOTSup 294; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press 1999] 199–213, 215).

¹⁰⁵ This is what Oded Lipschits and Joseph Blenkinsopp posit (*Judah and the Judeans in the Neo-Babylonian Period* [Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns 2003] 324–326, 355–360).

¹⁰⁶ Grabbe, *A History of the Jews and Judaism*, I, 292–294.

Ezek 44:10-16,¹⁰⁷ referring to the time of Moses and the reform of Josiah), but at the same time provoked animosities between the old and new priests. Acting cautiously, Nehemiah was careful not to spurn the degraded Levites. He knew that if the experiment with the new priestly line failed, the old Levitical priests – already after the purifying reform – would have returned to office, which they certainly aspired to and hoped for. The Book of Nehemiah is silent on the very moment of reform, so that in the future the descendants of the Levites could not make any claims.

Who was Malachi? A forerunner of reform? A visionary? These questions will not be answered, but there are many indications that he was actively involved in the process of preparing the reform. Thus, he could have been a Levite with excellent knowledge of the priestly environment. He could have been an aide to Nehemiah¹⁰⁸ ... or Nehemiah himself, who, as מַלְאָכִי Yahweh’s messenger, seeks to establish credibility with the Judaeen public by distributing an anonymous work under a pseudonym. Malachi exhibits the same spirit and the same fervor as Nehemiah. If this is true, the dating of the Book of Malachi should be shifted to the mid-fifth century BCE, although this argument still remains in the realm of hypothesis.

7. CONCLUSION

Mal 2:1-9 is a literary, theological and historical testimony to the existence of a post-exile priesthood reform, the direct result of which was the degradation of the Levites. The main reasons for it were abuses in the sphere of sacrificial worship and immorality of life (although political and social factors cannot be excluded either). Mal 2:1-9, however, is more than a prophetic accusatory speech. It is a mitzvah whose consequences are about to be revealed in the lives of the Levites and the entire Yehud community. The performer of the mitzvah will be God Himself, who will come in the person of his messenger.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abba R., “Priests and Levites,” *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* (ed. G. Buttrick) (Nashville, TN: Abingdon 1962) III, 876–889 (= *IDB*).
- Aberbach M., Smolar L., “Aaron, Jeroboam, and the Golden Calves,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 86 (1967), 129–140.
- Abramowiczówna A., *Słownik grecko-polski* (Warszawa: PWN 1958), I.
- Achtemeier P.J., (ed.), *Encyklopedia biblijna* (Warszawa: Vocatio 1999).
- Albertz R., *Storia della religione nell’Israele antico. Dall’esilio ai Maccabei* (Introduzione allo studio della Bibbia. Supplementi 24; Brescia: Paideia 2005) I-II.

¹⁰⁷ Ezek 44:10-15 also implies that the degradation of the Levites took place later, in the post-exilic period.

¹⁰⁸ Alexander von Bulmerincq (*Kommentar zum Buche des Propheten Maleachi* [Tartu: Mattiesen 1926–1932] I-II) claims that Malachi was an associate of Ezra. The targumim and St. Jerome say the same.

- Alonso Schökel L., Sicre Díaz J.L., *I profeti* (Roma: Borla 1996).
- Baudissin W., "Priests and Levites," *Hastings' Dictionary of the Bible* (ed. J. Hastings) (New York: Scribner's 1902) IV, 67–97.
- Bos J.M., *Reconsidering the Date and Provenance of the Book of Hosea. The Case for Persian-Period Yehud* (Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 580; London et al.: Bloomsbury 2013).
- Botterweck G.J., Ringgren H., Fabry H.-J., (ed.), *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 2021) (= *TDOT*).
- Brzegowy T., „Kaplani i lewici w tradycji kapłańskiej (P) Pięcioksięgu,” *Collectanea Theologica* 72/3 (2002), 5–32.
- von Bulmerincq A., *Kommentar zum Buche des Propheten Maleachi* (Tartu: Mattiesen 1926–1932) I-II.
- Carter C.E., *The Emergence of Yehud in the Persian Period* (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 294; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press 1999).
- Cody A., *A History of Old Testament Priesthood* (Analecta Biblica 35; Rome: PIB 1969).
- Cross F.M., *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1973).
- Cross F.M., *From Epic to Canon. History and Literature in Ancient Israel* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press 1988).
- Dahmen U., „כֹּהֲנִים,” *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (ed. G.J. Botterweck, H. Ringgren, H.-J. Fabry) (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans) XV, 67.
- Deissler A., *Zwölf Propheten III: Zefanja – Haggai – Sacharja – Maleachi* (Neue Echter Bibel 21; Würzburg: Echter 1988).
- Dogondke D., *Charakter deuteronomistyczny Księgi Malachiasza. Teologiczne implikacje analizy biblijnej* (Lingua Sacra. Monographs 3; Warszawa: Verbinum 2013).
- Elliger K., *Das Buch der zwölf kleinen Propheten II* (Das Alte Testament Deutsch 25/2; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1963).
- Fohrer G., *Strutture teologiche dell'Antico Testamento* (Biblioteca di cultura religiosa 36; Brescia: Paideia 1980).
- Freedman D.N et al., (ed.), *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday 1992) (= *ABD*).
- Glazier-McDonald B., *Malachi the Divine Messenger* (Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series; Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press 1987).
- Grabbe L.L., *Priests, Prophets, Diviners, Sages. A Socio-Historical Study of Religious Specialists in Ancient Israel* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International 1995).
- Grabbe L.L., *A History of the Jews and Judaism in the Second Temple Period. I. Yehud. A History of the Persian Province of Judah* (The Library of Second Temple Studies 47; London–New York: Clark 2004).
- Grabbe L.L., "The Priesthood in the Persian Period: Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi," *Priests and Cults in the Book of the Twelve* (ed. L.-S. Tiemeyer) (Ancient Near Eastern Monographs 14; Atlanta, GA: SBL Press 2016), 149–156.
- Gray G.B., *Sacrifice in the Old Testament. Its Theory and Practice* (Oxford: Clarendon 1925).
- Gressmann H., „Sage und Geschichte in den Patriarchenerzählungen,” *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 30 (1910), 1–34.
- Gunneweg A.H.J., *Levitens und Priester. Hauptlinien der Traditionsbildung und Geschichte des israelitisch-jüdischen Kulturpersonals* (Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments 89; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1965).
- Haran M., *Temples and Temple Service in Ancient Israel. An Inquiry into the Character of Cult Phenomena and the Historical Setting of the Priestly School* (Oxford: Clarendon 1978).
- Hauer Jr., C.E., "Who was Zadok?" *Journal of Biblical Literature* 82 (1963), 89–94.
- Hill A.E., *Malachi. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Anchor Bible 25D; New York: Doubleday 1998).
- Horst F., *Die zwölf kleinen Propheten Nahum bis Maleachi* (Handbuch zum Alten Testament 14; Tübingen: Mohr & Siebeck 1964).
- Hossfeld F.-L., Zenger E., *Psalms. III. A Commentary on Psalms 101-150* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press 2011).

- Judge H.G., “Aaron, Zadok and Abiathar,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 7 (1956), 70–74.
- Kelly J.C., *The Function of the Priest in the Old Testament* (Pontificium Athenaeum Antonianum. Facultas Theologica – Thesis ad Lauream (Doctoratum) 242; Roma Pontificium Athenaeum Antonianum 1973).
- Kennett R.H., “The Origin of the Aaronite Priesthood,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 6 (1905), 161–186.
- Kitchen K.A., Lawrence P.J.N., *Treaty, Law and Covenant in the Ancient Near East* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz 2012) I-III.
- Koehler L., Baumgartner W., Stamm J.J., *Wielki słownik hebrajsko-polski i aramejsko-polski Starego Testamentu* (Warszawa: Vocatio 2008) I-II.
- Lipschits O., Blenkinsopp J., (ed.), *Judah and the Judeans in the Neo-Babylonian Period* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns 2003), 329–330.
- Merrill E.H., *An Exegetical Commentary. Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press 1994).
- Metzger B.M., Coogan M.D., (ed.), *Słownik wiedzy biblijnej* (Warszawa: Vocatio 1997).
- Meyer E., *Die Israeliten und ihre Nachbarstämme. Alttestamentliche Untersuchungen* (Halle: Niemeyer 1906).
- Milgrom J., “Book of Numbers,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (ed. D.N. Freedman et al.) (New York: Doubleday 1992) IV, 1152.
- Nelson R.D., *Deuteronomy. A Commentary* (Old Testament Library; Louisville, KY – London: Westminster John Knox 2004).
- North F.S., „Aaron’s Rise in Prestige,” *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 66 (1954), 191–199.
- Nurmela R., *The Levites. Their Emergence as a Second-Class Priesthood* (South Florida studies in the history of Judaism 193; Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press 1998).
- O’Brien J.M., *Priest and Levite in Malachi* (Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series 121; Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press 1990).
- Ogden G.S., Deutsch R.R., *Joel and Malachi. A Promise of Hope – A Call to Obedience* (ITC; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 1987).
- Petersen D.L., *Zechariah 9-14 and Malachi. A Commentary* (Old Testament Library; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox 1995).
- Pfeiffer E., „Die Disputationsworte im Buche Maleachi. Ein Beitrag zur formgeschichtlichen Struktur,” *Evangelische Theologie* 19 (1959), 546–568.
- Piwowar A., *Historia Izraela czasów Starego Testamentu. Od patriarchów do podboju przez Rzymian* (Materiały Pomocnicze do Wykładów z Bibliistyki 12; Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL 2013).
- Purvis J.D., Meyers E.M., *Wygnanie i powrót. Od zburzenia Jerozolimy przez Babilończyków do odbudowy państwa żydowskiego, Starożytny Izrael. Od Abrahama do zburzenia Świątyni Jerozolimskiej przez Rzymian*, 3rd ed. (ed. H. Shanks) (Warszawa: Vocatio 2012), 297–335.
- von Rad G., *Deuteronomio* (Antico Testamento 8; Brescia: Paideia 1979).
- Ramsey G.W., “Zadok,” *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (ed. D.N. Freedman et al.) (New York: Doubleday 1992) VI, 1034–1036.
- Redditt P.L., *Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi* (New Century Bible; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 1995).
- Renker A., *Die Tora bei Maleachi. Ein Beitrag zur Bedeutungsgeschichte von tôra im Alten Testament* (Freiburger theologische Studien 112; Freiburg: Herder 1978).
- Reventlow H.G., *Aggeo, Zaccaria e Malachia* (Antico Testamento 25/2; Brescia: Paideia 2010).
- Rofé A., *La composizione del Pentateuco. Un’introduzione* (Bologna: Dehoniane 1999).
- Rowley H.H., “Zadok and Nahushtan,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 58 (1939), 113–141.
- Rowley H.H., “Melchizedek and Zadok (Genesis 14 and Psalm 110),” *Festschrift für A. Bertholet zum 80. Geburtstag* (ed. W. Baumgarten) (Tübingen: Mohr & Siebeck 1950), 461–472.
- Rudolph W., *Haggai, Sacharja 1-8, Sacharja 9-14, Maleachi* (Kommentar zum Alten Testament 13/4; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Mohn 1976).
- Schaper J., *Priester und Leviten im achämenidischen Juda. Studien zur Kult – und Sozialgeschichte Israels in persischer Zeit* (Forschungen zum Alten Testament 31; Tübingen: Mohr & Siebeck 2000).

- Schart A., "Cult and Priests in Malachi 1:6-2:9," *Priests and Cults in the Book of the Twelve* (ed. L.-S. Tiemeyer) (Ancient Near Eastern Monographs 14; Atlanta, GA: SBL Press 2016), 213–234.
- Schmid K., *Literaturgeschichte des Alten Testaments. Eine Einführung* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft 2014).
- Smend R., *La formazione dell'Antico Testamento* (Brescia: Paideia 1993).
- Smith J.M.P., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Malachi* (International Critical Commentary; Edinburgh: Clark 1980).
- Smith M., *Palestinian Parties and Politics That Shaped the Old Testament* (New York: Columbia University Press 1971).
- Smith R.L., *Micah-Malachi* (Word Biblical Commentary 32; Waco, TX: Word Books 1984).
- Smith W.R., Bertholet A., "Levites," *Encyclopaedia Biblica* (ed. T.K. Cheyne, J.S. Black) (New York: MacMillan 1902), 2770–2776.
- Snyman S.D. (Fanie), *Malachi* (Historical Commentary on the Old Testament; Leuven–Paris–Bristol, CT: Peeters 2015).
- Stuart D., "Malachi," *The Minor Prophets. An Exegetical and Expository Commentary*, 3rd ed. (ed. T.E. McComiskey) (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic 1998) 1245–1396.
- Sweeney M.A., *The Twelve Prophets* (Berit Olam; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press 2000) I-II.
- Tiemeyer L.-S., (ed.), *Priests and Cults in the Book of the Twelve* (Ancient Near Eastern Monographs 14; Atlanta, GA: SBL Press 2016).
- Tournay R.J., *Voir et entendre Dieu avec les Psaumes ou la liturgie prophétique du Second Temple à Jerusalem* (Cahiers de la Revue Biblique 24; Paris: Gabalda 1988).
- VanGemeren W.A., (ed.), *New International Dictionary of Old Testament and Exegesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan 1997) (= NIDOTTE).
- Verhoef P.A., *The Books of Haggai and Malachi* (New International Commentary on the Old Testament; Grand Rapids, MI – Cambridge: Eerdmans 1987).
- Waltke B.K., O'Connor M., *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns 1990).
- Walton J.H., *Ancient Israelite Literature in Its Cultural Context. A Survey of Parallels Between Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (Library of Biblical Interpretation; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan 1989).
- Weaver H.R., *The Priesthood of Judaism in the Persian Period* (Dys. Boston University Graduate School 1949) <https://open.bu.edu/handle/2144/6350> (accessed: 16.12.2022).
- Wellhausen J., *Prolegomena to the History of Israel* (Scholars Press Reprints and Translations Series; Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press 1994).
- Westermann C., *Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox 1991).
- Weyde K.W., *Prophecy and Teaching. Prophetic Authority, Form Problems, and the Use of Traditions in the Book of Malachi* (Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 288; Berlin: De Gruyter 2000).
- van der Woude A.S., *Haggai, Maleachi* (De Prediking van het Oude Testament; Nijkerk: Callenbach 1982).
- Zawadzki A., *Mesjaństwo w Ml 3,1-5 i jego deuteronomiczna korekta – studium egzegetyczno-historyczne*, *The Biblical Annals* 5/2 (2015), 375–403.
- Zimmerli W., *Ezekiel. II. A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel Chapters 25-48* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia, PA: Fortress 1983).

Summary

The article aims to demonstrate that Mal 2:1-9 is a manifesto of the reform that led to the degradation of the Levites in Nehemiah's time (mid-fifth century BCE), elevating a new generation of priests, who may have been Zadokites or Aaronites, to the chief priesthood (the OT texts are not conclusive here). On the one hand, Julius Wellhausen's theory, which indicates that the degradation of the Levites

was an aftermath of Josiah’s reform, is challenged, while on the other, certain texts (2 Kgs 23:9-10; P texts and Ezek 44:10-16) are interpreted as a post-exile attempt to archaically project the degradation of the Levites to the pre-exile period. An exegetical analysis further reveals that Mal 2:1-9 (together with some Deuteronomistic texts) is the youngest and last historical testimony to the Levites’ priesthood prior to their degradation. A new translation and interpretation enriches the previous understanding of the pericope. It is also plausible that a close associate of Nehemiah or Nehemiah himself is disguised as Malachi.

**„WYSMARUJĘ WAM TWARZE GNOJÓWKĄ” (MI 2,3B).
MOWA BOGA DO KAPŁANÓW (MI 2,1–9)
JAKO MANIFEST REFORMY NEHEMIASZA
KRYZYS KAPŁAŃSTWA I DEGRADACJA LEWITÓW
W PIERWSZEJ POŁOWIE V WIEKU PRZED CHR.**

Streszczenie

Artykuł ma na celu wykazanie, że Mi 2,1-9 jest manifestem reformy, która doprowadziła do degradacji lewitów w czasach Nehemiasza (połowa V w. przed Chr.), wynosząc do rangi głównego kapłaństwa nową linię kapłanów, którymi mogli być sadokici lub aaronici (teksty ST nie są tu jednoznaczne). Z jednej strony podważa się teorię Juliusa Wellhausena, według której degradacja lewitów była pokłosiem reformy Jozjasza, z drugiej zaś interpretuje się inne teksty (2Krl 23,9-10; P i Ez 44,10-16) jako powygnaniową próbę archaizującej projekcji degradacji lewitów na okres sprzed wygnania. Analiza egzegetyczna wykazuje ponadto, że Mi 2,1-9 (wraz z niektórymi tekstami deuteronomistycznymi) jest najmłodszym i ostatnim historycznym świadectwem o kapłaństwie lewitów sprzed ich degradacji. Nowe tłumaczenie i interpretacja ubogaca dotychczasowe rozumienie perykopy. Nie wyklucza się też, że pod postacią Malachiasza kryje się bliski współpracownik Nehemiasza lub sam Nehemiasz.

Słowa kluczowe: Malachiasz, lewici, kapłani, kapłani drugorzędni, Mi 2, degradacja lewitów, reforma Nehemiasza

Nota o Autorze

Ksiądz **Arnold ZAWADZKI**, prezbiter archidiecezji łódzkiej, adiunkt Katedry Ksiąg Historycznych, Prorockich i Sapiencjalnych ST w Instytucie Nauk Biblijnych KUL, wykładowca ST i NT w Wyższym Seminarium Duchownym w Łodzi, doktor habilitowany nauk biblijnych Papieskiego Instytutu Biblijnego w Rzymie (2009), autor monografii *Il peccato di Gabaa. Os 10,9-10.11-15 e i suoi echi in Geremia* (Studia Biblica Lublinsensia 8; Lublin, Wydawnictwo KUL, 2010) i wielu artykułów. Jego badania koncentrują się na pismach Proroków Mniejszych i ich oddziaływaniu w kontekście całej tradycji prorockiej. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7827-7881>
Kontakt e-mail: zawadzki.a@icloud.com