

Linear and Concentric Patterns in the Rhetorical Style and Structure of Malachi

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Introduction

The element of beauty (i.e. in the prophecy of Malachi) is almost wholly lacking, there being but slight attempt at ornamentation of any kind. The figurative element is very limited.... Neither in spirit, thought, nor form, has it the characteristics of poetry. (J.M.P. Smith, *International Critical Commentary*, pp-4-5.)

Unlike Zechariah, Malachi does not employ any particular literary structure in order to convey his meaning. The subjects with which he deals follow one another apparently haphazardly.... (J.E. Baldwin, *Tyndale Old Testament Commentary*, p.214.)

The purpose of this paper is to adduce evidence, based on a literary structural analysis of the text, which would contradict the two opinions stated above. The style of Malachi is as beautiful as it is forceful, containing a rich diversity of rhetorical ornamentation, including figurative language, which has much in common with the poetic forms to be found in the other Hebrew prophets. Secondly, the discourse structure of Malachi is in fact quite elaborate, for it features two distinct, yet overlapping types of formal organization which complement one another perfectly, both to demarcate meaningful units in the prophecy as a whole and hence also to convey the burden of Yahweh's urgent message to his errant people Israel.

Aspects of Malachi's Rhetorical Style

Most commentators are quick to classify Malachi's prophecy as being essentially "prose." While this may be true, it is important to specify the reasons why such an evaluation is made. Information of this nature is necessary because the distinction between prose and "poetry" in ancient Hebrew literature is not as obvious as the general lack of discussion on the subject would suggest. Rather than being an either-or situation, careful linguistic and literary analyses indicate that it is more likely that, as in most complex artistic phenomena, a continuum of possibilities for differentiation is involved. On the one hand, we have literature that is "more poetic," on the other, texts which are "more prosaic," with various stages in between these two putative extremes. It is not uncommon to find varied blends of style even within the same document, all being the product of a single author, e.g. Hosea, skilfully utilizing the full literary potential of his language (and not a patchwork of "sources").

As was intimated above, there is no one set of criteria that may be applied to unambiguously distinguish prose from poetry. In their *Anchor Bible Commentary on Hosea* (p.60), Andersen and Freedman advance the premise that the percentage of three "prosaic" particles, namely, 'eth (sign of a direct object), 'asher (relative particle), and h- (definite article), provides a syntactic means for doing this, i.e. 3% or less is poetry. If this is true, then there are some large chunks of poetry in Malachi, 1:6-11 for instance, where the percentage works out to be 1.7%. Various metrical schemes have also been proposed, most seeking to establish a rhythmic basis for determining the poetic sections of O.T. prophecy. These methods would be more credible if scholars could agree on exactly what constitutes Hebrew meter. In the absence of such evidence, however, decisions made

according to phonological criteria are open to debate. But it is clear that there are at least several segments in Malachi which do appear to be arranged in a metrically measured form (e.g. again 1:6-9).

Employing the relative density of figures of speech and other “literary” devices as a means of designating Malachi as prose similarly poses problems for the analyst since statistical methods are just that—relative. In fact, this prophecy evinces a wide variety of such so-called “poetic” forms. Here are just a few of the more prominent and characteristic types (the translations that follow are rather literal in order to highlight repeated formal and lexical elements).

1. *Parallelism*

A son honors a father,
and a servant his master.
Now if I (am) a father, where(is) my honor?
And if I (am) a master, where (is)my fear? (1:6)

(Note: all verse references are based on the English text.)

We have now seen phonological, syntactic, and structural evidence for calling the preceding passage “poetry.” There are many other verses in Malachi which exhibit grammatical and lexical parallelism such as this (e.g. 2:2, 10, 3:6, 10-11, 18).

2. *Chiasm*

Reverse parallelism also appears frequently in Malachi:

(A) “I have loved you,”
(B) says Yahweh.
(B) And you say,
(A) “How have you loved us?” (1:2)

(A) And suddenly he will come to his Temple, the Lord,
(B) whom you are seeking,
(C) namely, the Messenger of the Covenant,
(B) whom you are pleased (with).
(A) Behold, he comes, says the LORD of Hosts. (3:11)

More extensive parallelistic and chiastic patterns will be cited later in the discussion of the larger poetic structures of Malachi.

3. *Simile & Metaphor*

These two figures of comparison frequently appear in conjunction with each other, e.g.:

For he (is) like *fire* of the refiner and like *soap* of the fuller.
And he will sit (like) a *refiner* and a *purifier* of silver,
and he will *purify* the sons of Levi,
and he will *purge* them like *gold* and like *silver*. (3:2)

For behold, the day (is) coming, *burning* like an *oven*,
 and all the arrogant ones and every doer of wickedness will be *stubble*,
 and it will *set* them *ablaze*, the coming day,
 and they will be *ashes* under the soles of your feet. (4:1, 3)

Such extended figures are highly poetic; they are also very emphatic. Notice that in each case the imagery serves to focus upon one of the key thematic elements of Malachi's prophecy, that is, "the coming day of Yahweh." In addition to similes and metaphors, we find a number of important comparisons, which express the relationship between Yahweh and Israel in intensely human terms, e.g. father-son, master-servant (1:6).

4. *Synecdoche & Metonymy*

Synecdoches and metonymies, which are figures of speech based on some conventionalized semantic relationship between a word and its non-literal referent, are sprinkled throughout the oracle of Malachi, often at points of increased emotive tension, e.g.:

Judah (= the people of J.) have been unfaithful,
 and an *abomination* (= divorce/idol worship) has been committed in Israel.
 ... for *Judah* has profaned the *holy thing* (= sanctuary/people) of Yahweh...
 and he has married the *daughter* (= women who worship) of a *foreign* (= false) god. (2:11)

5. *Rhetorical Question*

The rhetorical question, whether used to initiate a new topic or to highlight some crucial attitude or emotion, was a mainstay in the Hebrew prophet's stock of poetic devices. Rhetorical questions abound also in Malachi, especially in the mouth of Yahweh as he forcefully levels his incisive accusations at a wayward nation, e.g.:

Was not Esau the brother of Jacob? (1:2)
 And if I am a father, where is the honor due me? (1:6)

Go ahead and bring it to your governor, will he be happy with you? (1:8)
 Am I to accept (such offerings) from your hand? (1:13)

Indeed, the rhetorical question is the keystone of the dialectic style which animates the admonitory message of Malachi.

6. *Antithesis*

Malachi is full of emphatic contrasts which foreground the wicked attitudes and behavior of the Jews by comparing it either with what Yahweh demands in his holy Law or with what will be the case in the future Messianic age. The latter idea is prominent in the glorious prophecy of 1:11, which acts as a climactic antithesis to everything that has been said previously in the discourse unit spanning verses 6-11:

| | | | |
|----|--|----|--|
| | <i>Positive</i> (v.11) | | <i>Negative</i> (vs. 6-10) |
| a) | all nations... great name of Yahweh | a) | corrupt priest of Israel... despised name of Yahweh (6) |
| b) | pure offerings/worship | b) | polluted offerings/worship (7-8) |

c) accepted by/pleasing to Yahweh (implied) c) rejected/by/hateful to Yahweh

Emphatic (independent) pronouns are also employed in typical poetic fashion to effect a sharp contrast in participants, e.g.:

For *I* Yahweh do not change,
Thus *you* sons of Jacob, you have not been consumed. (3:6)

7. Exclamatory Utterances

Malachi is a messenger who is thoroughly taken up with his message. He functions as the mouthpiece of the LORD of Hosts, and his method is to allow the LORD to speak for himself (of a total of 55 verses, 47 record the first person address of Yahweh). Here is a righteous and all-powerful God who is paradoxically also a merciful and loving Father, calling his delinquent children to repentance in order to restore a ruptured Covenant relationship. Such a combination of factors is emotively combustible, and hence it is not surprising that the language periodically bursts into flame with a dramatic power that is unrivaled in the Old Testament—from the simple, yet poignant “I have loved you,” which opens the prophecy, to its concluding prediction of *cherem* ‘holy destruction’ upon those who obstinately close their hearts to the gracious appeal of Israel’s Savior-God.

The language of Malachi is intensified in various ways, for example, through a repetition of sound and sense, e.g.:

When you present blind (beasts) for sacrificing,
there is no harm in that!

When you present the lame and the sick,
there is no harm in that! (1:8a)

Bring it now (-a’) to your governor (-cha),
will he accept you (-cha) or
will he lift up (-a’) your face (-cha) (1:8b)

(Assonance here focuses attention upon the “you” being addressed.)

The latter passage also illustrates the biting irony that characterizes much of the first chapter. This figure, too, automatically intensifies the thoughts being expressed. Malachi manifests other emphasizing devices that are found in the repertoires of the more “poetic” prophets: vocatives (e.g. 1:12), emphatic pronouns (e.g. 3:12), rhetorical questions (see above), word order variations (see below), and, of course, the familiar exclamatory particles, such as *hinneh* ‘behold’ (e.g. 1:13), *na’* ‘please’ (e.g. 3:9), *attah* ‘now’ (e.g. 1:9), and asseverative *ki*:

In truth, look—the day is coming! (4:1)

8. Graphic Diction

This feature often accompanies the preceding one, for where the language is emphatic, it is also likely to be evocative, that is, capable of conjuring up vivid images in the receptor’s mind. Figurative language contributes much to this effect as has already been shown. Hyperbole may also be involved, as well as a certain

aptness of lexical choice—putting the right words in the right places. This we see in the following passage which, were it not for the dead seriousness of the situational context, might strike the reader as being rather humorous (2:3):

Look, I will punish your seed (= children),
 I will spread dung on your faces—
 the dung of your animal sacrifices,
 and you will be carried away with it! (i.e. to the dunghill)

Malachi at times couples his colorful choice of words with apt allusions to outstanding aspects of Yahweh's prior revelation to his spokesmen. These allusions may be to either prophetic (e.g. 1:11) or historical material, e.g.:

Did (God) not make one (being), flesh and spirit for him?
 And what was the one seeking?
 (It was) the seed of God.
 So take heed for your spirit,
 and do not be unfaithful to the wife of your youth! (2:15)

9. Verbal Shifts

In common with the other prophets, Malachi frequently capitalizes on the Hebrew potential for variations in word order. This positional fluidity generally has a focusing effect which throws information that the prophet considers to be important into a foregrounded place in the clause or sentence, i.e. either in front or in back. In other words, such placement may involve either a shift forward (FS) or backward (BS) from an element's expected appearance in the normal VSO (verb-subject-object) arrangement. We see both types occurring in the next passage, which sets the tone with an emphatic initial cognate-complement construction to lead off this word of condemnation:

With a curse you (are being) cursed,
 for *me* (FS) you (are) robbing, *the nation, all of it!* (BS) (3:9)

In 4:4 an expansive restatement is situated in utterance-final position to highlight the semantic topic:

Remember the law of Moses, my servant,
 which I commanded him in Horeb for all Israel,
the statutes and the judgments.

10. Closure

Closure is a poetic technique which is employed to bring a certain unit of discourse to a memorable conclusion. It is comprised of a variable number of individual linguistic and literary devices, such as asyndeton, abbreviation, intensification, figurative language, and verbal shifts (see 9 above). A good example of closure occurs in 1:6. Notice how the prophet begins his highly structured argument with general truths which, though potentially incriminating, must be accepted as valid by all in the audience. The real truth, namely, the specific addressees of Malachi's words, does not strike home, however, until the very end when the priests, who surely must have agreed up to this point, are trapped in a terrible accusation:

A son honors (his) father, and a servant his master.

Now if I (am) a father, where (is) my honor?

And if I (am) a master, where (is) my fear?

says Yahweh of Hosts... *to you, O priests, despisers of my name!*

3:5 illustrates a somewhat different form of closure. It utilizes the enumeration of specific examples to conclude a larger segment of text. Then, at the end of this relatively lengthy listing is placed a concise summarizing statement which simply, but forcefully, expresses the root of all of Israel's problems:

... and I will be a swift witness

against the sorcerers and against the adulterers,

and against those swearing deceitfully,

and against those extorting the laborer and (oppressing) the widow and the orphan,

and those turning away the alien,

and they do not fear me!

says Yahweh of Hosts.

The survey above by no means exhausts the inventory of literary-poetic features which embellish the oracle of Malachi. Other devices that could be mentioned, in addition to those having a wider range of application in the discourse (discussed below), are: personification (e.g. 4:1), proverbial quotation (e.g. 4:1), alliteration (e.g. 2:12), idiomatic speech (e.g. 1:8-9), panegyric appellation (e.g. 2:16), lexical interlocking (e.g. 2:17), and repetition, both exact (e.g. 2:2) and synonymous (3:16). But the preceding has been sufficient to support the validity of the first part of my thesis: the style of Malachi undeniably demonstrates considerable artistic proficiency, a fluency which reflects a definite rhetorical purpose, namely, to convey the author's urgent (life-or-death) message with an impact and appeal that enhances its communicative effectiveness.

We will now direct our attention to the larger structure of Malachi and a description of the two complementary methods of poetic-rhetorical arrangement which the prophet employs both to outline his message as well as to give it cohesion (perhaps to assist an audience perceiving it aurally). As a result of this organization, which is at the same time both similar to and distinct from that of the other prophets, the thematic points of this book are transmitted with a clarity and power that is unsurpassed in prophetic literature.

Linear Patterning

In addition to the individual parallel structures of various length which appear frequently throughout the book of Malachi, there is a generic pattern composed of a triad of alternating elements which is repeated to organize the prophecy as a whole. This reiterated sequence results from Malachi's novel (for the OT) treatment of his subject, viz. a dialectic style which serves a didactic-admonitory purpose. That is to say, in teaching the Jews about Yahweh's faithful love and his righteous judgment to come in order to get them to repent and initiate a genuine reform of society, the prophet casts his argument in the form of a series of dialogues involving Yahweh and his people. These mini-conversations assume the nature of a dispute, each of which consists of three basic constituents:

- a) *Assertion* (A) – Yahweh makes a general statement concerning the current unacceptable faith-life of Israel;
- b) *Objection* (O) – The people, or a particular segment of society (i.e. the priests), react in opposition to the theological/moral assertion or implication made by Yahweh. This objection is probably not a direct quotation, but in it Yahweh through his prophet epitomizes a given attitude or behavior of the people which is contrary to his will as expressed in the Mosaic Law; and

- c) *Response (R)* – Yahweh, in turn, answers the objection of the people in the form of an accusation, reproof, rebuttal, reproach, exhortation, admonition, warning, and/or promise (various combinations of these intentions do occur). Usually this response is directed toward some specific sin of thought, word, or deed that is being manifested by the Jews.

(A) and (O) are thus essentially rhetorical devices that focus upon a particular problem and set the stage for Yahweh’s instruction of his people (R). The linear progression (A - O - R), though basic to the forward thematic movement of the message, is not a stereotyped one, however. More often than not, the pattern is varied in order to avoid monotony (negative effect) and to increase the quality of communication (positive effect). The cycle is completed in full six times and that is the reason for my decision to segment the discourse into that many major units, termed “disputes,” each of which expresses a distinct theme or related corpus of subject matter. As we will see later on, there are additional structural reasons for positing these six principal divisions, but these would only complicate the discussion at this point.

Below is a table which gives a summary of the linear (diachronic) ground-plan of the oracle of Malachi. It includes a citation of some of the chief lexical “markers” which help in distinguishing the onset of these segments. The “theme” provided consists of an abstraction of the content of a given section. Numeral subscripts (with or without an apostrophe) indicate the presence of variations in or elaborations of the basic pattern (A - O - R), while the small letters in parentheses refer to explanatory notes given after the table. These notes comment on certain problem areas in the analysis and attempt to briefly explain the decisions that were reached. It should be remembered that this scheme is tentative pending a more thorough discourse analysis of Malachi, the metrical organization (where such exists) in particular.

| Verse(s) | Unit | Markers | Theme |
|-----------------|--|---|---|
| 1:1 | Heading | (prophetic formula) | Introduction |
| 1:2-5 | Dispute 1 | | Yahweh’s Covenant Love for Israel is Manifested in His Rejection of Esau. |
| 2a | A | “...says Yahweh.” | |
| 2b | O | “And you say...” | |
| 2c-5 | R | Rhetorical questions + “...oracle of Yahweh.” | |
| 1:6-2:9 | Dispute 2 | | The Priests Pollute the Table of Yahweh and Corrupt the Covenant of Levi. |
| 6a | A | “...says Yahweh of Hosts.” | |
| 6b | O | “And you say...” | |
| 7a | R=A ₁ (a) | | |
| 7b | O ₁ | “And you say...” | |
| 7c-11 | R ₁ | “When you say...” | |
| | (A ₂ + O ₂) (b) | | |
| 12-14 | R ₂ (c) | “When you say...” | |
| 2:1-9 | R’ ₂ (d) | “...says Yahweh of Hosts.” | |
| 2:10-16 | Dispute 3 | | Judah Proves to Be Unfaithful to Yahweh Through Intermarriage With Heathen Women and Divorce. |
| 10-12 | A (e) | Rhetorical question | |
| 13 | A’ | “And this is a second thing...” | |
| 14a | O | “And you say...” | |
| 14b-16 | R | “Because Yahweh...” | |
| 2:17-3:5 | Dispute 4 | | Yahweh Will Come to |

| | | | |
|-----------------|------------------------|------------------------------------|---|
| 17a | A | | Judge the Wicked and to Purify His People. |
| 17b | O | “And you say...” | |
| 17c-3:5 | R | “When you say...” | |
| 3:6-12 | Dispute 5 | | Yahweh Longs to Bless His Unfaithful People. |
| 6-7a | A | “...says Yahweh of Hosts.” | |
| 7b | O | “And you say...” | |
| 8a | R = A ₁ (f) | Rhetorical question | |
| 8b | O ₁ | “And you say...” | |
| 8c-12 | R ₁ | | |
| 3:13-4:3 | Dispute 6 | | On Serving and Fearing Yahweh: The Contrasting Fates of the Righteous and the Wicked. |
| 13a | A | “...says Yahweh.” | |
| 13b | O | “And you say...” | |
| 14-18 | R | “You have said...” | |
| 4:1-3 | R' (g) | “For behold, the day is coming...” | |
| 4:4-6 | Epilogue (h) | “Remember the Law of Moses...” | Concluding Exhortation |

Discussion

There are several points of a general nature to note in connection with the table above. First of all, the theme of the prophecy as a whole might be stated something like this: THE MERCIFUL YET MIGHTY LORD OF HOSTS CALLS HIS FAITHLESS PEOPLE TO REPENTANCE. Neither this theme nor the six subparts is unique to Malachi, but the way in which these concepts are expressed certainly is. The criticism that there is no order in the presentation of the prophecy's thematic ideas is quite unfounded. Yahweh is not only a God of the Law and punishment—he is first and foremost a God of faithful love (Dispute 1). It was this that motivated and maintained his gracious covenant with Israel, despite his people's continued infidelity. Nevertheless, Yahweh's justice cannot be compromised. He will punish unrepented sin. But first he mercifully allows sinners the chance to repent by calling their attention to the terrible error of their ways (Disputes 2-3). If, despite repeated warnings, some refuse Yahweh's invitation, he will assuredly come in judgment to punish the wicked (Dispute 4). After giving the latter warning, it's almost as if Yahweh regrets having had to threaten his chosen people, and he quickly reminds them of his gracious love and eager desire to forgive and bless them once again (Dispute 5). However, in view of the people's self-righteous defiance, he must direct their thoughts once more to the reality of “his day,” the final judgment, when both the righteous and the wicked will receive their just reward (Dispute 6). The Epilogue then summarizes in linear fashion the main points of Malachi's message:

- 4:4) *Reformation* – observe the Law of Moses (the focus of chapters 1-2);
- 4:5) *Preparation* – there will come a day of restoration and renewal for the righteous under the “Messenger of the Covenant” (3:1), who will be preceded by the second “Elijah”—but this will be a day of dreadful punishment for the unrighteous (the focus of chapters 3-4);
- 4:6a) *Repentance* – Yahweh desires the conversion of all;
- 4:6b) *Punishment* – but he will not hesitate to deal with the wicked in judgment.

Turning back to the larger structure, we note in passing the chiasmic arrangement in the markers of the (A) elements:

1. “says Yahweh” 6. “says Yahweh”
 2. “says Yahweh of Hosts” 5. “says Yahweh of Hosts”
 3. the prophet speaks 4. the prophet speaks

It should be noted that although Dispute 4 begins with the speech of Malachi, the remainder of the unit alternates between the words of Yahweh and his prophet. The (O) segments are quite clearly indicated since each one starts off with “And you say....” There may be some debate about positing the initial boundary of the (R) sections, for the divisions proposed above often incorporate quotations of other speeches made by the “people.” However, since these are cited by Yahweh as “evidence” against them, I have included them as part of (R), e.g.:

- (A) You have wearied Yahweh with your words.
 (O) And you say, “How have we wearied him?”
 (R) When you say, “*Every evildoer is good in the eyes of Yahweh...*” (2:17)

The following then gives a brief explanation of some of the main variations and problem areas encountered in the demarcation of the six disputation segments. These are discussed in order according to the small letters enclosed in parentheses:

(a) 1:7 is a complex verse structurally since it includes all three constituents of the basic linear pattern. “(You are) offering defiled food on my altar” is Yahweh’s response (R) to the priests’ objection given in the previous verse (O). The priests then reply with another question (O₁), “How did we defile you?” Thus the original (R) cited above functions also as an assertion (A₁) in the second series of elements which comprise this dispute. Due to the clear semantic and structural overlap here, a new major discourse unit is not proposed. This decision, as well as many of those that follow, is supported by the concentric pattern that coincides with the linear one throughout the book (see below).

(b) The Messianic motif which is so prominent in 1:11 obviously marks the end of a sub-unit (“paragraph”) in Dispute 2. What then is to be done with the following material, i.e. through verse 14, where this motif recurs to signal another boundary? Since the content of verses 12-14 is so closely related to that of verses 6-11, and since there are no typical (A) or (O) markers present at the beginning of verse 12, it seems best to view this section as simply a continuation of the same dispute—the variation on a theme. Therefore, we must posit the pair of missing structural elements as being implicitly expressed in the context. Support for this interpretation is found at the beginning of the section in verse 6. The crucial words here are those of Yahweh’s sharp accusation: “You priests (are) despisers of my name!” (A). That occasions the retort, “How have we despised your name?” (O). If a similar pair of elements (i.e. A₂ + O₂) are allowed implicitly in the initial clause of verse 12, “And you (are) profaning it (i.e. “name”),” then the subsequent rejoinder by Yahweh follows naturally: “... in your saying, ‘The table of the Lord (is) defiled...’” (R₂).

(c) The paragraph covering verses 1:12-14 is unique for several reasons. For one thing, it is one of the few larger units in the prophecy that is not structured also concentrically (another being the Epilogue, 4:4-6). However, it does manifest a linear arrangement that closely matches the order of constituents in verses 6-11. The argument of this paragraph thus repeats that of the preceding one point for point in an “*overlay*” pattern. This type of rhetorical structure, whether realized on an abstract or a concrete level, is certainly not foreign to the OT prophets (e.g. Hosea 9:10-14 and 15-17), though it is not usually recognized for what it is. A summary of this overlay is as follows:

| Designation | A-O-R/A ₁ -O ₁ -R ₁ | (A ₂ -O ₂) – R ₂ |
|---|--|--|
| Indictment (despise Yahweh) – Result | 6 – despise <i>name</i> O priests | 12a – profane it (<i>name</i>) you (emphatic) |

| | How have we despised it | (implicit) |
|--|---|--|
| Indictment – Means-Generic (Chiasm between the four parts) | 7 – by offering <i>polluted food</i> on my altar | 12b – the <i>table</i> of the <i>Lord</i> is defiled |
| | Thinking that the <i>Lord’s table</i> may be despised | Its <i>food</i> is despicable |
| Indictment – Specific | 8 – you offer blind animals, lame, sick | 13a – you bring stolen, lame, sick members of the flock |
| Verdict (Yahweh rejects) | 10 – I will not accept an offering from your hand | 13b – should I accept (this) offering from your hand? |
| Validation (authority of Yahweh) | 11 – for my <i>name</i> is great among the nations | 14 – for I am a great king; my <i>name</i> is feared among the nations |

(d) 2:1-9 (R'₂) is a section which illustrates the freedom of composition that Malachi enjoyed when formulating his prophecy. He certainly did not feel bound to confine himself to any one stereotyped pattern. This highly poetic and intricately constructed unit does not give evidence of any of the markers which distinguish the other disputation sections. Nevertheless, it is included in Dispute 2 for several reasons: 1) the addressees are the same, namely, the “priests,” who are specified in the opening verse of each subunit, i.e. 1:6 and 2:1 (anaphora); and 2) the content of this section nicely complements that of 1:6-14; in the former Yahweh attacks the wicked practice of the priests while in the latter he reproves their corrupt teaching and disinterested attitude toward his Law. 2:1-9 also vividly warns of the punishment that awaits such despicable behavior and at the same time it summarizes the characteristics of the anti-type, the genuine “messenger of Yahweh of Hosts.”

(e) In this instance, two (A) constituents appear to complicate the basic pattern. Verses 10-12 introduce the second half in the treatment of a serious family problem which forms the subject of this dispute, namely, the marriage of heathen women by Jewish men. Malachi does not complete his accusation immediately, but rather prefaces it in verse 13 (A') with some graphic imagery depicting the pathetic result of Yahweh's rejection of the men's worship due to their infidelity both to their wives and to their God. The naïve objection, “For what reason (i.e. have our offerings been refused),” then sets the stage for Yahweh's powerful condemnation of the sin of divorce, i.e. of Jewish women.

(f) Yahweh's response (R) in 3:8a to Israel's objection (O), “How shall we return?” serves simultaneously as an introduction to a more precise statement (A') of the sin that is being censured: “You have robbed me.” In this case the function of the repeated pattern is to emphasize the accusation by means of a generic-specific progression.

(g) The passage 4:1-3 (R' of Dispute 6) again does not manifest any of the normal sequential markers. Thus, one must either treat it as an independent unit or attempt to attach it to an unambiguous section that has already been established. This, in my opinion, is another instance of the artistic liberty that Malachi exhibits in the composition of his message. Variety, within limits, avoids monotony and preserves interest in what is being said. As we saw in the case discussed under point (d), it is likely that the present segment is best construed as a continuation of the preceding one (3:13-18). Evidence which would substantiate this is as follows: 1) formally we see the repetition of several important concepts, in particular, the reference to a future “day” of judgment (vs. 17 & 19) when two groups will be distinguished, viz. the “doers of wickedness” (vs. 15 & 19) and the “fearers of Yahweh/my name” (vs. 16 & 20); and 2) (R) anticipates (R') semantically by alluding to a time when there will be a “difference between the righteous and the wicked” (v. 18); this difference is then elaborated upon in a variety of contrasting images in 4:1-3.

(h) The variant linear arrangement of the Epilogue (4:4-6) and its purpose in the structure of the discourse as a whole has already been discussed.

Concentric Patterning

As we have now observed, the message of Malachi is meaningfully, and rather uniquely, organized on a linear, diachronic plane. This in itself is significant, for it contradicts the widespread opinion that there is little, if any, formal arrangement in the book. However, it is in the diverse concentric patterns that are skillfully superimposed upon the former that the rhetorical genius of the prophet is most fully revealed. These introverted patterns serve a cohesive function to knit the discrete units (paragraphs and sections) tightly together and to provide an internal organization to segments of the text which at first glance (hearing) might seem to be rather loosely constructed. Furthermore, by expressing his (Yahweh's) ideas and concerns in a poetic form that was familiar to the people, Malachi undoubtedly enhanced the efficiency and impact with which they were communicated, thus heightening listener/reader response, whether sympathetic or antagonistic. The basic formula for the concentric, or chiasmic, structure being referred to is this: A – B – (C – B') – A'. The parentheses indicate components which are optional in any given sequence. The strength or perspicuity of the pattern varies according to the number of formal lexical and/or syntactic features that support it. In some instances, it exists only in bare outline, whereas elsewhere it is outstanding to the point where it dominates the discourse.

There are three other rhetorical devices which help the analyst to delineate the various boundaries and interrelationships of the major units of a Hebrew text:

- a) *Inclusio* – This refers to the occurrence of formal or semantic similarities at both the beginning and the ending of a particular section, whether this is included within a larger segment or itself including smaller segments. As a rule, every type of concentric pattern employs at least some degree of *inclusio*.
- b) *Anaphora* – In this case the formal or semantic correspondences are found at the respective beginnings (only) of distinct units, be they adjacent or removed in space.
- c) *Epiphora* – This is the same as anaphora, except that the formal likenesses appear at the endings of discrete segments. The number of segments so marked are not limited to two.

As these techniques will be illustrated below, there is no need to do so here.

Below is set forth the sequence of larger concentric structures as they occur in Malachi. These will be presented only in summary schematic fashion, except for the section 2:1-9, which will be displayed in more detail to illustrate the complexity with which such patterns may be constructed in the poetic-rhetorical oratory of the prophets.

Dispute One (1:2--5) A – B – C – B' – A'

- (A) Yahweh refers to Jacob in blessing: “you” + “Jacob” (2)
- (B) Yahweh's judgment upon Esau: “I have wasted his inheritance” (3)
- (C) Edom's lack of repentance: “we will rebuild” (4a)
- (B) Yahweh's judgement upon Esau: “let them build – I will tear down” (4b)
- (A') Yahweh refers to Jacob in blessing: “you” + “Israel” (5)

Notice how appropriately the structure complements the theme which deals with Yahweh's contrasting treatment of the two brothers. The core element (C) is significant for it suggests that Yahweh's dealing with Esau/Edom were not the result of a purely arbitrary choice—petty favoritism. Rather, aside from Yahweh's

universal mercy (also a theme of Malachi), his relations with Edom were at least partly determined by the latter's response to the LORD's will and ways.

Dispute Two (1:6-2:9)

Part 1 (1:6-11) A – B – C = C' – B' – A'

- (A) Honor is due Yahweh's name: "my name" (6)
- (B) The priests' sin, defective offerings: "my altar" + "offer" + "food" + "sacrifice" (7-8a)
- (C) Result = no mercy: "governor" + "lift up your face" (8b)
- (C') Result = no mercy: "God" + "lift up your faces" (9)
- (B') The priests' sin, defective offerings: "my altar" + "food offering" (10)
- (A') Honor is due Yahweh's name: "my name" (11)

Part 2 (1:12-14)

As was pointed out in an earlier section, the organization of this portion is basically linear since it embodies an "overlay" structure that duplicates the essential elements of the preceding part. The three chiasmic components do appear, but in an altered order:

- (B'') The priests' sin, defective offerings: "table of the Lord" + "food" + "fruit" + "meal offering" (12-13a)
- (C'') Result = no mercy: "I will not accept it from your hand" + "cursed" (13b-14a)
- (A'') Honor is due Yahweh's name: "my name" (14b)

Observe the Messianic refrain which recurs to conclude the major segments of chapter one (epiphora): it is a reverent tribute to the revelation ("name") of Yahweh and his all—inclusive kingdom of greatness and grace (vs. 5,11,14).

Part 3 (2:1-9)

The unit as a whole manifests a general "ring structure" (A-B-A') as follows:

- (A) the priests' perversion → curse (1-4)
- (B) the pure priestly prototype (5-7)
- (A') the priests' perversion → punishment (8-9)

Each of the three segments is itself intricately arranged in a variety of concentric patterns.

Paragraph 1 (2:1-4) A – B = B' – A'

- (A) Introduction: "to you this command" + "O priests" (1)
- (NB anaphoric features: "now" (1 :9) and "priests" (1:6))
- (B) Judgment: x – "you don't take it to heart" (2a)
- y – "I will curse your blessings" (2b)

- y' – “I have cursed it” (2c)
 x' – “you don't take it to heart” (2d)
- (B') Judgment: x – “I will rebuke you” (3a)
 y – “dung” (3b)
 y' – “dung” (3c)
 x' – “I will carry you out” (3d)
- (A') Conclusion: “to you this command” + “Levi” (4)

Paragraph 2 (2:5-7) A – B – A'

- (A) Introduction: “before my name trembled *he*” (5)
 (B) The priestly life: x – “law” + “in his mouth” (6a)
 y – “lips” (6b)
 z – “he walked with me” (6c)
 z' – “he turned many” (6d)
 y – “lips” (7a)
 x' – “law” + “from his mouth” (7b)
- (A') Conclusion: “the messenger of Yahweh is *he*” (7c)

Paragraph 2 begins this way:

“My covenant was with him (one of) life and peace,
 and I gave them to him (for) fear—and he feared me.” (2:5)

This characterization of the desire of Yahweh, the ideal priest, is foregrounded in several ways other than by serving as the subject of this central paragraph. First of all, the bicolon occurs almost precisely at the midpoint of this entire section, Part 3, viz. 61 words (120 syllables) after the initial *we'attah* (v.1) and 62 words (114 syllables) prior to the final *battorah* (v.9). Secondly, the rhythmic pattern of these two lines (a virtually identical 12 and 11 syllables respectively), should this section indeed prove to be metrical, appears to be quite distinct from the verses which occur preceding and subsequent to it. That is to say, in the context the utterance lengths average out to be considerably shorter, i.e. approximately seven syllables, and this would immediately be noticeable to anyone listening to this text being read. Observe also the thematic appellation, “the messenger of Yahweh of Hosts,” which is found at the end of this medial paragraph/strophe; it is punctuated by the utterance-final emphatic pronoun *hu* ‘he.’

Paragraph 3 (2:8-9) A – B = B' – A'

- (A) Means: “turned from the way” + perverting “instruction” (8a)
 (B) Result – indictment: “you have corrupted the Covenant of Levi” (8b)
 (B') Result – punishment: “I have made you despised” (9a)
 (A') Reason: “not keeping my ways” + perverting “instruction” (9b)

This paragraph is semantically linked with Paragraph 2 both anaphorically: “my covenant ...with him” (5) – “the covenant of Levi” (8), and epiphorically: “the Law” (7) – “the Law” (9). Both of these concepts are, of course, crucial in the development of Yahweh's case against his people.

Dispute Three (2:10-16)**A – B – C = C' – B' – A'**

- (A) Ideal situation = unity: “one God” + “one Father”
 General sin = “infidelity” (10)
 (B) Indictment/specific sin = intermarriage: “daughter of a foreign god” + “infidelity”
 (11)
 (C) Verdict: exclusion, rejection of “food offering” (12)
 (C') Verdict: rejection of “food offering” (13)
 (B') Indictment/specific sin = divorce: “wife of covenant” + “infidelity” (14)
 (A') Ideal situation = unity: “one... one”
 General sin = “infidelity” (15)

Verse 16 effectively summarizes this unit by restating its theme: “God hates divorce... so don't be unfaithful.” Here repeated once more is the leitmotif which acts as a cohesive thread running throughout the segment: *b-g-d* ‘infidelity.’ We also find an expression which functions as an *inclusio* which ties the center of the concentric structure to this concluding verse: “...covers X with Y” (vs.13 & 16). Finally, we note the chiasmic pattern that develops in the citation of references to the deity: (A) God (B) Yahweh (C) Yahweh (C') Yahweh (B') Yahweh (A') God. This series is rounded out with “Yahweh...God” in verse 16.

Turning back to the beginning of Dispute Three, we observe an anaphoric element that recalls the start of Dispute Two, namely, the twofold mention of the word “father” (*ab*). In this way the prophet lexically underlines, as it were, this central concept: Yahweh is the one and only “father” of Israel (he is also a loving father, cp. Dispute One, 1:2). There are several other ways in which the opening lines of these two principal discourse segments are rhetorically marked, viz. through: a) parallelism of members; b) sound similarity; and c) rhythm:

- (1:6) A son honors his *father* (*-ab*), and a servant his *master* (*-av*).
 And if a *father* (am) I (*-ni*), where (is) my honor (*-di*)?
 And if a *master* (am) I (*-ni*), where (is) my fear (*-i*)? //8:8:10//
- (2:10) (Is there) not one *father* to us all (*-anu*)?
 (Has) not one God created us (*-anu*)? //7:7//

The parallelism is obvious, as is the rhythm (indicated by syllable counts between // signs). In these particular verses, the sound harmony patterns are also quite prominent. There is rhyme as indicated (not normally a characteristic of Hebrew poetry) as well as alliteration, i.e. *b/v* in 1:6 and */I* in 2:10. This highly poetic type of “oracular prose” is typical of the onset of each of the major disputation units. Coupled with the diagnostic question-answer form, the rhetoric acts as an effective means of distinguishing the initial boundaries of these important sections or stages of the prophetic message (anaphora).

Dispute Four (2:17-3:5)**A – B = B' – A'**

- (A) Warning – the day of judgment is coming: “judgment” + “come” + “says Yahweh of Hosts”
 (2:17-3:2a)
 (B) Means – purification of the people (3:2b-3a)
 (B') Result – pleasing offerings (3:3b-4)

(A') Warning – the day of judgment is coming: “judgment” + “come” + “says Yahweh of Hosts” (3:5)

The announcement of this new and important theme, i.e. the coming of Yahweh's messenger (A), is highlighted by a concentration of rhetorical devices, including some elaborate lexical patterning which features an interlocking double chiasm:

(A) “every evildoer... in them (Yahweh) is pleased” (2:17)
 (B) Question: “where (is) the God of judgment?”
 (B') Answer: “he will come... the Lord whom you are seeking” (3:1)
 (A') “...(in) whom you are pleased”

This structure is interwoven with the following:

(A) “Behold, I am sending” (3:1a)
 (B) “my messenger”
 (B') “namely, the messenger of the Covenant” (3:1b)
 (A') “Behold, he comes”

Dispute Five (3:6-12)A – B – C – D – C' – B' – A'

(A) Introduction: a divine premise (6)
 (B) Appeal – repent: 1) stated negatively: “you have turned away from my statutes” (7a)
 2) stated positively: “return to me” (7b)
 (C) Indictment: “you have robbed me” (8)
 (D) Verdict: CURSE! (9a)
 (C') Indictment: “you are robbing me” (9b)
 (B') Promise – blessings upon those who repent:
 1) stated positively: an overflowing harvest (10)
 2) stated negatively: protection from calamity (11)
 (A') Conclusion; a Messianic vision (12)

The first and the final elements in this concentric pattern, i.e. (A) and (A'), carry strong overtones of several key motifs that were introduced in chapter one and play a prominent part in the overall message which Yahweh wishes to convey to his people. (A) recalls the loving father theme of 1:2 (anaphora) while (A') reminds the listener of the glorious plan that Yahweh will put into effect in the Messianic Age, a plan that will encompass “all nations” (cp. 1:5,11,14 – epiphora). Verse 6 is often incorporated by the versions and commentaries into the preceding unit. My analysis is based upon the reason given above, namely, that (A) is an anaphoric type phrase, and upon the fact that the justice and immutability of Yahweh expressed here is also a leading idea throughout the rest of the prophecy, especially in 3:18 and 4:1-3.

The structure of this dispute is admittedly not as transparent as some of the others due to a relative decrease in the amount of lexical correspondence. Nevertheless, the patterns which we have observed elsewhere would influence us to view the unit concentrically, and this does provide a satisfactory arrangement, albeit on a more abstract level. The central core, (D), however, is quite concrete: “with a curse you are being cursed!” (9a) This shocking pronouncement stands out not only in its immediate context, but also within the section as a whole since it expresses almost the antithesis of the outer constituents of the chiasm. Perhaps this may be regarded as a formal means of calling attention to the truth that a righteous Yahweh cannot condone sin; his justice will not be compromised by his gracious desire to forgive.

Dispute Six (3:13-4:3)

$$A - B = B' - A' + X - Y - X'$$

- (A) Objection – Yahweh is unjust: “serve God” + “doers of wickedness” (13-15)
- (B) Justice: Yahweh “hears” those who “fear” him (16)
- (B’) Blessing: Yahweh will spare his “treasure” (17)
- (A’) Refutation – Yahweh is just: “serve God” + “the wicked” (18)

Segment (A) bears a strong resemblance to the initial unit of Dispute Four (2:17 – anaphora). An obvious inclusio demarcates the boundaries of segment (B) in the words, “those who feared Yahweh.” Segment (B’) reiterates the focal father-son motif and couples this with the promise of a “day” of judgment. Segment (A’) sets the stage for the second half of the dispute (4:1-3), which specifies the difference in how Yahweh is going to treat “the righteous and the wicked” in his judgment:

- (X) Fate of the wicked: “day” + “wicked” + “ablaze” + “Yahweh of Hosts” (1)
- (Y) Future of the God-fearing: metaphors of healing and happiness (2)
- (X’) Fate of the wicked; “wicked” + “ashes” + “day” + “Yahweh of Hosts” (3)

The verses above are linked to 3:13-18 by virtue of the fact that they thematically satisfy the anticipation which was aroused in verse 18. The two passages are also joined by a number of significant lexical connections, for example: “day” (3:17 + 4:1, 3), “doers of wickedness” (3:13 + 4:1), “wicked” (3:18 + 4:3), and “those who fear Yahweh/my name” (3:16 + 4:2). Notice that these words are not selected at random. On the contrary, each expresses a key concept that Yahweh wishes to convey to the Jews in his call to repentance. This is but one more instance of the expert application of rhetorical form to divine content that distinguishes Malachi from his non-inspired contemporaries at the close of the Old Testament prophetic tradition.

Conclusion: an Evaluation of Literary-Structural Analysis

In this paper I have tried to demonstrate how a specific literary-structural analysis as part of a larger historical-linguistic approach can assist the Bible scholar in his study of the book of Malachi in particular, and indeed, the other prophetic writings of the Old Testament. There are several cautions to be kept in mind, however, when applying this type of analysis to the Scriptures. First and foremost, it must always be based on a thorough exegesis of the individual passages of the original text. A study of the whole without the parts is, at best, superficial and probably also highly speculative; a study of the parts without some idea of the total framework may be misleading or simply wrong in a number of its conclusions since it fails to distinguish the forest on account of the trees. Both types of analysis are necessary, the holistic as well as the particular, for they complement and correct one another. Included within a verse-by-verse examination of the text must be some detailed isagogical research into the background of a book, namely, the particular historical, religious, literary, and socio-cultural context in which the message first originated as a dynamic communication event involving God, his prophet, and his chosen people.

Secondly, a literary-structural analysis must never become an end in itself—a convenient means of demonstrating its author’s facility and finesse in uncovering and describing all kinds of elaborately constructed patterns, some of which pass beyond the bounds of perception and credibility, even for the trained reader. Rather, the aim must always be to elucidate the text, to demonstrate how God in his wisdom employed also the *form* of human language (Hebrew and Greek in particular) in order to more effectively transmit divine truths to mankind.

Finally, one must be careful not to claim or base too much upon such an analysis. It is but one tool among many which the Bible student has at his disposal to probe more deeply into the meaning and relevance of these ancient documents. A literary-structural analysis does well to solve even a fraction of the questions which one might encounter in a comprehensive investigation of a biblical book. Nevertheless, that fraction is significant and ought not be ignored.

What then are some of the main contributions of this type of study? At this point I can merely suggest and summarize. It remains for others to conduct some follow-up research in order to more fully explore the validity and implications of the following observations. I see five general areas of possible application for a literary-structural (LS) analysis:

a) An L-S analysis helps one to understand the author's message more completely by revealing in a more explicit fashion the *overall arrangement of content* and how that content is organized or subdivided into a variety of patterns which express the writer's intended meaning. In short, by knowing the "how," one is in a better position to grasp the "what." The discourse structure illuminates a work's theme and the manner in which this is developed (expanded, divided, repeated, combined, etc.) from one point to another. The associated stylistic study suggests places where the author employed a rhetorical spotlight, as it were, to emphasize his main ideas. In the case of Malachi, we have seen how the larger linear and concentric patterns, as well as the diverse lot of literary devices, serve both to shape and to sharpen Yahweh's sincere appeal to repossess the "heart" of his people (4:6).

b) An L-S study has relevance not only for the higher-level meaning of a book, but it also aids in the *exegetis and interpretation* of individual passages. The whole sheds light upon the parts even as the parts combine to constitute the whole. In instances where two (or more) valid interpretations are possible for a given passage, knowledge of the encompassing literary pattern may tip the balance of preference in favor of one reading or the other. In the case of 1:5, for example, epiphoric pressure exerted from 1:11 and 1:14 with regard to the repeated phrases, "my name" and "among the nations," would lead one to see a corresponding pair in 1:5, viz. "Yahweh" and "*beyond* the border of Israel" (rather than "*over* the border of Israel"). Similarly, the fact that 2:15 occurs at a corresponding stage with 2:10 in a chiasmic frame would lend support to the NIV interpretation of the former passage (in preference to that of Luther and Laetsch), namely, that the subject of the initial verb is "God," and not "Abraham" (this is also reinforced by the immediate context where the specific topic has to do with divorce rather than a second marriage). As was pointed out earlier, such comments based on structural criteria are by no means conclusive. Nevertheless, they do contribute additional evidence in favor of one position over against another, evidence which must be weighed and evaluated as to reliability just like any other information that is available.

c) The results of an L-S analysis are able to improve the *quality of a translation*. Over and above the exegetical insights that it provides, it clearly indicates points or areas where the original text is marked by some type of rhetorical highlighting, for example, the climactic utterance of closure in 1:6, i.e. "...to you, O priests, despisers of my name!" These places of formal and semantic prominence ought to be preserved in a translation, for translation is not merely a matter of transferring message content from one language to another. It must also, where possible, be faithful also to the intention and impact of the original. Often this will involve a change in the linguistic forms from those used in the source language text. Thus, the censure referred to above is encoded in the form of a dependent participial construction in the Hebrew. In English, however, the emphasis conveyed by these words is more dynamically reproduced by an independent sentence introduced by an existential copula construction: "*It is you*, O priests, who despise my name" (NIV). A translation may also be enhanced typographically through the information derived from an L-S study of the text, e.g. where to indicate the presence of poetic discourse, such as the opening lines of the successive disputation sections (1:2, 1:6, 2:10, 2:17, 3:6, 3:13) or where to begin a new paragraph unit (e.g. 2:17, 3:6).

d) A study of the literary structure might occasionally offer some *homiletical advice* to the pastor. By formally defining the sections and subsections of a text and by revealing those portions of the message which

the original author sought to emphasize, the method offers guidance both in the selection of an appropriate theme and also in the formulation of parts that harmonize with the author's arrangement of his material. This is not always necessary or even desirable in sermon preparation, but at times such information can serve to make the preacher's job easier, and perhaps even more effective—to the point! For example, below is a sample theme and parts based on the text covered by the first half of the sixth dispute (3:13-18):

TO SERVE GOD OR NOT TO SERVE HIM—WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE? (v.18)

A. Here In This Life:

1. The *complaint* of the unwilling servant (vs.13-14)
 - a) there is no profit in it
 - b) the wicked have all the fun
2. The *confidence* of the willing servant (v.16)
 - a) he continues to “fear the LORD”
 - b) he receives the LORD's personal assurance

B. In The Hereafter:

1. The wicked servant will not escape the just punishment of the Almighty (v.18, by implication, (v.18, by implication, cp. 4:1)
2. The righteous servant will enjoy the LORD's blessing (v.17)
 - a) he will be preserved (as “his own son”)
 - b) he will be honored (as “his treasure”)

e) This last point is perhaps the least important, and yet it should not be disregarded completely. The effort of carrying out an L-S analysis will be rewarded by an increased *awareness of the artistic qualities* of a particular book—the pure beauty or feeling of it. Such a heightened response may in turn lead to a greater appreciation for the work, to be specific, a realization of different ways in which the diverse literary forms of the original language are pressed into the service of a more dynamic transmission of the meaning of the message. An understanding of the nature of the poetic process and its function in the text, even if only partial (as it must always be), will certainly influence a person to return to that book again and again. And each time he will, of course, derive a little more benefit from it. In his repeated encounters with a living discourse, the student will also learn how to better communicate its divine message, applying it first of all to himself, and then to others.

After all, that is the essential idea of the prophet Malachi: let us “fear Yahweh” and honor “his name” in our daily lives, for he is the loving LORD OF HOSTS. It is this truth to which the book's rhetorical style and structure also attest.