The End of Prophecy: Malachi's Position in the Spiritual Development of Israel

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Rabbi Hayyim Angel is Rabbi of Congregation Shearith Israel, the historic Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue of New York City—founded 1654. He teaches Bible at Yeshiva College and is the author of three books and numerous articles. This article appears in issue 9 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

Introduction

God communicated to people through prophecy for nearly the entire biblical period, from Adam until Malachi. According to a prevalent Jewish tradition, prophecy ceased with Malachi, not to be renewed until the messianic age. In this article, we will consider a few traditional explanations of why prophecy ceased and some spiritual implications for Judaism over the ensuing 2,500 years and counting.

Overview of Malachi

Unlike Haggai and Zechariah, whose prophecies pulsated with messianic potential, Malachi lived a generation or two later—a generation in which that messianic potential appears to have been lost. At that time, the people’s political and economic suffering contributed to:

their feelings of rejection by God (1:2–5),
corruption of the priesthood (1:6–2:9),
rampant intermarriage (2:10–16), and
laxity in tithing (3:8–12).
God-fearing people were losing heart as well. Why remain righteous? Their sinful compatriots were successful, while God-fearing people suffered (2:17; 3:13–21)!

All Malachi could answer was that for now, the mere fact of Israel's continued existence proved that God still loved them (1:2–5). Only in some unspecified future would God bring complete justice (3:13–24).

According to a prevalent Jewish tradition, Malachi was the last prophet (see, for example, Tosefta Sotah 3:3; Yoma 9b; Sanhedrin 11a). That his book is positioned last in the Twelve Prophets does not prove he was the last prophet, since the book is not arranged in chronological order. However, it seems from textual evidence that he likely was the last of the Twelve. Radak and Abarbanel observe that unlike Haggai and Zechariah, Malachi does not mention the Temple construction; it was in use already. Malachi also condemns intermarriage (Mal. 2:10–16), a shared concern of Ezra and Nehemiah (458–432 B.C.E., see Ezra 9–10; Neh. 13:23–28). The widespread laxity in tithing (Mal. 3:8–12) also likely dates to Nehemiah's time (Neh. 10:35–40; 12:44; 13:5, 10–12).

Even if Malachi were the last of the biblical prophets, there is no statement at the end of his book or anywhere else in the Bible stating categorically that prophecy had ceased. For example, Nehemiah battled false prophets (Neh. 6:5–7, 11–13) but did not negate the existence of prophecy in principle.

Nevertheless, the tradition that Malachi was the last prophet opened the interpretive possibility that Malachi was conscious of the impending end of prophecy.

A pronouncement (massa): The word of the Lord to Israel through Malachi (Mal. 1:1).

Most commentators understand the book's opening word massa as another generic term for "prophecy." However, Abarbanel notes that the term could also mean "burden." One Midrash similarly understands massa in this vein:

?[Prophecy] is expressed by ten designations…And which is the severest form? ... The Rabbis said: Burden (massa), as it says, As a heavy burden (Ps. 138:5) (Gen. Rabbah 44:6).

Within this interpretation, it is possible that Malachi viewed his mission with additional weight, conscious of his being the last of the prophets.

Similarly, several interpreters understand the book's closing verses as a self-conscious expression that prophecy was about to end:

Be mindful of the Teaching of My servant Moses, whom I charged at Horeb with laws and rules for all Israel. Lo, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before the coming of the awesome, fearful day of the Lord. He shall reconcile parents with children and children with their parents, so that, when I come, I do not strike the whole land with utter destruction (Mal. 3:22–24).

Kara (on 3:22), Ibn Ezra (on 1:1), Abarbanel (on 1:1), and Malbim (on 3:22) explain that Malachi was aware that prophecy would stop with him. The word of God would henceforth be available only through the written word of the Bible. Malbim links the exhortation to observe the Torah to the prediction of Elijah's coming. With the end of prophecy, the Torah would sustain the people of Israel until the messianic era, at which point prophecy will resume.

Why Prophecy Stopped

We now turn to three leading trends in traditional Jewish thought as to why prophecy ceased: sin, the destruction of the Temple, or a metaphysical spiritual transition.

Sin

Some sources suggest that the loss of prophecy was punishment for sin. Over 200 years before Malachi, the prophet Amos predicted the cessation of prophecy:

A time is coming—declares my Lord God—when I will send a famine upon the land: not a hunger for bread or a thirst for water, but for hearing the words of the Lord. Men shall wander from sea to sea and from north to east to seek the word of the Lord, but they shall not find it (Amos 8:11–12).

Avot D'Rabbi NathanB:47 explains that prophecy ceased as a consequence of people mocking the prophets.

Radak (on Hag. 2:5) suggests more generally that lack of fidelity to the Torah resulted in the loss of prophecy. A Midrash (Pesikta Rabbati 35) states that many Jews failed to return to Israel after Cyrus gave them permission, and therefore prophecy ceased. Commenting on Yoma 9b, which blames the lack of redemption in the Second Temple period on the fact that many Jews did not return, Maharsha similarly states that prophecy ceased as punishment for the non-return from exile.

Destruction of the Temple

Ezekiel chapters 8–10 describe a vision wherein God shows the prophet the rampant idolatry in Jerusalem. God’s Presence abandons the Temple and goes into exile. Radak (on Ezek. 9:3) explains that the absence of God’s Presence ultimately contributed to the disappearance of prophecy.

Although Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi prophesied after the destruction of the First Temple, a number of sources consider the destruction to have dealt a fatal blow to prophecy.

?In five things the first Sanctuary differed from the second: in the ark, the ark-cover, the Cherubim, the fire, the Shekhinah, the Holy Spirit [of Prophecy], and the Urim ve-Thummim [the Oracle Plate] (Yoma 21b).

As Benjamin is the last tribe, so Jeremiah is the last prophet. But did not Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi prophesy after him? R. Lazar says: they had limited prophecy. R. Samuel b. Nahman says: [Jeremiah’s] prophecy already was given to Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi (Pesikta D’Rav Kahana 13).

The last prophets were diminished or, alternatively, were mere transmitters of Jeremiah’s message. Malbim (on Zech. 1:5–6) presents a more benign form of this approach:

I will not send new prophets, since there is no longer any need for prophets as you have seen all the prophecies of doom fulfilled against you…there is no longer any need for prophecy since you already understand God’s hand in history.

According to Malbim, there no longer was any need for prophecy since the message had already been given through earlier prophets.

Metaphysical Transition

Seder Olam Rabbah30 states that prophecy ceased in the time of Alexander the Great. Based on the rabbinic chronology, the Greek Empire began immediately following the end of the biblical period, so this time frame would synchronize with Malachi. Following this chronological assumption, R. Zadok HaKohen of Lublin observed that a metaphysical transition to an age of reason occurred in Israel and in Greece at the same time:

The proliferation of idolatry and sorcery in the gentile world paralleled divine revelation and prophecy in Israel. When prophecy ceased and the era of the Oral Law commenced, there appeared Greek Philosophy, which is to say, mortal wisdom (Resisei Laylah, 81b, Bezalel Naor translation).

This idea meshes with a talmudic statement that at the beginning of the Second Temple period, the temptation for idolatry ceased being the force it had been during the First Temple period (Yoma 69b). R. Yehudah HeHasid argued that once the urge for idolatry vanished there no longer existed the need for prophecy to counterbalance magic (Sefer Hasidim, Wistenetzky ed., p. 544; cf. R. Elijah of Vilna, commentary on Seder Olam Rabbah 30; R. Zadok, Divrei Soferim, 21b).

Similarly, a certain spiritual intensity was lost. Once the urge to idolatry had declined, prophetic revelation would have too much power if left unchecked. To preserve free will, prophecy had to cease as well (R. Eliyahu Dessler, Mikhtav me-Eliyahu III, pp. 277–278).

Religious Implications

According to the sin approach, the deprivation of the supreme gift of prophecy was a devastating punishment that has diminished the connection between God and humanity for the past 2,500 years since Malachi. Within the destruction of the Temple approach, the disappearance of prophecy was a necessary corollary of that cataclysmic event.

Although the loss of prophecy was a spiritual catastrophe, there still are some spiritual benefits to its suspension particularly within the approach that there was a divinely ordained metaphysical shift from prophecy-idolatry to human reason. In 1985, Professor Yaakov Elman published two articles analyzing the position of R. Zadok HaKohen of Lublin in reference to the transition from the age of prophecy to the age of Oral Law. According to R. Zadok, the end of prophecy facilitated a flourishing of the development of the Oral Law, a step impossible as long as people could turn to the prophets for absolute religious guidance and knowledge of God’s Will. Sages needed to interpret texts and traditions to arrive at rulings, enabling them to develop axioms that could keep the eternal Torah relevant as society changed.

Although the decline of revelation distanced people from ascertaining God’s Will, it simultaneously enabled mature human participation in the mutual covenant between God and humanity. This religious struggle is captured poignantly by the talmudic passage:

And they stood under the mount: R. Abdimi b. Hama b. Hasa said: This teaches that the Holy One, blessed be He, overturned the mountain upon them like an [inverted] cask, and said to them, ‘If you accept the Torah, it is well; if not, there shall be your burial.’R. Aha b. Jacob observed: This furnishes a strong protest

against the Torah. Said Rava, Yet even so, they re-accepted it in the days of Ahasuerus, for it is written, [the Jews] confirmed, and took upon them [etc.]: [i.e.,] they confirmed what they had accepted long before (Shabbat 88a).

Rather than explaining R. Aha's question away, Rava understood that revelation in fact crippled an aspect of free will. He proposed Purim as the antidote, since that represents the age when revelation ceased.

Although prophecy was the ideal state—and we pray for its return—its absence enables the flourishing of human reason, as we no longer have access to absolute divine knowledge. We must take initiative in our relationship with God or else the relationship suffers. R. Zadok applied this human endeavor to the realm of Torah study. Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik understood prayer as replacing prophecy, precisely with the imperative of our responsibility to keep the lines of communication between God and humanity open:

In short, prayer and prophecy are two synonymous designations of the covenantal God-man colloquy. Indeed, the prayer community was born the very instant the prophetic community expired and, when it did come into the spiritual world of the Jew of old, it did not supersede the prophetic community but rather perpetuated it…If God had stopped calling man, they urged, let man call God (The Lonely Man of Faith [New York: Doubleday, 1992], pp. 57–58).

Institutionalizing prayer rescued intimacy with God by creating a new framework for this sacred dialogue.

Although prophecy disappeared some 2,500 years ago, the underlying spiritual struggle continues to be manifest in contemporary society. Many people long for absolute knowledge of God's Will. Consequently, there exists a compelling pull toward holy men (rebbes, kabbalists) or the over-extension of a da'at Torah concept that accords near-infallibility to Torah scholars. Though that appeal may be understandable, it must be remembered that (a) these individuals are not prophets and therefore do not have the certain divine knowledge that many accord to them; and (b) in an age lacking prophecy we have a far greater responsibility to learn Torah and pray, and to take that spiritual energy to infuse every aspect of our lives with sanctity. This requires a healthy dose of human reason and effort, coupled with an ongoing consultation with spiritual guides who can help us grow.

For further study, see:

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Hayyim Angel, “The Theological Significance of the Urim VeThummim,” in Through an Opaque Lens (New York: Sephardic Publication Foundation, 2006), pp. 195–214.
Gerald Blidstein, “In the Shadow of the Mountain: Consent and Coercion at Sinai,” Jewish Political Studies Review 4:1 (1992), pp. 41–53.
Yaakov Elman, “R. Zadok HaKohen on the History of Halakha,” Tradition 21:4 (Fall 1985), pp. 1–26.
Yaakov Elman, “Reb Zadok HaKohen of Lublin on Prophecy in the Halakhic Process,” in Jewish Law Association Studies I: Touro Conference Volume, ed. B. S. Jackson (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985), pp. 1–16.
Lawrence Kaplan, “Daas Torah: A Modern Conception of Rabbinic Authority,” in Rabbinic Authority and Personal Autonomy, ed. Moshe Sokol (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc., 1992), pp. 1–60.
Bezalel Naor, Lights of Prophecy (New York: Union of Orthodox Congregations, 1990).