The Messenger of The Covenant: Identification, Meaning, and Implications (Malachi 2:17-3:6)

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Abstract

The focus of the study in Malachi 2:17-3:6 has been the identification of the characters enumerated in Malachi 3:1. However, the significance of the phrase “messenger of the covenant” is not dealt with. So, what does this phrase mean? Why is the word “covenant” attached to “messenger”? What is the significance of this phrase in the book of Malachi and in the Scripture as a whole? What is the implication of this phrase in Malachi’s time and in the 21st century? This paper which employed exegetical and hermeneutical principles of the Old Testament as well as intertextuality or inter-biblical interpretation explored the Messenger of the covenant, its identification, meaning, and implications. It is significant as covenant theology is embedded in the Old Testament. While some books have only implied covenant concept, the book of Malachi explicitly contains this concept. Understanding this phrase “messenger of the covenant,” will have an impact in OT covenant theology. This research found out that the “מessenger of the covenant” of Mal 3:1 means “heavenly” messenger of the covenant which differs from the “earthly” messengers (prophet and priest) in Mal 1:1 and 2:7. It also shows how both the terms were heavily used in Malachi. Messenger is used from the beginning up to the end whether expressed implicitly or explicitly. The same is true with the word covenant. The peak of the use of both terms is found in Mal 3:1 showing that the answer to the unfaithfulness of both the priests (messengers) and the people with their covenant relationship with God is the “Messenger of the Covenant.” The term “messenger of the covenant” is found only in Malachi, not only the apex in Mal 2:17-3:1-6 but also in the whole book. It may signify God’s commitment to fulfill His covenant promises with His people from the beginning up to eternity.

Keywords: Malachi, messenger, covenant, theology

Qualifications That King Nebuchadnezzar Seeks

During Nehis’ first trip (605 BC) in Jerusalem to besiege it, he brought the best to Babylon. Daniel records, “Then the king commanded Ashpenaz, his chief eunuch, to bring some of the people of Israel, both of the royal family and of the nobility, youth without blemish, of good appearance (רוֹם לִבְנֵי כְּנֻיָּה) and skillful in all wisdom, endowed with knowledge, understanding learning, and competent to stand in the king’s palace, and to teach them the literature and language of the Chaldeans (1:3-4).” In here, King Nebuchadnezzar instructed Ashpenaz to pick up the best for his kingdom. He chose young people from the royal and noble family. They should be physically without blemish and good looking, excelling mentally, and able to learn for the benefit of the king and of his kingdom. Social status also was considered for these young people who came from the royal family and the nobility. These “chosen were the most likely to be natural leaders (from the royal family and the nobility), and had already demonstrated intellectual prowess.” So in the sight of the king, qualifications were important for the people to ensure the success of his kingdom. “These captives were choice young men both physically and mentally and as such, they could be an asset to the king’s palace.” Is King Nebuchadnezzar wiser than God’s people today? In the eyes of the king and possibly in the eyes of the people surrounding him, physical and mental qualifications are needed to be in the king’s
court. It shows that to unbeliever living in the city (especially to those who are influential politically and materially) physical, social status, and mental qualifications matter.

It should be noted that the king is not only after the secular success of his kingdom. His plan was to reeducate them “intellectually and treated royally. Several aims were in view, e.g. religious re–programming (language, literature and diet all carried religious as well as cultural meanings) and a ‘brain drain,’ which would simultaneously weaken the prospect of a capable future leadership among the Israelites and potentially strengthen Babylonian society when the process was completed (5b).” So in both secular and religious matters, to an unbeliever king, qualifications are important. King Nebuchadnezzar knew this including the importance of education. He has a curriculum to educate and equip his recruit. Daniel and his friends were educated for three years before the king evaluated them.

The Qualifications That God Seeks

Although the context of Daniel’s urban ministry was not done through his initiative but God’s, Daniel and his friends demonstrated what to be urban ministers. Through their strong uncompromising determination to stand for God dead or alive, they reached the heart of the king and of his kingdom. In this section, the qualifications that God seeks for His children are clearly displayed. The qualifications are discussed below:

*Determined to Live the Word of God (Daniel 1:8)*

King Nebuchadnezzar changed the Hebrew names of Daniel and his friends and he also introduced a kingly diet to them. On the one hand, on changing their names there is no record that they rejected their Babylonian given names. On the other hand, on changing their diet they stood strong and did not allow their bodies to be defiled. Daniel 1:8 records, “But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the king’s food, or with the wine that he drank.” They had three reasons why they did so: (1) King’s diet includes unclean food, (2) animals offered to idols, and (3) strong drink which is against Proverbs 20:1 and Isaiah 5:11. In working for urban areas, one needs to be keen or mature in knowing what he can do or cannot do, in knowing the things that he has control over and those things that he does not have. He needs to “interact with the surrounding culture, yet he must know when it is time to stand against it.” Daniel and his friends did not compromise their faith but rather stood for what they knew were right, dead or alive. This is crucial to working in urban areas. To compromise faith and truth to reach out the people in urban does not characterize Daniel and his friends. Urban ministers could either shine or shrink in the cities. The city or urban areas need men and women who are determined to honor God to make a difference and proclaim the name of God by words and deeds.

*Determined to Worship God Alone, Dead or Alive (Daniel 3:16-18; Daniel 6:10)*

The golden image and Daniel’s friends’ narrative of faithfulness to God dead or alive is a popular story especially among the Adventists. Hananiah (Shadrach), Mishael (Meshach), and Azariah (Abed-Nego) stood firm while the “the satraps, the prefects, and the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the justices, the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces” (Daniel 3:2, 7) fell down and worshipped the golden image that the king had set up. They stood for God and they did not allow to be swayed by the presence of all influential people around. God, who looks not on the outward appearance but on the heart (1 Sam. 16:7), can work with urban workers who will not be swayed by the crowd but will be true to His name. Daniel did the same commitment to God dead or alive in chapter 6.
Thus, in both instances, one can observe that both Daniel and his friends were persecuted because of their faithfulness to God. They would rather die than to dishonor him. Lifestyle evangelism revealed through the lives of urban workers characterized the urban ministry of this small group in a huge kingdom of Babylon. Elliston and Kauffman (2000) identify these qualifications as critical traits of urban Christian leaders, namely, love and integrity.12

Dependent on God
(Daniel 2:17, 18)

When Daniel and his friends faced life-threatening situation due to the dream, which no one can interpret, this small group of young urban workers sought the Lord in prayer for the solution to their burden. God answered their prayers and in return blessed them. Urban workers need to depend on God and not on their supervisors or administrators. They need to consult Him first and foremost. God demonstrated that He is a prayer hearing God, ready to guide His children working for His cause.

Humility (Daniel 2:27-30)

Daniel, as urban worker, exemplified humility. He did not take the credit due to God when he was brought to the king. Daniel replied to the King, “but there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries…. But as for me, this mystery has been revealed to me, not because of any wisdom that I have more than all the living;13 but in order that the interpretation may be made known to the king, and that you may know the thoughts of your mind” (Daniel 2: 27-30). When the urban workers take the credit due to God, pride will replace the humility in their hearts and pride always leads to destruction and fall, “Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall” (Prov. 16:18).

The Result of Urban Ministry in Babylon

What was the result of urban ministry of Daniel and of his friends? Daniel 4 records the conversion of the king. King Nebuchadnezzar was finally and thoroughly converted.14 God did His best to reach the king through the second dream and he was successful. In the end, the king glorified the God of Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. He recognized God as the King of kings and that His dominion is from everlasting to everlasting. He also considered himself as nothing. On the contrary, in Daniel 5, which is the thematic partner of Daniel 4 based on the chiastic structure above, King Belshazzar hardened his heart despite that he knew what happened to King Nebuchadnezzar. Thus, in Babylon, the urban ministers or workers presented life and death. They did not only commit themselves to live the Word of God, but they also preached it without hesitation. As a result of the godly lives Daniel and his friends exemplified, the ministries and messages they preached, and the strong call of God through dreams, King Nebuchadnezzar himself was converted. In doing urban evangelism in our time, the physical, mental, social, and spiritual qualifications (include but not limited to humility, love, trust, and integrity) of workers are as needed today as during Daniel’s time.

Principles of Urban Ministry in Daniel 1-7

Out of this discussion above, here are some of the principles that could be applicable today while reaching people in the cities:
1. Although God looks on the heart and not on the appearance, on the eyes of the people in the cities, physical, social, and mental qualifications are important as in the case of the king of Babylon.
2. Physical appearance, social status, and mental ability are not enough. Spiritual fitness (includes but not limited to humility, love, trust, and integrity) is crucial in reaching out cities for Jesus. Urban workers should be men and women of God and of His Words. They should shine and not shrink in the cities. Chong Aum admits, “A different approach is required to reach these people for Christ than to reach those in rural areas.”

   He also cites Craig W. Ellison when he argues that,

   Urban ministry is usually not comfortable or convenient. It requires the best of God's people. It demands a sustained, personal walk with Christ, and a willingness to take risks and to live with uncertainty, to confront evil and its destructive influence in the lives of people and to incarnate the good news.

3. On top of these qualifications, they need to have a message to tell. In this side of the city, they preached the prophecies of the end time. This is still true today. People who live in the cities need to know what is ahead of them, that God is preparing a better kingdom than they have today.

4. Education is important in reaching out the cities. There is a need for training or much better for modeling how to become urban workers.

5. Urban workers need to “interact with the surrounding culture, yet they must know when it is time to stand against it.”

   Aum describes why it is so, “Spiritual decay is observed not only in the inner-city areas but also in all aspects of urban life. The city is not necessarily synonymous with evil, drugs, and a culture gone mad with sex; but these are found in an urban setting far more than in rural areas.”

6. To ensure the success of urban ministry, urban workers do not only need to commit his time and his talent, but his whole life as well. Daniel spent his life in Babylon from his youth to his old age.

7. Small group of committed urban workers has an advantage compared to the one working alone. Small group is also found out to be one of the effective strategies to reach out the cities.

**Summary and Conclusion**

This paper considered the urban ministry in the book of Daniel 1-7. In the great city of Babylon, urban ministers such as Daniel and his friends, demonstrated how to be one. This paper also considered the strategy of King Nebuchadnezzar in selecting potential young people to be equipped to strengthen his kingdom. He examined their physical and mental qualifications and their social status as well. Although these qualifications are important, they are not enough. Thus, God, through Daniel and his friends, demonstrated the spiritual qualifications of urban workers. They were men who cannot be bought, men who will stand though the heavens fall, and men who love God more than their lives. This is the Babylonian model of reaching the cities for Christ.

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This combination also appeared in Esther 2:7 (טוֹבַַ֨ת מַרְּא ִ֜ה) although this time, it is in feminine form referring to Esther. Joseph is described as (׃יְּפֵה־ת ֹ֖אַר ו יפֵֵ֥ה מַרְּא ֶֽה) is Gen. 39:6. They were urban workers in Persia and in Egypt respectively. See Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia Tagged.

From here on all Scripture references are from the English Standard Version.


Ferguson, Daniel, 748.

Sung Ik Kim called Daniel “as a cross-cultural missionary in a heathen kingdom throughout his whole life.” See Sung Ik Kim, “Proclamation in Cross-Cultural Context: Missiological Implications of the Book of Daniel” (PhD diss., Andrews University, 2005), 13. However, in this paper, I will call Daniel and his friends “urban ministers or worker.”

Pfandl explains, “Daniel and his friends could not change what others called them…..” See Pfandl, Daniel, 16.

Pfandl, Daniel: The Seer of Babylon, 16-17.


Pfandl, Daniel, 19.

Elliston and Kauffman, Developing Leaders for Urban Ministries, 72-73.

Italics mine.


Pfandl, Daniel, 19.

Aum, “The Cell Church Model,” 19.