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A table of contents for the *Calvary Baptist Theological Journal* can be found here:

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Four Hundred Silent Years

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Americans recently recognized, in 1976, a two hundredth national birthday. Someone observed at that time that those fifty years of age had lived through one-fourth of the nation's history. For many that made the two hundred years seem much shorter.

Obviously four hundred years is twice as long as the United States has been a nation. Israel for some four hundred years, Malachi to John the Baptist's father, had no direct special revelation from God. These have been referred to as silent years.

Another period of four hundred "silent" years from Jacob to Moses is also distinctive in Israel's history. It is that four hundred year period that is the scope of this study.

The nature of this study is according to the pattern developed by Geerhardus Vos,¹ properly identified as History of Special Revelation.² This is an endeavor to understand God's self-revelations in their progressing historic setting, employing periodic grouping. The period of time for this study is roughly 1900 to 1500 BC.³

As for justification that there might be revelatory significance in the absence of direct self-revelations of God, Vos has analyzed the period prior to revelation given to Noah as significant.⁴ The four hundred year period from Jacob to Moses shows positive significance in the growth and development of the nation, fulfilling the promise given to Abraham.

That there was positive purpose for this period is directly stated in Scripture.

A crucial event of the patriarchal period is the 400-year sojourn in Egypt. The Lord had given Abraham and his seed through Isaac the title deed to Palestine, and had let them live there as nomads. Isn't it strange that He would then bring the whole nation to the land of Egypt for four long centuries? The Scriptures assure us that the Lord had two good reasons for allowing this seeming absurdity: (1) His longsuffering and mercy toward the Canaanites, and (2) His desire to keep Israel from being contaminated by idolatry.

God wanted to give these inhabitants of Palestine ample time to repent, and He did not want the Israelites to intermarry

with them. He indicated His patient concern in a prophetic vision to Abraham, telling the patriarch that his descendants would be "sojourners in a land that is not theirs . . . and they shall afflict them four hundred years" (Genesis 15:13). Then He added, "But in the fourth generation they shall come here (to the land of Canaan) again; for the iniquity of the Amorites (sometimes a synonym for Canaanites) is not yet full" (Genesis 15:16).

Egypt was an ideal place for the sons of Jacob to become a strong nation. According to the ceremonial laws of the Egyptians, the Israelites were an unclean people. This minimized the danger of intermarriage and joint participation in worship. The descendants of Jacob were able to maintain their ethnic purity while they grew numerically. Then too, they did not face continual tribal warfare in Egypt as they would have in Canaan. In Goshen, they became a strong, unified nation. They were brought into contact with an advanced civilization and profited from its learning. And they were given just enough suffering to weld them together as a people that the Lord would use to advance His purposes.⁵

Source material for this study can come only from the Bible, and even there it is sparse. Yet the accounts contain both direct indications of God's purposes and indirect intimations that appear significant.

For the nation, the situation was quite different from the later four hundred years of silence, 400 to 6 BC. The Hebrews in Egypt did not have written revelation. Recollection of the numerous self-revelations to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, including miracles performed during the lives of the patriarchs gave the people an oral "Bible" content to sustain and guide them. In addition, God gave adequate direction to His people for their sojourn in Egypt.

Although comparatively little is known of the pre-exodus period, study of that portion of Israel's history demonstrates that God designed and directed it for a purpose. What little has been recorded has been provided by God for our understanding. A survey of God's purpose for post-patriarchal pre-exodus Israel includes consideration of five areas, the patriarchal promises, the example of Joseph's life, the prophecies of Jacob prior to his death, the special provision of Joseph concerning his body, and the witness of Levi.

Promises to the Patriarchs

Oral communications to Abraham, Isaac, and Joseph had included promises that could be claimed by believing Hebrews during the four centuries in Egypt. God had adequately revealed Himself, His might, His holiness, and His purposes.

Promises to Abraham

The history of the Hebrew nation began with the call of an individual, Abraham, to leave Ur of the Chaldees (Gen 12). The history of God's special redemptive efforts in the calling of a chosen nation began with that call and culminated in the work of the Messiah. God in calling individuals and forming a nation was working in expectation that in the fullness of time He would send His only Son to a prepared people. The certainty that the Almighty would complete this purpose surely undergirded the faith of Abraham's descendants in Egypt.

The promise to Abraham was three-fold, first, that God would make of his seed a great nation; second, that God would give unto that nation the land of Canaan, and third, that through God's work there would come blessing for all people (Gen 12:1-3).

Since God did not endeavor to hide His plans from his friend Abraham, He revealed to him that the nation was to sojourn in Egypt for some four hundred years, including even bondage (Gen 15:13-14, 16; Acts 7:6-7). The time spent in Egypt then must not be looked upon as a hiatus, a mistake, a time of wasted backsliding, nor even of just marking time. It was included in God's training program for His people.

During the four hundred years in Egypt, the nation grew numerically (Ex 1:7). Seventy plus servants became a national entity. God's promise that one family would increase to equal the number of stars (Gen 15:5) was increasingly becoming evident. By the time of the Exodus the total number of descendants of Jacob may have been two million.⁶

Living separate from the Egyptians in the land of Goshen, the developing nation was able to develop a distinct heritage. Although they had Egyptian overlords, they maintained tribal distinctions and solidified political relationships. Their manner of life as shepherds enabled them to live as a group apart from Egyptians in the land of Goshen (Gen 43:32; 46:32-34).

Maintaining a different language helps to keep a people from integrating into society. The nation being formed retained their West-Semitic dialect, noticeably distinct from the Egyptian of the land in which they dwelt, and increasingly distinct from other West-Semitic peoples to the north.

Differences of occupation, custom, language, etc., were met by active political oppression. The pharaoh who knew not Joseph (Ex 1:8) may have begun the policy of official subjugation about seventy-five years following the death of Joseph,⁷ about 1730 BC. The people were despised and increasingly enslaved for nearly three centuries.

If the days of Abraham-Isaac-Jacob appear as the baby years of the nation, the Joseph to Moses years were the formative childhood years before the teenage nation set forth toward Canaan. There is a maturing; an increasing national awareness. There is a congealing; geography, language, customs, occupation, culture, and probably their physical appearance showed them both distinct from the Egyptians and like each other.

Promises to Jacob

God warned Abraham in advance about this specially designed maturing period. He set it in motion through Joseph and Jacob. His procedure for Joseph was largely in the realm of providence. Later, to supplement this providential leading, His instruction to Jacob was verbal.

God directed the hatred of Joseph's brethren against him (Gen 50:20). Instead of killing him, they sold him into servitude (Gen 45:4-8). Joseph had no choice. Later the famine came by divine instigation, not by human endeavor. It was only through providential control that God brought Joseph's brethren before him in Egypt.

To Jacob, however, God gave clear oral revelation. Since both his father (Gen 26:1-17) and grandfather (Gen 12:10-13:1; 20:1-18) had experienced misfortune when they departed from the land during famine, he was justifiably reluctant to consider the move his sons recommended. He did not believe their report that Joseph was yet alive and now governor over all the land of Egypt (Gen 45:26). His choice seems at first to be agreement only to visit (Gen 45:28), but after divine instruction at Beersheba (Gen 46:1-4) he supervised a full move of their family and all possessions (Gen 46:5-7). This direct divine revelation would continue to encourage the nation during the next four centuries. To appreciate this self-communication from God, both its form and content need to be examined.

The form of communication was typical of that to earlier patriarchs.⁸ God manifested Himself such that Jacob saw a vision (Gen 46:2). He both saw and heard. God called him by name, and God identified Himself as the God of Isaac (Gen 46:2-3). The continuity of God's earlier promises was thus stressed: the same God, the same covenant favor, the same supernatural provisions to fulfil His announced plans.

It had been twenty years or more since Jacob at Bethel had had a miraculous self-communication from God (Gen 35:1-15). Joseph's dreams (Gen 37:5, 9) seem to have been the last previous divine communication. Thus the oral instruction came as urgent marching orders to Jacob.

The content of this special self-revelation conveys three words of encouragement and assurance to Jacob himself and obviously for his entire family. First, God encouraged departure to Egypt; second, He repeated His purpose to make of them a great nation; and third, he exalted Joseph.

Both similarity and striking contrast are evident in this last verbal communication of the Abrahamic covenant. Continuity and similarity are clearly evident in the repetition of the divine promise. Also a sharp contrast needs to be noted. The totality of the physical descendants of Jacob now are to be included in God's program. Previously limitation had been God's pattern. Abraham had been instructed to leave family and kindred (Gen 12:1). Ishmael was not the son of the covenant line, only Isaac (Gen 17:18-21). Sons of Keturah were not to inherit and were not to continue to live with Isaac (Gen 25:1-6). God told Rebekah prior to the birth of twins that the elder would serve the younger (Gen 25:21-23). Isaac blessed Jacob (Gen 28:1-5) and as Jacob was leaving the promised land to go to Haran, God reiterated the patriarchal promises (Gen 28:13-15).

Now with Jacob God does not limit or restrict any further. The entire family of Jacob (Israel) is to be the national unit. No son is eliminated. Later God will distinguish a spiritual remnant from the physical descendants of Israel; but as Jacob contemplates leaving the land to go to Egypt, God includes all his sons; there is to be no further limitation.

The first word to Jacob is of personal encouragement, "Fear not to go down into Egypt" (Gen 46:3). His doubt and hesitation need not continue. God does not leave Jacob's choice to recognition of providential provision. Jacob receives a clear simple command including not only his departure and designation but also concerning his attitude. All doubt and hesitation is removed with the authoritative word from God.

The second word to Jacob repeats the earlier patriarchal promise. It specifies the purpose of God during the anticipated period in Egypt, promises the personal divine presence, and certifies future return to the land they are now leaving: "I will there make of thee a great nation: I will go down with thee into Egypt; and I will also surely bring thee up again" (Gen 46:3-4). This second word has definite encouragement.

(1) As earlier promised to Abraham and Isaac, God will form the children of Israel into a distinct national unit during the four hundred and thirty years (Gal 3:17) between this last oral proclamation of the Abrahamic covenant and His thunderings at Mount Sinai.

Joseph fulfilled responsibilities of the firstborn at the death of Jacob.

(2) God will be with them. Although leaving the promised land, they are not leaving the realm controlled by the God who called Abraham. The silent years are not absent years. The promised four hundred year presence of God with His chosen people as they leave the land recalls the similar promise to Jacob as he left the land to go to Haran, "Behold, I am with thee, and will keep thee in all places whither thou goest" (Gen 28:15). Jacob had known God's presence and blessing before (Gen 28:16; 30:27, 30; 31:5, 11-13, 42; 33:11); God's promise will also be valid in Egypt.

(3) As great and comforting as was the promise of God's presence, the assurance, "I will also surely bring thee up again" is given by the God whose purposes are never thwarted. He names Himself as the One to bring about the return.

Return to the promised land of Canaan is clear. The part of the promise not obviously apparent is the use of the singular "thee," whether of the individual Jacob or of the nation as a unit. As with many promises, God may have intended both ideas to be included: Jacob's body would be returned for burial with his forefathers; the nation would be brought back after some four hundred years.

The third word to Jacob assures him that "Joseph shall put his hand upon thine eyes" (Gen 46:4). He had supposed Joseph to have been dead for years. Not only has Joseph been the means of help from the famine, he will also assume his position among the sons of Jacob as favored "firstborn" and will personally fulfill responsibilities of the firstborn at the death of Jacob (cf Gen 49:33-50:13).

To recapitulate, Israelites going down to Egypt had information from God (1) indicating that the length of their sojourn would be four hundred years, (2) indicating that their sojourn would include bondage, (3) indicating numerical growth to be a nation, (4) promising the presence of God with them, and (5) assuring them of the certainty of return and inheritance of the promised land. This extensive oral encouragement was fitting undergirding for four hundred silent years.

Joseph's Example

A further encouragement for the eleven or more generations who lived in Egypt was the personal example of one who had been faithful through adversities. When a king rose up who knew not

Joseph, the enslavement predicted to Abraham began to be increasingly severe. The example of Joseph would stimulate patriotic and religious loyalty through years of undeserved oppression.

Reaction to oppression is often expressed, "I don't deserve it. I didn't do anything to bring it upon me." The innocent attitude of Joseph following the dreams God gave him (Gen 37:5-11) should set the pattern for generations to follow. A true servant of God must remain right in spite of attitudes of or attacks from others.

"As a sheep before her shearers is dumb" (Isa 53:7), so Joseph maintained commendable conduct while being placed in a pit by his brothers, sold into servitude, serving in the house of Potiphar (Gen 39:9), and while in prison. Faith in God is manifest in faithful living. Joseph's conduct was always above reproach.

One reason for Joseph's loyalty to God through various circumstances of life was his awareness of God's presence and blessing, even in an ungodly land (Gen 39:2-3, 5, 21, 23). The experience of Joseph would thus be a stimulus to godly living for succeeding generations in Egypt. God's presence with Joseph was not manifest through theophany or revelation, nor would there be continuing divine manifestation through the four hundred years. Joseph faithfully trusted God through adversity as well as advancement.

The special revelation of God to Joseph was through dreams and the interpretation of dreams. To Joseph, to Pharaoh's servants, and to Pharaoh himself, these were not ordinary or unusual dreams; they were dream visions. This form of divine self-revelation seems particularly fitting for the immature or non-Israelites.⁹ Coming at night, the recipient would not be distracted; coming during a state of sleep, attention of the recipient would be exclusive. The dream form of communication was strongly impressed in the mind. The butler and the baker were certain that their dreams were significant.

Joseph clearly witnessed to his God. No man can know the future. If these dreams are from God, then God is the only one able to provide interpretation (Gen 40:8; 41:16, 25, 32, 38). Joseph recognized the manner by which God gave the interpretation to him, but the account does not clarify the form used. Joseph clearly credits the interpretations to God, not to inner guesswork or intellectual cleverness. These special divine revelations in Egypt should further encourage coming generations both of the divine guidance and of the divine presence. Even before Jacob and his families moved to Egypt, Joseph is recognized as a prophet (Gen 40:20-22; 41:53-54).

Joseph functioned as father to Pharaoh.

"What hast thou that thou didst not receive?" (I Cor 4:7) includes native gifts and abilities as well as material things. Joseph received from God in a special way the information needed to interpret dreams. His personal administrative "talent" though a part of his personal makeup was also from God and used for God's purposes. His conduct as a servant and as a prisoner was discreet and wise (Gen 41:39). He was placed over the household of Potiphar (Gen 39:8) and over other prisoners (Gen 39:22). For what he was and what he did, he gave credit to God.

Joseph later told his brethren that God had made him "a father to Pharaoh" (Gen 45:8), lord over all his house and ruler throughout all the land of Egypt. He was recognized as qualified when chosen (Gen 41:38-41). Through the years of plenty and years of famine his administrative skill was commendable. When money and cattle were all government owned (Gen 47:13-18), the people and the land were pledged (Gen 47:19-26).

Wisdom comes from God (James 1:5). The wisdom of Joseph was evident not only in administrative areas but also in personal relationships, especially in his dealings with his brethren (Gen 42:7ff; 45:5-11). Following the death of Jacob, Joseph's brethren feared that he might retaliate (Gen 50:15). Again he graciously answered them (Gen 50:19-21).

Abraham when in Egypt had not been a good example for the people to follow during the predicted four hundred years. Joseph's conduct in Egypt demonstrates that a follower of God can and should remain true no matter what the circumstances. His faithful life should encourage coming generations.

Prophecies of Jacob

God's special preparations to undergird His people through years of blessing and bondage included oral patriarchal promises, the providential and dream interpretation example of Joseph as prisoner and prime minister, and also the special dying prophecies of Jacob.

The form of self-revelation, the patriarchal blessing, used by God to encourage His people resident in Egypt had been used before the flood (Gen 5:29), by Noah (Gen 9:20-27), and by Isaac (Gen 27:28-29, 39-40). The very fact of God's giving Jacob prophetic utterance in Egypt shows His approval for their being there, shows He is in control and is guiding the future, and shows His continuing presence among them.

The content of Jacob's special prophecies falls into three divisions, concerning his burial, blessing the sons of Joseph, and characterizing the future of the various tribes.

The Burial of Jacob

Burial in the Old Testament hinted at expectation of a future bodily resurrection. Job expected again in the flesh to present his case before a living Redeemer (Job 19:23-27). The practice surely enabled the coming forth of Lazarus (John 11:41-44) as well as the once-for-all, utterly unique resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Being gathered unto their fathers meant joining ancestors in heaven (Matt 22:31-32), not the body being placed near the bodies of others.

Proximity of Jacob's body to the earlier patriarchs and great distance later for the body of Joseph are not significant. Aaron in the wilderness was "gathered unto his people" (Num 20:24); his body was buried at Mosera (Deut 10:6 — no ancestors there).

Jacob's request concerning burial witnessed his faith in coming bodily resurrection, but more than that, his confidence concerning fulfillment of God's promises concerning Canaan.

Jacob's requests concerning burial are to be understood also as witness to the oneness of patriarchal promises. Joseph was later to be buried at Sechem. Jacob requested burial at Hebron, alongside the bodies of Abraham and Isaac (Gen 47:29-31; 49:29-52; 50:13). Their remains are in the land promised to them, the land which their children will later conquer and inhabit. The promises to them are valid assurance concerning Jacob as well. His "amen" will be with theirs through coming centuries.

Blessing the Sons of Joseph

The adoption and blessing of Ephraim and Manasseh is the second division of Jacob's dying prophecies. Unity and continuity once more is stressed as Jacob shares his personal testimony of the reassurance of the Abrahamic promise (Gen 48:3-4). Inclusion of Ephraim and Manasseh is not just a notion of a dying patriarch but is a part of God's special program. They are "adopted" by Jacob as his own sons to be tribes just as Reuben and Simeon (Gen 48:5). Thus would Joseph receive the double portion of the first born (Gen 48:15-22).

Deliberately Jacob had placed his right hand on Ephraim (Gen 48:14). When Joseph objected, his father explained that the younger would be the greater (Gen 48:18-19). That both would be richly blessed was indicated in the prophetic blessing, that people of the nation would pray, "May God make thee as Ephraim and Manasseh" (Gen 48:20). Just as God had personally promised

Jacob that he would return to Canaan, so Jacob prophetically assures Joseph and his sons of God's continuing presence, of the certainty of return to the promised land and of great abundance in the land (Gen 48:21).

Prophecies of the Tribes

The third occasion of prophetic utterance by Jacob in Egypt had to do with the twelve tribes (Gen 49:1-27). Once again he charged them to bury his body in Hebron (Gen 49:29-33). The explanatory verse (Gen 49:28) appears to have been inserted by Moses, indicating that the predictions were yet future concerning the tribes after they would be assigned portions in the land. Obviously, if the fulfillment will be in Canaan, these prophecies reassure the generations during the four hundred years of the certainty of expected fulfillment. Specific features of the prophecy point to and clearly require residence in the promised land.

Past personal conduct of Simeon and Levi will result in these two tribes being scattered in Israel (Gen 49:5-7). Zebulun will dwell along the sea and border Sidon (Gen 49:13). Tribes of Joseph will greatly increase and spread across the hill country (Gen 49:22-26).

God's purpose in forming this chosen nation is to use it to bring forth a promised Messiah. The God of Jacob and Joseph Himself will provide the shepherd, the stone of Israel (Gen 49:24). A ruling line will arise from the tribe of Judah and the rightful ruler will come, Shiloh, the Prince of Peace, bringing rest for all people (Gen 49:10).

Joseph's Continuing Witness

In two ways, toward the end of his life, Joseph continued to live in such a way as to be an example and a special encouragement to succeeding generations over the next four hundred years. Joseph graciously forgave his brethren. He also commissioned that his body remain in Egypt to be carried forth to Canaan at the time of future exodus.

Forgiving His Brethren

Joseph had obeyed his father's wishes; he and his brethren carried Jacob's body to the cave of Machpelah for burial. Reasoning that Joseph had been gracious out of respect for his father but now that Jacob was dead, the brethren expected him to "requite us all the evil which we did unto him" (Gen 50:15). Commendably they initiated a request for continuing forgiveness

(vv 16-17). This may even be recorded as showing a change of attitude, of genuine repentance, on their part. They did, in a fulfillment of the earlier offending dream (Gen 37:10) show outward subordination, bowing before him (Gen 50:18).

The response of Joseph is of such a nature as to stimulate faithfulness through generations in Egypt. Joseph proclaims that God is in full control. God's purpose may be hard to understand, but can surely be accepted. Faithfulness through bondage will be rewarded. God will not fail His declared purposes for the nation. Joseph concludes: "Ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive" (Gen 50:20).

Joseph further set as an example before them that they should trust God not men. Concerning their well-being as well as a reaction to their bowing before him, Joseph declared, "Fear not: for am I in the place of God?" (Gen 50:19). His personal loyalty to the plan of God follows: "Now therefore fear ye not: I will nourish you, and your little ones" (Gen 50:21).

Requesting Delayed Burial

Joseph's request prior to death concerning burial was similar to the request of his father, but notably different. It was similar in its typical expectation of physical resurrection. It was similar in that he requested that his body not be buried in Egypt but carried back to the promised land as a witness of expectation of fulfillment of the patriarchal promise. Joseph's body was embalmed as Jacob's had been (Gen 50:3, 26).

Joseph's request was different concerning place of burial and even more important, as to time of burial. Rather than immediate transport to Canaan, he requested that his body accompany the nation when they return: "God will surely visit you, and ye shall carry up my bones from hence" (Gen 50:25).

Joseph not only witnessed to his brethren of the certainty of the promised future return (Gen 50:24), he had them take an oath, based on the certainty of God's future deliverance, that they would carry his bones along at that future date (Gen 50:25). The physical presence of his embalmed body during the remainder of the four hundred years thus was also a continuing reminder of his confident expectation that God would bring them forth as He had said.

Faithful to Joseph's request, Moses saw to the necessary arrangements to take along the bones of Joseph as they departed (Exod 13:19). Burial was in Shechem where Jacob had purchased land (Josh 24:32). At Shechem Jacob had dug the well visited by Jesus (John 4:5-6).

Worship at Shechem was without conquest.

Ownership of this field (or fields?) through the four hundred years and necessary correspondence with those working the land helps to explain familiarly of Israel as well as friendliness toward Israel prior to Joshua's conquest of the land. God had commanded the tribes to assemble for reading of the blessings and curses on the sides of Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal (Deut 11:29-32; 27:11-13), which they did after taking Jericho and Ai (Josh 8:30-35). At that time Joshua built an altar on Mount Ebal (Josh 8:30). There is no hint of local animosity. These unsettled people come as local landowners, easily making necessary advance arrangements.

God had wisely provided adequate encouragement to sustain His people during four hundred years in a foreign land. His exhortations had been varied, employing several forms of self-communication and several different people. Although He would remain silent through most of their stay, He had marvelously undergirded the expanding nation with numerous objective revelations. Later information indicates He strengthened them subjectively as well at the beginning of the four hundred years.

Levi the Soulwinner

Information presented in the book of Malachi at the end of the Old Testament self-revelations speaks in its application directly to Levitical priests of Malachi's day concerning Levi the patriarch and a special covenant God made with the man Levi. These assertions by Malachi (by God through Malachi) are significant in tracing the revelatory patterns of God between Jacob and Moses. Consistent with these direct assertions in Malachi are intimations of the historical truth of that which Malachi records.

Assertions

Seven direct statements in Malachi 2:4-6 seem to refer to the Levi of Joseph's day. The Levites of Malachi's day are directly addressed in verses one through the first part of verse four and again in verses eight and nine of Malachi two. Verse seven asserts three things concerning true priests: (1) their lips should speak truth, (2) people should learn revealed truth from them, and (3) each priest serves as a messenger (a play on the name or title of Malachi) of the great Lord of hosts.¹⁰

As the first assertion, God declares that He had made a covenant with Levi (Mal 2:4-5). His commandment unto the Levites of Malachi's day was so that that covenant might continue.

The verse may properly be translated, "And you shall know that I have sent this commandment unto you so that My covenant with Levi might continue, saith the Lord of hosts."¹¹ The New International Version has:

And you will know that I have sent you this admonition so that my covenant with Levi may continue," says the Lord Almighty. "My covenant was with him, a covenant of life and peace, and I gave them to him; this called for reverence and he revered me and stood in awe of my name. True instruction was in his mouth and nothing false was found on his lips. He walked with me in peace and uprightness, and turned many from sin.

The admonition through Malachi calls for corrective actions by contemporary priests so that they might merit God's continuing work through them. God will surely fulfill His plan to maintain the Levitical priesthood until the coming of the promised Messiah, but whether they will qualify to participate in God's program depends on their heeding the admonition through Malachi. The remaining assertions have to do with this covenant God declares He made with Levi at the beginning of the four hundred years under consideration.

The second assertion is two-fold; God identifies two special characteristics of His covenant with Levi, qualities which He Himself gave (Mal 2:5). Life and peace were special characteristics of the covenant when initially given. ("My covenant with him was [a covenant of] life and peace, and I gave such to it"¹² Hebrew *lo'*).

This life is not speaking of birth but of new birth, true life with God. In the later Mosaic system the high priest was the representative of life; ceremonially he was not to come in contact with death (cf Num 17; Lev 21:10-11).¹³ Those later symbols may well portray the earlier reality ascribed to the covenant with Levi.

The peace here seems to be the peace of God (cf Rom 8:6). Levi thus would have personally experienced the saving grace of God and been given a covenant ministry whereby others could receive true life and peace with God through the message he proclaimed.

Life with God and peace with God are in the context in contrast to death and dung and weariness (Mal 1:6-2:3). The life and peace were for Levi and also through Levi and his descendants for others, for the lips of a priest should keep knowledge, and men should seek the law from his mouth: because each priest is a messenger of the Lord of Hosts (Mal 2:7).

The third assertion speaks of that faith response whereby Levi had received new life and peace. God gave Levi life and peace and a covenant to teach others this life and peace because of "the fear wherewith he feared Me, and was afraid before My Name" (Mal 2:5). This fear speaks of a life-changing relationship, that

termed conversion, including repentance and regeneration. The initial covenant with Levi was established and was a covenant of life and peace because Levi truly feared God and continued to live a life of genuine respect for his God.

This is asserted of Levi the person. It is not said of Levi the tribe nor so far as can be known was it ever true of the tribe historically. Priests of Malachi's day have "departed out of the way; ye have caused many to stumble at the law" (Mal 2:8); they needed to repent and be converted. Levi repented and was converted.

This same Levi who just prior to his father's death was charged with cruelty, anger and self-will (Gen 49:5-7) came to fear the Lord. He both had an initial fear, and manifested continuing fear "before My Name" (Mal 2:5). God says, "he feared Me and trembled before My Name."¹⁴ Conversion and continuing sanctification characterized Levi.

The fourth assertion concerning Levi is that "the law of truth was in his mouth" (Mal 2:6). Such teaching of revealed truth (though not yet inscripturated in Levi's day) should be true of every priest (Mal 2:7).

The functions of the whole tribe of Levi were to preserve the law of Jehovah in all its integrity and purity, to see that its requirements were duly complied with, to dispense justice in accordance with its enactments, and to transmit it to posterity (Lev 10:11; Deut 17:18; 31:9-13; 33:10: comp II Chron 17:8-10; Neh 8:9; Zek 44:23; Mal 2:7 sq.¹⁵

Priests were assigned to copy the Scriptures, to teach the Word of God among the people, and to render judgment concerning stipulations of the law.

These things were not true of the priests of Malachi's day. Levi had been a true preacher of righteousness following his conversion; sons of Levi should do the same.

The fifth assertion is that Levi controlled his tongue, "wickedness was not found on his lips" (Mal 2:6). Levi was separated to God. Levites of Malachi's day murmured and complained and criticized. A priest should speak the truth of God; he should not speak anything dishonoring to God. Levi was such an example of one who refrained from speaking evil.

The sixth assertion declares that, similar to Enoch (Gen 5:24), Levi walked with God. "In peace and in righteousness he walked with Me" (Mal 2:6). His walk among men was proper because he walked with God. Such a walk includes communion, constant conversation, prayer without ceasing, not grieving God's spirit, seeking guidance and following direction. Levi manifested the "normal" Christian walk.

Levi was a well-qualified soul-winner.

Fearing God in the previous verse may be speaking of Levi's spiritual relationship with God. The walk in this verse portrays his daily relationships to others, his earthly walk. He manifested peace and righteousness in his contacts with others (cf Rom 12:18). His influence among others promoted peace and righteousness. The pattern of his daily conduct was consistently peace among all men and equity in treatment of others. Levi demonstrated that one who truly knows the Lord manifests that love in a proper relationship of love for all neighbors. His actions as well as his lips taught men the law of truth.

The seventh assertion concerning Levi is clearly the most important, both in relation to the initial establishment of the covenant with Levi and as an exhortation to priests of Malachi's day. Levi had a reputation as a soul-winner. "He turned many from iniquity" (Mal 2:6).

God's great concern throughout the Old Testament was not ritual or cultic but the individual's heart relation to the Lord. Every prophet cried, "Repent, return unto the Lord." Every generation was born in sin. Every generation needed personal conversion changes. Levi seems by extensive activity to have maintained a reputation as a soul-winner in connection with which God established a covenant with him which had continuing effect during the years in Egypt and was fully established in the wilderness with the tribe of Levi.

It is important to notice the tone of presentation of these seven assertions in Malachi. These do not appear as new, previously unknown items of information either to Malachi nor to contemporary priests. The tone is brief, concise. These are reminders of what they already knew. People of the nation a thousand years after the exodus still were fully cognizant of the conversion, soul-winning and covenant of Levi even though these matters were not a part of previous written Scripture. The nation obviously had a great quantity of literature other than that upon which God had placed His stamp of inspiration.

God thus provided a special spiritual strengthening that His people might endure the four hundred years. Rather than occasional revelation "miracles," He gave repeated conversion "miracles" among His people. The radical change in the life of Jacob was a witness of the inner power of God.¹⁶ A startling change in the life of Levi manifested the hand of God. He was not alone. As a diligent, soul-winner he saw many turn from their iniquity.

Indications

Although the assertions in Malachi appear late in recorded revelation, they must be accepted as relating earlier history. If, as God says, these things were true of Levi, when in his life did his conversion take place? From Jacob's prediction (Gen 49:5-7), it was probably not before his father's death. A stimulus to repentance may be noted in the attitude of Joseph when his brethren feared retribution after Jacob's death (Gen 50:15ff). Inasmuch as many were converted, it must have been some years prior to Levi's death. Levi lived to be 137 years of age (Ex 6:16; c 1925-1788 BC). If he was about fifty when he moved to Egypt and about sixty-five when Jacob died, that would leave some seventy years of soul-winning activity.

The growth of the nation is predominantly separate from the Egyptians. There are no indications of Egyptians becoming Israelites (except Joseph's wife), thus presumably Levi's converts were among the Israelites not the Egyptians.

Neither Genesis nor Exodus mention a covenant with Levi nor do those books give any hint of Levi's soul-winning reputation. A few things can be considered which appear consistent with the characterization of Malachi. These indications do not themselves establish the earlier existence of a covenant or of active soul-winning.

The first intimation is the lack of any real explanation for the choice of the Levites at Sinai. The Levites were not numbered among those "able to go forth to war" (Num 1:3) for they are to be appointed over the tabernacle (Num 1:49-53). The tribe of Levi is assigned to assist the family of Aaron in the service of the tabernacle (Num 3:5-10). The Levites are to be the Lord's instead of firstborn delivered by the Passover (Num 3:11-13). They are numbered by the sons of Levi (3:17) and assigned service by families (Num 3:14-39). For the 273 firstborn more than the number of Levites money was given for redemption (Num 3:44-51). At the cleansing of the Levites (Num 8:5-26) no indication is given as to why they were chosen except that they serve in the place of the firstborn (v 16). The Levites were honored for their zeal following the incident of the golden calf (Ex 32:26-29) but that is not given as a reason for choosing them.

At Sinai God declared His choice of Levi. A covenant made with Levi when they were first in the land to be fulfilled in a special

Levi may have preached for half a century.

way in the formation of the nation would parallel the patriarchal promises, which saw national fulfillment at the time of Moses.

A second intimation of a covenant promise to Levi appears in connection with the attitude of the father and mother of Moses. The parents of Moses were both Levites (Ex 2:1). They hid him because they saw he was a proper child (Heb 11:23). Perhaps in addition to the expectation that deliverance would come after four hundred years there was also expectation that that deliverance would come by means of one from the line of Levi, based on a covenant of God with Levi.

A third indication is similar, the attitude of Moses. Moses expected that his brethren would recognize him as the one to deliver them (Acts 7:25).

A fourth indication appears in the priestly activity of Moses. Both parents of Moses, Amram and Jochebed, were Levites (Ex 6:16-20). Aaron, Miriam and Moses were thus of the tribe of Levi. All high priests would be qualified sons of Aaron. Moses functioned as a priest in the consecration of Aaron (Lev 8:1-13). Moses fulfilled priestly functions as a Levite.

A fifth intimation may be suggested in the customary national worship prior to the exodus (Ex 7:16; 8:8, 25, 27-28; 10:25-26), sacrificing in the wilderness, holding a feast unto the Lord (Ex 10:9). An annual spring festival with the Levites conducting the national sacrifices (instead of family, head of family patterns) would show early development of the covenant with Levi.

A sixth indication may be seen in the seeming reversal of the prophetic pronouncement by Jacob. What appears as a curse is fulfilled as a blessing.

“For in their anger they slay men and in their wantonness they ham-string oxen” (RSV). They were cursed for a life of violence and cruelty in which Shechem was merely an early and outstanding example. Later history was to show that the loyalty of Levi’s descendants to Yahweh could turn the curse to a blessing, and their division and scattering in Israel was as His representatives.¹⁷

The change in fulfillment may be solely because of loyalty by the Levites (but not Simeon).

After the Exodus, when the terrible apostasy of the golden calf took place, they showed themselves loyal to the covenant (Ex 32:26-29). This act of obedience is referred to in Moses’ blessing of the tribes (Deut 33:8-11). As a reward Jacob’s prophecy concerning them (Gen 49:7) was fulfilled as a blessing. They were “scattered in Israel,” yet not as a punishment, but as an honor.¹⁸

Moses as a Levitical priest consecrated Aaron to his work.

The change from seeming curse to blessing may better be assigned to a change in the lives and character of Levi and Simeon. Their violence and cruelty were condemned; when life and peace and fear of God characterized their lives (a hint that Simeon turned from iniquity) the predicted fulfillment amounted to commendation. Simeon, being absorbed into the tribe of Judah, would participate in blessings of Davidic kingship.

The information concerning Levi shows a special spiritual strengthening at the beginning of the sojourn in Egypt, an example to encourage the nation for ten centuries or more. A portion of the divine preparation for the period was subjective in nature. Inner conversion and sanctification do not necessarily indicate new self-revelations from God. The preaching, teaching, witnessing of Levi may also have been a proclamation of previous revelations (the word in Mal 2:6 is *torah*, in the emphatic position). That God established a covenant with him (Mal 2:5) does indicate verbal self-communication from God to Levi and for the benefit of the entire nation, the exact wording of which is no longer extant.

Joseph lived by faith. Jacob obeyed and moved to Egypt by faith. Joseph by faith requested that his body await the exodus return. Levi by faith himself turned to God and turned many from iniquity. The parents of Moses manifested that same faith in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who had revealed Himself and His purposes so clearly and so fully to undergird His people during their divinely-designed period of growth, maturing and testing in Egypt.

Notes

¹ Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publ Co, 1948)

² Vos, p 14 (1980 printing)

³ For consistency, dates employed are from the Chronological Chart in Leon Wood's, *A Survey of Israel's History* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publ House, 1970) pp 417ff

⁴ Vos, 45ff

⁵ Herbert Vander Lugt, *The Book in Review* (Grand Rapids: Radio Bible Class, 1979) 63-4

⁶ Wood, 85, 131

⁷ Wood, 114, 419

⁸ Vos, 69-76

⁹ Vos, 71-2

¹⁰ Warren Vanhetloo, "Where Is God? A Commentary on Malachi" *Central CB Quarterly*

Fall 1963; separately published as a booklet by Central CB Press

¹¹ *Ibid*, 18

¹² *Ibid*

¹³ William G Moorehead, "Priest" *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, IV: 2440-41

¹⁴ Vanhetloo, 18

¹⁵ Merrill F Unger, "Levites" *Unger's Bible Dictionary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1957) 656

¹⁶ Vos, 93ff

¹⁷ H L Ellison, "Levi" *The New Bible Dictionary*, ed J D Douglas (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962) 729

¹⁸ Oswald T Allis, "Levites" *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*, ed Everett F Harrison (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1960) 321