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Review

Stephen Oluwarotimi Y. Baba, *Malachi's Understanding of Unfaithfulness in Covenantal Marriage Relationships*. Carlisle: Langham Academic, 2025. ISBN 9781786412829. xx, 158 pp.

Reviewed by Olufunmilola Ajayi[1]

Few passages in the Minor Prophets have generated as much sustained and varied interpretive debate as Malachi 2:10-16. Scholars have focused on themes such as intermarriage, divorce, covenant, and cultic infidelity, producing significantly different interpretations of both the passage and its theological implications. In *Malachi's Understanding of Unfaithfulness in Covenantal Marriage Relationships*, Stephen Oluwarotimi Y. Baba enters this debate with the conviction that these differing interpretations arise from the various interpretive frameworks applied to the text rather than from the complexity of the text itself. Baba proposes that Malachi's understanding of marital unfaithfulness is best interpreted through the cohesive theological concept of covenant fidelity. Published by Langham Academic, this revised doctoral dissertation supports its thesis through detailed historical-grammatical exegesis, situating it within the broader Old Testament canonical theology. The significance of this study is not simply in offering another interpretation of Malachi 2:10-16 but also in presenting an integrated hermeneutical approach that combines exegesis, biblical theology, and pastoral theology.

Baba's argument unfolds with deliberate methodological progression. Instead of moving directly to the exegesis of Malachi 2:10-16, Baba begins by surveying the principal scholarly interpretations of the passage, demonstrating how divergent readings have emerged from different understandings of covenant, marriage, divorce, and intermarriage. He then justifies his use of the historical-grammatical method, arguing that careful attention to the Hebrew text, literary

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features, historical context, and canonical setting provides the most reliable basis for interpretation. Following this, he surveys covenant theology in the Old Testament, which sets the theological framework within which the subsequent exegesis is to be understood. The nearly seventy pages devoted to interpretive history, methodology, and covenant theology before the exegetical discussion begins are not a sign of delayed analysis but of deliberate persuasion. Baba implicitly suggests through the structure of the book that exegetical conclusions cannot be separated from the interpretive and theological frameworks from which they arise. In this respect, the introductory chapters function not merely as background materials but as the hermeneutical foundation upon which the entire study rests.

The study ultimately depends on the detailed exegesis of Malachi 2:10-16. Having argued that covenant fidelity provides the appropriate hermeneutical framework, Baba demonstrates that this claim is drawn from the text itself rather than being imposed upon it. The real achievement of Baba's exegesis is not that it privileges covenant over divorce but that it explains the coherence of the passage as a whole. Rather than treating marriage, divorce, treachery, and covenant as separate themes, he argues that they become mutually intelligible only when examined through the overarching concept of covenant fidelity. His analysis is characterized by sustained engagement with the Hebrew text, careful attention to lexical and grammatical features, and responsible interaction with competing interpretations. How he explored the recurring language of treachery (*בגד*), which functions as the rhetorical thread uniting the passage's concerns with marriage, covenant, and communal responsibility, is particularly noteworthy. The persuasiveness of Baba's proposal is not in the novelty of identifying covenant as a central theme, but in his demonstration that covenant fidelity offers the most coherent explanation for the diverse motifs of the passage.

The significance of Baba's study extends beyond its interpretation of Malachi 2:10-16. Its more enduring contribution is the model of biblical interpretation that it embodies. Rather than treating historical exegesis, biblical theology, and pastoral theology as distinct or competing modes of inquiry, Baba presents them as successive stages of a single interpretive process. Historical-grammatical exegesis establishes the meaning of the text; biblical theology situates that meaning within the broader context of Scripture; and pastoral theology explores its significance for the life of the church. Baba does not

propose a new hermeneutic; rather, he demonstrates the explanatory power of an integrated evangelical approach to biblical interpretation through sustained engagement with a notoriously difficult text. This is particularly evident in the transition to the book's pastoral reflections. Baba avoids moving directly from exegesis to application, allowing the theological and ecclesial implications of Malachi 2:10-16 to be earned rather than assumed. The pastoral conclusions derive their persuasive strength from the cumulative argument that precedes them.

If the study invites some criticism, it is not because its central thesis is unconvincing but because the argument occasionally limits itself to a specific theological perspective. Baba effectively demonstrates that covenant fidelity offers the most coherent framework for interpreting Malachi 2:10-16; however, in the exegetical chapters, his engagement with alternative interpretations sometimes moves too quickly from critique to synthesis rather than transitioning from sustained dialogue to persuasion. A more extended interaction with the strongest contemporary defences of competing interpretations would have strengthened an already compelling case. Similarly, while the pastoral reflections are thoughtful and arise organically from the preceding exegesis, readers might have appreciated greater engagement with contemporary African biblical scholarship and with the diverse social, ecclesial, and cultural contexts in Africa. Such interaction would have further enriched the contextual dimension of the study without altering its central thesis.

The value of Baba's study is twofold. Firstly, from an exegetical perspective, it offers a coherent and well-reasoned interpretation of one of the most contested passages in the Hebrew Bible. Secondly, from a methodological perspective, it demonstrates that historical-grammatical exegesis, canonical theology, and pastoral reflection need not be competing approaches but can collectively constitute a coherent and intellectually responsible approach for interpreting Scripture. Baba has not written the final word on Malachi 2:10-16, nor does he claim to have done so. However, his study compels future scholars to seriously consider covenant fidelity as the central theological principle of the passage and, more broadly, to examine the connection between exegesis, theology, and the life of the church. For this reason, *Malachi's Understanding of Unfaithfulness in Covenantal Marriage Relationships* deserves careful attention from Old Testament scholars, theological educators, graduate

students, pastors, and all who are interested in the faithful interpretation of Scripture.