

**MALACHI 3:16: "BOOK OF REMEMBRANCE"
OR ROYAL MEMORANDUM?¹
AN EXEGETICAL NOTE**

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In the ancient world, kings used documents to administrate their domains. They preserved some texts in the royal archives as records of administrative decisions; others were dispatched and carried by messengers to officials who would perform the actions commanded therein.

Correspondence was delivered in several ways: foot runners traversed short distances; caravans, although somewhat slow, carried the correspondence longer distances; chariot-riding messengers were no doubt the fastest. During the period of Persian domination, or perhaps earlier, Near Eastern kings built sophisticated networks of roads and relay stations,² in essence a postal system, to accommodate the movement of correspondence. With a communication infrastructure in place, they were able to expand their empires considerably.

Scripture portrays God as King. In so doing, it draws upon the trappings of kingship in order to form analogies about what God is like³ and how He works. God possesses a throne, manifests attributes

¹J. Hoftijzer and K. Jongeling, "zkrn," *Dictionary of the North-West Semitic Inscriptions*, vol. 1 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995) 331.

²W. L. Westermann, "On Inland Transportation and Communication in Antiquity," *Political Science Quarterly* 43 (1928):375-76.

³Mark Brettler, *God is King: Understanding an Israelite Metaphor*, JSOTS 76 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1989) 14-15.

of kingship, and gathers about Himself courtiers among whom are messengers and scribes. In His role as Sovereign par excellence, God appears as the exalted and transcendent⁴ King who dispatches His messengers from His heavenly court to direct the affairs of His people. Isaiah the prophet, when caught up by vision into the heavenly royal court, received a commission by the enthroned Sovereign to dispatch God's missives (Isa 6:1-13). Similarly, Haggai, "the messenger of the Lord, spoke the message of the Lord" (Hag 1:12).

⁴There is a correlation between God's use of administrative correspondence and His "relational distance" (i.e., transcendence) from His people. Other factors, such as a need to portray God's transcendent majesty or the agency of His priests and prophets, engage the metaphor.

"Malachi" translated means "My [i.e., God's] messenger." The book of Malachi presents God as "a great king" (Mal 1:14) by drawing upon administration imagery in a number of ways: in the first chapter, God introduces his messenger, the bearer of the book's message; chapter two portrays the priests as messengers who have strayed from the path (v. 8), leading to the recipients of God's message; "My messenger" reappears in chapter three along with "the messenger of the covenant,"⁵ and chapter four predicts Elijah's return as a messenger.⁶

In Mal 3:16, the Sovereign King orders that an administrative document of a different kind be recorded. Rather than translate *spr zkrn* "book of remembrance," one might better render it "memorandum"⁷ (or "record"⁸), as in Ezra 6:2 which records the actual document. The memorandum was not a public document like a decree or a proclamation but was intended for the private use of its possessor.⁹ In the strictest sense, it preserved the details of an administrative decision¹⁰ and facilitated the memory of a messenger¹¹

⁵Unlike the "messengers of the LORD of hosts" (2:7) who performed their priestly duties of sacrifice and teaching in violation of God's standard, the Messenger of the covenant "will purify the sons of Levi . . . so that they may present to the Lord offerings in righteousness."

⁶The identities and roles of the messengers is much debated.

⁷J. Fitzmyer, "Aramaic Epistolography," *Semeia* 22 (1981):31.

⁸, *rkz* in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* 242.

⁹Paul E. Dion, "Aramaic Words for 'Letter,'" *Semeia* 22 (1981):84. In one instance it served as an aid to the memory of one who conveyed a message orally.

¹⁰Schottroff argues that the document preserved the details of an administrative decision or event of some sort for future action (Willi Schottroff, "*Gedenken*" *im alten Orient und im Alten Testament* [WMANT 15, Neukirchen-Vloyn: Neukircher Verlag, 1964] 68, 301).

¹¹One extra-biblical example, AP 32:1 appears to have been written for a messenger (A. E. Cowley, *Aramaic Papyri of the Fifth Century BC.*, ed. with translation and notes [Oxford: Clarendon, 1923] 28-30). This document type is often referred to as a "messenger text."

or ruler at a later date, often as evidence for past administrative action.¹² Several passages of Scripture illustrate the memorandum-document type.

In Ezra 4:15 Artaxerxes ordered a search of the archives for evidence of Judah's rebellion prior to the exile. When found, a memorandum (*spr dkrn*¹³) provided the impetus to stop the temple construction in Jerusalem and to prevent any further progress.

Ironically, in Ezra 6:1 Darius issued an order to search the "house of scrolls" for evidence of a previous administrative decision to rebuild the house of God in Jerusalem. A memorandum (Ezra 6:2 [hnwrkd]) was found containing Cyrus¹⁴ decree to rebuild the temple. The outcome of the text's discovery was that temple construction was resumed and subsequently completed.¹⁵

Mordecai's exploits in the book of Esther include delivering King Ahasuerus from an assassination attempt by exposing the plot of two conspirators (Esth 2:21-23). But even though the two were tried and executed, Mordecai received no reward. One sleepless night Ahasuerus ordered several of his courtiers to search the royal archives for evidence chronicling Mordecai's faithful deeds (Esth 6:1 ff.). After reading the memoranda (*spr zkrn*), the king promptly rewarded Mordecai for his loyalty in protecting the monarch's life.¹⁶

In light of the evidence for the consistent use of the memoran-

¹²The memorandum document is widely attested in countries neighboring Israel. For example, among the Persepolis Treasury Tablets in Elamite are found many memoranda. Cf. R. T. Hallock, "A New Look at the Persepolis Treasury Tablets," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 19 (1960):90-100.

¹³Hebrew *zkrn* corresponds to Aramaic *dkrn* through a standard orthographic change.

¹⁴Memoranda and letters often contained other document types embedded.

¹⁵The memorandum wielded significant administrative force.

¹⁶In all three Ezra and Esther passages (cf. above) the memorandum wielded significant administrative force. This is due to the fact that memoranda were recorded to retain an accurate account of the past *so as to engage legal action* in the future (Botterweck, " ,rkz," *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. 4 [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980] 79).

dum (*spr zkrn*) and for its fairly well-defined function, the Mal 3:16 passage may be explained as follows: God's memorandum is on file in His royal archives for the great and terrible day of His visitation in battle against His enemies (cf. Malachi 4). On that day and when drawn from the royal archives, the memorandum will engage God's administrative authority to spare the pure sons of Levi. But at that time, God will burn to the very roots the "chaff" whose names do not appear in the memorandum.¹⁷

In one of Daniel's visions of heavenly splendor, the Majestic Sovereign, opened the books in judgment before His royal court:

I kept looking
 Until the thrones were set up,
 And the Ancient of Days took *His* seat. . . .
 Thousands upon thousands were attending Him,
 And myriads upon myriads were standing before Him;
 The court sat,
 And the books were opened (Dan 7:9-10).¹⁸

The "books" in Daniel's vision will serve the same judgmental purpose as the one in Malachi's prophecy.

¹⁷Prior to that day, the LORD of hosts will dispatch still another messenger, Elijah. In quoting Mal 3:1, Jesus identifies John the Baptist as "My messenger" (Matt 11:10) and says "And if you care to accept it, he himself is Elijah who was to come" (Matt 11:14).

¹⁸Regarding the memorandum in Mal 3:16 and the Daniel passage Verhoef argues, ". . . these things are written which God wanted to be reminded of" and "*concerning which he wanted to do something*" (P. A. Verhoef, *The Books of Haggai and Malachi* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987] 320 [emphasis added]).