

MALACHI

Message

Malachi wrote to remind Israel of God's love for them and to rebuke Israel's morally insensitive and cynical priests and people for reverting back to their former sins; and to exhort them to exercise faithfulness to God as they awaited God's messenger who would herald the coming Day of the LORD in which Messiah will be revealed in all of His resplendent glory.

QuickTime™ and a
TIFF (Uncompressed) decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

Title

The Hebrew title assigned to this book is Malachi, meaning “my messenger.” The meaning of this term is uncertain, but is thought to be derived from a shortened form of the name *malachiyyah*, “messenger of Yahweh.”¹ Nothing is known about the prophet Malachi (not even his father's name, ancestry, or place of birth) apart from that which is recorded in this book bearing his name. Jewish tradition asserts that Malachi (like Zechariah) was a member of the “Great Synagogue”—the group responsible for collecting and preserving the sacred Canon of God's Old Testament revelation/Scripture.²

Overview

Malachi is the last book in the Old Testament, and last book written (430-425 B.C.). It records God's final word to His people in the Old Testament. Malachi rebuked the people and priests for their neglect and perversion of true worship of the LORD, and called them to repentance (1:6; 3:7). The book records what God has to say about how the people and priests had backslidden and become mechanical in their observance of the Mosaic Law. The people and priests were guilty of defiling God in their worship by offering defective sacrifices (1:6-14), being unfaithful in their teaching of God's Word (2:1-9), entering into spiritually mixed marriages (2:10-12), dealing treacherously with their wives by divorcing them (2:13-16). Yet in spite of all their failures, Malachi concludes his book with Yahweh's prediction of the coming of Christ—an event to be preceded by a forerunner (John the Baptist) who prepares the way for Messiah (4:5-6).

Historical Background

When Malachi was pressed into service by the LORD to address the rebellious and backslidden postexilic community in Jerusalem, the Jewish remnant had been back in the land of Canaan for about one hundred years. The remnant, comprised of nearly 50,000 Jews, had first returned to Jerusalem from exile in Babylon under the leadership of Zerubbabel,

¹Andrew Bowling, “*mal'ak*” in *Theological Workbook of the Old Testament*, ed. R. Laird Harris, et al, vol. 1 (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 1:464-65.

²Robert B. Chisholm, Jr., shows how the various arguments leveled against Malachi are inconclusive (*Interpreting the Minor Prophets* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990], 277-78).

the governor, and Jeshua, the high priest in 537 B.C. (Ezra 1:5–2:70). Although the temple foundation was laid in 536 B.C. (Ezra 3:7-13), the actual temple rebuilding was interrupted for fourteen years due to Samaritan opposition and spiritual indifference on the part of the spiritually inept remnant (534-520 B.C.; Ezra 4:1-24).³ God raised up the prophets Haggai and Zechariah in 520 B.C. to exhort the people to finish rebuilding His temple, which was then completed in 516 B.C.

In 458 B.C. Ezra the priest led a second wave of 1,700 men, plus women and children (perhaps as many as 5,000 individuals), back to Jerusalem. Ezra reinstated proper temple worship (Ezra 7:17), taught the people the Word of God, and instructed them in how to live a life of obedience to the Law of Moses (Ezra 7:25-26).

Thirteen years later (444 B.C.) Nehemiah was granted permission from King Artaxerxes to return to Jerusalem in order to rebuild the broken down walls (Neh. 2:1-10; 6:15). Nehemiah led the third wave of Jewish refugees back to Jerusalem, but it is not certain how many Jews traveled back to the land at this time for he provided no numbers. Nehemiah stirred the people to rebuild the walls around Jerusalem, and the task was completed in only 52 days. Nehemiah also introduced sweeping social and religious reforms. He convinced his fellow Jews to help the poor (Neh. 5:2-13), to abolish mixed marriages, to observe the Sabbath (Neh. 10:30-31), and to give their tithes and offerings unto the LORD (Neh. 10:37-39).

In 432 B.C. Nehemiah returned to the service of King Artaxerxes (Neh. 13:6), and during his absence the people fell back into their former sins. Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem after an indeterminate period of time (426 B.C.?) to discover that the people had reverted back to their former sins. The priests had become corrupt, and the people were not giving their tithes and offerings, were breaking the Sabbath, and were inter-marrying. These same sins are condemned by Malachi (see Mal. 1:6-14; 2:14-16; 3:7-12), who, as suggested above, probably prophesied against them just prior to, or shortly after Nehemiah's return, at which time he also dealt with them (see Neh. 13).

Literary Style

Malachi's style of writing differs from that of any of the other writing prophets, in that he employs a didactic-dialectic" style generally considered to be "disputational" (question and answer or "point-counterpoint").⁴ That is, Malachi develops his message by using a series of question asked by both God and the people. The pattern is built upon a recurring pattern in which God delivers an *accusation* against the people ("You are robbing Me!"), who respond with an *interrogation* of God ("How have we robbed Thee?"), who provides a *refutation* against the people's denials of sin ("In [the withholding of your] tithes and offerings"). The people repeatedly employ false conclusions and rationalizations ("but you say" and similar expressions appear more than a dozen times) in an attempt to refute God's condemnation and exposure of their sins.

As we shall see, Malachi would get the people's attention by asking them a sarcastic question, and then he would respond with Yahweh's answer (*condemnation*). This prophet

³The rebuilding of the 2nd temple seems to have been hindered by Samaritan opposition from 536 to 534 B.C. (Ezra 4:1-5) and the work ceased altogether from 534 to 520 B.C. (Ezra 4:24).

⁴Habakkuk also uses "disputation," in that he asks two questions of God. Jensen states that this literary style of writing "has been called didactic-dialectic, or dialogistic" (Irving L. Jensen, *Jensen's Survey of the Old Testament* [Chicago: Moody Press, 1978], 468).

more than any other in the Old Testament Canon spoke by the authority of Almighty God. The phrase, “thus says the LORD” occurs twenty times in the book’s four chapters. What is more, *God speaks forty-seven of the fifty-five verses directly to Israel*, clearly the highest proportion of any of the prophetic books. Repetition is another common element found in the book. The name LORD Almighty (τῶαδὲβϞ hÎwhϞy, *Yahweh tsabaoth*) occurs 23 times.⁵ Finally, Malachi is the only prophet who ends his ministry and book with judgment.⁶

Malachi serves as a fitting conclusion to the Old Testament canon because it underscores the sinful human condition of mankind and anticipates God’s gracious solution to mankind’s fallen condition to be realized through the work of redemption that will someday be fully accomplished through the return of His holy Son, the Messiah. The final words of Malachi introduce a four hundred year period of silence in which God does not communicate with His rebellious and obstinate people.

Theological Purpose

Like all the writing prophets, Malachi’s chief revelation was the person and work of Almighty God. Though some charged God with injustice, Malachi presented Israel’s God as a loving and sovereign ruler over Israel and the whole world. According to Malachi, the exile had not terminated God’s covenant relationship with Israel. Despite the people’s continued covenant unfaithfulness, God urged His people through His prophet (Malachi) to repent of their sin and return to a life conditioned upon obedience to the covenant mandates recorded in Deuteronomy 28–30. Malachi reminded the Israelites of Yahweh’s faithfulness to His covenant promises which included promises of future blessing. In addition, he warned the people that covenant-breakers will be purged out of the covenant community in the future Day of the LORD. For God said, “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and dreadful day of the LORD. And he shall turn the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the earth with a curse” (Mal 4:5-6).⁷

The Book of Malachi serves as both a conclusion and a connecting link. It concludes Israel’s history (which spanned from Abraham’s call in 2100 B.C. to the time of this final writing by Malachi, between 430 and 425 B.C.) as the final prophetic voice of the Old Testament era. Also, Malachi’s final prophecy concerning the forerunner of Messiah (3:1; 4:5-6) connects the Old Testament with the New Testament because this prophecy is ultimately fulfilled by John the Baptist, the forerunner, and Jesus Christ, the Messiah.

Following four hundred years, in which God was silent, John the Baptist fulfills the role of forerunner to Messiah as he bursts forth on the scene and pointing to Jesus declares, “Behold!

⁵As was pointed out in connection with the study in Zechariah, this title for God (τῶαδὲβϞ hÎwhϞy), meaning “LORD of Hosts,” literally “God of War,” is used 91 times in the postexilic corpus. The emphasis being employed here in Malachi’s use of this powerful name for God may be to provide the remnant with hope based upon the fact that God will someday return as the Righteous Branch of David to personally wage war against the enemies of Israel and thereby defeat the Gentile kingdoms of the world and establish His own glorious kingdom in Zion, Jerusalem (Dan. 2 and 7; Zech. 13-14).

⁶While Joel and Zephaniah present the theme of the future “Day of the LORD” with greater intensity than Malachi (3:2, 17; 4:1, 3, 5), they nonetheless conclude with the positive theme of hope and blessing.

⁷This notable messianic prophecy deals with Messiah’s forerunner (3:1; 4:5). He would be like Elijah and would call the Israelites to repentance (cf. Matt 11:14; 17:12-13; Mark 9:11-13; Luke 1:17).

The Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world!” (John 1:29). Malachi’s “messianic flashes (3:1-6; 4:2) prepare us for the New Testament revelation and focus our attention on Him [Jesus Christ] who alone is the world’s hope.”⁸

Outline

There are a couple of ways of dividing or structuring the material in Malachi. The book may be divided into three large chiasms, or according to the seven rhetorical questions in the book. Note the threefold chiastic structure⁹:

First Address:

- Motivation - God’s Love 1:1-5
- Situation - Failure to honor God 1:6-9
- Change - Stop Vain offerings 1:10
- Situation - Profaning God’s name 1:11-14
- Motivation - God’s Discipline 2:1-9

Second Address:

- Motivation - Spiritual Unity 2:10a
- Situation - Faithless 2:10c-15b
- Change - Be Faithful 2:15c-16
- Situation - Hypocrisy and Injustice 2:17
- Motivation - Coming Messiah 3:1-6

Third Address:

- Change - Return 3:7-10b
- Motivation - Future Blessing 3:10c-12
- Situation - Rejection and Complacency 3:13-15
- Motivation - Coming Day 3:16-21
- Change - Remember Torah - 3:22-24

Note the contrasts between the positive and negative motivations in the above motivation sections. Also, observe how the pattern in the third address is changed for surprise and emphasis. It is very prominent because the order of elements are changed, the change is relocated to begin and end the chiasm (this inclusio is stressed by bwv, return) with the situation (of Israel’s rejection and complacency) highlighting the central focus of the chiasm.

Some focus on the seven rhetorical questions in the book. Although I think the chiasm works for understanding the message of the book, I think it is better to focus on those questions which are designed to convict Israel of her spiritual indifference and cause the people to return to God.

⁸Merrill F. Unger, *Ungers Bible Handbook, rev ed.* (1966; Chicago: Moody, 1984), 349.

⁹This chiastic arrangement is taken from Ray Clendendon, Paper at ETS, Fall 94.

Disputations: Yahweh vs. Israel

Dispute 1: How Have You Loved Us? (1:1-5)

God's Love for Israel

Dispute 2: How Have We Despised Your Name? (1:6–2:9)

Compromising Clergy Don't Honor God

Dispute 3: For What Reason? (2:10-16)

Disobedient People Break God's Covenant

Dispute 4: How Have We Wearied Him? (2:17-3:5)

God's Messenger, Jesus Christ, Will Institute Justice

Dispute 5: Why Won't You Turn Back to God? (3:7)

When Israel Returns to Yahweh, He will Return to Them

Dispute 6: How Have We Robbed Thee? (3:8-12)

Israel Must Bring Yahweh's Tithes into His Storehouse

Dispute 7: What Have We Spoken Against Thee? (3:13-18)

Israel Arrogant Words Will Be Forgiven

The book concludes with a prediction of the coming Day of the Lord (4:1-6)

Summary

- God affirms love for Israel, but the first question shows the people's skepticism and doubt that God loved them.
- The second question focuses on the neglect of priests and people who brought second rate sacrifices.
- The third question showed how their bad relationship with God carried over into the community through the practice of divorce and remarriage to foreigners.
- The fourth question showed that the people mistook God's patience for lack of divine justice.
- The fifth question showed that their tithes and offerings were affected by their attitudes.
- The sixth question demonstrates their arrogance and shortsightedness in neglecting a God-honoring lifestyle.
- The section on the Day of the Lord promises judgment will come on the wicked and salvation to the righteous.

The conclusion exhorts them to obey the Law and wait for Elijah who would announce the Day of the Lord.

Outline

I. God's Compassion for His Chosen People Israel 1:1-5

- A. Introduction to the Book 1:1
 - 1. The oracle of the word of the LORD to Israel 1:a
 - 2. The commission of Malachi 1:b
- B. God's Declaration of His Love for Israel 1:2
[Disputation #1 But you say, How hast Thou loved us? (1:2)]
- C. Israel's Doubt of God's Love 2:2b
- D. God's Demonstration of His Love for Israel 1:2c-5
 - 1. In preferring Jacob over Esau 1:2c, 3a
 - 2. In punishing Edom (Esau's descendants) 1:3-4
 - 3. In preserving and blessing Israel (Jacob's descendants) 1:5

II. God's Condemnation of Israel's Sins 1:6–3:15

- A. The sins of the priests 1:6–2:9
[Disputation #2a But you say, How have we despised Thy name? (1:6)]
#2b But you say, How have we defiled Thee? (1:7).
 - 1. They dishonored God in their sacrifices 1:6-14
 - a. Their disrespectful service 1:6-7
 - b. Their disqualified sacrifices 1:8-10
 - c. Their disdainful attitudes 1:11-14
 - 1) The Gentiles will honor God's name 1:11
 - 2) The priests will not honor God's name 1:12-14
 - 2. They did not faithfully teach the law of God 2:1-9
 - a. God's warning to the priests 2:1-3
 - 1) Their disobedience 2:1-2a
 - 2) Their condemnation 2:2b-3
 - b. God's reminder to the priests 2:4-9
 - 1) Levi's faithful example 2:4-7
 - a) The purpose of the covenant 2:4-5a
 - b) The practice of Levi 2:5b-7
 - i. His reverence (fear) for God 2:5b
 - ii. His truthfulness 2:6a
 - iii. His uprightness 2:6b
 - iv. His mediatorial role 2:7

- 2) The present priests unfaithfulness 2:8-9
 - a) Their practices 2:8
 - i. They turned away from pursuing righteousness 2:8a
 - ii. They caused many to stumble by false teaching 2:8b, 9b
 - iii. They corrupted the covenant of God 2:8c
 - b) Their punishment: 2:9
 - i. God made them despised 2:9a
 - ii. God made them debased 2:9b

B. The Sins of the People 2:10–3:16

1. The people's sin of mixed marriages and divorces 2:10-16
 - a. They committed idolatry by marrying foreign women 2:10-12
 - 1) Rebuke of those who married foreign wives 2:11
 - 2) Threat against those who married foreign women 2:12
 - b. They indulged in divorce 2:13-16
 - 1) God's declaration of the problem and refusal of their sacrifices 2:13
 - 2) Israel's response 2:14a

[Disputation #3 Yet you say, for what reason? (2:14)]

 - 3) God's response: Divorce is a sin He hates 2:14b-16
 - a) God's declaration that divorce is a treacherous sin 2:14b
 - b) God's warning against the practice of divorce 2:15
 - c) God's attitude toward divorce: He hates it 2:16
2. The people's sin of condoning evil 2:17–3:6
 - a. God's complaint against the people 2:17a

[Disputation #4 Yet you say, How have we wearied Him? (2:17)]

 - b. Israel's denial of sin 2:17b
 - c. God's reminder that He will come to purify and to judge in the future Day of the LORD 2:17c–3:6
 - 1) God's exposure of their sinful attitude 2:17c
 - 2) God's warning of His coming to purify and to judge 3:1-6
 - a) God's messenger will precede His coming 3:1a
 - b) God's Messiah will suddenly come to His temple 3:1b
 - c) God's Messiah will come to purify and to judge 3:2-6

C. The people's sin of robbing God 3:7-12

1. God's statement: Israel must return 3:7a
- [Disputation #5 But you say, How shall we return? (3:7b)]
2. Israel's denial of sin 3:8

[Disputation #6 But you say, How have we robbed Thee? (3:8b)]

3. God's explanation of their sin: They withheld His tithes and offerings 3:8c-12
- D. The people's sin of arrogance 3:13-15
1. God's statement of Israel's arrogance 3:13a
 2. Israel's denial of her sin of arrogance 3:13b
- [Disputation #7 Yet you say, What have we spoken against Thee? (3:13b)]
3. God's explanation of their sin: They were arrogant 3:14-15

III. God's Care For the Righteous Remnant In Israel 3:16–4:3

- A. His recognition of the righteous remnant 3:16-18
 1. The response of the righteous 3:16a
 2. The remembrance of God 3:16b-18
- B. His separation of the wicked from the righteous 4:1-3
 1. God will destroy the wicked 4:1, 3
 2. God will bless the righteous 4:2
- C. His exhortation to Israel 4:4-6
 1. Remember to obey the Law of Moses 4:4
 2. Watch for the coming forerunner Elijah the prophet 4:5-6
 - a. The promise of his coming 4:5a
 - b. The time of his coming 4:5b
 - c. The purpose for his coming 4:6

Argument

Malachi is commissioned by God to participate in a divine dialogue between God and His rebellious people which comprised the remnant of Israel. The book may be divided into three major sections.

In the first section (1:1-5), the LORD Affirms His Compassion for His Chosen People Israel. God declares His love for Israel in response to some who were doubting His love (1:2). He reminds His people that He loves them not because they deserve it, but because He has chosen to love them. God's love for Israel is demonstrated in His sovereign choice of Jacob over Esau (1:2-3), and in His choice to bless Jacob's descendants (1:4-5).

The second section (1:6–3:15) reveals God’s condemnation of Israel for sins. First, he condemns the sins of the priests (1:6–2:9) who dishonored God in their sacrifices (1:6-14), and did not faithfully teach the law of God (2:1-9). In addition, the priests turned away from pursuing righteousness (2:8a), caused many to stumble by false teaching (2:8b, 9b), and corrupted the covenant of God (2:8c). Because of these things they will be punished (2:9). He next exposes the various sins of the people (2:10–3:16). The people were sinning by engaging in mixed marriages and divorces (2:10-16), condoning evil (2:17–3:6); robbing God by withholding His tithes and offerings (3:7-12), and practicing arrogance (3:13-15).

The third section (3:16–4:6) delineates God’s care for the righteous remnant in Israel. He provides special recognition of the righteous remnant (3:16-18), promises a future separation of the wicked from the righteous (4:1-3), and exhorts Israel to obey the Law of Moses (4:4) and to watch for the coming forerunner Elijah the prophet (4:5-6).