

Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Malachi

Scripture: Malachi

Code: MSB39

Title

The title is derived from the prophecy's author, Malachi. With this last work in the Minor Prophets, God closes the OT canon historically and prophetically.

Author and Date

Some have suggested that the book was written anonymously, noting that the name, meaning “my messenger” or “the LORD’s messenger,” could be a title rather than a proper name. It is pointed out that the name occurs nowhere else in the OT, nor is any background material provided about the author. However, since all other prophetic books have historically identified their author in the introductory heading, this suggests that Malachi was indeed the name of the last OT writing prophet in Israel. Jewish tradition identifies him as a member of the Great Synagogue that collected and preserved the Scriptures.

Looking solely at internal evidence, the date of the prophecy points to the late fifth century B.C., most likely during Nehemiah’s return to Persia ca. 433–424 B.C. (cf. Neh. 5:14; 13:6). Sacrifices were being made at the second temple (1:7–10; 3:8), which was finished in 516 B.C. (cf. Ezra 6:13–15). Many years had passed since then as the priests had increasingly become complacent and corrupt (1:6–2:9). Malachi’s reference to “governor” (1:8) speaks of the time of Persian dominance in Judah when Nehemiah was revisiting Persia (Neh. 13:6), while his emphasis on the law (4:4) coincides with a similar focus by Ezra and Nehemiah (cf. Ezra 7:14,25,26; Neh. 8:18). They shared other concerns as well, such as marriages to foreign wives (2:11–15; cf. Ezra 9,10; Neh. 13:23–27), withholding of tithes (3:8–10; cf. Neh. 13:10–14), and social injustice (3:5; cf. Neh. 5:1–13). Nehemiah came to Jerusalem in 445 B.C. to rebuild the wall, and returned to Persia in 433 B.C. He later returned to Israel (ca. 424 B.C.) to deal with the sins Malachi described (Neh. 13:6). So it is likely that Malachi was written during the period of Nehemiah’s absence, almost a century after Haggai and Zechariah began to prophesy. Similar to Rev. 2,3, in which Christ writes what He thinks about the conditions of the churches, here God writes through Malachi to impress upon Israel His thoughts about the nation.

Background and Setting

Only 50,000 exiles had returned to Judah from Babylon (538–536 B.C.). The temple had been rebuilt under the leadership of Zerubbabel (516 B.C.) and the sacrificial system renewed. Ezra had returned in 458 B.C., followed by Nehemiah in 445 B.C. After being back in the land of Palestine for only a century, the ritual of the Jews’ religious routine led to hard-heartedness toward God’s great love for them and to widespread departure from His law by both people and priest. Malachi rebuked and condemned these abuses, forcefully indicting the people and calling them to repentance. When Nehemiah returned from Persia the second time (ca. 424 B.C.), he vigorously rebuked them for these abuses in the temple and priesthood, for the violation of the Sabbath rest, and for the unlawful

divorce of their Jewish wives so they could marry Gentile women (cf. Neh. 13).

As over two millennia of OT history since Abraham concluded, none of the glorious promises of the Abrahamic, Davidic, and New Covenants had been fulfilled in their ultimate sense. Although there had been a few high points in Israel's history, e.g., Joshua, David, and Josiah, the Jews had seemingly lost all opportunity to receive God's favor since less than 100 years after returning from captivity, they had already sunk to a depth of sin that exceeded the former iniquities which brought on the Assyrian and Babylonian deportations. Beyond this, the long anticipated Messiah had not arrived and did not seem to be in sight.

So, Malachi wrote the capstone prophecy of the OT in which he delivered God's message of judgment on Israel for their continuing sin and God's promise that one day in the future, when the Jews would repent, Messiah would be revealed and God's covenant promises would be fulfilled. There were over 400 years of divine silence, with only Malachi's words ringing condemnation in their ears, before another prophet arrived with a message from God. That was John the Baptist preaching, "Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand!" (Matt. 3:2). Messiah had come.

Historical and Theological Themes

The Lord repeatedly referred to His covenant with Israel (cf. 2:4,5,8,10,14; 3:1), reminding them, from His opening words, of their unfaithfulness to His love/marriage relationship with them (cf. 1:2–5). God's love for His people pervades the book. Apparently the promises by the former prophets of the coming Messiah who would bring final deliverance and age-long blessings, and the encouragement from the recent promises (ca. 500 B.C.) of Haggai and Zechariah, had only made the people and their leaders more resolute in their complacency. They thought that this love relationship could be maintained by formal ritual alone, no matter how they lived. In a penetrating rebuke of both priests (1:6–2:9) and people (2:10–16), the prophet reminds them that the Lord's coming, which they were seeking (3:1), would be in judgment to refine, purify, and purge (3:2,3). The Lord not only wanted outward compliance to the law, but an inward acceptance as well (cf. Matt. 23:23). The prophet assaults the corruption, wickedness, and false security by directing his judgments at their hypocrisy, infidelity, compromise, divorce, false worship, and arrogance.

Malachi set forth his prophecy in the form of a dispute, employing the question-and-answer method. The Lord's accusations against His people were frequently met by cynical questions from the people (1:2,6,7; 2:17; 3:7,8,13). At other times, the prophet presented himself as God's advocate in a lawsuit, posing rhetorical questions to the people based on their defiant criticisms (1:6,8,9; 2:10,15; 3:2).

Malachi indicted the priests and the people on at least 6 counts of willful sin: 1) repudiating God's love (1:2–5); 2) refusing God His due honor (1:6–2:9); 3) rejecting God's faithfulness (2:10–16); 4) redefining God's righteousness (2:17–3:5); 5) robbing God's riches (3:6–12); and 6) reviling God's grace (3:13–15). There are 3 interludes in which Malachi rendered God's judgment: 1) to the priests (2:1–9); 2) to the nation (3:1–6); and 3) to the remnant (3:16–4:6).

Interpretive Challenges

The meaning of Elijah being sent "before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD"

(4:5) has been debated. Was this fulfilled in John the Baptist or is it yet future? Will Elijah be reincarnated? It seems best to view Malachi's prophecy as a reference to John the Baptist and not to a literally-returned Elijah. Not only did the angel announce that John the Baptist would "go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah" (Luke 1:17), but John the Baptist himself said he was not Elijah (John 1:21). Thus John was like Elijah, internally in "spirit and power" and externally in rugged independence and nonconformity. If the Jews would receive the Messiah, then he would be the Elijah spoken of (cf. Matt. 11:14; 17:9–13); if they refused the King, then another Elijah-like prophet would be sent in the future, perhaps as one of the two witnesses (cf. Rev. 11:1–19).

Outline

I. The Denunciation of Israel's Sins (1:1–2:16)

A. Reminder of God's Love for Israel (1:1–5)

B. Rebuke of the Priests (1:6–2:9)

1. Contempt for God's altar (1:6–14)

2. Contempt for God's glory (2:1–3)

3. Contempt for God's law (2:4–9)

C. Rebuke of the People (2:10–16)

II. The Declaration of Israel's Judgment and Blessing (2:17–4:6)

A. Coming of a Messenger (2:17–3:5)

B. Challenge to Repent (3:6–12)

C. Criticism by Israel Against the Lord (3:13–15)

D. Consolation to the Faithful Remnant (3:16–4:6)

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