

A Brief Introduction to the Book of Malachi

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INTRODUCTION and BACKGROUND

Malachi is one of the twelve Minor Prophets¹ along with Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, and Zechariah.¹ It is the last of the Minor Prophets in the Bible and the final book in the Old Testament. In addition, it spells the end of prophetic activity for 400 years until John the Baptist arrives to announce the arrival of the Saviour. This period is what some call the “400 silent years.” “According to Jewish tradition, when the last prophets (Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi) died, the Holy Spirit departed from Israel.”²

Malachi is not a long book, four chapters in our English Bible and three in the Hebrew Bible, but it is filled with words of love, encouragement, challenge, and rebuke. However, the basic message of Malachi is centred on the love of God. The people have begun to doubt and question God’s love and Malachi wants to demonstrate the reality of God’s love for His people. In doing so it is necessary for him to point out that their ability to enjoy that love is being hindered by their own sinfulness. As Malachi confronts the spiritual lukewarmness of God’s people, it is very relevant to the North American church of the twenty-first century.

The message of Malachi cannot be understood apart from at least a basic knowledge of the world in which he lived. Like the rest of the prophets, he prophesied from God, but he did so within the backdrop of the circumstances and situations of his time. The content of Malachi’s message is tightly intertwined with the political, social and religious issues of the times.

¹ The Minor Prophets are so named because they are shorter in length than the Major Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, and Daniel), not because they are less important.

² William Sanford La Sor, et al, *Old Testament Survey: The Message, Form, and Background of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1982), p.501.

Malachi was written at a time of relative political peace that Baldwin calls “an uneventful waiting period.”³ Most of the Old Testament prophets preached in times of turmoil and upheaval, as nations struggled for control of the ancient world. It was a different story, however, for Malachi. The world in which he lived was part of the powerful Persian empire which was firmly in control of its world.⁴ Because of this, Malachi’s day was a time of large-scale political peace.

Judah during this era was a very small province within the Persian empire. While we cannot be certain, many Old Testament scholars believe the House of David was stripped of all its political power, and therefore influence, by the Persians. It appears that Judah functioned as a sub-province under Samaria until Nehemiah's return.

To say it was a time of political peace, does not mean it was an encouraging time in the history of Judah. Conflict between the Jews and the nobles of Samaria appears to have been a regular occurrence. The Judeans would have been well aware of the less than prominent role they played in their world. This reality surely impacted them socially and spiritually. Peter Craigie summarizes the situation very well:

For all the tranquility of Malachi’s world, it was not a particularly happy time for the chosen people. Times of international crisis bring with them their own stimulus to action and thought, but calmness can dull the spirits and destroy any sense of vitality. Israel floated on these still waters of international calm, with little sense of direction and the collapse of international discipline.⁵

³ Joyce G. Baldwin, *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1972), 211.

⁴ Leon Wood, *A Survey of Israel’s History* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978), 387-406.

⁵ Peter C Craigie, *The Twelve Prophets*, vol. 2, The Daily Study Bible, John C.L. Gibson (ed.) (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), 225: quoted in J.N. Heflin, “The Prophet Malachi, His World, and His Book,” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 30:1 (Fall 1987): 6.

Socially, Malachi's day was one of disillusionment and gloom. The tidal waves of enthusiasm that had been created by the preaching of earlier prophets had by then crashed on the rocks of reality. The prophecies of Ezekiel, Haggai, Zechariah and the other prophets had raised the hopes of the people. There was great excitement in the waning years of the sixth century B.C. The people believed, based on the words of the prophets, that a new, more prosperous, messianic age about to manifest itself at any moment. The new temple would be more glorious than the first (Haggai 2:9). Their land would be renewed and produce abundant crops (Ezekiel 34:26-30; Isaiah 41:18-19). The land would not be able to contain all the people (Isaiah 54:1-3) and the population of Jerusalem would overflow its borders (Zechariah 2:4). Instead of Israel being the slave, the nations of the world would serve them (Isaiah 49:22-23) and the glory of the Lord would return to the temple (Ezekiel 43:1-5).

However, as time dragged by it became more and more clear that the prophecies would not be fulfilled in the way and the time the people anticipated. The lives of the Israelites were restricted to Jerusalem and the immediate area. Drought and locust attacks devastated land that was already largely unproductive (Haggai 1:10-11; Malachi 3:11). Crop failures were a common occurrence. Poverty was rampant and the people struggled to survive (Nehemiah 5). Some families were actually forced to sell their children into slavery to just to pay their debts (Nehemiah 5:5). Jerusalem's population was very sparse and was still in ruins for the most part (Nehemiah 7:4). The people saw no evidence that God's glory had returned to the temple and perhaps most disappointing, there was no visible restoration of the kingdom promises made to David.

As a result of the broken dreams, lost hopes, disillusionment, sadness, and resentment the people of Judah sunk lower and lower morally and ethically. Morality seemed to have been totally forgotten. Divorce (Malachi 2:13-16) and adultery (Malachi 3:5) were so common that the total destruction of Jewish families seemed almost imminent. The disadvantaged – the widows, orphans, and immigrants – were ignored or even persecuted (Malachi 3:5). Discrimination was the norm. Perjury was common within the court system (Malachi 3:5) as was employers cheating their employees (Malachi 3:5). Interest rates the rich charged for money lent to the poor were obscenely,

and unlawfully, high (Nehemiah 5:10-11). It was obviously not a pretty picture! The people were corrupt and sin was openly practised and tolerated.

The attitudes of discouragement, disillusionment, and bitterness were not only revealed socially, but spiritually as well. The people were not only sinning against one another, but also against God. Religion had become nothing more than ritual and while it was very formal, it was also superficial – there was no real commitment to God. Contrary to Deuteronomy 15:21 – “If an animal has a defect, is lame or blind, or has any serious flaw, you must not sacrifice it to the LORD your God” – lame and sick animals were brought to the temple to be sacrificed (Malachi 1:6-14). Rather than being given to God, tithes were being kept for personal use (Malachi 3:8-9). The people were apathetic about their religious practices and the upkeep of the temple.

The priests were no help at all. Not only did they not confront the superficiality or abuses, they set a terrible example themselves. They were indifferent and apathetic in their duties (Malachi 1:6-2:9) and even complained that their duty was a burden (Malachi 1:13). They were negligent in their teaching and training of the people (Malachi 2:7-8). They even revealed their dishonesty by playing favourites in the administration of justice (Malachi 2:9).

The people were growing increasingly sceptical about spirituality generally and God specifically (Malachi 1:2; 2:17; 3:14-15). They doubted God's love (Malachi 1:2) and were cynical about His justice (Malachi 2:17). The prevailing belief was that there were no benefits to being the children of God and therefore religion was a waste of time and effort (Malachi 2:17; 3:13-15). This led to a lack of interest in, or attention to, their unique role as the people of God. With this thinking firmly in place, it is not surprising that when they divorced their Jewish wives there was no reluctance to marry “foreign” wives – worshippers of idols. It is obvious that the people of Judah were anxious to give up their religion as an irrelevant relic from the past – much like people today!

If the people of Judah were not able to regain their spiritual equilibrium, they were in grave danger of totally losing sight of what it meant to be set aside as God's unique and distinct people. Not only were they in danger of losing their distinctiveness, but total collapse and destruction was a growing possibility. What was needed was a

prophetic word and it was at this time and into this situation that Malachi arrived on the scene.

The Author

The Book of Malachi begins very abruptly and to the point – “An oracle: The word of the LORD to Israel through Malachi.” (1:1)⁶ The opening verse gives no information about the prophet’s hometown, his background, his father’s name, or his vocation. He is not called a prophet or given any other title for that matter. While this type of introduction is not common neither is it totally unheard of in prophetic literature.

Further complicating the issue is the fact that Malachi is not mentioned anywhere else in either the Old Testament or New Testament. “Though his writings are either quoted or alluded to several times in the New Testament, he is not mentioned there by name.”⁷

The scarcity of information about him and the Hebrew meaning of Malachi (“my messenger” or perhaps even “my angel”⁸), has led some scholars to believe that it is not a proper name, but rather a description or office of the person who is writing. Ellison takes this view and writes, “We shall be almost certainly correct in regarding the book as anonymous, and Malachi as a title which the prophet gave himself...”⁹ Two ancient Jewish writings, the Targum and the Talmud, consider Malachi to be a description of the prophets role as the messenger of God and attribute the actual authorship to either Ezra (the Targum) or Mordecai (the Talmud).

Peter Craigie acknowledges “there is some difficulty in determining whether we are dealing here with an anonymous prophet who is entitled ‘my (read God’s)

⁶ All Scripture citations are from the New International Version (unless otherwise indicated).

⁷ J.N. Heflin. “The Prophet Malachi, His World, and His Book,” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 30:1 (Fall 1987), 5.

⁸ Baldwin, 211.

⁹ H.L. Ellison, *The Old Testament Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1979), 133.

messenger,' or with a virtually unknown individual called Malachi."¹⁰ However, he goes on to state, "the balance of probabilities is that we should take the word to simply be the prophet's name..."¹¹ I would agree. The arguments for an anonymous author are not convincing and I believe Malachi is the actual name of the author. If not, it would be the only anonymous book among the Prophets and that seems highly unlikely.

However, even if one believes that Malachi is not the author's name it does not detract from the authenticity of the book – authorship does not affect inspiration.

Date

It would be beneficial to begin with some background before addressing the specific dates of Malachi's writing. In 587 or 586 B.C. Babylon destroyed Judah. The Babylonian army, under Nebuchadnezzar, defeated Jerusalem, destroyed the temple, and led the people into exile. They are scattered throughout the Babylonian empire. During this time there are prophets, like Isaiah, who rose up and said, "God is not done with His people. He is going to gather His people again. He is going to bring them back." After seventy years in exile, they are indeed allowed to come back to their land. God promises they are going to rebuild the temple, and they do it. However, while they're rebuilding it they grow tired of the task and the work slows down, so God sends Haggai and Zechariah to prophesy to the people. He reminds the labourers, "You have got to rebuild, keep going. It will not be by your might, not by your power, but by My Spirit" (Zechariah 4:6). The people continue and the temple is restored, but by the time Malachi comes on the scene the people are already slipping backward spiritually.

Dating the Book of Malachi is difficult as there is no external evidence to point us in the right direction although there is some helpful information within Malachi itself. As previously stated Malachi almost certainly ministered during the Persian Empire (539-333 B.C.). The term used for "governor" (1:8) "is a technical term from the Persian

¹⁰ Peter C. Craigie, *The Old Testament: Its Background, Growth and Content* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), 207.

¹¹ Ibid.

period.”¹² This would mean it was written in Israel’s post-exilic period – after the people of Israel returned from Babylon (modern day Iraq).

Malachi confronts many of the same sins (mixed marriages, failure to tithe, not keeping the Sabbath, faithless priests, and social problems) that other post-exilic prophets, Haggai, Zechariah, and particularly Ezra and Nehemiah, addressed which suggests a similar time period. While it is almost certain that he wrote some time after Haggai and Zechariah, it is not possible to determine with any accuracy whether he preceded Ezra and Nehemiah, followed them, or wrote at the same time.

It appears that sacrifices were being offered at the temple which means it had already been rebuilt (Malachi 1:10) (the temple was rededicated in about 515B.C.). However, because there was already disillusionment about the temple, “it is probable that a few decades have passed since its completion.”¹³

With all of the above evidence it seems likely that Malachi can be dated sometime between 475-450 B.C. I personally favour a date of about 460-450 B.C.

Structure

Perhaps because of the people’s disillusionment and contempt for their covenant with God, Malachi uses a somewhat unique structure in trying to make God’s point with the people. Although it was occasionally used by other prophets, no one else uses it to the extent that he does. The book focusses on six dialogues between God and His people. These dialogues are sometimes called disputes, disputations, or arguments. The general pattern of these dialogues or disputes is as follows: (1) God states His issue with the people, (2) the people respond with a question, and (3) God responds with a message of challenge, rebuke, or warning. He often does this by reminding them of His past or coming actions, or revealing how their actions show contempt.

These disputes are a wake-up call at a time of rebelliousness, discouragement and depression (see 3:14) when the returnees from Babylon felt abandoned or even

¹² Tremper Longman III and Raymond B. Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament (Second Edition)* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 498.

¹³ Ibid.

rejected by God. Rather than use a court setting (as in Hosea and Micah, for example), God challenges them by means of declaration, question, and explanation.

There is a kind of progression to the dialogues/disputes. They begin with Israel questioning God's love (and therefore His compassion for and loyalty to them). God responds that not only does He love them (look what I did to Edom), but that there is lots of evidence they do not love Yahweh. This is seen in the contempt for the covenant by both the priests and people (offering blemished animals in sacrifice, and divorce and intermarriage with pagans). The final three disputes start the cycle again. They feel abandoned by God so the people complain about the prosperity of those who practice injustice. However, God responds that they also practice injustice by withholding tithes, the means of livelihood for the Levites and of provision for the poor (Numbers 18:21-32; Deuteronomy 14:28-29). Finally, there are assurances of God's coming justice – both judgment of the wicked and salvation of the (new) righteous remnant.

The six disputes are:

1. Dispute over God's (Yahweh's) Love (1:1-5).
 2. Dispute over Unacceptable Sacrifices (due largely to poor spiritual leadership) (1:6-2:9).
 3. Dispute over Breaking Faith (as seen in their intermarriage and divorce) (2:10-16).
 4. Dispute over Justice in the Land (2:17-3:5).
 5. Dispute over Tithes and Offerings(3:6-12).
 6. Dispute over Serving God(3:13-4:3)
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1. Dispute over God's Love (1:1-5).

The people of Malachi's day had somehow determined that God did not love them. God responds with an illustration from Israel's past history. God's choice (election) of Jacob was an act of love and God still loved and cared for Israel. The future God promised to Jacob's descendants is proof of His love.

2. Dispute over Unacceptable Sacrifices (1:6-2:9).

Judah's spiritual leaders not only failed to confront the people about their flawed and lukewarm worship practices, they practised them themselves. This not only dishonoured God, it also violated the covenant He had made with them. Malachi's prescription for their half-hearted religion was a renewed commitment to honour God. He is the "Lord Almighty"¹⁴ and as such should receive at least the honour due a father, a master, or the governor. Malachi challenged the priests and the Levites (and the people) to honour God or He would be honoured by the nations of the world. This would have been an affront to Jewish beliefs regarding Gentiles worshipping God.

3. Dispute over Breaking Faith (2:10-16).

The people's negative relationship with God created problems in their relationships with one another (as is usually the case). Men who were supposed to be following God were divorcing their Jewish wives with whom they had made a marriage covenant and marrying women who worshipped pagan Gods. Malachi bluntly states that God hated this kind of unfaithfulness. This kind of behaviour demonstrated a total disregard for the covenant commitment. God's people must be people of integrity and faithfulness in the most important relationships in their lives.

4. Dispute over Justice in the Land (2:17-3:5).

Sadly, the people did not believe God was fair and just, because the unjust and the wicked seemed to prosper while the just and the righteous seemed to suffer. God responded that someday all of this would change and He would set things straight. The Messiah would come and bring true and lasting justice. He would judge everyone like a "refiner's fire" that separates pollutants from the pure silver.

The New Testament writers understood "the messenger" in 3:1 to be a reference to John the Baptist (Matthew 11:10; Mark 1:2; Luke 7:27). Therefore, Jesus was "the Lord [they were] seeking" and the refiner of His people (Malachi 3:1).

¹⁴ The phrase "Lord Almighty" is used twenty-four times in Malachi.

5. Dispute over Tithes and Offerings (3:6-12).

Malachi called the people to repentance. God assured them that if they returned to Him He would return to them. Giving tithes and offerings was a visible way of demonstrating to God they had turned to Him. The tithe was what one owed God, so withholding it was just like robbing Him. In this way they were guilty of the very injustice they complained about in others (see 2:17-3:5). Malachi saw a close relationship between giving to God and blessing in life.

6. Dispute over Serving God (3:13-4:3).

The final dispute is about the people's sense of hopelessness in serving God. They see no benefit to being the people of God. God's response is to help them see beyond their present circumstances to a future day when justice would be dispensed once and for all. The wicked will be consumed in God's fire of judgment, while those who fear and honour God will know the protecting power of "the sun of righteousness" rising "with healing in its wings" (4:2).

Malachi concludes by bringing Moses (the law) and Elijah (the prophets) into the picture. The people are challenged to keep the covenant of the law; they can look forward to the coming of a second Elijah who will precede the coming Great day of the Lord. The New Testament writers identified this "second Elijah" as John the Baptist (Matthew 11:14; 17:12; Mark 9:11-13; Luke 1:17).

Malachi reminds the people of Israel that they must take their covenant relationship with God very seriously and that a great new day will dawn for them with the coming of Elijah (John the Baptist) to precede the Lord (Jesus Christ).

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