

Malachi

“Behold, I send My messenger, And he will prepare the way before Me.
And the Lord, whom you seek, Will suddenly come to His temple,
Even the Messenger of the covenant, In whom you delight.” (Mal 3:1)

Last words are always important. Malachi is the last word of the Old Testament. It is mostly criticism—a reminder that Israel was still in need of a new covenant, with a new spirit and motivation (cf. Jer 31:31; Ezek 36:26-27). But it also contains encouragement, for it reminds Israel that Yahweh was indeed coming and that His coming would not only bring judgment but restoration and blessing as well. While awaiting that glorious appearing, Israel is exhorted to give attention to the essence of Torah because it still had value for regulating the life of the community and for exalting Yahweh’s name among the nations.

Authorship

Since “Malachi” means “my messenger” in Hebrew, some doubt that it should be understood as a personal name in this book’s title. However, that is contrary to every other prophetic book. Since the meanings of the names of the prophets usually have something to do with their messages, this would not be an unusual play on words. Nothing else is known about Malachi.

Date

There are no textual time indicators to aid in dating the prophecy or its final composition. The existence of the temple, the Persian word for “governor,” and the general feeling of disillusionment confirm that the post-exilic period is in view. Lack of mention of Ezra or Nehemiah have led many to suggest a date of 475-450 B.C.¹ Others feel that the same evidence points to a date after Nehemiah, ca. 435-430 B.C.² The later date is preferable. This makes Malachi the last writing of the Old Testament canon.

Historical Setting

Israel had returned from the Babylonian captivity in 537 B.C. and had rebuilt the temple. After a time of inactivity Ezra and Nehemiah return to give leadership in respect to the observation of Torah and the rebuilding of Jerusalem’s walls. However, it was apparent that

¹ Cf. Raymond B. Dillard and Tremper Longman, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 439; and for rationale for dating options see C. Hassell Bullock, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophetic Books* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 338-39.

² Charles Dyer and Gene Merrill, *The Old Testament Explorer* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 2001), 833-34.

without continual prodding and reminding, the nation was still prone to fall into lethargy and disobedience. Malachi's ministry takes place after all other events recorded in the Old Testament, but with the same perspective that had informed the prophets for hundred's of years, namely, that present living must take place in the light of the future coming of Yahweh.

Original Readers / Occasion

While no historical occasion is mentioned, the general reason for Malachi's ministry and writing is the general stupor of priest and people following their reestablishment in the Promised Land. The written prophecy of Malachi would stand as a guide and reminder that Yahweh was coming and would hold them accountable for their conduct. The priests are especially addressed in their role as protectors of Yahweh's honor and guides of the people.

Special Issues

Identity of Various Messengers. Several messengers appear in Malachi (the prophet himself functioning as a messenger). The priest is to be a messenger (2:7). There is a messenger forerunner (3:1) and the Messenger of the covenant. These cannot possibly all refer to the same person. While the nature and function of the messenger in each case is similar, their identities are distinct. Usage and correlation determines specific identity.

Theme Statement

Because the Messenger of the covenant is coming in purifying judgment, the priests and people of Israel ought to be submissive to Torah for then Yahweh will be magnified and they will be delivered from punishment.

Outline

- I. Title: The oracle of the word of Yahweh to Israel by Malachi.1:1
- II. Prologue of Affirmation: Israel exists because Yahweh chose of Jacob.1:2-5
 - A. Precipitating Exchange regarding Yahweh's love for Israel.1:2a-b
 - 1. Yahweh's Assertion: "I have loved you."1:2a
 - 2. Israel's Question: "How have You loved us."1:2b
 - B. Yahweh's Answer: "Jacob have I loved (chosen)."1:2c-5
 - 1. Israel exists by Yahweh's elective grace.1:2c-3
 - 2. Edom is not sovereign over its own destiny.1:4
 - 3. Yahweh will be magnified beyond Israel—that is their destiny.1:5
- III. Body of Accusation: Israel is charged with covenant violation.1:6–4:3
 - A. The priests are blamed for violation of Levi's covenant of life and peace.1:6–2:9
 - 1. They are blamed for despising Yahweh's name by offering defiled sacrifices.1:6-14

2. They are commanded to proclaim Torah as the messengers of Yahweh.2:1-9
- B. The people are blamed for violation of Moses' covenant of holiness and testimony.2:10-4:3
 1. They are blamed for violating Yahweh's design for marriage.2:10-16
 - a. They marry wives with foreign gods.2:10-12
 - b. They divorce their own wives of covenant.....2:13-16
 2. They are blamed for condoning and excusing evil.2:17-3:5
 - a. They weary Yahweh by approving of evil and discounting His justice.2:17
 - b. They will be suddenly confronted with Yahweh's presence when He comes to judge.....3:1-5
 - 1) His messenger will prepare the way for the coming of The Messenger of the covenant.3:1
 - 2) His coming will bring purifying judgment.3:2-5
 3. They are blamed for withholding their tithes and offerings.....3:6-12
 - a. They are counseled to return to Yahweh.3:6-7
 - b. They are charged with holding on to their tithes and offerings thus denying Yahweh the opportunity to bless them abundantly.3:8-12
 4. They are blamed for their ungrateful arrogance.....3:13-4:3
 - a. They elevate the proud as those truly blessed.3:13-15
 - b. They are instructed that it is those who fear Yahweh who will be preserved and blessed in the day of His coming.....3:16-4:3
- IV. Epilogue of Anticipation: Present conduct is to be motivated by the coming day of Yahweh.4:4-6
 - A. The Torah of Moses is to be observed in the present.....4:4
 - B. The Day of Yahweh will bring restoration and judgment.....4:5-6
 1. Elijah will usher in the Day of the Lord.4:5
 2. It will be a day of restoration and judgment.....4:6

Theme Statement

Because the Messenger of the covenant is coming in purifying judgment, the priests and people of Israel ought to be submissive to Torah for then Yahweh will be magnified and they will be delivered from punishment.

Theme Development

I. Title: The oracle of the word of Yahweh to Israel by Malachi (1:1).

Malachi is structured around rhetorical questions asked on behalf of the people in response to various assertions made by the Lord. The questions, which display a sense of incredulity on the part of the recipients, are answered by extended explanations that include exhortation and warning as well as information. The first question is slightly different than the

rest in that it involves something about God rather than themselves (“How have You . . .” vs. “How have we . . .”). Hence, it may be taken as a prologue to the prophecy.

II. Prologue of Affirmation: Israel exists because Yahweh chose of Jacob (1:2-5).

The context for Malachi’s words is the elective grace of God which is indicated in the statement concerning Yahweh’s love for Israel. They were feeling very unloved at the time and needed assurance that they were still the covenant people. Though Yahweh’s election of Israel through Jacob meant their blessing instead of Edom’s impoverishment, the Lord was still intent on magnifying His name “beyond the border of Israel” (1:5). In this Israel had a great part to play, one that they were failing at presently.

III. Body of Accusation: Israel is charged with covenant violation (1:6-4:3).

The main section follows through with various ways in which Israel had been obscuring the purpose and responsibility of their election. It included especially a message to the priests who had a crucial role in the people’s faith and obedience.

A. The priests are blamed for violation of Levi’s covenant of life and peace (1:6-2:9).

The priests are taken to task for despising Yahweh’s name by not honoring and reverencing Him (1:6). They were despising His name by offering unacceptable sacrifices on the altar of worship (1:8). This was no way to demonstrate the worthiness of Yahweh who was to be worshipped among the nations (1:11, 14), the purpose of Israel’s original mandate (cf. Exod 19:5-6). They are weary with such considerations, having no sense of the holy (1:12-13). Hence, both purposes of Leviticus are being frustrated: they were not enjoying fellowship with the holy God and they were failing to give witness to the nations of their holy God. In light of these violations the priests are commanded to practice and proclaim Torah as messengers of Yahweh (2:1-8). They were to follow the example Phinehas the Levite who atoned for the people and led them in life and peace (cf. Num 25:12-13).

B. The people are blamed for violation of Moses’ covenant of holiness and testimony (2:10-4:3).

Even though the priests are guilty of failure to lead the people properly, the people are still held accountable for their conduct. Such is always the case with God’s administration. The various charges against the remnant as a whole are organized around the rhetorical question technique.

1. They are blamed for violating Yahweh's design for marriage (2:10-16). Israel has been created as a national, ethnic entity so as to bear witness in the world to their covenant keeping God. For that reason their marriages had been regulated for their own preservation as a people, as well as for a demonstration of the uniqueness of the God in whose image they had been created as male and female (cf. Gen 1:26-28). Their marrying of wives who worshipped foreign gods (2:10-12) and the practice of divorcing their wives of covenant (2:13-16) struck at the heart of who they were as a people.

2. They are blamed for condoning and excusing evil (2:17-3:5). Israel's conduct displayed the attitude that with God there is no good or evil, that He does not and will not render justice (2:17). To this Yahweh responds that the day of judgment is coming, just as promised, when all things will be purified, including the unrighteous of Israel (3-5). They will know the day has arrived because Yahweh's messenger will prepare His way (3:1). Once that has happened, then the Lord Himself will come to His temple, also identified as the Messenger of the covenant.³ God will not always mediate His righteous judgment through priest and prophet. At some point He will appear personally in judgment.

3. They are blamed for withholding their tithes and offerings (3:6-12). By withholding their tithes and offerings they were again dishonoring God by failing to render to Him proper tribute. This was robbery, not because it somehow left God destitute, but because it obscured the manifestation of His glory. If they would give freely to Him then He would bless them with great abundance and the rest of the nations would see how great a God Israel worshipped (3:12).

4. They are blamed for their ungrateful arrogance (3:13-4:3). Finally, Israel is rebuked for thinking that God owed them more than they were experiencing. They had "walked as mourners before the Lord of hosts" and had not profited from keeping His ordinances. In their pride, they had discounted God's elective grace and forbearing mercy and denied culpability for their own sin. It was as though they were deserving of more than God had given. However, not all will be so callous. Those who fear Yahweh will become the remnant to serve as His special treasure (3:16-17). In the Day of the Lord the proud will be destroyed (4:1) while the humble, who fear His name, will experience healing by the Sun of Righteousness, enjoy abundance, and be victorious over their enemies (4:2).

³ For a summary of the issues involved in identifying the Messenger of the covenant see Walter C. Kaiser, "The Promise of the Arrival of Elijah in Malachi and the Gospels," *Grace Theological Journal* 3 (Fall 1982): 224-25.

IV. Epilogue of Anticipation: Present conduct is to be motivated by the coming day of Yahweh (4:4-6).

The epilogue summarizes the message of the book. Israel must observe Torah, not from a mercenary, profit motive, but because it embodied God's will and purpose for them and because He was coming back to render judgment by its statutes. Present conduct is most effectively motivated by expectation of the coming of the day of Yahweh (4:5).

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