

STUDIES IN THE
OLD TESTAMENT

Adult Bible Equipping Class
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OLD TESTAMENT FLYOVER:

Malachi's message, as the prophetic word of YHWH, was one of rebuke and indictment of each of these ills and across the social spectrum, a message that ended, however, with a note of ultimate hope. In a series of disputations the man of God called to account all the guilty, challenging them to face up to and confess their sins to the Lord of the covenant before whom, in fact, they stood in arraignment. His word is strong, impassioned, and unrelenting, for he lived in critical times. Unless he could get his message across, there was a real and imminent danger that all the gains of postexilic renewal would be irretrievably lost. As the last of Israel's kerygmatic heralds, Malachi reached back to the beginning of her covenant election and forward to the promise of covenant fulfillment, bridging the two with his urgent insistence that the theocratic people be worthy of their calling, for the King of all the earth was at hand.

Eugene H. Merrill, *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi: An Exegetical Commentary*
(Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 385.

Malachi

I. Introduction

A. *Date & Authorship*

The identity of the prophet called "Malachi" is notoriously sketchy. The name literally means, "My Messenger," which has led some to conclude that it is rather a descriptive title and not a proper name. This fact seems to be supported further by the occurrence of the identical name in 3:1. But the obviously eschatological setting of 3:1 precludes this "Malachi" from being identified as the author of the book. Thus, it's not unreasonable to conclude that the prophet's name was in fact, Malachi, though nothing more can be gained about the man, for nowhere else in the OT is he mentioned.

In fact, it's not even clear when Malachi's ministry occurred. His position in the Twelve suggests that he should be counted among the postexilic prophets, and ancient Jewish tradition affirms this view. Yet unlike Haggai and Zechariah, who provide numerous chronological data, Malachi offers no datable events or persons in his message. The only potentially datable event is the reference to the destruction of Edom (1:2-5). For this reason, scholars have offered a wide array of dates, ranging everywhere from the early exile (mid-6th cent.) to the Maccabean period (2nd cent.). In the case of both extremes, the motivation seems to be to date the book *after* the destruction of Edom in question, either

by means of the Babylonians in 586 B.C. or the Maccabeans in 165-161 B.C. In either case, these dates reflect the assumption that Malachi's reference to Edom is only an alleged prediction, one that he made *vaticinium ex eventu*—after the event.

Setting aside anti-supernatural biases, it is much more likely that Malachi's book dates to sometime during the return of the exiles, and that his reference to Edom was a prediction of the coming Nabataean expulsion of the Edomites in 312 B.C.¹ The actual historical date of Malachi's ministry is another matter, and one which will be addressed in the context of the larger historical context.

B. *Historical Background*

One of the major challenges facing any student of Malachi is locating his message within some type of chronological framework so as to make sense of all the unique particularities and themes of his message. Whatever time period he prophesied, it provided a certain *Sitz im Leben*—a life setting—for the behaviors and attitudes he was addressing. The fact that the prophet offers no definitive clues as to chronology makes this problem rather difficult.

The other difficulty lies in the rather oblique silence of the biblical record on issues and events in Palestine between Darius' 6th year and Artaxerxes' 7th year. Apart from passing references to Xerxes (Ezra 4:6) and Artaxerxes (Ezra 4:7-23), we know very little of what occurred in that region between 515-458 B.C. until narrative picks up with the arrival of Ezra in 458 B.C. The temple had been completed in 515 B.C., and it appears that the cult was fully operational during that time. But when Ezra arrived, he encountered a deteriorating spiritual and cultic condition that needed immediate attention. Politically, rebellion in the western satrapies had created regional unrest, and it is not unreasonable to assume that Artaxerxes had allowed Ezra to return to aid in stabilizing things in Palestine (cf. Ezra 7:21, 23-26).

Morally and spiritually, things were far worse, as seen especially in the practice of mixed marriages (Ezra 9:1-4), a practice symptomatic of a deeper spiritual issue among the people (9:1, 14).

Unrest in the region continued after Ezra's reforms, to the point that Artaxerxes was willing to send his own beloved cupbearer Nehemiah to help straighten things out. But Nehemiah's main concern was what he learned of the conditions of the city and the people. The city's walls lay in ruins, the people remained under opposition from enemies, and moral and spiritual issues plagued the community.

Thus Nehemiah got to work. He appointed religious and political leaders (Neh 7:1-2), addressed economic and social issues (5:1-5), and compelled the people to recommit themselves to the covenant (7:73-9:38). Having dealt with the issues, he returned to Susa, only to have the conditions degrade yet again. His opponent had been given quarter in the Temple by the high priest, and another priest had married the daughter of a Gentile ruler (13:28). Meanwhile, the Levites were being ill-treated, illegal marriage was reoccurring,

¹ Eugene H. Merrill, "Malachi," in *The World and the Word: An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2011), 490-1.

and the Sabbath was regularly neglected. Nehemiah responded forcefully, threatening serious repercussions should conditions persist (13:23-27).

Somewhere within this milieu of history falls the book of Malachi. It is popular to date the book to the time between Ezra and Nehemiah, or approximately 434 B.C.² But certain features of the book suggest that Malachi may have in fact prophesied in the interim period following the completion of the temple and the arrival of Ezra in 458 B.C. For one, except for the matter of intermarriage, Ezra concerns himself with none of the issues which Malachi addresses. This could either be because these issues had not yet arisen until Ezra's ministry ended and Malachi entered the scene, or because Malachi's earlier ministry had proven effective in dealing with many of the issues save that of intermarriage. Merrill argues for the latter:

But could not Malachi have composed his work early in the days of Ezra, before the Ezra-Nehemiah reforms took effect, and could not his preaching have provoked the reforms in the first place or at least have encouraged them? This is possible, but once more it must be pointed out that Malachi's concerns are much different from those of either Ezra or Nehemiah, for he was almost wholly transfixed by concerns about the cult. It is much more likely that he spoke to and remedied conditions that prevailed before Ezra ever came on the scene, conditions that in fact Ezra faced (if at all) in a totally different form (Ezra 7:1-10).³

With this emphasis, Merrill suggests that a date between 500 and 460 B.C. is preferable, with a probably date around 480-470 being a "reasonable guess."⁴ When one adds that Malachi makes no reference to any kind of recent legislation reflective of Ezra and Nehemiah's leadership, it solidifies the idea that Malachi's ministry preceded them.⁵

II. Major Themes

A. *The Current Sins of the Nation*

When Malachi addressed the post-exilic Jewish community in Palestine, he encountered a people who had entered into serious spiritual relapse. The gains made in the early years of their return—the completion of the temple and restoration of social, religious, and political life—had eroded into a pessimistic cynicism that manifested itself in a number of different ways. Posed in a series of rhetorical questions, the prophet exposes the people's actions.

The first question posed serves as a launching point for the rest to follow, for it reinforces God's covenant care and election of Israel and exposes Israel's lack of trust in that same care. While the prophet affirms God's covenant love for Israel (1:2a), Israel's response is

² Robert L. Alden, "Malachi," in *EBC*, 12 vols., ed. Frank E. Gæbelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), 7:701.

³ Merrill, *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi*, 378.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Joyce G. Baldwin, *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi: An Introduction & Commentary*, TOTC (London: The Tyndale Press, 1972), 213.

to question the statement's veracity. To answer them, the prophet takes them all the way back to the days when God affirmed his covenant loyalty to Jacob. The love that elected Israel will ultimately sustain, preserve, and restore her (1:3-5).

1. Sins of the Priests

Malachi's first audience is none other than the religious leaders themselves, who had corrupted the priesthood both in ritual service and instructional responsibility. First, he rebukes them for willingly accepting and offering inferior sacrifices (1:6-10). While the law demanded unblemished sacrifices, the priests were accepting animals that were blind, lame, and sick, an act that revealed their contempt for Yahweh and their lack of fear of covenant reprisal. As Malachi reminds them, such sacrifices would never be offered to their governor (1:8), yet they expected God to not only accept such sacrifices, but receive the people kindly (1:9). Instead, he wished that there was but one priest righteous enough to shut the gates to the temple and stop such offensive offerings (1:10).

The underlying contempt of the priests is further exposed in 1:11-14, as their entire attitude towards their service is clarified. Though God desires his name to be magnified among the nations (1:11), his own covenant people—the means of attaining that desire—profanes the divine name through corrupted priestly service (1:12). "Their utter contempt," Merrill writes, "is most picturesquely portrayed by their dismissal of the whole thing—altars, incense, sacrifices, and all—as so much needless bother (v. 13). In their own words they say, 'What weariness!'" He goes on to write,

The joy has left their worship, and it has become an onerous burden. The loss of a true understanding of worship leads easily to a total disregard or even repudiation of its requirements, and so these calloused ministers of the Temple sniff at their responsibilities, considering them as beneath their dignity, and go about establishing the cult on their own terms. This is summarized by their willingness to receive and to offer in sacrifice stolen, lame, and sick animals (cf. v. 8), a gesture that elicits the strongest abhorrence from YHWH who says (literally), "Can I be pleased with it from your hands?"⁶

Yet sacrificial duties aside, the priests had failed in another critical manner. From the earliest of Israelite covenant life, the priestly line carried a dual ministry of ritual mediation and covenant instruction (Lev 10:11; Deut 31:9-13; 33:10), a role that only increased as prophetic activity declined following the return from exile (Hag 2:11; Zech 7:3; Ezra 7:10, 25; Neh 8:9). The priests addressed by Malachi had abdicated this responsibility as well, and had begun to neglect instructing the people in covenant living. While "the lips of a priest should preserve knowledge, and men should seek instruction from his mouth" (2:7), these priests have "turned aside from the way; [they] have caused many to stumble by the instruction; [they] have corrupted the covenant of Levi" (2:8). That is to say, they had misled the people in their understanding of the law, that the people had failed to keep its requirements.⁷

⁶ Merrill, *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi*, 402.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 410.

2. Sins of the People

Next, the prophet turns to the people to uncover the fruit of this egregious dereliction of priestly duty: covenant unfaithfulness. At the outset, he reminds them of their overall unity as one nation bound together under the fatherhood of God (2:10). Despite this fact, the people abused each other, most specifically by giving their daughters in marriage to foreigners (2:11). Merrill notes,

The prophet is not dealing in generalities here, as the continuation of his accusation shows. Judah—and, indeed, Israel and Jerusalem as well—has dealt treacherously as a sacred community by undertaking action whose net result would lead to the disintegration of the people as an elect nation more quickly and surely than anything else she could do, namely, by intermarriage with the pagans.⁸

Not only did intermarriage blur the uniquely elective line of Israel as the chosen descendants of Abraham, but it introduced pagan influence into covenant life and threatened to vie for Israel's religious affections. Yet such intermarriages were occurring, yet the people fully expected their offerings to please Yahweh (2:12), a sign of just how delusional the nation had become.

As 2:13 clarifies, the people were confounded by God's rejection of their sacrifices. So Malachi uncovers the insidious back story of their intermarriage. It appears that many were actually divorcing their Jewish wives in order to enter into these foreign unions (2:14). Thus, the entire situation served as an illustration of the larger issue. Their marriage to foreign wives was really a spiritual adultery with other gods, and they had necessarily divorced themselves from their covenant union with Yahweh. The divorce/foreign marriage debacle was representative of their own relationship nationally to Yahweh.

In addition to this overarching sin, Malachi presents a number of other sins committed by the people. He says that they are self-deceived, lacking trust that God will deal justly with the nation and that they themselves will escape from God's judgment unscathed (2:17). He condemns their selfishness, exposing how they were withholding portions of their tithes and offerings (3:6-9). And he denounces their arrogant self-sufficiency, in which they saw their success and prosperity as the result of their own efforts and not flowing from the grace and provision of God (3:13-15).

B. The Coming Judgment & Blessing of God

A true prophet of God, Malachi's message is both severe and hopeful. The sins he exposes among the priests and the people come with serious consequences. Upon the priests, he warns of covenant curses that will befall them for their utter dereliction of duty (2:2). He speaks of consequences that will flow not only to them but to their descendants (2:3, 9).

Likewise, the prophet gives numerous warnings to the people as well. He reminds them that outward religious exercise that covers up unrepentant covenant sin will result in the cutting off of tents from Israel (2:12). He warns them that God's messenger would come, and the nation would be purified and the priesthood purged (3:1-4). Judgment would

⁸ Ibid., 415.

come against all covenant violators (3:5). In the future day of Yahweh, the entire nation will undergo a refining, and the wicked will be consumed (4:1).

But accompanying God's judgment upon his people, he will also bring blessing to them, just as he long ago promised. He had introduced his message with a reminder of God's covenant love and election of Israel (1:1-5). Because Yahweh is faithful, the nation will not ultimately fall in judgment. As the prophet reminds, "For I, Yahweh, do not change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed" (3:6). So curse can turn into blessing as the nation turns from sin to obedience (3:10b-12). And those who fear Yahweh and walk righteously will "bask in the 'sun of righteousness (4:2)'."⁹ He promises to send Elijah the prophet in order to prepare the nation for the day of Yahweh, and to restore the nation to covenant faithfulness (4:5-6), a reference that Jesus identifies specifically as fulfilled in the person of John the Baptist, the last OT prophet whose responsibility was to the herald for the last time the message of covenant repentance as the way was prepared for the coming of Messiah (3:1).

III. Purpose

Israel was called to repentance and covenant faithfulness.

IV. Literary Structure

Malachi is perhaps the least 'poetic' of all the prophets, even so that scholars are divided on whether his words should be considered prose or poetry. Yet his literary style is set apart by his unique use of the rhetorical question, a device he uses seven times, more than any other OT book. Each represents a question posed from the lips of the priests or people that reveal the ignorance of the people concerning their sin:

"How have you loved us?" (1:2)

"How have we despised you?" (1:6)

"How have we defiled you?" (1:7)

"How have we wearied you?" (2:17)

"How shall we return?" (3:7)

"How have we robbed you?" (3:8)

"What have we spoken against you?" (3:13)

Additionally, the prophet also poses a series of rhetorical questions back at his audience:

"If I am a father, where is My honor" And if I am a master, where is my respect? (1:6)

"But when you present the blind for sacrifice, is it not evil? And when you present the land and sick, is it not evil? Why not offer it to your governor? Would he be pleased with you? Or would he receive you kindly?" (1:8)

"But now will you not entreat God's favor, that he may be gracious to us? With such an offering on your part, will he receive any of you kindly?" (1:9)

⁹ Robert L. Alden, "Malachi," in *EBC*, 12 vols., ed. Frank E. Gæbelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), 7:705.

"Do we not all have one father? Has not one God created us? Why do we deal treacherously each against his brother so as to profane the covenant of our fathers?" (2:10)

"But not one has done so who has a remnant of the Spirit. And what did that one do while he was seeking a godly offspring?" (2:15)

"But who can endure the day of his coming? And who can stand when he appears?" (3:2)

These rhetorical questions become central to Malachi's organization of his material, as well as provide thematic cohesion to the work as a whole. With that said, the overall structure of the book is as follows:

Introduction (1:1)

- I. God's Election of Israel (1:2-5)
- II. The Sacrilege of the Priests (1:6-2:9)
 - A. The Sacrilege of Priestly Service (1:6-14)
 1. The Inferior Sacrifices (1:6-10)
 2. Their Insolent Spirit (1:11-14)
 - B. The Sacrilege of the Priestly Message (2:1-9)
 1. The Corrupted Vocation of the Priests (2:1-7)
 2. The Covenant Violation of the Priests (2:8-9)
- III. The Rebellion of the People (2:10-16)
 - A. The Disruption of the Covenant (2:10-13)
 - B. The Illustration of the Covenant (2:14-16)
- IV. The Resistance to Yahweh (2:17-4:3)
 - A. Resistance through Self-deceit (2:17-3:5)
 1. The Problem (2:17)
 2. The Promise (3:1-5)
 - B. Resistance through Selfishness (3:6-12)
 1. The Problem (3:6-9)
 2. The Promise (3:10-12)
 - C. Resistance through Self-sufficiency (3:13-4:3)
 1. The Problem (3:13-15)
 2. The Promise (3:16-4:3)
- V. Restoration through YHWH (4:4-6)