**MALACHI**

Introduction:

*Malachi* is the last book in the OT both in terms of placement, and probably, chronologically. No dates, events, or persons are mentioned in the book. Nonetheless, *Malachi* always has been placed among the 3 post-exilic prophets. Nothing is known about Malachi, not even the name of his father, tribe, hometown, or background. His name meant “My messenger,” which may have been a description of his role rather than his given name.

The book began like a gift tag: “From”- “To.” The gift was “the Word of the Lord”- “From” was God, Who sent His Word through Malachi. It was “To” Israel. God’s first to Israel were, “I have loved you.” What a beautiful salutation!

Since God was the primary character in this book, nothing much was said about Malachi. Indeed, since Malachi meant “messenger,” some hypothesize the book name merely referred to his role. It was not a name at all; so perhaps, the author was unknown.

The book’s contents indicate *Malachi* waswritten after Zerubbabel returned to Jerusalem. It could not have been written before the Temple was built (515 BC). Ezra returned to Jerusalem with more exiles in 458 BC, the 7th year of Persian King Artaxerxes. Nehemiah returned in 445 BC, Artaxerxes’ 20th year, and led the people in rebuilding Jerusalem’s walls. Nehemiah returned to Persia in the 12th year of his governorship of Jerusalem, about 434 BC. That may have been when Malachi assumed the spiritual helm in Jerusalem. After the city walls and Temple were built, and a sense of spiritual apathy and lethargy set in among the people.

Malachi probably was not a priest. By 515 BC, the Temple had been built, with the encouragement of Haggai and Zechariah. But the people and priests had lost their sense of chosenness and had ceased to honor God. They were apathetic to Temple ritual and Mosaic Law. Among the people, intermarriage with Gentiles was common, as was divorce, adultery, sorcery, fraud, oppression, and injustice.

Some say *Malachi* was written in the 5thC BC, before the reforms instituted by Ezra and Nehemiah. Others suggest *Malachi* merely was cut off the end of *Zechariah,* and a new book was created so Scripture would include 12 Minor Prophets. Most believe the book was written in the interim after Nehemiah returned to Persia and before he came back to Israel. Nonetheless, the canonicity of *Malachi* never was seriously questioned. The book was repeatedly referred to in the NT and a small fragment of itwas found at Qumran.

*Malachi* was not mentioned elsewhere in the OT, but it was quoted in the NT. Even when it was quoted, however, Malachi’s name was not mentioned. Indeed, it was not mentioned anywhere else in the Bible.

*Malachi*’s message was packed with largely negative judgments, but the book provided a glimpse of hope at the end. The book, however, contained no oracles against foreign nations, no demonstrative prophecy, no apocalyptic, and it was written mostly in prose, not poetry, as was much of prophecy. Uniquely among prophets, Malachi used rhetorical questions, which later became popular rabbinic stye.

*Malachi*, like other prophets, portrayed God as sovereign Lord of Israel and the world. God was concerned with all nations, and especially with justice, mercy, and faithfulness. *Malachi’s* main contribution to Messianic prophecy was his emphasis on Messiah’s forerunner, now known to have been John the Baptist.

Malachi was set as a court case being tried in the Temple, with the Lord defending against 2 charges by the people:

* You have not loved us
* You have not acted as a God of justice to fulfill Your covenant duties.

God issued counteraccusations against the priests and people, quickly putting them on the defensive. Ultimately, the Lord was innocent and Israel guilty. Israel was ordered to obey the Law, and God promised His people mercy and love if they did so.

Chapter1:

Through the ages Israel and its leaders questioned God. Even Jesus asked: “My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?” (Mk.15:34). In Malachi’s time, perhaps about 460 BC, Judah called God to account with fierce accusations. Judah was struggling in an impoverished little province within the Persian Empire. The promises of *Haggai* and *Zechariah* about a glorious Messianic kingdom had not come to pass although the Temple had been built for about 50 years. None of the promised blessings had materialized. Israel still had locusts and drought, and the people lived at a subsistence level.

In this context *Malachi* opened several dialogues between God and Israel, which doubted God’s love for them. God again declared He had loved Israel and still did. Although God had allowed Israel/Judah to be exiled because of their sins, that had been half a century earlier. Since then, God had returned them to Palestine, though without *Exodus*-type miracles.

The people cynically responded to God’s declaration of love, saying, “How have You loved us.” They did not want God not to point to the past and its miracles. They wanted to know what God had done for them lately. Israel had grown tired of waiting, obeying, and trusting (though they had not done a good job of any of those things) because it appeared nothing was happening. Life and religion had become boring or worse- having to love neighbors; pay tithes to support worthless priests; give up prized lambs and calves to become burnt offerings on an altar; learn religious traditions that seemed to be as far away the God they represented; pray when it felt like the words bounced off the ceiling. God did not seem interested in Judah, and His future promises seemed hollow. Were they really God’s chosen people?

God responded by reminding the people of Gen.25:23. He had chosen Jacob/Israel over Esau and ancient Edom/Esau’s country, became a wasteland. The Edomites, also called Amalekites (Amalek was Esau’s grandson), were Israel’s most hated, consistent, and longest enemy. Moreover, God’s rejection and the coming destruction of Edom was declared by several of Israel’s prophets.

But in 587 BC, God allowed Babylon to devastate Jerusalem, and the people of Judah were sent into exile. Meanwhile, the Edomites helped the Babylonians by informing on Israel, looting their lands, and cutting off escape routes (Obad.10-14). Then, they happily took over Israel’s abandoned land. (Lam.4:21,22). It looked as if God had not chosen Jacob over Esau at all.

But God said, Edom had not been chosen. He was working out His universal purposes through Israel. Edom had not gone unpunished, and if they tried to rebuild, He would not allow it- they would suffer. In fact, Edom never recovered the territory it lost to the Nabateans in the 4th C BC.

[A little after Malachi’s time, Nabateans drove the Edomites West, out of their homeland and into the Negeb, the South part of Hebron in Judah, they never recovered their original land. Later, the Edomites living in the Negeb were called “Idumeans.” Then, Israel’s John Hyrcanus (134-104 BC), Jewish high priest and member of the Maccabean/Hasmonean family, though he never took the title of “king,” forcefully expanded Israel’s boundaries to include Idumea and Samaria. In an unprecedented move, Hyrcanus required the Idumeans to convert to Judaism and be circumcised. Years later, Rome named Herod the Great, whose mother was a Nabatean princess, and whose father was an Idumean Jew, king of Israel Herod’s grandfather, Antipas, was Hyracanus’ first convert in Idumea.]

*Malachi* then turned from the people of Israel to its priests accusing them of despising His Name. *Malachi* had the highest view of priesthood in the OT. [In the Protestant tradition of the priesthood of all believers, this should particularly touch readers.] Priests were to mediate the knowledge of God to the people, to preserve the traditions of God’s mighty acts, and to instruct His people in proper reverence and awe of the King of Glory. Indeed, priests were to walk with God (a high privilege and honor), such that, from them, Israel would learn how to walk with God and render Him the glory He was due.

The priests refused to recognize their own corruption and the fact that their corruption meant the corruption of the people also. Priests should honor God as Father and Master. Even more than stressing the love connection with God, they should stress reverence and awe of God. They did not.

God, through *Malachi*, charged the priest with despising His Name. As spokesman for God, *Malachi f*ramed 2 rhetorical questions:

* Where is the respect I deserve? [The priests had failed in their most important duty= honoring God. Their familiarity with holy things had caused them to treat holy things disrespectfully -familiarity bred contempt], and
* You have placed defiled food on my alter.

The priests of Malachi’s day were not treating God with even the respect

they would show human governors. (Probably he was referring to the Persian appointee serving during Nehemiah’s absence or before he came. Animals were not brought to the governor to sacrifice, but as tax payments. The Persians would not have tolerated such cost cutting by taxpayers.) God said He too would not tolerate such insults.

The priests accepted damaged, stolen, and sick gifts for sacrifice that no one would accept or eat. The priests viewed the sacrificial system as a mechanical routine, and their service had become tiresome. They thought worship was unimportant.

*Malachi* framed several more questions, expanding the charges:

* Would God be pleased with the sacrifice of damaged animals?
* Would He show them favor under such circumstances?
* When you bring stolen, lame, and sickly offerings should I not despise them?
* Shouldn’t someone just close the Temple and altar of sacrifice?

Then, God, through *Malachi,* said He had no desire for them. He was the God Whom all nations would worship. He was the Lord of Armies, and His name was fearsome among the nations. God had others in different places and later times who would bring acceptable offerings with love and devotion. He was still at work through history to the final goal of His Kingdom. Israel had been called to be God’s instrument to establish His Kingdom, but Israel was insulting Him by bringing despised offerings.

God even indicated He wished the Temple would go out of business. It was

not a meeting place for God and man. Its rituals had become perfunctory and self-deceiving, but the priests and people thought they were winning God’s approval. He was not pleased with them.

Chapter 2:

Continuing HIs chastisement of the priests, *Malachi* declared that if they did not honor God’s name and heed His commands, God would curse them. He would scatter offal from their sacrifices on their faces so the priests would be carried away from the camp with the waste. [“Offal” was the internal waste of the sacrificial animal. It was carried outside the camp for disposal.]

God had made a covenant with Levi, which he carried out. (Deut.33:8-11= Moses’ blessing of the ideal Levite.) Levi taught the people to trust God and he walked with God in peace and uprightness. He was God’s messenger, but these priests despised the covenant with God.

*Malachi* returned to the people’s unrighteousness with the same themes as those in *Ezra* and *Nehemiah.* They had intermarried with aliens/nonbelievers and had begun to worship their spouse’s heathen gods. They had broken marriage vows, by divorcing the wife of their youth to marry a foreigner, probably leaving the divorced woman in economic distress. [The refence to a man spreading his garment over a woman was a sign of his choosing her to marry. (Ruth 3:9; Exk.16:8).] [And Note: Polygamy was legal in Israel, but especially in post-exilic times, monogamy was the general practice, probably for economic reasons.]

Chapter 3:

The 1st half of vs.3:1 is quoted in the NT (Mat.11:10; Mk.1:2; Lk.7:27), “Now I will send My messenger.” (Remember: Messenger/Malachi is both the name of the book and a reference to Messiah’s harbinger. *Malachi*, like other prophets, spoke of the coming Messiah, but he more clearly than other prophets, also pointed to another Elijah who would announce Messiah’s impending arrival.)

The 1st half of vs.3:1 often is used in churches during Advent to celebrate John the Baptist’s birth. All 3 NT passages refer to John as forerunner of Christ Jesus. (The messenger is one of *Malachi’*s primary contributions to OT prophecy.)

Even in their sin, God’s people longed for Messiah to come, even though the prophets had declared that His coming meant judgment. When God returned to His purified Temple, He would make a reckoning in Israel. But Judah was not faithful/righteous. They were totally indifferent to God.

*Malachi* next asked, “Who will stand when He appears? Messiah would purify the priests so they will gleam like gold and silver. He would judge the sorcerers (those who practiced the occult), the adulterers, the perjurers (false swearers), those who oppressed the widow and orphan, and those who did not fear God. God was unchanging and would keep His promises to the patriarchs. That evil generation would pass away and a God-fearing one would inherit the promises.

*Malachi* then returned to dialogic challenge and response. God had declared, He was unchanging, and He called the people back to Him. But the people asked, “How are we to return?” From the earliest days, Israel had been broken to the core, but God continued to invite her to return to Him. *Malachi* recorded no answer to this question. Israel they were innocent/ acceptable.

Instead, *Malachi* asked whether humans could cheat God? The people queried: how had they cheated Him? But God affirmed they were cheating Him, and He brought another charge against them- robbery, which both included taking what did not belong to the person and holding back what belonged to another (like Ananias & Sapphira).

Then God pointed to Israel’s insufficient tithes and gifts. God was entitled to 1/10th of each person’s income. Failure to pay fully and properly was robbery. God had assigned the 1/10th the Levites. In addition to tithes, the people were to make offerings, of which were set apart for maintenance of the Levites and priests. Gifts also were given to God for special purposes. (Since this was an agrarian society, tithes and offerings/gifts generally were paid in kind rather than in coin.) [Nehemiah dealt with this problem, which was widespread then and now. (Neh. 10: 32-39; 13:10.]

God charged the people with stinginess, cheating, short-changing (failure to bring the whole tithe, sacrifice, or gift), and the priests may have been holding back the best parts for themselves. But the people did not trust God; hence they felt there was no point in keeping the Law. They had been promised blessings, but they had miserable lives. What was the point of giving offerings and sacrifices to God? [This still is a common refrain. According to Elizabeth Achtemeier, *Interpretation Bible Commentary*, a man in Dade County FL sued his church for return of the $800 in savings he had given to the church in response to the pastor’s promise that blessings and rewards would come to anyone who tithed 10 % of his wealth. But he had not received those benefits.]

*Malachi* then asserted that God also charged Israel with having spoken harshly against Him. But the people said, “How did we speak against You?” And they continued complaining that they had received nothing from serving the Lord, but they saw evil-doers flourish.

So, God challenged the people to test Him. Judah had suffered for its breach of covenant with God. They had promised obedience and had done the opposite. If they truly trusted and obeyed Him, they would find blessing. He would provide abundant return if they tithed. The crops would be plentiful (important in an agrarian society, but also indicating God’s blessings to man and nature.) He would listen to those who feared Him.

*Malachi* concluded with a huge, eschatological finale about the Day of the Lord. Those who feared God spoke with one another and the Lord heard them and wrote their names in the “book for remembrance.” When they came before Him on the Last day, He would have pity on them.

*Malachi* painted a cosmological picture of destruction by fire. (Noah’s was water.) The righteous remnant would luxuriate in the freedom, joy, and love which God would pour out to them like sunshine. The arrogant and evildoers of Israel would be totally consumed/destroyed/incinerated. The Day of the Lord was in the future; therefore, *Malachi* made a last plea to the indifferent, disbelieving people to obey the Law. God would not give up on them.

God would send Elijah to announce Messiah’s coming and to prepare for the great and fearsome Day of the Lord. Elijah would come to turn the people to God, as he had turned his contemporaries from idolatry. And God would turn the fathers’ hearts to their children and vice versa- lest God strike the land with utter destruction. Hence, the OT ended with hope, not a curse.