

Malachi - Introduction & Background

Title

The Hebrew title of the book is *Mal'aki* and this name means "my messenger." Given the significance of the theme of messenger found throughout the book (2:7; 3:1), this title is appropriate. The LXX entitles the book *Malachias*. The Latin Vulgate entitles the book *Maleachi* and the English title of the book is Malachi.

Authorship

Some have questioned whether the prophet Malachi is the book's author since the LXX translates the first verse as "by the hand of his messenger" rather than "by the hand of Malachi." This translation is based upon a textual variant that substitutes "w" for "y" as the word's final letter. This view is bolstered through a Targumic tradition that names Ezra as the book's writer. Others translate the opening verse as "the burden of the word of the Lord to Israel by my messenger." According to both of these translations, *Mal'aki* is not a proper name and therefore the book is an anonymous work.

However, there are sound reasons for understanding Malachi as the book's writer. First, since all other prophetic books name their authors, why should the Book of Malachi be the single exception to this rule?⁵ Second, the LXX probably mistranslated 1:1 due to its reliance upon a defective manuscript. Third, the mistranslation of 1:1 notwithstanding, the LXX still entitles the book *Malachias* or Malachi. Fourth, "the authorship, date and unity of Malachi have never been seriously challenged."

The unified question and answer format displayed throughout the book shows it to be the work of a single author. Despite the existence of a Jewish tradition indicating Malachi's membership in the Great Synagogue, nothing else is known of Malachi beyond the information found in 1:1. His father's name, ancestry, tribal lineage, and geographic origin remain a mystery.

Date

Although the book contains no overt chronological markers, the date can be determined by observing the book's internal clues. First, because the book refers to the temple and its sacrifices (1:7-10; 3:8), it must have been written after the rebuilding of the temple in 515 BC. However, the book was probably written sometime after this date since it would have taken some time for the novelty of worship to wear off and for the religious system to become corrupt. Second, the book must have been written during the Persian era since it uses the term *Pecah* (1:8), which is a word meaning "governor" that was common in the Persian era (Neh 5:14; Haggai 1:1,14; 2:2,21). Third, it is probable that Malachi was written during the same time as Nehemiah since both works seem to deal with the same issues.

These include oppression of the poor (3:5; Neh 5:1-13), priestly covenant infidelity (1:6; 2:9; Neh 13:1-9), neglect of tithes and offerings (3:7-12; Neh 13:10-13), and Jew-Gentile intermarriage (2:10-16; Ezra 9:1-10; Neh 13:1-3,23-28).

The date for the book's composition can be pinpointed even further by noting that Nehemiah left Jerusalem to visit the king of Babylon in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes (464–424 BC) or 432 BC (Neh 5:14; 13:6). Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem in 425 BC and launched various Sabbath, temple, and marriage reforms at that time (Neh 13:4-29). Three reasons make it probable that the Book of Malachi was written while Nehemiah was away. First, the book indicates that the Persian governor was in control when the book was written (1:8) and this would not have been the case during Nehemiah's two governorships. Second, 1:8 indicates an offering could have been made to the governor and Nehemiah made it a habit of not receiving such offerings from the people (Neh 5:14,18). Third, the book could not have been written after Nehemiah's second governorship since that governorship reformed the very sins of Judah exposed in Malachi's book. All things considered, a date of 430 BC for the composition of the Book of Malachi seems appropriate. The Book of Malachi was written almost a century after the ministry of the other post-exilic prophets of Zechariah and Haggai.

Place of Writing and Recipients

The writer makes numerous references to temple practices throughout his book (1:7-10; 3:8) making Jerusalem the logical place of the book's origin. Although the book is generically addressed to "Israel," its recipients are the post-exilic community of Judah. While parts of the book are specifically addressed to Judah's priests (1:6; 2:1), the book as a whole is addressed to the post-exilic community.

Occasion for Writing

	Date	Persian king	Jewish leader	Scripture	Purpose
1st return	538–515 B.C.	Cyrus	Zerubbabel	Ezra 1–6; Isaiah 44:28	Rebuilding the temple
2nd return	458–456 B.C.	Artaxerxes	Ezra	Ezra 7–10	Reforming the people
3rd return	444–432 B.C.	Artaxerxes	Nehemiah	Nehemiah	Rebuilding the wall

The Book of Malachi was written after the above-described three returns and the rebuilding of the temple. It was also written after the revival associated with Nehemiah's first governorship (Neh 10:28-39). However, the novelty associated with the rebuilt temple and Nehemiah's revival had apparently worn off since the priests and people in Malachi's day had lapsed into a form of worship involving covenant infidelity (1:7; 3:8). While the nation had begun to experience covenant curses in the form of famine (3:11), the people failed to connect these curses to their own covenant rebellion.

Instead, they questioned God's love for them (1:2) and whether righteousness was worth it (3:14-15). The people had become discouraged that the prophesied prosperity, as predicted nearly a century earlier by the post-exilic prophets Zechariah and Haggai, had not yet materialized. During this time the Persian king was Artaxerxes I Longimanus (464-424 BC). Periodic food shortages, relative peace, and the Persian king's contentment to let the Jews go about their business after taxing them characterized this era.

Message

The problems of the nation are attributable to lack of authentic worship that is consistent with God's covenant principles. Thus, covenant blessings can be restored only as the nation embraces God's covenant love (1:1-5), follows God's covenant guidelines in the areas of the priesthood (1:6—2:9), mixed marriages and divorce (2:10-16), and tithes and offerings (3:8-12), and trusts in God's ability to provide justice (3:1-7) and reward righteousness (3:13—4:6).

Purposes

The prophet Malachi had several purposes in mind when he composed his book. First, he wrote to rebuke Judah for her covenant infidelity in worship. Second, he wrote in order to exhort Judah to authentic worship. Thus, while Haggai's concern involved the rebuilding of the temple, Malachi was interested in the type of worship that was taking place within the temple. Third, he wrote in order to explain the connection between covenant disobedience and curses. An explanation of this connection was necessary since the nation's spiritual insensitivity caused them to blame their adverse circumstances on God rather than on their own covenant infidelity. Fourth, Malachi wrote to provide the nation with hope by describing God's eschatological program regarding the messenger, the Lord, Elijah, and the Day of the Lord.

Unique Characteristics

The Book of Malachi boasts several outstanding characteristics. First, the book features numerous rhetorical questions. Thus, the book's question and answer format is one of the book's outstanding features. The book contains 23 such questions. Second, the book also has a unique accusation (3:8a), interrogation (3:8b), and refutation (3:8c) format. Third, the book features the recurring phrase "but you say" over 12x. Such repetition shows the callousness and spiritual insensitivity of the people. Fourth, most of the book's verses are spoken by God (47 of 54 verses). This percentage is greater than any of the other OT prophetic books.

Fifth, while the other OT prophets typically end their works on a note of hope, Malachi concludes with a message of judgment. Such a conclusion is appropriate for the last OT prophetic book since it establishes man's need for forgiveness that awaits fuller development in the coming NT revelation. Sixth, because Malachi is the last book in the *Naviim*, his words represent the last prophetic utterance for 400 years until the arrival of

John the Baptist. Seventh, the book is unique among the prophets in that it consists of short paragraphs and does not contain a calling section, an oracle against the nations, or personal illustrations. Eighth, the book's plethora of themes also make it unique among other prophetic writings. Eighth, the book uniquely predicts Elijah's future ministry (4:4-6).

Structure

Some hold to a three-fold structure of the book. Thus, they group the book into its discussion of Israel's past (1:1-5), present (1:6—3:15), and future (3:16—4:6). Another way of saying this is Israel's past privileges (1:1-5), present pollution (1:6—3:15), and future promises (3:16—4:6). Perhaps it is better to organize the book according to its six major rhetorical questions that introduce key topics. These questions involve God's love for Israel (1:1-5), unfaithful priests (1:6—2:9), divorce and remarriage (2:10-16), God's justice (2:17—3:7), tithes and offerings (3:8-12), and God's ultimate reward for the righteous (3:13—4:6).

Christ in Malachi

Christ is apparent in Malachi in several ways. For example, Malachi predicts the coming of Christ to His temple (3:1b-5). Second, Malachi predicts Messiah's forerunners. They include the messenger or John the Baptist (3:1a; Is 40:3; Matt 11:10) as well as Elijah who will prepare the way for both the Messiah's first (Matt 3:3; 11:10-14; 17:9-13; Mark 1:3; 9:10-11; Luke 1:17; 3:4; John 1:23) and second (Rev 11:6) comings. The book's rich Christological significance is captured on the following chart.

Malachi	New Testament Fulfillment
Messenger comes to His temple (3:1) and purifies His people (3:3)	Christ cleanses the temple (John 2:14-17) and sanctifies the people (Heb 3:12)
His coming judgment (4:1)	Revelation 20:11-15
Christ heals His people (4:2)	Christ heals (Matt 12:15; Rev 21:4)
Forerunner prepares for the Lord's coming (3:1; 4:5)	John the Baptist announces Christ (Matt 11:10-14)

Outline

I. God corrects Judah's doubt of His love (Mal 1:1-5)

- (1) God pronounces His love (1:1-2a)
- (2) Israel questions God's love (1:2b)
- (3) God proves His love (1:2c-5)
 - (A) Rejection of Esau (1:2c)
 - (B) Selection of Jacob (1:2d)
 - (C) Punishment of Esau (1:3-4)
 - (D) Blessing upon Jacob (1:5)

II. God corrects Judah's priests (Mal 1:6—2:9)

- (1) God accuses the priests of not giving God proper honor (1:6)
 - (A) God's accusations (1:6a)

- (B) Priests' denial (1:6b)
- (2) God accuses the priests of offering imperfect sacrifices (1:7-14)
 - (A) God's accusation (1:7a)
 - (B) Priests' denial (1:7b)
 - (C) Priests' sins enumerated (1:7c-14)
 - (a) Despising God's altar (1:7c)
 - (b) Offering blemished sacrifices (1:8-10)
 - (c) Profaning God's altar (1:11-12)
 - (d) Offering stolen and blemished sacrifices (1:13-14)
- (3) God cursed the priests (2:1-9)
 - (A) Curse described (2:1-3)
 - (B) Reasons for the curse (2:4-9)
 - (a) Covenant with Levi is the priests' standard (2:4-7)
 - (b) Priests' violation of the Levitical standard (2:8-9)

III. God corrects the people of Judah for mixed marriages and divorce (Mal 2:10-16)

- (1) Mixed marriage (2:10-12)
 - (A) Rebuke (2:10-11)
 - (B) Threat (2:12)
- (2) Divorce (2:13-16)
 - (A) God declares that He will no longer receive Judah's offerings (2:13)
 - (B) Judah's response (2:14a)
 - (C) Divorce (2:14b-16)
 - (a) Sin of divorce (2:14b)
 - (b) God warns against divorce (2:15)
 - (c) God's hatred of divorce (2:16)

IV. God corrects Judah for questioning His justice (Mal 2:17—3:7)

- (1) God's weariness with Judah (2:17a)
- (2) Judah's denial (2:17b)
- (3) God explains that Judah has questioned God's justice (2:17c)
- (4) God's promise to cleanse Judah (3:1-7)
 - (A) Messenger's coming (3:1a)
 - (B) Lord's coming (3:1b)
 - (C) Cleansing described (3:2-5)
 - (D) God's covenant faithfulness prevents His cleansing from destroying Judah (3:6)
 - (E) God calls Judah to repent to avoid cleansing (3:7)
 - (a) Call to repentance (3:7a)
 - (b) Judah's spiritual insensitivity (3:7b)

V. God corrects Judah for withholding tithes and offerings (Mal 3:8-12)

- (1) God's accusation of robbery (3:8a)
- (2) Judah's denial (3:8b)
- (3) God's explanation: Judah's withholding of tithes and offerings (3:8c)
- (4) Curses and blessings (3:9-12)
 - (A) Curses for covenant infidelity (3:9)
 - (B) Blessings for covenant fidelity (3:10-12)

VI. God corrects Judah for questioning the benefits of practicing righteousness (Mal 3:13—4:6)

- (1) God accuses Judah of arrogance (3:13a)
- (2) Judah's denial (3:13b)
- (3) God explains that Judah has questioned the benefits of practicing righteousness (3:14-15)
- (4) God defends the benefits of righteousness (3:16—4:6)
 - (A) God will remember the righteous (3:16-18)
 - (B) God will destroy the wicked (4:1,3)
 - (C) God will bless the righteous (4:2)
 - (D) God's instruments for bringing blessing to the righteous (4:4-6)
 - (a) Obedience to the Mosaic Law (4:4)
 - (b) Elijah (4:5-6)
 - (i) Time of his coming (4:5)
 - (ii) Purpose of his coming (4:6)

Introduction

Malachi means "my messengers." Despite many other scholastic conjectures, he was probably a person with this proper name. [Contrary to the *Septuagint* and *Targumim*.] The tradition of some of the ancient sources is that he was of the tribe of Zebulun, and that he died young.

[The Targum of Jonathan (after "Malachi," this targum adds, "who otherwise is called the scribe Ezra."), Jerome, and Rabbi Rashi (1040-1105) understood Malachi as a title for Ezra the Scribe. Pseudo Epiphanius and other church fathers (Dorotheus, Ephraem Syrus, Hesychius, and Isidorus Hisp, statements as cited by John M.P. Smith, *Book of Malachi*, p. 10) linked Malachi with a town of Sopha or Sophira in Zebulun (*Epiphanius, vitae prophetarum*, as cited by Smith, from Nestle's *Marginalien*, p. 28f.)]

Background, Setting

The Temple was rebuilt; priestly worship carried on; people had fallen into spiritual decline, and their attitudes developed later into the sects of the Pharisees and Sadducees. (Like today...)

- Insensible to the love of God displayed toward them
- Unaware of the enormity of their departure from the will and the way of the Lord
- Lacked reverence for Him

Malachi ministered in the fifth century BC, about 100 years after Cyrus had issued the decree in 538 BC which permitted Jews to return from exile to Judah. The destruction of Edom (re: Mal 1:3-5) was affected by the Nabatean Arabs who totally drove out the Edomites between 550 and 400 BC, setting up their own Idumean state in its place. In response to the prophetic ministries of Haggai and Zechariah, the repatriated Jews had rebuilt the temple, completing it in 515 BC. Houses had been reconstructed. Most likely in Malachi's day the wall of Jerusalem was being rebuilt or had been completed (by Nehemiah's crew). Nehemiah, whose activity in Judah began in 445 BC, focused his reform efforts on ending intermarriage (Neh 10:28-30), restoring the practices of honest tithing (Neh 10:32,38-39) and of proper ritual (Neh 10:33-37), and ending exploitation of the poor (Neh 5:1-13).

Israel's Enigma

In their minds, the post-exilic era was supposed to be different: the land was to rebound with miraculous fruitfulness (Ezek 34:26-30); the population would swell (Is 54:1-3); the nation was to rise to a glorious reign of a new David (Jer 23:5-6); and all nations were to come and serve them (Is 49:22-23).

The realities of life were just the opposite. The land languished under drought (Mal 3:10), the population remained a fraction of what it had been, and the nation continued under the political dominion of Persia (*pechah*, Aramaic for "governor", Mal 1:8, was a Persian title, also used in Ezra 5:3,6,14; 6:6-7,13; Dan 3:2-3,27; 6:7).

Thus, the book may be placed in the reign of Xerxes I (486-464 BC), when the Persians were experiencing their first stinging defeats by Greek armies. At this time, Judah was a vassal state of the Persians, living under a non-Davidic governor appointed by the Persians, and may have been searching the international conflicts of the time for signs of divine intervention.

Harvests were poor and subject to locust damage (Mal 3:11). Most hearts were indifferent or resentful toward God. Both the priests and the people were violating the stipulations of the Mosaic Law regarding sacrifices, tithes, and offerings.

The people's hope in God's covenant promises had dimmed, as evidenced by their

- (1) Intermarriages with pagans
- (2) Divorces

(3) General moral ambivalence

Parallel to America today: Biblical promises seem remote, resulting in neglect, disobedience.

Sins of Israel that provoked Nehemiah were the same as stirred up Malachi:

- (1) The defilement of the priesthood (Mal 1:6—2:9 vs Neh 13:7-9)
- (2) Disregard of the Sabbath (Mal 2:8-9; 4:4 vs. Neh 13:15-22)
- (3) Foreign marriages, with divorce of the Israelite wives (Mal 2:11-15 vs. Neh 13:23-27)
- (4) Neglect of tithes and offerings (Mal 3:8-10 vs Neh 13:10-14)
- (5) Oppression of the poor (Mal 3:5 vs Neh 5:1-13)

Malachi will present a triple rebuttal:

- (1) Their suffering was linked to their sins, from the top on down.
- (2) God's love was in evidence if they would abandon their pity- party and compare their lot with the Edomites.
- (3) The third response was that the Day of YHWH was coming (Mal 3:16—4:6).

There is a purpose that runs through all of history. That purpose will be realized when this age has been overtaken by the last days.

Style

Malachi's style differs from that of the other writing prophets. Rather than making direct proclamations, Malachi used a dialectical or disputational style. In this style he introduced each of his six messages by a charge or command addressed to the people. Malachi then characterized the people as questioning five of the six charges (each one except the third one), then he offered proof that each charge was correct. This style was an appropriate way to confront the apathetic Israelites. Dialectic style which became very popular in later Judaism.

Another theme also left its imprint on later ages, that describing the "messenger" (identified in 4:5 as Elijah) who would prepare the way for the Lord on the Day of Judgment (Mark 1:2; Matt 11:10,14; 17:10-13; Luke 1:17; John 1:21,25.)

Key, pivotal, statements: "*I have loved you.*" (Mal 1:2); "*I the Lord change not.*" (Mal 3:6)