

STUDIES IN MALACHI

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Malachi's Place in the Bible

The last book in the Book of the Twelve (Minor) Prophets in virtually all manuscript collections, last in the Hebrew Latter Prophets, and last in the OT in most Greek collections, and last in the Eng. Bible without the Apocrypha. Is this final position important? Does it have anything to do with the meaning and significance of the book? I think it is very important.

The Jewish Bible was divided into the the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings.

For Jews the Law or the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible, contained the sacred traditions on which their faith and very existence were based.

The Prophets included what they called Former Prophets (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings), the Latter Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Book of the Twelve, or the twelve minor prophets, which ended with Malachi).

The Writings included the rest of the OT books.

B. The Situation of the Jews at this time

1. The Jews faced a tremendous problem of their religious faith when they were defeated by their enemies and went under the captivity of foreigners, beginning with the ten tribes in the Northern Kingdom of Samaria, about 721 B.C., and then with the fall of Jerusalem and the Southern Kingdom of Judea about 589 B.C. Many Jews were exiled to captivity in foreign countries, and those who remained in the Holy Land were greatly weakened. They had thought that the Kingdom of David would last forever, and that this could never happen.

2. The Prophets helped them come to terms with the loss of their national identity and homeland. They showed that God did have a purpose for them, a life in covenant with them, and a faith for them even though they were scattered over the world.

They said Jerusalem and its Temple could be rebuilt and restored, the exiles would return, and the central Temple in Jerusalem could again be the focus of Jewish worship.

In the meantime, the Jews should be as faithful to the Lord as they possibly could in their circumstances and apply the teachings of the Law of God to their changed life-style wherever they were. The Prophetic books turned their eyes toward a present and a future in which God had a special meaning and purpose for them.

3. The Minor Prophets are generally thought of as separate books, but they form ONE book in the Hebrew Latter Prophets to balance the longer prophetic books such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel.

The Twelve Books together present a more powerful message than they do separately, and they need to be studied together as a complete collection.

Malachi is placed last in virtually all collections. Hosea is first in almost all collections.

The two books have much in common, especially the first three chapters of Hosea.

They both stress the unchanging elective and covenant love of God for a people who have dishonored and abandoned him.

They both picture God as unchanging in this relationship. Both see it in terms of a marriage which God is unwilling to recognize as broken.

4. Micah is the central book of the Twelve, and chapter four is its central chapter. Its picture of a restored Temple Mount to which all peoples may come is the ideal against which fifth-century B.C. worship practices are to be measured.

Malachi shows how far short the worship in the second Temple fell from that goal.

The Book of the Twelve uses the theme of restored Temple worship and exalts it by putting it at the very center of the book. This Scroll of the Twelve places the theme of God's unchanging love through election and covenant at the beginning and end of the book as a whole.

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5. Another important theme developed throughout the Book of the Twelve is the theme of "the Day of the Lord." In Joel, Amos, and Zechariah this theme is announced and described. Malachi picks up this theme as a reminder that the day was not to be seen as completely fulfilled in the terrible destruction of Jerusalem of 589 B.C. The readers of the entire collection of prophecies still look forward to The Day of the Lord with fear and trembling. Most Christian interpreters see this Day of the Lord as identical with the Second Coming of Christ.

6. Verses 2-3 of chapter 4 indicate a hope of a future deliverer for Jews, but Malachi gives no support to Judean rulers of the fifth century B.C. of a royal descendant of David. Rather, hope centers in a restored temple that will be open to all (as in Micah 4 and Isaiah 2). Hopes in human kings had proven disappointing too many times in the past. Their hope now is in genuine worship in a restored temple, with no reference in this particular book to a Davidic ruler.

Their hope is based on the constancy of God's love for Israel and the assurance of salvation for those who honor him.

7. Malachi is the very last of all the prophetic books of the OT. It shows that God continues to love his chosen people, regardless of their outward circumstances.

It should encourage Christians today, as we apply its message to our lives, that God's love for his people never fails, and that we should be faithful to him and keep up a sincere worship and dedication and obedience in every situation.

It is alright to ask questions and face problems, but there are no questions that can not be answered, and no problems of faith which cannot be dealt with satisfactorily, if we will honestly listen to what God has to say to us and have the courage to do what he asks us to do. There are many questions in this book. We shall notice these questions and responses as we study the book, and we shall pay attention to how some of these questions call for a response from the reader today as well as from the ancient audience in Malachi's time.

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8. This book looks to the future when God's intervention will come. It promises a prophetic figure, Elijah, to intercede with the people in calling them to faith.

It relates the Law and the Prophets to each other and binds the people in observance to both (4:4-5).

C. Malachi in the NT

The Gospels identify John the Baptist with the prophecy in Mal. 4:5-6 (Mark 9:12-13; Matt. 17:9-13). They also use Mal. 3:1 and Isa. 40:3 to describe John the Baptist as the one who will prepare the way of the Lord (See Matt. 11:10 and Jn. 1:21).

The gospel narratives of the Transfiguration (Mark 9:4 and Matt. 17:3) also build on the references to Moses and Elijah in the conclusion to Malachi. Finally, Rev. 11:3-7 draws on the prophecy of Malachi 4:5-6 in speaking of two witnesses who are sent to warn of the judgment to come.

D. The Superscription of the book (1:1)

The term "oracle" or "burden" is the same as the term over Zech. 9:1 & 12:1.

The word means "to lift up," as in the phrase "to lift up the voice," and so comes to refer to words which the voice utters, or the message of the speaker. The oracle of a prophet can therefore be described as his "burden," literally "that which is lifted up."

"The Word of the LORD to Israel" identifies the book as a part of the authoritative, recognized, inspired scripture.

It identifies the intended readers to be "Israel." "Malachi" means "My messenger." He is not identified further. Such a prophet by this name is otherwise unknown, and many scholars think this may be an assumed name taken from the same word in 3:1. The Greek version of the Heb. OT translates it "by the hand of his angel."

At least one of the Aramaic translations of Malachi (Jonathan) adds that the writer "is called the scribe Ezra." Jerome, Calvin and others also thought Ezra wrote the book.

E. The Date of the Book

It is after the Exile, and the references to the Temple imply that it is written after Haggai and Zechariah (which was about 520-515 B.C.).

But the way the writer speaks about the lack of a clearly ordered priestly service suggests that the work of Ezra-Nehemiah (which was about 445 B.C.) had not yet taken place.

The date must be set in the fifth century B.C., when Judah was under the rule of a Persian governor (1:8). The conditions of the time described by the writer match those just before the time of Nehemiah, and some time between 475 B.C. and 450 B.C. is about as specific as we can get, but that is good enough to help us quite a bit in understanding the message of the book.

For further reading and references, see

Watts, J.D.W., "Introduction to the Book of Malachi," Review and Expositor, Vol. LXXXIV, No. 3 (Summer, 1987), 373-381.

Dentan, Robert C., "Introduction to the Book of Malachi," in The Interpreter's Bible, Vol. VI (New York: Abingdon, 1956), pp. 1117-1120.

Tate, Marvin E., "Questions for Priests and People in Malachi 1:2-2:16," Review and Expositor, Vol. LXXXIV, No. 3 (Summer, 1987), 391-407.

Francisco, Clyde T., Introducing the Old Testament Revised Edition (Nashville: Broadman, 1977), pp. 226-227.

Gailey, James H., Jr., The Layman's Bible Commentary, Vol. XV (John Knox Press: Richmond, 1962), pp. 129-144.

II. Malachi 1:2-2:16: Searching Questions for Priests and People.

A. A dominant literary feature of the book is the question and answer format, and the style is that of a disputation, or, specifically, of a "prophetic disputation," in which a controversy between two people is stated in a rather formal manner.

B. The First Disputation, The LORD's love for Israel, 1:2-5.

Although God's love for Israel is questioned, it is proved by the fate of Edom. Their question to the Lord was, "What have you done for us lately?"

Love requires continual reaffirmation in word and deed.

C. The Second Disputation, Indictment of the Priests and the People, 1:6-2:9.

1. Priests who despise the Name of the LORD, vs. 6-10. The priests do not honor or glorify the name of the Lord; rather, they "despise" it, and they corrupt his worship.

Vs. 9 is ironic or sarcastic, an ironic reference to the Priestly Blessing, which is turned upside down: "May the LORD grant you favor/grace," Num. 6:25. See the Jerusalem Bible paraphrase of vs. 9, "Now try pleading with God to take pity on us (this is your own fault); do you think he will receive you graciously?"

2. People who profane the name of the LORD, 1:11-14, by bringing defective sacrifices.

Anything is good enough for God, they thought.

Some people cheat on their vows to God.

vs. 11 is difficult to interpret.

It may refer to the offerings by Israelite exiles in their far-flung places of residence in the post-exile period, possibly with the understanding that the regular Temple sacrifices could be replaced by prayer and the study of the Law (Torah) until proper Temple worship was restored in Jerusalem.

But this verse may be prophetic, or eschatological, referring to the future.

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The participle "caused to be offered" in vs. 11 could be with the sense of "is about to be offered," referring to an action expected in the future. This would be in keeping with the messenger passage in 3:1-4 and the anticipated purification of the Temple, followed by the reestablishment of acceptable worship of the LORD.

The purification and renewal of worship would bring in a new era in which the Gentiles would offer pure offerings to the great name of the LORD (Cf. Isa. 2:2-4; 11:10; 19:16-25; 42:6; 49:6; 55:3-5; 66:10-21; Ezek. 36:23; 37:28; 38:23; 39:7). This harmonizes with much of the teaching of Isa. & Ezek.

3. The Corruption of the Covenant with Levi, 2:1-9.

The "Covenant with Levi" (2:4, 8; 3:3) is not known in the Pentateuch.

According to Numbers 25:12, a "covenant of peace" and perpetual priesthood was made with Phinehas after he demonstrated his zeal for the LORD, but he was an Aaronite, and there is no indication of a covenant with the Levites as a whole.

On the other hand, a covenant with the Levitical priests is referred to in Jer. 33:20-26 and Neh. 13:29. These verses show that the idea of a covenant with the Levitical priests was known by others just before and after the time of Malachi.

D. Profaning the Covenant with the Fathers, 2:10-12. (Some commentators incl. vs. 13-16 in this section; but the disputative question in vs. 14 seems to indicate a new unit.)

The question in this section is put by an unidentified voice speaking as one of the people (v. 10): "Why are we faithless to one another, profaning (cf. 1:12) the covenant of our fathers?"

The last statement of vs. 12 sets forth the profaning and covenant breaking act of Judah: he has "married the daughter of a foreign god" (intermarriage with foreign women who worship foreign gods).

E. Breaking faith with Covenant Wives, 2:13-16. This whole passage is about the degradation of marriage. Malachi believed that much of the troubles of their times were due to the general contempt for the solemn obligations of marriage. It was one thing to feel sympathy and even affection for the heathen; it was quite a different thing to allow the purity of Israel's religion, already corrupted by the indifference and neglect of the people and their leaders, to be further diluted by introducing into Jewish families wives and mothers who had no knowledge or understanding of Israel's God. There is abundant evidence in our own day that mixed marriages on the whole tend to undermine religious loyalties.

The special mention of "the wife of thy youth" in vs. 14 seems to show that elderly Jewish wives were being divorced so that husbands might marry young and attractive girls from the neighboring nations. Note that monogamy is assumed to be the normal practice.

Malachi says that Marriage is not a matter of private arrangement or personal convenience or gratification, but a solemn covenant entered into before God, and its obligations may not be disregarded for frivolous reasons.

Vs. 16, "I hate divorce."

The Heb. text and translation of this vs. are uncertain, *Either "I hate" or "he hates divorce."* If this is the correct translation, it is the only place in the OT where God says plainly, "I hate divorce."

The Aramaic, Greek, and Old Latin translations give the meaning: "If thou hate her, divorce her," which is almost the opposite meaning of the Heb. texts on which most of our English translations are based. Most Jewish Rabbis preferred the policy expressed in Deut. 24:1, which allowed and accepted divorce. Some have even suggested that some of the scribes may have altered the text slightly so as to leave room for a possible understanding which corresponded with Deut. 24:1.

Textual critics tell us this could be an argument of some weight in favor of an original strong ~~affirmation~~ statement regarding God's displeasure with divorce. If a text is altered, it is probably done to make it more acceptable to prevailing opinions and practices, rather than to make it more restrictive.

It seems better, then, to accept the strong statement of the plain general sense in the Hebrew language, without being too dogmatic or trying to build a great doctrinal position on this text alone.

The next phrase that "violence covers his garment" seems to indicate that there is some violence or cruelty associated with divorce, and that is usually true. Divorce is usually not without some sadness, suffering, and trauma which often threatens life and well-being of persons. The NEB trans. may reflect the true thrust of the Heb. text: "If a man divorces or puts away his spouse, says the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel, he overwhelms her with cruelty [says the Lord of Hosts]. Keep watch on your spirit, and do not be unfaithful."

This seems to fit the context as well as the "I hate divorce" reading. If the latter is retained, however, it is well to remember that the love-hate word pair must be interpreted RELATIVELY sometimes in the Bible, understanding "hate" sometimes as strong displeasure or preference rather than bitter animosity.

Also, God may "hate" divorce, but he does not hate divorcees.

III. Questions of Reward and Punishment (2:17-4:3)

A. Wearying the LORD with doubts about divine justice (2:17-3:5).

1. The opening statement of this dispute is an indictment: "You have wearied the LORD with your words." Here the "wearying" is not physical but mental, emotional, and spiritual fatigue; it is used in a figurative sense here to describe God's response to the people's continual complaints. The reply of the people, "How have we wearied him?", is a defensive, self-justifying response, like they are demanding to hear evidence supporting the charge against them, or perhaps indicating surprised ignorance.

2. The second part of the statement reinforces the first: God "delights" in the evildoers, suggesting that the people think the prosperous evildoers enjoyed God's favor.

Ps. 5:4 had stated clearly that "Thou art not a God who delights in wickedness...thou hatest all evildoers."

3. The second example of the people's wearisome words is a question, "Where is the God of justice?" They had assumed that the God of justice would have punished the wicked and vindicated the righteous. (The "doctrine of retribution").

What do you think was the tone of these words?

-- an earnest, sincere question?

-- a taunting adversary?

-- despairing cynicism?

4. The oracle which follows in 3:1-5 answers the people's question by announcing the advent of the LORD, who will indeed judge the guilty.

He will "draw near" to them, but it will be in judgment, not in grace (3:5).

5. This passage introduces a new prophetic person, "my messenger" or "the messenger of the covenant" (vs. 1). Dr. Paige Kelly suggests that these two references in the same verse need not be to the same person, but other Bible scholars disagree with him and say that the two references here in such close proximity probably are to the same messenger and the same person. (See Pamela Scalise

in The Review and Expositor (LXXXIV, No. 3, pp. 410-411), Robert C. Denton, The Interpreter's Bible (6:1137), and James H. GaiTey, Jr., The Layman's Bible Commentary, Vol. 15, pp. 139-141.

Vs. 2-4 announce the distinct activities of the messenger; he will purify the priests.

And God himself, when He comes, will judge those who do not fear him (3:5).

The messenger is in some respects like a priest, and in some respects like a prophet.

Like a priest, the Lord's messenger must give instruction, i.e. Torah, as well as preside over the worship and see that proper offerings were offered.

The messenger is like a prophet in that he is commissioned to deliver God's Word to the people; his message is punctuated with "says the Lord."

Mal. 4:5 identifies the forerunner in 3:1 with Elijah the prophet.

Malachi and Elijah had several features in common:

--both addressed "all Israel"

--both addressed a nation divided religiously and suffering under a curse on the land;

--both forced a decision for or against God;

--both involved "right offerings"

--in both cases fire from God was decisive.

Elijah was also a prophet like Moses, who met God at Mount Horeb, and whose ministry was to eliminate false and foreign worship from Israel.

Moses was both a descendant of Levi (Ex. 6:16-20) and a prophet (Deut. 18:15-18);

and the law of Moses is the norm of obedience throughout Malachi, climaxing in 4:2.

The pictures used to describe the messenger's work are images of purification rather than destruction.

John Calvin believed that the expression "the messenger of the covenant" in the end of 3:3 refers to Christ, who is both king and reconciler of his people.

The LORD's return to the Temple will fulfill promises found in Ezek. 43:1ff, Haggai 2:7, Zech. 8:3, and elsewhere. The priests and people must prepare for this glorious return.

The people's question in 2:17b receives an answer in 3:5--the God of justice is coming to them! In the LORD's court, God will be judge, prosecutor, and witness. There will be no escape from his judgment. The list of defendants will be those who have sinned habitually to violate the basic value of life, who do not fear or reverence God (vs. 5).

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B. Apostasy and repentance (3:6-12)

1. Here we have a dispute within a dispute.

First we see the opening statement in the beginning of vs. 6, a word of assurance that God does not change. The evildoers have not been consumed because of God's unchanging faithfulness; but he is still the God of Justice (2:17).

Malachi's audience still has an opportunity to repent. God's invitation is, "Return to me and I will return to you" vs. 7.

The people ask the question, "How shall we return?" (end of vs. 7). Vs. 8-12 gives the specific, practical answer, showing the way to true blessing.

2. A second opening statement, vs. 8, charges that the people are guilty of the unthinkable, of robbing God (in tithes and offerings).

The "offerings" here are probably the contributions to God for the support of the priests and Levites.

The practice of tithing is reported in Genesis, long before the Mosaic Law.

Abraham paid a tithe of the spoils of war to Melchizedek, priest of Salem (Gen 14:17-24), and Jacob made a vow at Bethel to pay God a tithe of his possessions if God would bring him safely back home (Gen. 28:18-22).

3. Deut. requires that tithes of crops be brought each year to J'lem and eaten as a feast to the LORD (12:6f & 11f; 14:22-27).

Lev. 18 assigns every tithe to the Levites as their heritage from the LORD in lieu of possession of any of the land, and as payment for their religious services (vs. 21-24).

The tithe was taken from the produce of grain, wine, oil, and from the flock and herd.

4. The question of the worthiness of the priests to receive support was not an issue here. The reason for tithing was "that there might be food (for the priests) in my house" so that the services of worship to the Lord could be carried on.

5. Notice how the passage moves from the curse in vs. 9 to the blessing in vs. 10 & 12. The curse must have been drought and "devourers," which the blessing promised to remove (vs. 11). According to the covenant between God and Israel, rewards or punishments came as a result of the faithfulness and obedience or unfaithfulness and disobedience of the people (Deut. 18 & Lev. 26). There would be punishment for disobedience, unless the people genuinely repented and gave concrete evidence such as the full payment of tithes would demonstrate in this instance.

George Adam Smith reminds us not to view this passage about tithes in a purely legal spirit, "for the neglect to pay the tithes was due to a religious cause, disbelief in Jehovah, and ... the return to belief in Him could not therefore be shown in a more practical way than by the payment of tithes." ("Malachi," The Book of the Twelve Prophets, vol. 2 (London: Hodder and Stoughton, n.d.), p. 367).

Rain and abundant harvests were among the primary blessings promised by God to obedient Israel.

6. Two unusual expressions describe the blessings offered by God in vs. 10-12.

In Gen. 7:11 the "windows of heaven" had opened up to permit the waters above the firmament to pour down as a great deluge of destruction in Noah's day. But here the windows of heaven have become an image of blessing and abundance, rather than judgment, almost like the positive effect mentioned in 2nd Kings 7:2, 19.

Secondly, rather than the surrounding heathen nations attacking and destroying Israel, as in the past, "then all nations will call you blessed," vs. 12. Other nations will pronounce a beatitude about Israel because such agricultural productivity will make it a land to be desired and enjoyed.

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Fame among the gentile nations and the fertility of the land are both important elements in the OT portrayal of the blessings of the end time (e.g. Isa. 62:1-5; Amos 9:13-15).

C. Assurance for God-fearers, 3:13-4:3

1. This final dispute begins with an indictment very similar to 2:17.

The people are accused of slandering God by declaring that it is of no use to serve God; that there is nothing to be gained for themselves by observing God's commands or by living a life of repentance.

The only beatitude they pronounce is, "Blessed are the arrogant," vs. 15. *(See vs. 10)*

The wicked put God to the test to prove him, and they seem to prosper and remain unpunished.

The response to this is in 4:1.

Before the end of time there will be a divine judgment on the arrogant and the evildoers, and fire will be the means and the image of this judgment.

2. This passage is interrupted by a short narrative in 3:16 describing the actions of those who fear the LORD.

a. The God-fearers of vs. 16 are probably a subgroup of the speakers in vs. 14, or a remnant within the larger general population of Israel. Notice it is not in the language or form of a quotation, as much of the preceding book, but it is a very brief narrative. The writer narrates or tells the story of what he sees and hears happening in this subgroup of Israel -- those who genuinely fear and reverence the LORD.

Malachi reports that part of his audience responded to the prophetic word by setting themselves apart and speaking together. We are not told what they said, but we assume they spoke to each other of the message of the prophet, of their response in faith and obedience to that message, and of their worship and praise to God Almighty, the Lord of Hosts.

b. We are told that a scroll of remembrance was written. The passive form of the verb does not tell us who did the writing, just that it "was written." A "Book of Remembrance" is a unique term in the OT, but there are several other references to records kept by God of people's deeds (Neh. 13:14; Dan. 7:10; 10:21) or the names of persons loyal to God (Ex. 32:32-34; Ps. 69:28; Ezek. 13:9). Or it is possible that the "Book of Remembrance" may be a metaphor for God's commitment to remember and save them at the time of judgment (cf. Isa. 4:3; Dan. 12:1).

There is another possibility: Since the post-exile community felt it was very important to record the names of individuals who chose to serve God by returning to J'lem or by entering into the covenant, the "book of remembrance" may have been an actual document drawn up by the God-fearers to record their commitment to the LORD. It is not a bad idea to record your commitment to God in a spiritual journal, as many Christians used to do.

3. At the final judgment God will make a distinction between the righteous and the wicked, 3:18. Sometimes in this life that difference is not always evident or obvious to all, but God knows the difference, and the day is coming when he will make that distinction public.

Some people think of salvation only in terms of prosperity and blessings and avoidance of punishment, but the righteous have much more than this in store for them as God's "special or treasured possession," vs. 17.

4. The metaphors in 4:2 are in keeping with the images of personal relationship to God in 3:17. The picture of the sun rising like a great bird and administering healing to the people stands in contrast to the day which dawns "burning like an oven" and consumes the guilty, 4:1.

The calf set loose from the stall enjoys the thrill of life, for the threat of an early death has been removed, since calves were kept in stalls to be fattened before slaughtering.

5. Vs. 4:3 speaks to the seriousness of the people's complaint about the justice of God. It would not be just for the wicked to be forever unpunished, so God will act in judgment to punish them and vindicate the God-fearers. The survival and prosperity of evildoers will no longer be cited as evidence against the justice of God.

CONCLUSION:

God's word through his messenger in this book is that the LORD (Jehovah), will be proceeded by the messenger of the covenant (as he has been in John the Baptist and the first coming of our Lord Jesus Christ), and at the day of the Lord, the end of the Church Age of Grace, at the Second Coming, He will come again to purify and judge the guilty. In the meantime you may still repent and enjoy the blessings which come from obeying God, and if you choose to fear God, you will survive the day of judgment to come because you too are God's special child and treasure.

LUKE 13:7;

