

MALACHI

Note: Refer to the “Introduction to the Prophets” for the place that Malachi plays in the Biblical Story.

Background¹

Authorship

There is some suspicion that Malachi is not a proper name at all, but simply a translation of 'my messenger' of 3:1. Some who hold that view hold that it was Ezra that actually wrote the book. The writers of the LXX translated the word '*angelos*' and thus did not take it as a proper name. It may very well be that Malachi was written anonymously. There is no other prophet that would fit into that category. However, since there is no mention of him in the Bible it is impossible to determine anonymity.

Date

The most reasonable date for the prophecy is about 450 B.C. Obviously the people had returned from the captivity and the initial sense of urgency that they carried with them had long since left. Malachi refers to a Persian governor (1:8) and thus must have been written after 538 B.C. The date of 450 is established due to the fact that the temple had been rebuilt and the priesthood re-established. The moral situation is parallel that of Ezra who returned in 458 and Nehemiah in 444.

Purpose

The subject of Malachi is obedience to the covenant will be brought about by YHWH who will refine the nation and cause it to repent.

Structure

The book basically is divided into two parts. The first is the Lord's complaint against Israel. They are blind. This is chapters 1-2. The last two chapters speak of reformation through the power of the Lord.

However, under those headings, it would be good to consider another literary structure; that of the seven rhetorical questions which run through chapters 1—3 with a conclusion in chapter 4.²

¹ For sources for the background, see Dr. Thomas Constable's “Introduction” to Malachi, and Word Biblical Commentary, “Zechariah.”

² This was suggested by Dr. Mark Bailey's class notes on Malachi. Dallas Theological Seminary

Commentary

- I. **Address: The Oracle of YHWH to Israel through Malachi (1:1).**
- II. **YHWH has loved Israel; for Edom (Esau) to be desolate, while Jacob is loved (1:2-5).**

Question #1: "I have loved you," says the LORD. But you say, "How hast Thou loved us?" (Mal 1:2 NAS)

The short answer that YHWH gives them is that He has chosen them to love ("Jacob I loved"), while Edom He has chosen for wrath ("but Esau I hated"). Thus, He is going to persevere to see them delivered and Edom destroyed.

The first part following the introduction and the address of the prophet details the doom of Edom. Edom was the descendent of Esau. The Lord is showing that Esau is without the covenant that was given Jacob. She has no hope as she has turned from God. Jacob, on the other hand, is under covenant. Regardless of her treatment of God, when she returns, she is blessed. The Abrahamic Covenant is here outlined as the basic difference between Israel and Edom. Thus the nation is to treat YHWH as their protector and supplier. Yet they do not.

- III. **Israel rebuked (1:6-2:16).**

The remainder of the first two chapters is a description of the various ways that Israel has forsaken the Mosaic Covenant, which was their means of sanctification along side the Abrahamic Covenant.

Question #2 (1:6—2:9): "A son honors his father, and a servant his master. Then if I am a father, where is My honor? And if I am a master, where is My respect?" says the LORD of hosts to you, O priests who despise My name. But you say, 'How have we despised Thy name?'" (Malachi 1:6)

- A. **The priests despise the name of YHWH, through pitiful sacrifices (1:6-14).**

Now the first group that the Lord takes on are the priests. They have not obeyed the Levitical instruction that was given in the Law. First, of all they do the absolute worst by voicing their innocence (1:6). Then they claim it is all right to offer imperfect animals. God desires that if they are going to disdain His Name like that, it would be better that they do not

sacrifice at all. God points out that they would not even give those animals to their governor, let alone should they give it to God. And they are blind to their sin. The perfect statement that expresses God's frustration with this people is in 1:10,

"Oh that there were one among you who would shut the gates, that you might not uselessly kindle fire on My altar!"

Further not only are the animals imperfect, but those that are vowed are replaced by imperfect animals. And some of the offered animals are actually taken by robbery.

B. YHWH curses the priests (2:1-9).

Having now placed the evidence before the priests concerning their violations of the Mosaic Covenant, YHWH now moves into their penalties. He first points out that He will curse their offerings so that the covenant will be secure with Levi; that is the temple worship which they are disregarding will go on. (2:1-4).

God points out that the purpose of His instruction to Levi was sanctification. But the present priests have turned it into the opposite, the way for a man to become corrupt. (2:5-9).

Question #3 (2:10): "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? (Mal 2:10 NAS)

The question is a follow up to the discussion regarding the priests and, in essence, questions the reasons that they are unfaithful to YHWH, especially in regard to their brothers.

Now YHWH accuses them of unfaithfulness in their covenant relationship with Him. He accuses them of leaving His worship for the worship of pagan gods. (2:10-12). Those who have done this will be cut off from the nation.

Thus the Lord has no regard for their sacrifice, and these hardened priests wonder, "Why not?" The Lord explains it is because they have forsaken the wife of their youth by covenant. (2:13-16).

This may refer to the Jewish men forsaking the original Hebrew wives for pagan wives. If this is the case it would likely refer to the same events as

in Ezra and Nehemiah.³ The divorcing that Ezra and Nehemiah command would not be the reference here.⁴

III. YHWH to send the Lord to His temple, who will refine Israel and turn Israel around (2:17--3:18).

God begins the section with the statement of their total hardness of heart. They have made evil good, and then have wondered why God is not blessing them. This introduces the second half of the book with, "Where is the God of justice?"

This second half of the book describes the process by which Israel will be turned around. What will it take? It will take YHWH's intervention through His Messenger.

A. YHWH to refine the priests and the people (2:17-3:6).

Question #4: ¹⁷ *You have wearied the LORD with your words. Yet you say, "How have we wearied Him?" In that you say, "Everyone who*

³ However a difficulty arises in that Ezra and Nehemiah do not mention Hebrew wives. One solution is, based on the context of verses 10-11 that God is referring to the unfaithfulness to the covenant of Moses, in that they were worshipping foreign gods. Their mixed marriages were obviously a part of this problem, but were not the problem that they were dealing with primarily. Under this scenario, the divorce that God is pointing out here is the divorce that is taking place between Himself and the Israelites under the covenant of Moses as in Hosea. For the tables are turned in Ezra, where Ezra commands them to divorce their pagan wives for the sake of YHWH worship.

⁴ Of course, this brings up the question of how God would command divorce through Ezra and Nehemiah, if in fact He hates divorce. And that forces a question as to the validity of the marriage vow even though it was to pagans. It might be claimed that the restriction of marriages to pagans (Deut. 7:3) would overrule the marriage. However, that is difficult, since the marriages of Israelites to pagans were considered greatly valid as in the case of Tamar (likely a Canaanite) and Er, Ruth and Mahlon, Joseph and his Egyptian wife, Moses and his Midianite wife.

The solution seems more likely that they were not actually married to these pagans, but were living with them in a common situation and even had children. The words used for marriage and divorce in these cases in Ezra and Nehemiah are not the word used for marriage and divorce when referring to the legal cases in the Hebrew Scriptures. The use of the word here, translated "married", is literally the word for "sit" or "dwell" (in the Hiphil would add "cause to dwell") and does not appear to ever be translated in the Old Testament as "married". It would be unique in the Ezra/Nehemiah situation. The word for translated "put away" is also in the Hiphil ("cause to go out" or "cause to bring out"). It is never used in the sense of divorce nor of the breaking of a covenant oath, but is used in the sense of separation out of a place (I.e., Israel brought out from Egypt).

does evil is good in the sight of the LORD, and He delights in them," or, "Where is the God of justice?" (Mal 2:17 NAS)

The answer is that The Lord of justice will appear in YHWH's messengers. The first messenger will clear the way before the second Messenger who is the messenger of the covenant. (3:1).

This messenger of the covenant will purify the sons of Levi (the priests) and will judge the people according to the Law so that they will have swift judgment. This is the God of justice.

B. YHWH calls for repentance (3:7-12).

Question #5: "From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from My statutes, and have not kept them. Return to Me, and I will return to you," says the LORD of hosts. "But you say, 'How shall we return?' (Mal 3:7 NAS)"

Question #6: "Will a man rob God? Yet you are robbing Me! But you say, 'How have we robbed Thee?' In tithes and offerings." (Mal 3:8, NAS)

Then God points out in response to another hardened question that they should repent. They should give up of their goods to tithe in the temple service so that they may be blessed in their land.

C. Israel presently blesses arrogance toward God (3:13-15).

Question #7: "Your words have been arrogant against Me," says the LORD. "Yet you say, 'What have we spoken against Thee?' (Mal 3:13 NAS)

God points out that since they have not had blessing come from their supposed humility, that they have turned around and called the arrogant blessed.

D. YHWH to align with those who remember Him (3:16-18).

Now YHWH states that He will bless those who have regarded Him and when the judgment comes, they will be delivered and spared.

IV. The Day of the Lord Announced (4:1-6).

Now the Lord describes that judgment day, when He will judge the wicked and purge the righteous.

A. YHWH to come and judge, and they will tramp out the wicked (4:1-3).

God states clearly that He will bring judgment on the wicked and the righteous will personally be instruments in judging them.

B. Elijah to come before that day and lead nation to repentance (4:4-6).

YHWH calls them to remember the covenant in Deuteronomy, so that they would be blessed as a nation. For Elijah would come to call the nation back to YHWH. This Elijah will bring a unification personally to the people of the nation through repentance. If it is not restored then the land will have a curse as described in Deuteronomy. This is, of course, what did happen to Israel, is that Elijah did come in the person of John the Baptist, and they killed him, and were exiled from their land. This was exactly as had been prophesied.

Elijah was the prophet who had been the major prophet to call Israel back from the Baals and the foreign gods. This was exactly what was happening now.

Thus the book closes with a note of expectation. If Israel did not repent and turn from its gods, then the nation could expect judgment. Was it any wonder that John the Baptist stated that the judgment was indeed here?