

Notes on the book of Malachi

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HISTORICAL CONTEXT

There are no chronological markers in the book of Malachi as there are in the books of Haggai and Zechariah.

Content, however, strongly argues for a time soon after the temple was built close to the time of Ezra/Nehemiah, for Malachi is dealing w/ similar sins as were Ezra/Nehemiah. To wit, withholding the tithe (Mal 3.8 – 10; Neh 13.10 – 14); corrupt priests (Mal 1.6 – 2.9; Neh 13.1 – 9); social injustice (Mal 3.5; Neh 5.1 – 13); and possibly mixed marriages (Mal 2.11 – 15; Ezra 9 – 10; Neh 13.23 – 27, although the Malachi passage here may refer to idolatry in a mixed-marriage metaphor).

Malachi does not bring up other transgressions mentioned by Ezra/Nehemiah: Usury, profaning the temple by allowing unbelievers to dwell in it, and violation of the Sabbath. Malachi is concerned about the kind of sacrifices brought to the temple, illegitimate divorce, and general apathy towards sacrifices at the temple.

Differences in the sins mentioned by Malachi and Ezra/Nehemiah can be interpreted two ways: First, Malachi is anterior to Ezra/Nehemiah because Ezra/Nehemiah are not mentioning the sins delineated by Malachi, which may mean that Malachi's message was taken to heart, so the sins were no longer around when Ezra/Nehemiah came on the scene.

On the other hand, Malachi could be later, for we might have something like this: After Ezra/Nehemiah, the people became apathetic again, and so Malachi appears after the time of Ezra/Nehemiah to set the people straight. Both prospects obtain, but it appears that most scholars put Malachi anterior to Ezra/Nehemiah rather than later. IMHO, however, a later Malachi is still reasonable.

Either way, Malachi was written in the 5th century.

Malachi deals both with contemporary and with eschatological issues. As for the former, divorce and apathy are pronounced. Even so, God tells Malachi that the time is coming when the Lord will redeem his people. In short, Malachi appeals to the people to "straighten up" in light of God's eschatological judgement and redemption.

From Baldwin page 211: Malachi's prophecy is particularly relevant to the many waiting periods in human history and in the lives of individuals he enables us to see the strains and temptations of such times, the imperceptible abrasion of faith that ends in cynicism because it has lost touch with the living God. Even more important he shows the way back to a genuine, enduring faith in the God who does not change (Malachi 3.6), who invites individuals to return to him (3.7), and never forgets of those who respond (3.16).

LITERARY FORM

Rhetorical questions (or disputes) on the part of the Lord to/from his people jump out as a literary pattern in Malachi. The questions are:

1. Does God still love the Jacob? (1.2 – 5) (I.e., is the covenant still in play?)
2. If God is "father" and "master," why are the people presenting such crummy sacrifices? (1.6 – 14)
3. If God is creator and father, then why are his children abusing one another? (2.10 – 12)
4. Why is God refusing to honor the sacrifices? (2.13 – 16)
5. How have the people wearied the Lord with their words? (2.17; 3.13 – 15)
6. Will a man rob God? (3.8, 9)
7. Why do the wicked prosper? Does God care? (3.13 – 15)

The Lord answers these questions in the “here and now,” but final resolution to these problems—especially the problem of evil—awaits until “that day.”

One can summarize the progression in Malachi as going from election and privilege (1.2 – 5) to ultimate judgment (3.13 – 4.3).

Part of the problem is that the people had not seen powerful interaction w/ God. The people had done their part in building the temple, so where was God’s response? (Do we feel that way as Xns sometimes?) Judah still had enemies, priestly corruption sapped the enthusiasm of the worshiper, and inhabitants of Judah continued to abuse one another. Such activity led to cynicism on the part of the people.

But God does not change, so the problem is w/ the people, not w/ God. Malachi calls the people back to a genuine faith in the covenant God of Israel.

COMMENTARY

Chapter 1

1: Malachi means “my messenger,” or “my angel” (cf. LXX). His name does not appear elsewhere in the Bible, which has led some to believe that it is not a name but an appellation. On the other hand, the names “Jonah” and “Habakkuk” do not appear outside of their own books.

Some also think that Malachi was a title for Ezra. Jerome, Rashi, and Calvin were inclined this way.

Best to think of “Malachi” as a real person’s name!

2 – 5: The Lord’s sovereignty: God chose (loved) Jacob (Israel) over Esau for no reason centered on either of these characters.

What does it mean that “God hates Esau?” (Cf. Gen 25.23, 27.27 – 29; 28.13 – 17; 35.9 – 15; Dt 7.6 – 11) Note how Paul uses this: Gal 3.8; Rom 11.25 – 32.

6 – 10: Unacceptable sacrifices: If God is a father (note that Israel was God’s firstborn: Ex 4.22 – 23) or a master, where is the respect due him? And this contempt comes from the *priests!*

The priests are so obtuse, however, they have to ask, “How have we shown contempt for your name?” (vs. 6)

Answer: blind, lame, diseased animals used for sacrifices.

What does this have to say about the attitude of the priests, especially if they wouldn’t dare present such offerings to their governor.

Note the use of the expressions “Lord Almighty” and “Lord of Hosts” in contrast to “governor.” I.e., God is infinitely grander than the governors, so he should have far more respect.

By the way, the “table” of vs. 7 can be the altar of sacrifice or the table where community meals were eaten. May also refer to tables used for the slaughtering of the animals, not the showbread tables. (Cf. Ezek 40.39 – 43; 44.16.)

11 – 14: Cheating the Lord w/ crummy sacrifices

In spite of being God’s special people, they show disdain for the Lord by offering unacceptable animals for sacrifices—animals they wouldn’t dare present to a human magistrate let alone to the Lord of Hosts.

Concomitantly, those sacrificing “cheat” the Lord by vowing acceptable animal and then pull a “bait and switch” with second (and third) rate sacrifices.

This is especially reprehensible in light of vs. 11 where the gentiles will offer incense and pure offerings to the Lord Almighty, for they—unlike the Jews of the time—will recognize the Lord’s majesty and respond accordingly.

The Lord's response (vs. 10): Shutter the windows!! Bar the doors!! Better not to have a temple than offer meaningless sacrifices by contemptuous people!

Chapter 2

1 – 3: Priests: BEWARE!!

One gets the impression that the priests have become lackadaisical about the sacrifices—they are not doing their job of instructing the people and they offer sacrifices *pro forma* than w/ real heart and devotion. (We will see later that they have a “the Lord couldn't care less” attitude.)

And since the priest are offering defiled animals to the Lord of Hosts, the latter prescribes the ultimate defilement of the priests: The offal of the sacrifices will cover their faces as a sign to all that the Lord has rejected their defiled offerings. Even chance contact w/ offal disqualified a priest from serving; offal on the face is about as disgusting as it gets!

4 – 7: God's admonition to the priests is so that his covenant, established w/ Levi, will continue, but continuance is based on reverence and awe, with true instruction. “Levi” probably serves as a patronym and metonymy for the righteous priests thru his line, for nothing complimentary is recorded in the OT about Levi (Cf. Gen 29 & 49).

But think of, for example, Phinehas who reacted against the immorality and idolatry of the Israelites w/ the Midianites (Num 25). Phinehas was praised for his action and promised him an everlasting priesthood (Num 25.10 – 13).

8 – 9: Unlike Levi (Phinehas), the present priests have perverted teaching God's word (Lit: “stumble in the Torah”) to the point where instead of being honored by the people, the people will despise them and they will be humiliated. (Like the status of lawyers in today's society?)

Here's an experiment: Tell people you're getting your information from your pastor and see how much respect that occasions! Have so many of today's church leaders been dissed because so many have, like the priests in Malachi's time, perverted God's teaching? Just saying....

The Lord takes the conduct of those filling his ordained offices seriously!

10 – 12: Is this the prophet speaking, or have the people awakened to the Lord's pronouncements? (Probably the former.) Since we all have one father, how should we act w/ one another since we are brothers and sisters? (Ideally, at least!)

But who is the father—God or Abraham? Or Jacob, for Malachi mentions Jacob frequently: 1.2; 2.12; 3.6? (Does it matter for the import of the teaching?)

As for God as “Father” in the OT, cf. Is 1.2; 63.16; 64.8; Jer 3.4, 19; 31.9. As seen before, the fact that God calls Israel his “firstborn” and his “son” (Hos 11.1) implies a father/son relationship.

Could Malachi be promoting universalism here? After all, isn't *all* humanity in God's image? Didn't God create all of us?

Note that desecrating the sanctuary had occurred in Ezra/Nehemiah's time.

13: The people may weep and wail that God is not accepting their sacrifices, but there is good reason. First, the sacrifices are inferior, as noted above.

14: Second, husbands have broken their marriage vow—for no good reason, it appears—thus breaking the covenant between husband and wife and negating the “one flesh” concept of marriage.

15: This is probably the most difficult verse in Malachi as can be seen by the varying translations. Who is the “one”: God, Abraham, Israel? But whatever way one interprets this verse, remaining “one flesh” is instrumental for godly offspring as recipients of the covenantal relationship w/ the Lord.

Who are the “godly offspring?”

- 16: The instruction about divorce in Malachi 2.16 makes one wonder whether Malachi is responding to an impetuous act on the part of Ezra to divorce foreign wives, or was Ezra countermanning the instruction of Malachi who tells us that God hates divorce? Either way, it is not unreasonable to put the date of Malachi close to the date of Ezra.

My view is that Malachi is not reacting negatively to the putting away of foreign wives. Rather, the dictate to put away forever and lies was taking as an excuse to put away one’s Jewish wives as well, and this is what Malachi was preaching against.

One also cannot miss the comparison between Israel’s unfaithfulness to the Lord and unfaithfulness to one’s wife, for the Lord uses the marriage relationship as a metaphor for his relationship to his people.

“I hate divorce!” Divorce is violent in the eyes of the Lord for the hurt it does to the spouse and to the family.

Even so, are there ever circumstances where divorce is biblically allowed? (Cf. Mat 19.9; 1 Cor 7.15.)

Also take heed to Peter’s admonition about prayer and spousal comity (1 Pet 3.7).

- 17: Wearying the Lord: Did disillusionment set in after the rebuilding of the temple, for no obvious supernatural event accompanied the return of the Lord to Jerusalem. The Jews have done their part, but God failed to fill his promises (cf. Zechariah 8.3). The delays were an excuse for cynicism and shoddy temple worship.

The people are under the illusion that God has turned justice upside down. Apparently, evil deeds are not quickly punished, so the people think God doesn’t care. He does, of course, but the ultimate judgment of evil will come in the future (i.e., eschatologically, cf. next chapter). Today, à la Habakkuk, remain faithful to God’s word.

The Lord’s return will answer the question “where is the God of justice.”

Chapter 3

- 1 - 4: The Lord will send his messenger who will enter his temple (cf. Is 40.3), but who will be able to stand it, for at this time real justice will emerge. He will refine and purify the Levites (priests), and the inhabitants will offer proper sacrifices that are acceptable to the Lord as they were in the past.

- 5: But judgment will come first. Notice the objects of judgment: sorcerers, adulterers, perjurers, those that defraud laborers, oppressors of widows and the fatherless, abusers of aliens out of justice, and ultimately those that do not fear the Lord.

One gets the impression that these were sins characterizing the inhabitants of the land at the time of Malachi, and that is why they are mentioned here. Are these the sins that people saw and wondered why God was not taking care of them? “Well, just wait!” says the Lord.

Of course, we see in the NT that the “Messenger” was John the Baptist (Mt 11.10; Mk 1.2), the new Elijah (Mal 4.5; Mt 17.10, 13; Mk 9.11 – 13; Lk 1.17; Jn 1.19 – 21).

- 6 – 9: Back to the present. The people are not presenting their tithes, thereby “robbing” God. (Shades of Haggai.)

One wonders if the questions asked of God by the people arise from obtuseness on the part of the people, or is it smarminess on their part? Either way, it’s bad!

Note that the tithe was mandated in the Mosaic Law as part of the covenant obligation: Lev 27.30 – 32; Num 18.21 – 32; Dt 12.5 – 19; 14.22 – 28; 26.12.

10 – 12: The Lord challenges his people to test his faithfulness (vs. 10). Bring the *whole* tithe to the storehouses (of the temple), and I will respond with limitless crops, vines, and fruit. Apparently, the people were trying to “get by on the cheap” with their tithes.

Note Proverbs 11.24: The one who gives grows all the richer while the one who withholds what one should give only suffers want. This is the irony of holding back giving or doing so grudgingly.

What does this say about God’s blessing an individual, or a church, or a nation that freely contributes to the Lord’s work?

Has the challenge changed in NT times? (cf. 2 Cor 9.6 – 11)

Note that the concept of supplying the physical needs of those who supply our spiritual needs applies to the church. (Cf. 1 Cor 8.11 – 14; Rom 15.27; Gal 6.6)

13 – 15: In context, the people see the arrogant and the evil doers prosper, and they believe that God is not all that interested, so why “knock ourselves out” keeping the Torah if nothing comes of it? I.e., God’s reciprocity for obedience, in their minds, has become a legal fiction.

Of course, this theodicy has been around as long as humans have believed in the God of the Bible.

17 – 18: Some of the people “get it,” and repent, and the Lord will make them part of his “treasured possession,” sparing them as a father spares his son.

Note the image of writing the names of the righteous on a scroll, or in a “book of life,” appears numerous times in the Bible (Ex 32.32, 33; P.S. 69.28; Dan 12.11; Lk 10.20; Phil 4.3; Rev 3.5; 13.8; 20.12, 15; 21.27; 22.19).

The Lord emphasizes again that true justice is eschatological. The time will come when the people will see the difference between the righteous and the wicked, between those that serve God and those who don’t.

Chapter 4

1 – 3 [Heb 3.19 – 21]: Back to the problem of evil and what the Lord will do about it. This is a continuation of 3.1 – 5. The Lord will destroy the wicked w/ fire. They will disappear “root and branch,” like stubble in a fire. (Think of the devastation in the recent CA fires!)

All this will happen “in the/that day,” and expression signifying the wrapping up of history, or eschatological end of the world as we know it (Cf. Zeph 1.8, 15 – 16; and esp. Zech 14.7).

But for those that honor God, the “Sun of Righteousness” will come w/ “healing in its wings” (Shades of “Hark the Herald, Angels Sing”¹). Note the use of this figure by Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist: “Because of the tender mercy of our God, with which the Sunrise from on high will visit us.” Note the similar figure in Is 9.2: “The people who walk in darkness will see a great light; Those who live in a dark land, the light will shine on them.”

Apparently, the righteous will have a part in the judgment, for they will “trample down the wicked,” and they will be “ashes under their feet.” (If this sounds vengeful, take a look at Rev 18.6.)

4 – 6 [Heb 3.22 – 24]: Remember the Law of Moses; watch out for the coming of Elijah.

Note that these are the persons that appeared w/ Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration (Mt 17; Mk 9; Lk 9) Moses represent the law and Elijah represents the prophets.

¹ Hail the Heaven-born Prince of Peace
Hail the Son of Righteousness
Light and life to all He brings
Risen with healing in His wings

Or the Lord will come and strike the earth w/ a curse! (Better, strike the land with total destruction [Heb: חָרָם])

Who is “Elijah to come?” Note that he is to the hearts of the parents to their children and vice-versa before the dreadful day of the Lord.

John the Baptist, called Elijah by Jesus (see above), did not come “before the great and dreadful day of the Lord.” It is not unreasonable, therefore, to suppose that an anti-type of John will appear before the Second Coming. Perhaps one of the “witnesses” of Rev 11.6? After all, one of the witnesses of Rev 11.6 has the power to shut up the sky so it does not rain. What prophet of the OT period was able to do that? A THOUGHT: In Mt. 17.11, 12 Jesus says, ““Yes, Elijah *is coming* and will restore all things, but I tell you that Elijah *has already come*.” Is Jesus telling us that someone in the spirit and power of Elijah, another John the Baptist-type, is coming in the future before Jesus’s Second Coming?

Note that when Jewish people reach the end of this passage and the word חָרָם, they go back to 4.5 [Heb 3.23] so as not to end on such a depressing note.