

Malachi: An Introduction

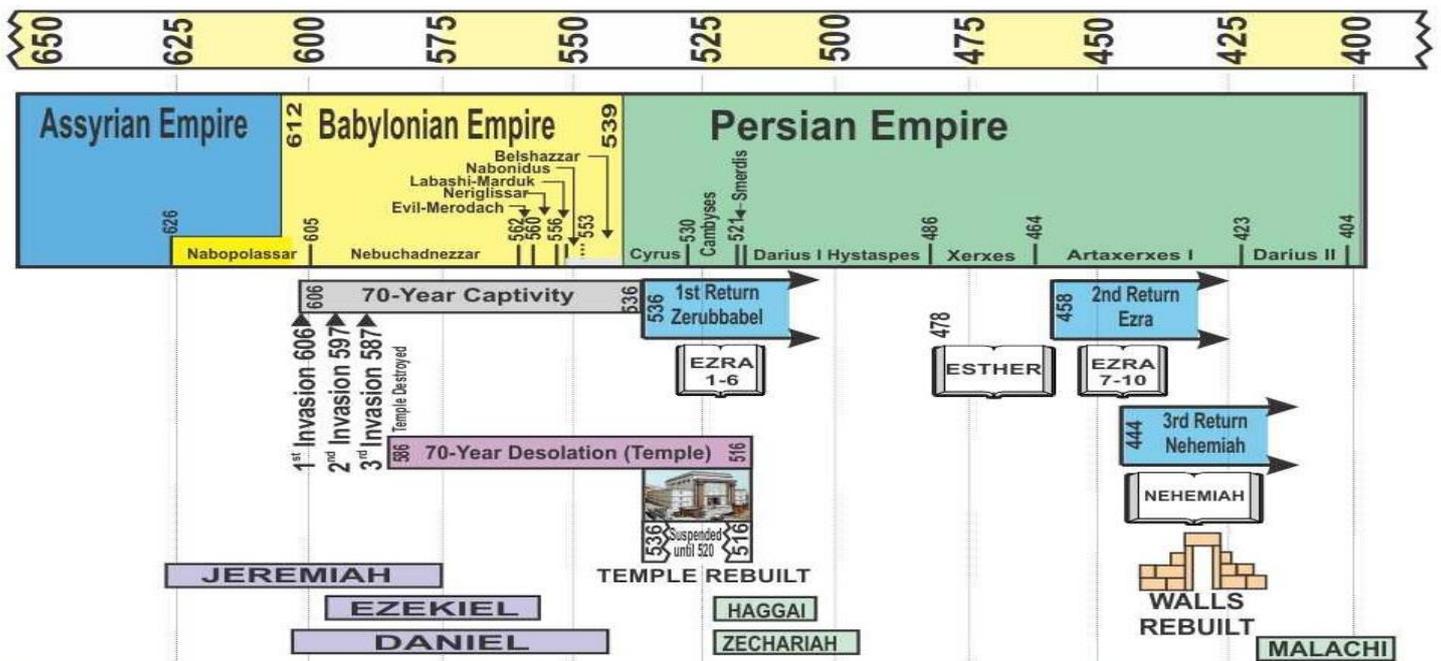
Malachi is a *post-exilic* book and the last revelation (chronologically) of the OT. 400 years of silence would follow, ringing only with Malachi's words of condemnation. The prophecy acts as a bridge between the OT and NT, looking forward to the coming of both *John the Baptist* and the *Messiah* (3.1). Sadly, the people of God in Malachi's day exhibited a spirit of outward, religious service with little corresponding inward devotion of heart. *Idolatry* (pre-exile) had been replaced by *infidelity*. This was the *seed* of a spirit which came to full *fruition* in the Pharisees and Sadducees. Yet, there was a *faithful* remnant who feared the Lord (3.16-18) – later reflected in individuals such as Simeon and Anna. As the prophecy of Malachi was the *last* revelation of a *closing* dispensation (law), so we stand at the closing of another (grace). There are therefore many parallels to be drawn.

The Title of the Book

- The title of the book is named after the prophet Malachi (1.1). We know nothing about his family, age or occupation – though he clearly ministered in Jerusalem. He is merely a voice in the gathering gloom (cf. Matthew 3.3).
- The name Malachi means 'my messenger' or 'my angel' – some have understood this literally, or as a title, but every other OT prophetic book begins with a prophet's name. Incidentally, the book mentions *four* messengers including the *priesthood* (2.7), the *forerunner* of Messiah (3.1) and the *Messiah* himself (3.1). Jewish tradition identifies Malachi as a member of the Great Synagogue that collected and preserved the Scriptures.

The Times of the Book

The captivity of Judah gradually took place in *three* stages, lasting a period of **20** years (see diagram below). In similar fashion, the *return* from captivity in Babylon was also in *three* stages, though over a much longer period (**92** years). It is always easier and quicker to get away from God than to get back. The **first** return under Zerubbabel (Ezra 1-6) was concerned, primarily, with the *house of God*, rebuilding the altar and temple (worship). The **second** return under Ezra (Ezra 7-10) emphasised the condition of the *people of God* (as measured by the word of God). The **third** and final return under Nehemiah was focussed on the *city of God*, especially the rebuilding of the walls and gates (work). Note the precedence of *divine* and *spiritual* interests over the *physical* and *temporal*.



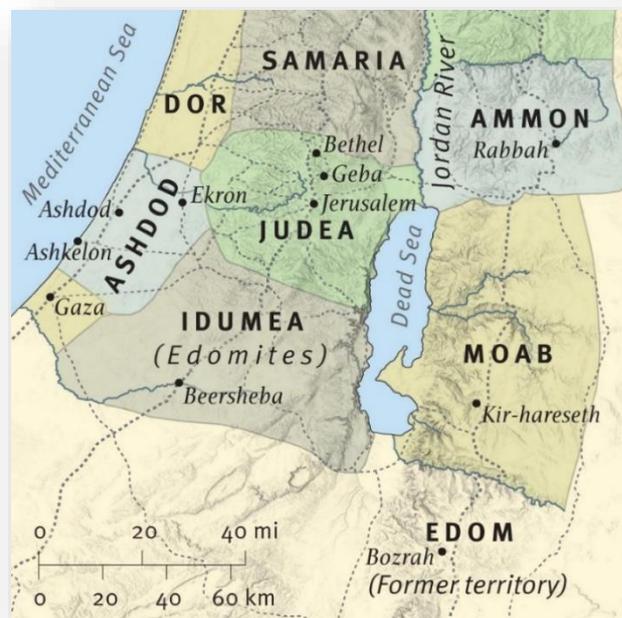
Nehemiah initially came to Jerusalem in 444BC to rebuild the walls. Before he returned to Persia (433BC) the people made a solemn vow, ratified in writing, to obey the word of God (Nehemiah 10.1). The vow contained three primary promises: **1.** To not allow any intermarriage with the pagan people of the land (10.30). **2.** To be careful to obey the Sabbath day and Sabbatical year (10.31). **3.** To bring the *firstfruits* of the harvest and present their *firstborn* sons and animals to God (10.35-36) including bringing the Levites a tenth of everything the land produced (10.37-38).

Nehemiah later returned a second time to Jerusalem (13.6-7). It is difficult to say how long had transpired – at least a year (given the travelling time) and possibly as long as 8-10 years (Artaxerxes died in 424BC). What Nehemiah found ‘grieved’ him, for the people had broken every promise (read Nehemiah 13). It is likely Malachi prophesied around this time, as he speaks against exactly the same issues as Nehemiah. Arnold Fruchtenbaum says, “*First, there was the defection of the priesthood from its responsibilities (Nehemiah 13.1-9; Malachi 1.6-2.9). Secondly, there was neglect of the law of the tithe (Nehemiah 13.10-13; Malachi 3.8-12). The third problem was that of intermarriage between the Jewish population and the pagan Gentile population (Nehemiah 13.23-28; Malachi 2.11-16).*”

The specific date of the prophecy is difficult to pinpoint with minute accuracy. Judah was still a Persian province (1.8), the temple had been rebuilt and public worship restored. As *Haggai* and *Zechariah* supported *Joshua* and *Zerubbabel* in their reforms, so it is likely *Malachi* supported *Ezra* and *Nehemiah* in theirs (cf. Nehemiah 6.7). A date of 430-400BC is most likely. However, the interesting timeline of Daniel’s Seventy Weeks must not be forgotten. Daniel 9.25: “*Know therefore and understand, that from the going forth of the commandment to restore and to build Jerusalem unto the Messiah the Prince shall be seven weeks...*” The seven weeks (**49** years) required to rebuild and restore Jerusalem to her former glory, and likely the rough time of the closing of OT revelation was approximately 396BC. See Daniel notes.

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After the return from exile, Judah remained an almost insignificant territory of about 20 x 30 miles (32 x 48 km), inhabited by a population of perhaps 150,000. Although they enjoyed the benefits of Persia’s enlightened policy of religious toleration and limited self-rule, the Jews acutely felt their subjugation to a foreign power (Nehemiah 1.3; 9.36), and they suffered persistent opposition from their neighbours (Ezra 4.23). Judah was no longer an independent nation and was no longer ruled by a Davidic king.



The Transcript (Type) of the Book

- The prophecy contains, proportionally, more of the direct words of Jehovah than any other (**47** of its 55 verses).
- The form of the book is quite unique, presenting **six** *disputes* or *conversations* between the Lord and His people (resembling a court case). First, there is a basic *declaration* followed by an *objection* voiced by the priests (or people). In Malachi, each of these objections begins with the same Hebrew word translated “Wherein”¹. Each objection is then *answered* by the Lord with accompanying evidence (see chart). This dialectic style of reasoning became popular in later Judaism and was used by Greek philosophers such as *Socrates* with his peers in Athens.
- The failures of the people are uncovered in the disputations (*one* of which is in *two* parts). **1.** They *doubted* Jehovah’s love. **2.** They *dishonoured* Jehovah’s name by offering *deficient* worship. **3.** They *disregarded* Jehovah’s law. **4.** They *defiled* Jehovah’s covenant by marrying idolatrous pagans and divorcing their faithful Jewish wives. **5.** They *defamed* Jehovah’s character by charging Him with failing to judge the wicked. **6.** They *denied* Jehovah His due by robbing him of tithes and offerings. **7.** They even *despised* Jehovah’s service, complaining that there was little benefit in following the Lord.
- Solemnly, the “Wherein?” responses of the people suggest either total *ignorance* of their proper condition before God (cf. Revelation 3.17), or *insolence* and *arrogance*. They were comfortable to challenge His word.

¹ In Hebrew the word מַה *māh* or מַה *meh*: An indefinite interrogative pronoun meaning ‘what?’ It occurs **x10** in Malachi 1.2, 6, 7; 2.14 (wherefore), 15 (wherefore), 17; 3.7, 8, 13 (what), 14 (what).

The Themes of the Book

- **Jehovah** (x49). The word that dominates the prophecy is in fact a *name*, **Jehovah** (the LORD). This name unfolds the *unchanging* character of God and His claims upon His people. He is referred to as the “LORD of hosts” (armies) on 24 occasions, a title suggestive of judgment. He has all the heavenly and earthly armies at His disposal to enforce his will. Jehovah thus speaks as One whose name has been dishonoured by the immoral behaviour of those in covenant relationship with Him. In Malachi, there is no denunciation of idolatry or appeal to rebuild the temple but an appeal to the conscience for moral reform. Hamilton Smith says, *“The round of religious observances was being conducted with the semblance of outward order. Though outwardly, however, in a right position, with a correct ritual, nevertheless their moral state was entirely wrong.”*
- Note. Both the ‘name’ (1.6; 2.2; 3.16; 4.2) and ‘fear’ (1.6; 2.5; 3.5, 16; 4.2) of the LORD are mentioned in every chapter. God was concerned about His name. We bear the name of Jesus Christ (Jehovah the Saviour). Do we honour His name by the way we live? In terms of ‘fear’, the people had lost their sense of *reverence*, taking great liberty with holy things. Common respect for the things of God is on the wane!
- **Covenant** (x6). Note the ‘covenant with Levi’ (2.4-5, 8), the ‘covenant of our fathers’ (2.10) and the ‘covenant’ of marriage (2.14) to name a few. By definition, a covenant is the formalising of a personal relationship, involving *promises* and *obligations*, sealed with an oath. Hence there is *love* (1.2), *hate* (1.3; 2.13), *anger* (1.4), *pleasure* and *displeasure* (1.10; 3.4). Malachi emphasises the unfaithfulness of the people in their relationship with God. They thought that this love relationship could be maintained by formal ritual alone, no matter how they lived. Philip Harding (What the Bible Teaches) says, *“When we come to Malachi, the remnant which was once marked by devotion and determination, self-sacrifice and spiritual exercise had fallen into moral and spiritual decay. Declension and departure had set in and thus Malachi’s ministry is directed to those characterised by a lack of devotion to God, with a feeble grasp of the honour of His name, little zeal for the House of God, and a failure to meet the claims of God. They were marked by irreverence, unfaithfulness, formalism, immorality, dishonesty, and materialism.”*
- **Christ**. The Lord Jesus is presented as the “messenger of the covenant” (3.1) and “Sun of righteousness” (4.2). As *Messenger*, He will yet make all the covenant blessings good to Israel. As the *Sun*, He will turn Israel’s dark night into day. The qualities of an ideal priest are also described (2.5-7) – all of which are to be found in perfection in Christ.
- **Priesthood**. The priests are directly addressed in the book (1.6; 2.1). They are viewed as *representative* and *spiritual* leaders of the people. As such they bore a large measure of responsibility for Israel’s unfaithfulness. Their failure is highlighted as those who did not *walk* in the ways of God or instruct clearly in the *word* of God (2.5-9).
- **Judgment**. The message of Malachi warns of impending judgment if the priests and people did not ‘return’ (3.7). Though preceded by a herald (3.1), the day of God’s wrath was coming (3.2, 4.1). The Judge would act as a *Refiner* to purge away all dross (3.2-3) and as the *Sun of righteousness* to establish justice in the earth. Though the Day would judge the *guilty* (3.1-6), it would also bless the *godly* (3.13-4.3).