

## MALACHI

**Historical context.** Malachi is the last book of the Twelve Minor Prophets and the final book of the Old Testament in its current setup. The word Malachi means “my [God’s] messenger.”

Scholars believe that this book was written around 450BC, just before the time of the reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah. These reforms, which the survival of the Jewish faith was contingent on, presupposed the prophetic word of a virtually unknown prophet, Malachi.

In its introduction to this book, *The People’s Bible* states:

*Malachi is written for a postexilic community experiencing deep divisions. Those in charge of the leadership—priests and powerful people—are forgetting their responsibilities and acting in ways that advance their own agendas. The priests are accepting sacrifices of lesser quality and perhaps using the good animals for their own benefit (1:7-8). The rich and affluent are divorcing their Jewish wives and entering into marital agreements with the leading families of the surrounding territories for economic self-aggrandizement (2:10-16). People are holding back their tithes, jeopardizing the temple’s function as a center of redistribution of food for the poor (3:8-10). In the process, laborers are defrauded of their wages, widows and orphans are being oppressed, aliens are deprived of justice (3:5), and women are the objects of violence through unjust divorces (2:16). And the most astonishing thing is that the leaders of the people are surprised when God disputes with them and accuses them of all these things. They even wonder where the God of justice is (2:17). Therefore the prophet announces a day of retribution and judgment when God will come to the temple to purify the priesthood and make sure that the people will bring the appropriate offerings. On that day God will also secure a group of faithful ones who revere the Lord’s name. The new age, which will dawn after God’s coming, will be anticipated by the coming of the prophet Elijah. This act became important for the writers of the New Testament, who saw in John the Baptist the fulfillment of this prophecy. (p.1111)*

So Malachi, in his prophet ministry, is faced with a wall of apathy and indifference. He preaches to a disillusioned people and a failed leadership. He is

primarily concerned with the lack of devotion and seriousness in Temple worship and over Judah’s sin fidelity in her social relationships.

**Division of chapters.** The three chapters of the book contain six oracles followed by two postscripts. The six oracles are in the form of disputations or arguments in which the opening statement is made by God. The people’s response expresses some form of objection or questioning of God’s statement. Then God responds with a rebuke and a promise of judgment.

## COMMENTARY

**First oracle – God’s love for Israel (1:1-5).** The first disputation opens with God saying: “*I have loved you [Israel]*” (1:2).

Then the author expresses the people’s response: “*How have you loved us?*” (1:2). By reflecting on their history, the people should be well aware of God’s patience and love for them. Asking to show how God has loved them is like Christians asking Jesus to show his love after he has died for them. Such a question clearly reflects the people’s blindness and hardness of heart.

**Jacob and Esau** are twin brothers. God does not hate Esau as the text states, but rather, God decides to choose Jacob over his brother. What we have here is “the mystery of God’s decision.” Why does God pick one over the other? Esau’s descendants, the Edomites, become the hated enemies of Jacob’s descendants. God fights for Jacob’s descendants against the Edomites. (See commentary on the prophet Obadiah.) This should lead Israel to see God’s work on their behalf and to praise God (1:5).

**Pause:** What can blind us to the love God has for us?

**Second oracle – Sins of the priests (1:6-2:9).** The focus of the second disputation is the priesthood and the worship they are engaged in. In the opening scene, God asks: “*Shouldn’t a son honor his father, and shouldn’t you honor me? But you haven’t. Instead, you have despised me.*” The people question how they have despised God and his name (1:6). God declares that their use of imperfect wounded animals

for sacrifice offend him. The priests may have been guilty of keeping the good animals for themselves for they would never dream of offering the Persian governor a shoddy sacrifice (1:8). Deplorably, it would be better for the people to close the temple door than to offer God their second or third best (1:10).

**2:1-9** is a condemnation of the priests for failing to teach the people true doctrine. “*You have caused many to falter your instructions...I therefore have made you contemptible*” (vv 6-9).

**Pause:** What are ways that we today can offer unworthy or polluted sacrifices to God?

**Third oracle – Protest against divorce and inter-marriage with pagans (2:9-16).** In this oracle, Malachi is concerned with the problem of divorce which is threatening his society. Wealthy men returning from exile have no property in Judah. Hence, they often divorce their wife and remarry a woman who owns land. Not only that—the woman is usually a non-Jew. Two negative consequences of this development are: a) the number of divorced Jewish women is growing; b) remarrying outside the Jewish faith is drawing the men away from their ancient faith. In response to this rapidly developing situation, Malachi speaks harsh words about divorce and remarriage.

**Pause:** In the past fifty years, divorce has become very common. In your opinion, what are the reasons for this?

**Fourth oracle – God’s justice (2:17-3:5).** As in the first and second oracles, this fourth oracle begins with a statement by the Lord: “*You have wearied the Lord with your words*” (2:17). The people respond: “*How have we wearied you?*” One way they weary God is by believing that “*every evildoer is good in the sight of God*” (3:15). Then the prophet adds: “*Suddenly there will come to the Temple a judge who will judge the wicked and reward the good. This coming of the Lord will be preceded by a messenger who will prepare the advent of the Lord.*” Jesus identifies this messenger to be John the Baptist (Mk 1:2).

**Fifth oracle – Robbing God (3:6-12).** The disputation begins once again with God admonishing the people: “*You have turned aside from your statutes and have*

*not kept them*” (3:7). They are called to “return” to Lord. The people ask God: “*How are we robbing you?*” to which God responds: “*By failing to bring in your whole tithe to the Temple.*” Forgetting that the whole harvest is a gift from God and not theirs is one reason why people resist tithing. The priests and the poor depend on the tithes. Without it, their relationship with God and the community is impacted. Stinginess with wealth is symptomatic of a weak relationship with God. Small giving equals small faith.

**Pause:** Has your attitude towards stewardship of finances changed over the years? If so, in what ways?

**Sixth oracle – Contrasting those who do and don’t fear God (3:13-21 or 3:13-4:3).** [In some Bibles, chapter 3 ends with verse 18, followed by a new chapter 4 beginning with verse 19. Hence, this section is alternately referenced as 3:13-4:3.]

In this final oracle, the prophet addresses the cynicism that permeates the whole community, including the leaders and priests. They reason out: “*Why follow God’s way while evildoers prosper?*” The community’s values have been totally reversed: those who ignore their faith prosper, whereas the righteous poor are despised for their ignorance and foolishness. Such attitude is an insult to God for it confuses good and evil. The Day of Judgment will be a great day for those who fear the Lord and follow his footsteps.

**Postscripts (3:22-24).** The people are exhorted to remember the Law of Moses (v.22), and the advent of Elijah is announced. Peter Craigie writes:

*Moses and Elijah represent here two of the great foundations of the Old Testament, law and prophecy. The law established the norms of life in relationship with God; the prophets served as the conscience of Israel, constantly calling back God’s people from the error of their ways to their first and true relationship. And thus it is no coincidence that, on the Mount of Transfiguration, it is with Moses and Elijah that Jesus converses (Mk 9:2-8).* (Daily Bible Study Series, p.248)