

# **Malachi**

- by Kiran Sam Thomas

## **Introduction:**

The Hebrew name “Malachi” means “my messenger” perhaps “messenger of the Lord”. The book of Malachi follows the same pattern that of the other 14 prophetic books in the Old Testament, where the author of the book is introduced by name in the opening verse itself. Chronologically, the book of Malachi should be much earlier in the Old Testament, i.e. somewhere alongside the books of Nehemiah, Ezra and 2 Chronicles. But the Old Testament is organized in a literary style, and therefore Malachi is grouped with the books of “Minor prophets” that finish out the Old Testament. The prophet Malachi is only mentioned by name once, i.e. in the first line of the book (Malachi 1:1). In spite of this, his words are quoted directly and indirectly at least 15 times in the New Testament. Even Jesus Christ himself quoted Malachi’s prophecy when telling the crowd about the place of John the Baptist in heavenly history (Matthew 11:7-15).

Malachi’s ministry was intended to foreshadow that of the coming messenger, who is identified as John the Baptist in the New Testament and his prophecies came as a wakeup call to renewed covenant fidelity as Israelites, at the time, were experiencing spiritual destitution.

## **Time line:**

The time of Malachi’s ministry is not precisely found, but the book of Malachi makes several historical and cultural references that can be traced to a specific time period in biblical history hence most scholars agree that Malachi was probably a contemporary of Ezra and Nehemiah in the mid-fifth century B.C. His ministry is believed to have taken place nearly a hundred years after the decree of Cyrus in 538 B.C. which ended the Babylonian captivity and allowed the Jews to return to their homeland and rebuild the temple. This was nearly 80 years after Haggai and Zechariah encouraged the rebuilding of that temple with the promises of God’s blessing, engrafting the nation’s prosperity, expansion, peace and return God’s glorious presence.

## **Literary style:**

The book is entirely in prose. Further, the material is not embodied in a conventional format of oracles of judgment and salvation. The dominant genre is satire i.e. an attack on vice in a discernible literary form and with a satiric norm by the criticism is conducted throughout. The primary vehicle in which the satire is embodied is rhetoric of questions and answers, as the people of Judah are pictured as asking a series of questions to which God answers in an accusatory and condemning manner.

## **Theme:**

There are two broad messages covered in the book of Malachi:

1. Israel must remember and observe the Old Testament laws, and
2. Israel must remember and take hope in the coming Messiah.

It is through these messages the key themes of the book is conveyed i.e. Malachi's six fold wakeup call to renewed covenant fidelity. The book is designed as a series of disputes and most section begin with God saying something or making a claim or accusation. Then Israelites would disagree or question God's statement, and then God would respond and give the last word. This happens six times in the book.

In the first three disputes God **exposes** Israel's corruption and in the final three disputes God **confronts** Israel's corruption. From the overall set of argument and dispute we can understand that the exile fundamentally didn't change anything and Israelite's heart is hard as ever.

- The first dispute (Malachi 1:2-5) is about God's elective love for Israel and God saying that he still loves his covenant people despite their failures in the past. But Israelites rudely objects God with their hypocritical formalism in worship, worthless offering and questioning God asking 'How have you shown us any love?' And God remind them of how he graciously chose the family of Jacob and their ancestors to become the carrier of covenant promises instead of Esau, his brothers and the family from him who eventually came to ruin (Genesis and Obadiah). Right from the beginning, it was evident that Israel doubts and is suspicious of God's love and faithfulness.
- The second dispute (Malachi 1:6-2:9) is about God exposing how Israel is despising and defiling the second temple i.e. the offences and rebuking the priests for condoning them and thereby violating Lord's covenant with Levi. But the people fire back asking 'How have us despised you?' to which God responds by showing how people are brining shamefully lame offering, sick blemished animals to the temple as offerings which shows that people doesn't value or honor their God. The priests who ran the temple participated in these corrupt forms of worship. This again proved that top to bottom that God's people were faithless.
- The third dispute (Malachi 2:10-16), God accuses the Israelite men of treachery against him and their wives i.e. God condemns men marrying an idolater and consider that as infidelity against Israel's covenant with the Lord, and he condemns divorce for no good reason as infidelity against marriage covenant between a husband and his wife.
- The forth dispute (Malachi 2:17-3:5) starts with Israelites accusing God of neglect saying 'Where is God of justice?' (Malachi 2:17). It is because of the injustice and corruption bounding the land and God seems not to be doing anything for them. Then Malachi broadens the indictment saying as Lord will vindicate his justice. This will take place when the Lord will send a messenger who will prepare the people for God's personal return in the day of the Lord. He will come like fire to purify his people and remove idolatry, sexual immorality and injustice so that only the faithful remnants will be left to become his people.

- The fifth dispute (Malachi 3:6-12) returns to the subject of Israel's begrudging offerings. Here people are experiencing material adversity and were under a curse. Therefore God calls the people to turn back to him to which people say 'How can we turn back?' So God confronts their selfishness and he show that they stopped offering their income to the temple i.e. Malachi challenges them to conscientious tithing, which will be rewarded with divine blessings. So God confronts them saying that he wants to bless them with 'abundance' only if they are going to be faithful.
- In the sixth dispute (Malachi 3:13– 4:3), the people accuses God and they say that it is pointless to serve him as they observe wicked, prideful people succeeding in life and God does nothing about it but as a response God assures his grumbling contemporaries that the evildoers, who seem to escape divine justice because of their prosperity, will be yet judged while the Lord will deliver those who fear him.

Hence the book of Malachi summarizes the main points of his prophecy i.e. 1. Remember the Law of Moses, and 2. Remember the promise of Elijah and the coming day of the Lord. The final three verses in the book functions as a concluding appendix bringing closure not just to the book but to the whole collection of the Old Testament books. It recalls the story and the laws of the covenants in the first five books of the Bible. The conclusion summarizes the Old Testament as a unified story that points to the future. Israel was redeemed by God and they betrayed him through their rebellion and hard hearts breaking the laws. But scripture anticipates a future day when God is going to send a new prophet, a new Moses, a new Elijah, who will restore God's people and heal their hard hearts (Deuteronomy 31, Jeremiah 31, and Ezekiel 36).

Therefore, the concluding appendix presents the scripture as a divine gift to read, to ponder and to pray over. It states the truth about human condition, about the selfishness and sin. It also announces God's promise that one day he would send a messenger and show them personally to confront evil to restore his people and bring healing justice. It is that future hope the book of Malachi is all about.

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