

Malachi

By Dr. Alan Cobb

Author

The name of the book is also the name of the author. We know nothing about which tribe was his, who his parents were, where he may have lived, or what his vocation might have been before he gave these messages from God or what he might have done after this time. His name means “messenger” which has led some scholars to try and prove that this all means he was an anonymous prophet, but that seems highly unlikely since that would make him the only prophet in the Old Testament who was unknown.

Background

Malachi was one of three prophets who wrote after the exiled Jews were allowed to return to their homeland. The other two were Haggai and Zechariah. The first group of exiles (almost 50,000) returned under the leadership of Zerubbabel in 537 BC. Ezra records their experiences. Haggai and Zechariah wrote to these returnees, urging them to get busy and restore the temple as they had agreed as part of their being allowed to return. The events of the Book of Esther took place in Persia between 482 and 473 BC. The second group of returnees (about 5,000) came under the leadership of Ezra in 458 BC. Ezra sought to beautify the temple and began reforms that would purify the worship. Nehemiah led the third group of returnees (about 42,000) in 444 BC. The events that happened between 445 and 420 BC, including the rebuilding of Jerusalem’s walls, are described in the book written by Nehemiah. These events are shown in the following depiction:

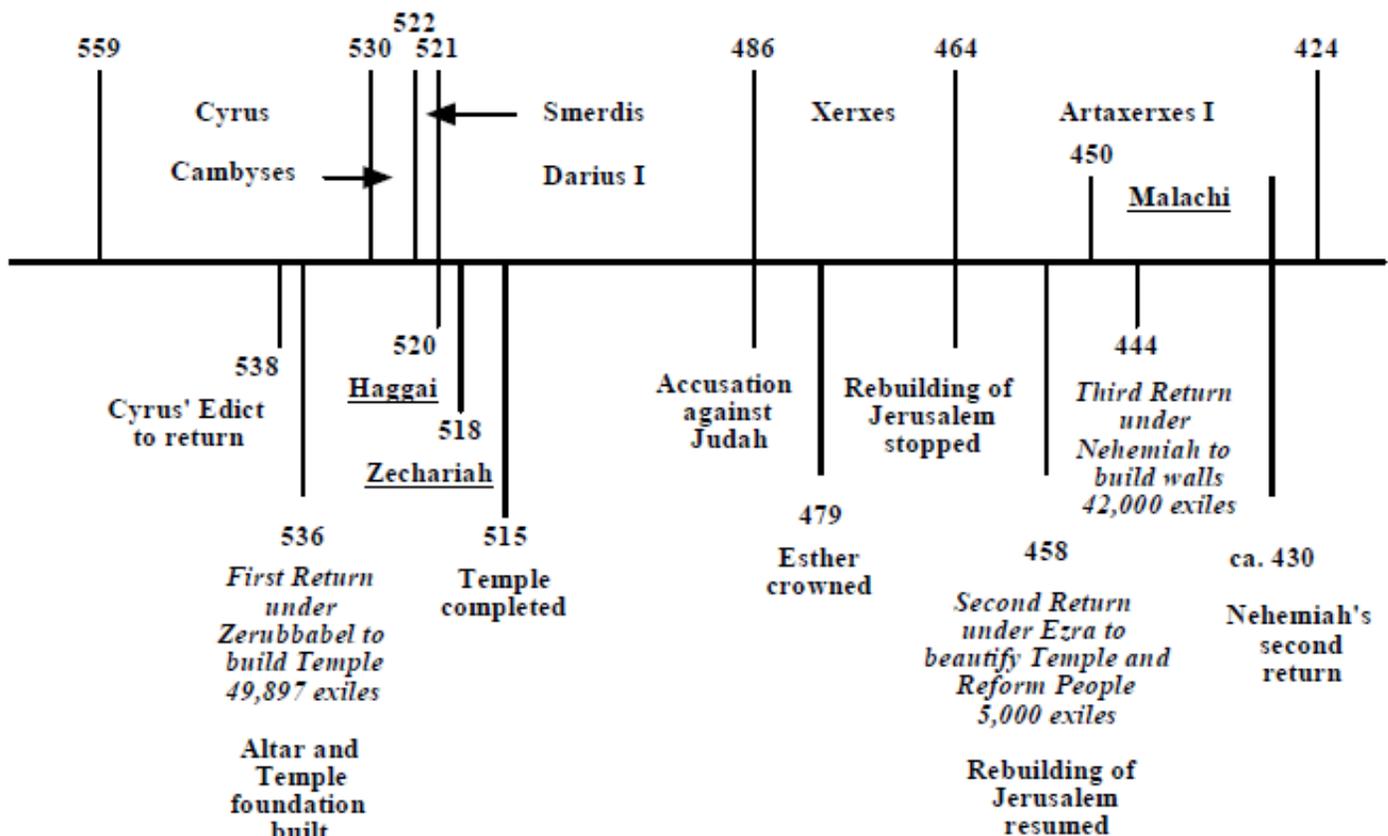


Image from Dr. Thomas Constable’s Notes on Malachi, page 4 of 2006 Edition.

Date

Malachi does not refer to any persons or events that can be used to date his writing so it is necessary to appropriate the date from implications of the situations to which God has him address. He references “your governor” which indicates he wrote after 538 BC when Cyrus the Persian who had conquered Babylon decreed that the Jews could return to their homeland which was still under Persian control. The word translated as “governor” is *pehah* which is a Persian title. Zerubbabel had this title (Hab 1:1, 14; 2:2, 21) and so did Nehemiah (Neh 5:14; 12:26). He must have written after the temple had been rebuilt because he refers to worship that is being held there. Since we know from a study of Haggai and Zechariah that the temple was completed in 515 or 516 BC, the means he must have written after that date. He addresses many of the same issues that Nehemiah tried to reform, like priests not performing their duties as prescribed, neglect of tithing, and intermarriage with foreigners. So he probably wrote during the time Nehemiah was governor from 445 to 420 BC. And since he doesn’t mention Nehemiah directly, the time of writing was perhaps during the period Nehemiah returned to Persia after his twelfth year of governorship and before he returned to Jerusalem (432 to 431 BC).

Audience

Malachi is giving God’s message to the community of Jews who had returned from the Babylonian exile and the ones who had not been taken captive but allowed to remain in the Promised Land.

Purpose

The purpose of Malachi’s writings was to confront the Jews with how they have been sinning against God and to encourage them to change and pursue lives of righteousness and holiness before YHWH.

Note: The verse quotations are a direct translation of the Hebrew by Bayit haMashiyach.

Chapter 1

1:1 translates as “The oracle of the word of YHWH to Yisrael through Malachi.”

This indicates that the writings are not just some individual’s thoughts about what was wrong with the way people were living but they are God’s own message to the people.

1:2-5 translate as “I have loved you, says YHWH. But you say: How have you loved us? Was not Esau Yaaqovs brother? declares YHWH. Yet I have loved Yaaqov, but I have hated Esau, and I have made his mountains a desolation and appointed his inheritance for the jackals of the wilderness. Though Edom says: We have been beaten down, but we will return and build up the ruins; thus says YHWH of hosts: They may build, but I will tear down; and men will call them the wicked territory, and the people toward whom YHWH is indignant forever. Your eyes will see this and you will say: YHWH be magnified beyond the border of Yisrael!”

God’s first statement to the people is a reminder of how he has loved them and repeatedly said and shown it through their history. And yet he says the people are questioning how God has loved them. So God gives them the example of Esau, the brother of their ancestor Jacob. He says he loved Jacob and hated Esau. It wasn’t really a hatred of Esau but a hatred of Esau’s rejection of God’s blessing of being the first born of Isaac that Esau despised in favor of a bowl of red stew (Gen 25:30-34). God says he has made the territory of Esau (also called Edom) a desolation and even though Edom tries to build up the ruins, he will again tear it down and says he will be indignant toward them forever (this being because they reject him). God says the people will see this

and declare YHWH is magnified beyond the borders of Israel. But this also means Israel should consider their actions and how they are treating God and not question his love for them.

1:6-9 translate as “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 YHWH of hosts to you, O priests who despise my name. But you say: How have we despised your name? You are presenting defiled food upon my altar. But you say: How have we defiled you? In that you say: The table of YHWH is to be despised. But when you present the blind for sacrifice, is it not evil? And when you present the lame and sick, is it not evil? Why not offer it to your governor? Would he be pleased with you? Or would he receive you kindly? says YHWH of hosts. But now will you not entreat El’s favor, that he may be gracious to us? With such an offering on your part, will he receive any of you kindly? says YHWH of hosts.”

Following upon God’s last statement that the people would say “God is magnified beyond the borders of Israel,” this is God’s question about why he is being dishonored by the priests despising his name. The priests were despising God’s name by presenting defiled offerings (blind, lame, and sick) upon his altar. Once the altar or anything had been defiled, it was not acceptable to be used, especially for anything being offered to God, until it had been properly cleaned (purified and consecrated). (See Lev 29 – 30 and 40; Num 11 – 16) God says to try giving their governor (the representative of the Persian king ruling over them) such a dishonoring offering and see if he would be pleased and receive them with kindness. So God asks if they will not ask for God’s favor that he may be gracious to them, and will defiled offerings bring him to receive any of them kindly.

1:10 translates as “Oh that there were one among you who would shut the gates, that you might not uselessly kindle fire on my altar! I am not pleased with you, says YHWH of hosts, nor will I accept an offering from you.”

God would rather that some one of the priests would shut the temple gates and stop offering sacrifices since they have so little regard for his greatness and love. So he is displeased and will not accept any of their offerings as long as they despise him (like Esau despised him by despising the firstborn blessing).

1:11-14 translate as “For from the rising of the sun even to its setting, my name will be great among the nations, and in every place incense is going to be offered to my name, and a grain offering that is pure, for my name will be great among the nations, says YHWH of hosts. But you are profaning it, in that you say: The table of the Master is defiled, and as for its fruit, its food is to be despised. You also say: My, how tiresome it is! And you disdainfully sniff at it, says YHWH of hosts, and you bring what was taken by robbery and what is lame or sick; so you bring the offering! Should I receive that from your hand? says YHWH. But cursed be the swindler who has a male in his flock and vows it, but sacrifices a blemished animal to the Adonay, for I am a great King, says YHWH of hosts, and my name is feared among the nations.”

The phrase “from the rising of the sun even to its setting” is not to be taken as a time interval but seen as an indication of a world-wide condition. This indicates that the time will come when God’s name will be honored throughout the world and incense and grain offerings will be offered in his name. The time that this will happen is during the Millennium when Jesus, the Messiah, sits on the throne of David and rules over the entire world from Jerusalem. But at the time of Malachi, God is condemning the attitude of the priests who are treating YHWH’s reputation as common by saying the altar is defiled and thus the offerings on it are despised. Not only that, but they see the worship of YHWH as tiresome. Therefore, they were presenting offerings of things they had taken (stolen) from the people and offering sick and lame animals in their place. So, YHWH says that anyone who has vowed an offering (which had to be a pure, unblemished one) and then sacrifices a blemished one is cursed for he is a great king and his name is feared among the nations.

The emphasis from verse 6 through verse 14 is the sinful actions of the priests shown in their performance of their duties to be a representative of the people before YHWH to present the worship of the people to him.

Chapter 2

2:1-5 translate as “And now this commandment is for you, O priests. If you do not listen, and if you do not take it to heart to give honor to my name, says YHWH of hosts, then I will send the curse upon you and I will curse your blessings; and indeed, I have cursed them already, because you are not taking it to heart. Behold, I am going to rebuke your offspring, and I will spread refuse on your faces, the refuse of your feasts; and you will be taken away with it. Then you will know that I have sent this commandment to you, that my covenant may continue with Levi, says YHWH of hosts. My covenant with him was one of life and peace, and I gave them to him as an object of reverence; so he revered me and stood in awe of my name.”

God now has Malachi give his command to the priests: If they don't take this to heart and give honor to his name, God will bring a curse upon them and in addition he will curse their blessings. It was their job to bless the people, so cursing their blessings would make the blessings they pronounce of no value. They received a blessing by getting part of the offerings and the tithes the people brought to the temple to honor and worship God. Cursing the blessings of the priests would probably include some reduction of that material blessing and it would definitely impact their spiritual blessings from God. Apparently the curse would also include a rebuke of their offspring which would mean they would not bear as many children. The refuse of their feasts being spread on their faces means that the offerings they stole from the people to use for their feasts would make them unclean and thus not able to present any acceptable offering on the altar. When all this happened, then they would know God had sent the commandment and discipline to them so that he might continue his covenant with Levi (Deut 33:8-11; Exod 32:25-29; Num 3:12; 25:10-13). The covenant was of life and peace because they had revered God and did what he said.

2:6-9 translate as “True instruction was in his mouth and unrighteousness was not found on his lips; he walked with me in peace and uprightness, and he turned many back from iniquity. For the lips of a priest should preserve knowledge, and men should seek instruction from his mouth; for he is the messenger of YHWH of hosts. But as for you, you have turned aside from the way; you have caused many to stumble by the instruction; you have corrupted the covenant of Levi, says YHWH of hosts. So I also have made you despised and abased before all the people, just as you are not keeping my ways but are showing partiality in the instruction.”

Levi and his descendants had given the Israelites instruction in God's way of living rather than the perverted instruction that the priests were giving. The instruction Levi and his descendants had given the people led them to honor and follow God's commands so they received life and peace with God and their fellow Israelites. But the instruction these rebellious priests were giving the people led them to dishonor God and not follow his commands and thus they had no peace with God.

This condemnation of the unfaithful priests should be a challenge to all believers to honor God by serving him with true gratitude for what he has given them and with the awareness that he will discipline those who are unfaithful and dishonor him and lead others to disobey by their disobedience.

2:10-12 translate as “Do we not all have one father? Has not one El created us? Why do we deal treacherously each against his brother so as to profane the covenant of our fathers? Yahudah has dealt treacherously, and an abomination has been committed in Yisrael and in Yerushalayim; for Yahudah has profaned the sanctuary of YHWH which he loves and has married the daughter of a foreign elohim. As for the man who does this, may YHWH cut off from the tents of Yaaqov everyone who awakes and answers, or who presents an offering to YHWH of hosts.”

Now God's message turns from chastising the unfaithful priests to pointing out the errors in the way Judah is living. He reminds them that they all have one father and that God has created them. So why are they dealing treacherously with each other and breaking the covenant of being family? Not only that but they have committed an abomination in Israel and Jerusalem because YHWH's sanctuary, which he loves, has been

profaned. The phrase “married the daughter of a foreign elohim” shows how the temple has been profaned. They have taken up the worship of foreign gods (elohim is a plural noun), sacrificing to them as if they were as important as YHWH. Worshiping a worthless god and then bringing a sacrifice to YHWH is an abomination because it is the same as calling YHWH just one of many gods and not the Creator of everything and the only God who has the right to be worshiped and to command what can and can’t be done. So God says that anyone who does this or agrees that it is OK to do should be cut off from the tents of Jacob by Adonai. The phrase “cut off from” was used to indicate that the people should be treated as being dead.

2:13-17 translate as “This is another thing you do: you cover the altar of YHWH with tears, with weeping and with groaning, because he no longer regards the offering or accepts it with favor from your hand. Yet you say: For what reason? Because YHWH has been a witness between you and the wife of your youth, against whom you have dealt treacherously, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. But not one has done so who has a remnant of the Elohim. And what did that one do while he was seeking a holy offspring? Take heed then to your spirit, and let no one deal treacherously against the wife of your youth. For I hate divorce, says YHWH, the El of Yisrael, and him who covers his garment with wrong, says YHWH of hosts. So take heed to your spirit that you do not deal treacherously. You have wearied YHWH with your words. Yet you say: How have we wearied Him? In that you say: Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of YHWH, and he delights in them, or: Where is the El of justice?”

God presents another thing they are doing wrong and weeping and groaning because God doesn’t accept an offering from them. They don’t understand why, so God tells them it is because they have broken their covenant with their wife by dealing treacherously with her. God cautions the people not to deal treacherously with their wives because God hates divorce and those who cover themselves with wrong. God says they have wearied him with their words – words like “everyone who does evil is good in the sight of God.”

These things God says the remnant of the tribe of Judah are doing. They are the same things people of today are still doing. And when a believer participates in the worship of something that some people call “god” and then comes to God with the idea of worshiping him also, it is an abomination to him. Many people today don’t see the difference between good and evil so they say that “good is bad and bad is good. Is it any wonder that God is not pleased with people who claim to be believers, yet don’t know the difference between good and evil or who participate in activities that are practiced by some false religion and then come to worship God?

Chapter 3

3:1-6 translate as “Behold, I am going to send my messenger, and he will clear the way before me. And the YHWH, whom you seek, will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says YHWH of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming? And who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fuller’s soap. He will sit as a smelter and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, so that they may present to YHWH offerings in righteousness. Then the offering of Yahudah and Yerushalayim will be pleasing to YHWH as in the days of old and as in former years. Then I will draw near to you for judgment; and I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers and against the adulterers and against those who swear falsely, and against those who oppress the wage earner in his wages, the widow and the orphan, and those who turn aside the alien and do not fear me, says YHWH of hosts. For I, YHWH, do not change; therefore you, O sons of Yaaqov, are not consumed.”

God has identified and pointed out to the leaders, priests, and people how they have failed to honor and obey God and called them to change their way of living or judgment would come. Here, he announces the messenger he will send to bring the judgment in the future. The messenger will come suddenly to his temple and God questions who can stand and endure his coming since he is like a refiner’s fire and like fuller’s soap (a harsh, lye based soap used to purify cloth of contaminants before it is dyed) and he will refine and purify the nation so

that the people may present offerings in righteousness that are pleasing to YHWH. And he will be a witness against those who participate in evil practices when they are judged.

3:7-12 translate as “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 YHWH of hosts. But you say: How shall we return? Will a man rob Elohim? Yet you are robbing me! But you say: How have we robbed you? In tithes and offerings. You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me, the whole nation of you! Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and test me now in this, says YHWH of hosts, if I will not open for you the windows of heaven and pour out for you a blessing until it overflows. Then I will rebuke the devourer for you, so that it will not destroy the fruits of the ground; nor will your vine in the field cast its grapes, says YHWH of hosts. All the nations will call you blessed, for you shall be a delightful land, says YHWH of hosts.”

God says that for generations the people have turned away from his statutes (commands), but he implores them to return to him (return to letting him be in control and to obedience to his will) and he will return to them (which implies blessing and life). But their thought is how can they return and go on to wonder if a man will rob God (that must seem to be an impossibility to do). God answers their thoughts by identifying that they rob him by not bringing their whole tithes and presenting unacceptable offerings. He invites them to bring their whole tithe and see if he doesn't pour out blessing until it overflows. Then all nations will call the nation of Israel blessed.

3:13-18 translate as “Your words have been arrogant against me, says YHWH. Yet you say: What have we spoken against you? You have said: It is vain to serve Elohim; and what profit is it that we have kept his charge and that we have walked in mourning before YHWH of hosts? So now we call the arrogant blessed; not only are the doers of wickedness built up but they also test Elohim and escape. Then those who feared YHWH spoke to one another, and YHWH gave attention and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before him for those who fear YHWH and who esteem his name. They will be mine, says YHWH of hosts, on the day that I prepare my own possession, and I will spare them as a man spares his own son who serves him. So you will again distinguish between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves Elohim and one who does not serve him.”

God says the people have spoken arrogant words against him, but the people ask what they have said against him. So God tells them. They have said that it is of no profit to serve him. The doers of wickedness are built up (get rich). They test Elohim (with their continued disobedience) and escape (are not judged and punished by him). Then those who give reverence to YHWH speak with each other about what the others are saying. God listens to their discussion and a book of remembrance is written about how they esteem his name and God says they will be recognized as his possession so that people will distinguish between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not. This distinction will occur when Jesus returns at the end of the Tribulation (when the OT saints are resurrected and their works judged). That will be when he rules the world from his throne in Jerusalem during the Millennium.

4:1-6 (3:19-24 in Hebrew text) translate as “For behold, the day is coming, burning like a furnace; and all the arrogant and every evildoer will be chaff; and the day that is coming will set them ablaze, says YHWH of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in his wings; and you will go forth and skip about like calves from the stall. You will tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day which I am preparing, says YHWH of hosts. Remember the Law of Moshe my servant, even the statutes and ordinances which I commanded him in Horeb for all Yisrael. Behold, I am going to send you Eliyah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of YHWH. He will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers, so that I will not come and smite the land with a curse.”

God says a day is coming when judgment will come to the arrogant and evildoers which will set them ablaze (burning as in the Lake of Fire in Revelation 20:11-15). But for those who fear (respect and honor) him, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in his wings. Some scholars say this is a description of the day of blessing the Messiah will bring and see that as the Millennium. The problem with this idea is that it is a description of an individual who has healing for people. So it must be pointing forward to Jesus as the Messiah who by his death and resurrection brings healing to those who will accept him as the Messiah and their Lord. Those who are healed (have sin's debt paid and receive forgiveness and a right relationship with God) will be so happy that they will skip around like calves that have been set free from the stalls that kept them from being free. And the wicked will be like ashes under the feet of the righteous. So, God says, remember the Law of Moses (the statutes and ordinances which God gave him on Mount Horeb, also known as Mount Sinai). Remember means to live in obedience to the Law. God then says he will send Elijah before the coming of that great and terrible day and he will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers so that God will not come and smite the land with a curse. This why the Jewish people were expecting Elijah to come during their Passover celebration every year and they would set a place for him to join them in eating the Passover meal.

We see that in Malachi God has identified for the people the error in the way they were living in disobedience of him (sinning) and encouraged them to return to letting him be God and in control of their lives. And he promised to bless them and send the Messiah, his servant, to rise and heal them and their families. After this we have 400 years without any further messages from God because he has given them everything they need to know about how to live in obedience to his will and to watch for his servant, the Messiah, to come and prepare people for his coming time of judgment of the wicked and blessing of the righteous.