

THE BOOK OF MALACHI

A. ORIENTING DATA FOR MALACHI

- Content: in six disputes with his people, Yahweh warns them of future judgments and promises redemption to the faithful
- Prophet: Malachi (“my messenger”), otherwise unknown
- Date of prophetic activity: unknown; perhaps ca. 460 B.C., just before the reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah
- Emphases: Yahweh is a covenant-keeping God and requires the same of his people; God’s people show disdain for God by their apathy and moral and religious decline; God will judge his people in justice for their halfhearted obedience

B. OVERVIEW OF MALACHI

Malachi’s oracle comes by way of six disputes between Yahweh and his people, all having the same root cause: In a time of spiritual disillusionment, Israel has grown weary of Yahweh and of keeping his covenant. The disputes come in two sets of three. The first set takes up the basic issue—their complaint that Yahweh does not love them (1:2–5), and Yahweh’s “complaint” that they have shown contempt for him (1:6–2:9; 2:10–16). In the second set, Yahweh twice takes up their complaint that he has done nothing about evil and injustice (2:17–3:5; 3:13–4:3); these two bracket Yahweh’s exposing their own form of injustice (3:6–12). At the same time they affirm that the great day of Yahweh will come indeed (3:1–4; 3:17–4:3). The book concludes (4:4–6) with words about the law (Moses) and the prophets (Elijah).

C. SPECIFIC ADVICE FOR READING MALACHI

Although one cannot be sure when Malachi prophesied, if it was just before the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, as seems likely, you would do well to review briefly what is said about these times in the “Specific Advice” for reading 1 and 2 Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah. Malachi’s book is a graphic indicator of the moral and spiritual apathy of the time, which expressed itself in various forms of contempt for Yahweh and the covenant. In fact, most of the sins mentioned in Malachi are also mentioned in Ezra and Nehemiah—mixed marriages (Mal 2:11–15/Ezra 9–10/Neh 13:23–27); failure to tithe (Mal 3:8–10/Neh 13:10–14); corrupt priests (Mal 1:6–2:9/Neh 13:1–9); and social injustice (Mal 3:5/Neh 5:1–13).

This general malaise and contempt for the covenant probably account in part for the unique form and structure of Malachi. You will see that each of the disputes tends to follow the same pattern:

- Declaration: the issue announced by Yahweh
- The people’s question: basically taking the form of “How so?”
- Yahweh’s response: reminding them of his past or coming actions, or revealing their actions that show contempt

These disputes function as a wake-up call in a time of disillusionment (see 3:14) when the returnees from Babylon felt generally abandoned by Yahweh. So rather than a court setting (as in Hosea and Micah, for example), Yahweh challenges them by means of declaration, question, and explanation.

There is a kind of progression to the disputes. They begin with Israel's questioning Yahweh's love (= compassion for and loyalty to them). To this, Yahweh responds that not only does he indeed love them (look what I did to Edom) but that there is plenty of evidence that they do not love Yahweh, in the form of contempt for the covenant by priests and people alike (offering blemished animals in sacrifice, and divorce and intermarriage with pagans). The final three disputes start the cycle again. Feeling abandoned by Yahweh, the people speak cynically about the prosperity of those who practice injustice. But, Yahweh responds, they themselves practice injustice by withholding tithes, the means of livelihood for the Levites and of provision for the poor (Num 18:21–32; Deut 14:28–29). In the final set, there are also assurances of God's coming justice—both judgment of the wicked and salvation of the (new) righteous remnant.

Thus, at the end of the Christian Old Testament (by way of the Septuagint) are prophetic words that Jesus and the New Testament writers see as speaking about his coming. Not only will God send “[his] messenger, who will prepare the way before [him]” so that “the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple” (Mal 3:1), but the final two words speak of Moses and Elijah, who make their appearance with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration.¹

¹ Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, [*How to Read the Bible Book by Book: A Guided Tour*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 262–264.