

Bible Study: Malachi

Author: Malachi, My messenger

Audience: Post-Exilic Jews in Judea

Date: c.a. 432-425 B.C.

Location: Jerusalem

Theme: Return to God, and He will return to you

Genre: prophecy

Outline

The Favor of the Lord (1:1-5)

The Sin of the Priests (1:6-14)

The Rebuke of the Lord (2:1-9)

The Sin of the People (2:10-16)

The Messenger of the Lord (2:17-3:5)

The Robbery and Riches of God (3:6-12)

The Servants of the Lord (3:13-18)

The Day of the Lord (4:1-6)

Observation

(1:1) Malachi (Heb. “My messenger”) is not a proper noun; a message to “Israel”

(1:2) Yahweh chose Jacob over his older brother Esau contrary to tradition

(1:3) Yahweh gave Israel the Promised Land; Esau got a desolate wasteland

(1:4) God will perpetually curse Edom; they rebuild, but He will tear down

(1:5) Israel will watch Edom’s destruction and give glory to God; prophetic sign

(1:6) The priests, the leaders of the people, failed to honor God; sullied His name

(1:7) They despised their sacred duty to present food offerings; self-righteousness

(1:8) They offered defective animals reflecting their disrespect for God; apathy

(1:9) Their sacrifices gained no favor; their prayers were not heard (vain religion)

(1:10) Their worship was offensive and pointless; better to stop it altogether

(1:11) Yahweh vowed that Gentile nations would honor and sacrifice to Him

(1:12) God had heard the sarcastic, disrespectful comments of the priests

(1:13) They brought sick, lame and stolen animals as offerings; disrespect

(1:14) The Gentiles respect God’s name but not His own chosen people (irony)

Interpretation

Why is this message addressed to “Israel” (1:1)?

The meaning of the term “Israel” changed over time. The 12 tribes were now co-mingled, and the terms “Israel” and “Judah” were often used interchangeably (cf. Mal 2:11, Zech 8:11-13).

Israel **1** the second name for Jacob given to him by God after his wrestling with the angel at Peniel. **2** the name of the descendants and the nation of the descendants of Jacob. **2A** the name of the nation until the death of Solomon and the split. **2B** the name used and given to the northern kingdom consisting of the 10 tribes under Jeroboam; the southern kingdom was known as Judah. **2C** the name of the nation after the return from exile.¹

¹ James Strong, *The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, H3478.

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Why did Israel doubt God's love for them (1:2)?

When the righteous suffer and the wicked seem to prosper, we are apt to question God's love. In this first disputation Malachi exposes and answers the doubts of his contemporaries. Because of their political, economic and spiritual destitution, they had come to question God's love.²

The people had returned from the Babylonian captivity more than a half century earlier. "In the absence of any subsequent marvels, there came despair born of unfulfilled hopes."³

What happened to Edom after Malachi predicted their downfall (1:4-5)?

In the fifth century, the Nabateans, an Arabian tribe, occupied Edom (located south and east of Judea) and forced the Edomites westward into a desert area later known as Idumea. In the fourth century, the Nabateans took over Idumea as well.⁴ Judas Maccabaeus later subdued them (1Macc. 5:65), and John Hyrcanus compelled them to be circumcised and incorporated into the Jewish people. The Herods were of general Edomite stock.⁵

Why was it wrong to sacrifice blind animals (1:8-10)?

Deuteronomy 15:21 forbade bringing any lame, blind, blemished, or sick animals to the altar. The priests should have been reminding the people of these ancient biblical regulations....

(1:9-10) Not only were the sacrifices ineffective, but the priests and the people were lulled into thinking that their deeds were winning God's approval. So why not shut the temple doors and be done with what was for the priests merely a nuisance? The thought may be applied to present-day churches that have ceased to be places where people worship in spirit and in truth and are merely meeting places and nothing more. It would be better for them to close down than to continue misleading those who think that what they are doing pleases God.⁶

Will Gentiles make grain offerings "in every place" (1:11)?

No. This problem is alleviated if the preposition *b^e* (usually meaning "in") before "every place" is rendered "from," as in Isaiah 21:1 (cf. *TWOT*, s.v. "*b^e*," 1:87).⁷

Application

A challenge to face: feeling abandoned by God during hard times (1:2)

A sin to avoid: falling into apathy and self righteousness (1:6-8)

² *New Bible Commentary*, s.v. Mal 1:2.

³ *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, s.v. Mal 1:2.

⁴ *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, 1:1576.

⁵ *New Bible Dictionary*, 291.

⁶ *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, s.v. Mal 1:8-10.

⁷ *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, 1:1578.

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Observation

(2:2) God warned them to repent before their punishment got any worse (Num 18:32)

(2:3) If not, God will smear the offal of their sacrifices on their faces, remove them with it

(2:4) This is the second prophetic sign that would validate the messenger (Deut 18:21-22)

(2:5) Levi commended as an example; he revered God and stood in awe of His name

(2:6) He walked with God in peace and uprightness and turned many from iniquity

(2:7) A priest should preserve knowledge, provide sound instruction in God's word

(2:8) They turned aside from the way, caused many to stumble by their instruction

(2:9) God caused them to be despised and abased before all the people (1Sam 2:30)

(2:10) Israel had one father (God/Jacob) and one Creator but sinned against their kin

(2:11) Judah inter-married with unbelievers, the daughter of a foreign god (Num 25:1-3)

(2:12) God will curse (cut off, utterly destroy) those who commit this sin (Deut 7:3-4)

(2:13) They knew their offerings were rejected but didn't understand why (1Pet 3:7)

(2:14) They had betrayed their marriage covenant; God was a witness against them

(2:15) They should not have dealt treacherously with the wife of their youth

(2:16) He (God) hates divorce and those who cloth themselves with injustice

(2:17) They accused God of indifference toward sin, supporting the wicked

Interpretation

Why would God rebuke the descendants of the priests (2:3)?

The NIV offers two alternative readings of v.3. The first problem is with the verb *goer* ("rebuke"). The translation follows the MT, but the relatively rare verb was read *gora* (with the last two consonants reversed) by the LXX and others. That change gives the reading "cut off."

The word for "descendants" (*zera*) can be rendered "seed." If the vowel pointing is adjusted to *zeroa*, the meaning is "arm" or "shoulder," which the LXX has.⁸

To "cut off an arm" was a metaphor for rendering one powerless (cf. 1 Sam. 2:31 NKJV).

⁸ *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, s.v. Mal 2:3 (Marginal Notes).

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What is the covenant of Levi (2:4)?

Throughout vv.4-6, Levi is spoken of ideally (e.g., Deut 33:8-11). The covenant with Levi must be the provisions of Numbers 3:45-48 and 18:21-24, while the "covenant of peace" of v.5 harks back to Numbers 25:12 and Phinehas the grandson of Aaron.⁹

What does "everyone who awakes and answers" mean (2:12 NASB)?

The phrase *'er w'e'oneh* is difficult to translate. The NIV translates it "whoever he may be." The NASB, which is more literal, reads, "...everyone who awakes and answers," and the KJV has "the master and the scholar." Some translate it "who gives testimony" (NIV marg.). Perhaps this was a proverbial expression, whose meaning is not clear today.¹⁰

What is the meaning of the Hebrew in Mal 2:15?

This is the most difficult verse in the book. NIV's rendering, though difficult, seems best to fit the Hebrew of this verse and its context in the chapter. In effect v.15 says that God made monogamous marriage and intends unions to last. Apparently the Israelites not only were marrying foreign women but were also divorcing their Israelite wives in the process. So they were really guilty of two sins—divorce and intermarriage with foreigners.¹¹

Why did God permit divorce if He hates it (2:16)?

Divorce was allowed but actually the instructions in that passage (Deut. 24:1-4) were given to protect the wife if a divorce should occur. Jesus taught that those concessions by Moses were given because of the hardness of people's hearts, but He emphasized that God does not approve of divorce (Matt. 19:7-9), though some Bible scholars see some bases for exceptions to this ideal. (cf. comments on Matt. 5:31-32; 19:1-12; Mark 10:1-12; and 1 Cor. 7:10-24.)¹²

Application

A challenge to face: religious leaders who fail (2:1-9)

A sin to avoid: marrying outside the faith (2:10-12)

A command to obey: do not betray your spouse (2:15)

⁹ *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, s.v. Mal 2:3-6.

¹⁰ *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, 1:1580.

¹¹ *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, s.v. Mal 2:15.

¹² *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, 1:1582.

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Observation

(3:1) Yahweh said, "I will send My messenger (*malachi*) to clear the way before Me."

(3:1) The Lord (*ha'adon*), the Messenger of the covenant, will come to His temple/palace

(3:2) He is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; He cleanses everything (Matt 3:12)

(3:3) He will purify the Levites; they will present offerings in righteousness (Jer 33:18-22)

(3:4) Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to Yahweh (millennial)

(3:5) Then I will draw near to you (Israel) for judgment, says Yahweh; all sin suppressed

(3:6) Yahweh does not change, so the sons of Jacob are not consumed (Deut 4:30-31)

(3:7) Return to Me, and I will return to you (merciful), but they don't see their sin

(3:8) They were robbing God by withholding tithes and offerings (Num 18:21-32)

(3:9) The whole nation was cursed for robbing God; sin brings curses (Deut 28:15)

(3:10) Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, and test (*bachan*) Yahweh in this

(3:10) Promise #1: I will open the windows of heaven and pour out a blessing (rain)

(3:11) Promise #2: I will rebuke the devourer for you so that it will not destroy (harvest)

(3:12) Promise #3: All the nations will call you blessed; you shall be a delightful land

(3:13) The people spoke against God but were oblivious of their sin; self-righteousness

(3:14) Their accusation: It is futile to serve God, keep His charge, and walk in mourning

(3:15) Furthermore, the wicked prosper; they test (*bachan*) God and escape punishment

(3:16) Those who respect Yahweh spoke to each other; God took note of it (Mt 12:36)

(3:17) They will be God's special treasure, and He will spare them as a son (Rev 21:1-8)

(3:18) You will repent (*shuv*) and distinguish between the righteous and the wicked

Interpretation

Who are the two messengers (3:1)?

The first messenger (*malachi*), who clears the way before Yahweh, is John the Baptist (Matt 11:10, Mark 1:2, Luke 7:27). The messenger of the covenant is the Lord Jesus Christ (Luke 22:20). Thus, the writers of the New Testament identified Jesus as "The Lord" (*ha'adon*) and as Yahweh (cf. Isa 40:3, John 1:23, 29-30).

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What was the law of tithing that the Israelites were breaking (3:8)?

The tithe was literally a 10th of all produce and livestock which the people possessed (Lev 27:30, 32). A tithe was to be given to the Levites who in turn were to give a tithe of the tithe to the priests (Num 18:21-32). The Israelites were also to bring a tithe of their produce and animals and eat it with the Levites before the Lord in Jerusalem as an act of festal worship (Deut 12:5-18; 14:22-26). Also every third year a tithe was to be stored up in the towns for Levites, strangers, widows, and orphans (Deut 14:27-29)... If the Levites and priests would not receive the tithes and offerings, they would have to turn to other means of supporting themselves. As a result, the temple ministry would suffer.¹³

Under the New Covenant, Jesus Christ is our High Priest according to the order of Melchizedek (Heb 6:20); Christians tithe to the Lord, who has in turn directed the church to support the ministry financially (1 Cor 9:14, Gal 6:6).

Doesn't the Bible say that we are not to put God to the test (3:10)?

Basically, there are two ways to test or prove God. The first is to obey Him and receive His blessings; the second is to sin against Him with a disrespectful attitude and dare Him to react. Common sense would dictate the former, and God forbids the latter. Moses wrote, "You shall not tempt the LORD your God as you tempted Him in Massah" (Deut 6:16); Israel grumbled against Moses at Massah because there was no water and tempted God by asking, "Is the LORD among us or not?" (Ex 17:7).

What is the Book of Remembrance (3:16)?

A book or scroll of remembrance (Heb. *sepher ha zikkaron*) referred to the historical records of a people (e.g., Ex 17:14; Est 6:1). Jesus warned that people will have to give an accounting for every careless word in the Day of Judgment (Mt 12:36-37). In the Judgment, books (plural) are opened that list the deeds of humanity (Rev 20:12).

Application

A verse to memorize: For I, the LORD, do not change; so you are not consumed (3:6)

A promise to claim: Return to Me, and I will return to you (3:7)

A verse to memorize: Will a man rob God? Yet you are robbing Me! (3:8)

A condition to meet: Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse (3:10)

A challenge to face: Avoiding spiritual blindness and self-righteousness (3:13)

An example to follow: Those who revere the LORD and who esteem His name (3:16)

¹³ *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, 1:1584.

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Observation

(4:1) “The Day” will come when every evildoer will be burned up (i.e., the lake of fire)

(4:2) “The Day” will bring healing and happiness for those who revere God (Isa 65:17-19)

(4:3) Those who revere God will walk over the ashes of the wicked (Rev 21:1-8)

(4:4) Remember the Law of Moses which God gave him for all Israel (Matt 5:17-20)

(4:5) Yahweh will send Elijah the prophet before the day of the Lord

(4:6) He will reconcile fathers and their children (possibly alienated by divorce)

(4:6) Otherwise, God will smite the land with utter destruction (*herem*)

Interpretation

Will the wicked suffer forever in this fire (4:1)?

No. The wicked will be “like chaff” which is consumed in the fire. Further, that day will “set them ablaze” where *lihat* is the Piel Perfect 3ms form of *lahat* meaning to set ablaze, burn up, or consume with fire. The fire will totally consume them leaving no root or branch (i.e., no body parts). They will literally “be ashes” (*yih^e yu ’eper*) under the feet of the righteous (3:3).

Was John the Baptist the fulfillment of the prophecy about Elijah (Mal 4:5-6)?

Before John the Baptist was born, an angel of the Lord predicted that he would minister “in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (Luke 1:17). This would seem to put together the two prophecies (Mal. 3:1 and 4:5-6) and to see John as fulfilling both of them.

However, while he freely admitted that he was the one who prepared the way for the Lord (Isa. 40:3; Mal. 3:1), John expressly denied that he was Elijah (John 1:21-23). Even when Jesus called John “the Elijah who was to come,” He conditioned that designation with the phrase, “if you are willing to accept it” (Matt. 11:14)... Jesus, speaking apparently after John’s death (cf. Matt. 14:1-2), affirmed that “Elijah comes and will restore all things” (Matt. 17:11). This future expectation indicates that Malachi 4:5-6 was *not* fulfilled in the ministry of John. Israel did not

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accept John the Baptist as the Elijah-like restorer of all things, so another Elijah-like forerunner is yet to come before the day of the Lord.

However, Jesus went on to say, “Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him” (Matt. 17:12), and the disciples understood He was talking about John the Baptist (Matt. 17:13). The solution to all this seems to be that though John did not fulfill Malachi 4:5-6 (for Elijah is yet to come), Elijah was a type of John in that there is a great deal of similarity between Elijah in 4:5-6 and the messenger (John the Baptist) in 3:1.

It is difficult to determine whether the Elijah to come is Elijah himself (as possibly indicated in Matt. 17:11) or someone in the spirit and power of Elijah (as John was, so that Christ referred to him as simply Elijah, Matt. 17:12)... The most likely NT reference to this future Elijah-like ministry is Revelation 11:1-13, which speaks of the two witnesses in the Tribulation.¹⁴

Application

A verse to memorize: For behold, the day is coming, burning like a furnace (4:1)

A command to obey: remember the Law of Moses (4:4)

A verse to memorize: Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet (4:5-6)

An example to follow: reconciliation of fathers and their children (4:6)

| Post-Exilic Israel | Modern Christianity |
|------------------------------------|---|
| “How have You loved us?” | Post 9/11, “Where is God?” |
| Corrupt & faithless ministry | Sexual immorality & atheism in the pulpits |
| Dishonoring God’s name | Blasphemous titles (e.g., Reverend, Father) |
| Sacrilegious worship | Sabbath breaking & idolatry in the churches |
| Sacrilegious offerings | Swindling parishioners; fleecing the flock |
| Treacherous divorce & broken homes | Rampant divorce & absent fathers |
| Illegal marriages with unbelievers | Illicit marriages with deviants |
| Cheating on tithes & offerings | Average Christian giving = 2 to 3% |
| Spiritually blind & self-righteous | Spiritually blind & self-righteous |

¹⁴ *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, 1:1588.