

## Book of Malachi

**Title:** The title is derived from the prophecy's author, Malachi. With this last work in the Minor Prophets, God closes the Old Testament canon historically and prophetically.

**Author – Date:** The name Malachi means “My Messenger”. Nothing is known of the personal life of the prophet. This has given rise to a number of theories concerning him. Because the Hebrew language, like Greek, has only one word that can mean either messenger or angel, some of the church fathers suggested that Malachi was really an angel incarnate. Other scholars have taken Malachi to be a pseudonym for Ezra, Nehemiah, or Zerubbabel. Still others have considered Malachi to be merely a general term for an anonymous prophet, and not a personal name at all. But there is no historical basis for any of these suggestions, nor are there any precedents for them in the rest of canonical literature. Some have supposed that since the priesthood occupies such a prominent place in the book, that Malachi must have been a priest. The simplest and best view is to consider Malachi as the name of the last prophet in Israel. The fact that nothing is known of his personal lineage or history is not uncommon among the prophets. Once again, the message to be conveyed is much more important than the messenger. The messenger is obviously adequate for the task committed to him.

The probable place from which the prophecy originated was Jerusalem at a location near the temple. This is even more likely if Malachi was a priest.

The purpose of Malachi is to deliver stern rebukes to the people and priests, to call them to repentance, and to promise future blessing. His theme is God's love for Israel, despite the sins of the priests and people.

Looking solely at internal evidence, the date of the prophecy points (to the late fifth century B.C.), most likely during Nehemiah's return to Persia (ca. 433 – 424 B.C.; compare Neh. 5:14; 13:6). Sacrifices were being made at the second temple (1:7-10; 3:8), which was finished (in 516 B.C.; compare Ezra 6:13-15). Many years had passed since then as the priests had increasingly become complacent and corrupt (1:6 to 2:9). Malachi's reference to “governor” (1:8), speaks of the time of Persian dominance in Judah when Nehemiah was revisiting Persia (Neh. 13:6), while his emphasis on the law (4:4), coincides with a similar focus by Ezra and Nehemiah (compare Ezra 7:14, 25-26; Neh. 8:18). They shared other concerns as well, such as marriages to foreign wives (2:11-15; compare Ezra chapters 9 and 10; Neh. 13:23-27), withholding of tithes (3:8-10; compare Neh. 13:10-14), and social injustice (3:5; compare Neh. 5:1-13). Nehemiah came to Jerusalem (in 445 B.C.), to rebuild the wall, and returned to Persia (in 433 B.C.). He later returned to Israel (ca. 424 B.C.), to deal with the sins Malachi described (Neh. 13:6). So it is likely that Malachi was written during the period of Nehemiah's absence, almost a century after Haggai and Zechariah began to prophesy. Similar to (Rev. chapters 2 and 3), in which Christ writes what He thinks about the conditions of the churches, here God writes through Malachi to impress upon Israel His thoughts about the nation.

**Historical Setting:** Malachi was almost an unknown, except for this book that he penned. He used the expression "Ye say" instead of "Thus saith the Lord". His book shows us a picture of the degradation in the land at the closing of the Old Testament. He also, gives hope for the future in

Messiah. He speaks out against the priesthood, as well as against these ungrateful people of God. He prophesied about the time of Nehemiah.

Malachi is later than Haggai and Zechariah. In those books the rebuilding of the temple is the central concern. We know (from 1:7 and 3:10), that not only had the temple been finished in Malachi's day, but it had been in use for some time, and sin was corrupting the worship that took place in it. Further, the book of Malachi must have been written after Nehemiah's first arrival in Jerusalem in the thirty second year of Artaxerxes Longimanus (in 444 B.C.), probably after the walls had been rebuilt around the city, for Malachi addresses the same sins noted in Nehemiah: the divorcing of Jewish wives and marrying heathen women (compare 3:8-10 with Nehemiah 13:10-14).

Nehemiah was recalled to the Persian court (in 433 B.C.), and another governor, who seems to have been a Persian governor, was placed over Palestine (compare 13:6).

Most likely, Malachi was written just before Nehemiah's second return to Jerusalem or during his presence there. Malachi ministered in support of Nehemiah's ministry, just as Haggai and Zechariah had ministered in support of Ezra and Zerubbabel nearly a hundred years earlier. The prophecy was probably written sometime between (433 and 425. B.C.).

"After Malachi, the prophetic voice was silent for some four hundred years. This fact makes it necessary for even the most destructive critic to admit that the hundreds of prophecies concerning the coming of our Lord are what they claim to be, Prophecy, and not the deceitful writing of history in poetical form.

Malachi has been called the Socrates of the prophets because he uses that style specialists in rhetoric call dialectic, "investigation through discussion and reasoning." The dialectic form used in the prophecy became a popular teaching style in later Judaism. The prophecy is a testimony to the graciousness of God in condescending to answer man's foolish and childish statements.

**Background – Setting:** Only about 50,000 exiles had returned to Judah from Babylon (538-536 B.C.). The temple had been rebuilt under the leadership of Zerubbabel (516 B.C.) and the sacrificial system renewed. Ezra had returned (in 458 B.C.), after being back in the land of Palestine for only a century. The ritual of the Jews' religious routine led to hard heartedness toward God's great love for them and to widespread departure from His law by both people and priest.

As over two millennia of Old Testament history since Abraham concluded, none of the glorious promises of the Abrahamic, Davidic, and New Covenants had been fulfilled in their ultimate sense. Although there had been a few high points in Israel's history, e.g., Joshua, David, and Josiah, the Jews had seemingly lost all opportunity to receive God's favor since less than 100 years after returning from captivity, they had already sunk to a depth of sin that exceeded the former iniquities which brought on the Assyrian and Babylonian deportations. Beyond this, the long anticipated Messiah had not arrived and did not seem to be in sight.

So, Malachi wrote the capstone prophecy of the Old Testament in which he delivered God's message of judgment on Israel for their continuing sin and God's promise that one day in the future, when the Jews would repent, Messiah would be revealed and God's covenant promises would be fulfilled.

There were over 400 years of divine silence, with only Malachi's words ringing condemnation in their ears, before another prophet arrived with a message from God. That was John the Baptist preaching, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" (Matthew 3:2). Messiah had come.

**Historical – Theological Themes:** The Lord repeatedly referred to His covenant with Israel reminding them, for His opening words, of the unfaithfulness to His love/marriage relationship with them. God's love for His people pervades the book.

Apparently the promises by the former prophets of the coming Messiah who would bring final deliverance and age-long blessings, and the encouragement from the recent promises of Haggai and Zechariah, had only made the people and their leaders more resolute in their complacency.

They thought that this love relationship could be maintained by formal ritual alone, no matter how they lived. In a penetrating rebuke of both priests and people, the prophet reminds them that the Lord's coming, which they were seeking, would be in judgment to refine, purify and purge.

The Lord not only wanted outward compliance with the law, but an inward acceptance as well. The prophet assaults the corruption, wickedness and false security by directing his judgments at their hypocrisy, infidelity, compromise, divorce, false worship and arrogance.

Malachi set forth his prophecy in the form of a dispute, employing the question and answer method. The Lord's accusations against His people were frequently met by cynical questions from the people. At other times, the prophet presented himself as God's advocate in a lawsuit, posing rhetorical questions to the people based on their defiant criticisms.

Malachi indicted the false priests and the people on at least 6 counts of willful sin:

- (1) Repudiating God's love (1:2-5);
- (2) Refusing God His due honor (1:6 - 2:9);
- (3) Rejecting God's faithfulness (2:10 - 16);
- (4) Redefining God's righteousness (2:17 - 3:6);
- (5) Robbing God's riches (3:7-12);
- (6) Reviling God's grace (3:13-15).

There are three interludes in which Malachi rendered God's judgment:

- (1) To the priests, (2:1-9);
- (2) To the nation (3:1-6);
- (3) To the remnant (3:16 - 4:6).