

**4**

**MALACHI**

## Introduction

Scholars are agreed that the Book of Malachi comes from the period after the return from exile. He speaks of a 'governor'(1:8), not a king, and there is a functioning temple (1:6 - 2:3). The book itself makes no explicit connections with historical events, and the matter covered is of such a general nature that it could apply to any time in the post-exilic period when Judah was under Persian control.

However, the connections between the concerns of Malachi and the concerns expressed in the Book of Nehemiah, yet his apparent ignorance of Nehemiah's divorce legislation (see Nehemiah 13:23-27), suggest that Malachi may fit best in the middle of the fifth century, in the early period of Nehemiah's governorship. Four areas can be named. There is the concern to provide for temple sacrifices (Malachi 1:6-14; see Nehemiah 10:32-39; 13:31). There is concern for tithes (Malachi 3:8-12; see Nehemiah 10:37-39; 13:10-14). There is the concern about appropriate marriage partners (Malachi 2:10-12; see Nehemiah 11:23-27; also Ezra 9-10). Both Malachi and Nehemiah object to the way the disadvantaged are exploited (Malachi 3:5; see Nehemiah 5:1-13).

However, this having been said, the content of Malachi is such that precision in dating is not a significant factor in interpreting the text.

Malachi's focus on the temple, the cult and the priesthood is understandable when we remember that after the exile it was the temple that became the social and religious centre of community life in Judah. Prior to the exile the temple was primarily an adjunct to the king's palace, so that the public frequented the temple only on important occasions.

Malachi's passion for justice, including his concern for the widows, orphans and labourers, takes us to the core of Yahwism and the reason for the very existence of Judah as a people in a covenant relationship with YHWH.

As one would expect from a prophet, Malachi's central focus is on the person and the presence and action of YHWH: YHWH's sovereignty and his choice of Israel. The vision of the Isaiah School in exile, the vision of Ezekiel and the expectations of Haggai and Zechariah failed to materialise. In spite of this, Malachi continues to inspire trust in God's special covenant with Israel. To enjoy the blessings YHWH wants for Judah, there had to be a change of mind and heart. The prophet felt called to encourage this.

### Inspired by Malachi?

Malachi is critical of priests who do not remain faithful to their vocation (2:4-9; see 3:3-5). He is critical, too, of those who are not faithful to their marriage vows (2:13-16).

Though the unjust appear to prosper (3:15), divine justice will ultimately prevail (4:1-6). God will not forget those who revere him. They are his 'special possession'(3:16-18; see 1:2).

Malachi's words are introduced as an 'oracle' (מְאִסָּא, māśśā'). Nahum and Habakkuk, who spoke for God in the final years of the 7th century are introduced in the same way, as are the 5th century additions to the scroll of Zechariah (see Zechariah 9:1; 12:1). Only here and in Zechariah is the term 'oracle' combined with 'word of YHWH'.

**<sup>1</sup>An oracle. The word of YHWH to Israel by Malachi.**

Those responsible for organising the scroll insist that in listening to the words of Malachi we are listening to 'the word of YHWH'.

'Malachi' (מְלֵאכִי, mal'ākî) means 'my messenger'. This has led to the suggestion that it may not be the name of the prophet, but rather a title to describe the anonymous prophet's role. The Greek Septuagint Version understands it this way.

Haggai is regularly called a 'prophet' (eg 1:1), but he is also called a 'messenger' (1:13). The term echoes the frequent mention in the Biblical record of God communicating through an 'angel' (מְלַאכֵי, mal'āk) of YHWH' (see, for example, Zechariah 1:11).

Though Malachi is in fact addressing the post-exilic community in Yehud, the editors want the reader to see his words as addressed to his contemporaries as representing the whole of God's people. Hence 'to Israel' (see also the Epilogue, Malachi 4:4).

YHWH loves Jacob

**<sup>2</sup>I have loved you, says YHWH.**

**But you say, “How have you loved us?” Is not Esau Jacob’s brother? says YHWH. Yet I have loved Jacob <sup>3</sup>but I have hated Esau; I have made his hill country a desolation and his heritage a desert for jackals.**

**<sup>4</sup>If Edom says, “We are shattered but we will rebuild the ruins,” YHWH of hosts says: They may build, but I will tear down, until they are called the wicked country, the people with whom YHWH is angry forever.**

**<sup>5</sup>Your own eyes shall see this, and you shall say, “Great is YHWH beyond the borders of Israel!”**

Everything that is asserted by Malachi is to be read in the light of the opening statement: ‘I have loved (אָהַב, ’āhab) you’.

It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that YHWH set his heart on you and chose you ... It was because YHWH loved you.

– Deuteronomy 7:7-8 (also Hosea 11:1)

The fact that Judah is dependent on Persia is enough to warrant the question: ‘How have you loved us?’ The delay in the fulfilment of promises heralded by earlier prophets could provide another reason.

In his response YHWH compares Jacob (Judah) and Esau (Edom). We are meant to recall the ancient rivalry between the two sons of Isaac (see Genesis 26, 27, 33). God ‘loves’ Jacob (compare Isaiah 41:8; Amos 3:2), but ‘hates’ Esau. It is essential to recall that neither word in itself denotes feeling. To love is to choose. To hate is not to choose. Judah is being assured that it is the object of God’s special choice. A sign of this is the desolate state of Edom in the middle of the fifth century. The Nabatean Arabs had moved into Edom’s traditional land (see map page 15).

At the time of the sacking of Jerusalem (587), Judah was a ‘desolation’ (see Jeremiah 9:11; 10:22). Edom played a role in this (see Obadiah, and Joel 3:19). But Judah has been re-built. Not so Edom. Judah’s arch rival has occupied southern Judah (the Negeb). Judah needs reassuring that YHWH’s anger against Edom is already a sign that YHWH is active in supporting Judah. Moreover his anger will not come to an end! The expression ‘YHWH of hosts’ underlines YHWH’s power, adding to the assurance that YHWH’s purpose will come about.

Malachi encourages the community to praise YHWH, who does great things for Israel’, and whose power extends through the whole world.

Note that ‘I have loved Jacob but hated Esau’ (verse 2) is quoted by Paul in Romans 9:13.

Malachi's second oracle (1:6 - 2:9) is a rebuke of the faithless priests. Verses 6-11 accuse the priests of failing to honour God – something sons are expected to do for their fathers, and slaves for their masters.

Of particular concern are abuses in the offering of sacrifices. The text assumes the Deuteronomic and Priestly laws, which require that animals selected for sacrifice must be without blemish (see Deuteronomy 15:19-23; Leviticus 1:3; 22:17-25).

Note the reference to the 'governor' (הַמֶּלֶךְ, pehâ, verse 8). We are in the period after the return from exile.

In verse 9 Malachi is being sarcastic. The effects of priestly intercession should be seen in divine favour. The absence of this favour highlights the hypocrisy of the priests.

Verse 11 appears to be making the point that YHWH's glory, power and greatness do not depend on what happens in the temple. Is Malachi here speaking of Jews living 'among the nations', whose worship (compared to that in Jerusalem) is acceptable? Is he saying that the worship non-Jews are offering, even if they do not know it, is being offered to the one God of all nations? Or is he speaking of the way things will be when history reaches its goal?

In verse 14 the accusation turns from the priests to the laity who provide the animals for sacrifice.

Verses 11 and 14 answer the question posed in verse 6: 'where is the honour due to me?'

**6A son honours his father, and servants their master. If then I am a father, where is the honour due me? And if I am a master, where is the respect due me? says YHWH of hosts to you, O priests, who despise my name. You say, "How have we despised your name?" 7By offering polluted food on my altar. And you say, "How have we polluted you?" By thinking that YHWH's table may be despised. 8When you offer blind animals in sacrifice, is that not wrong? And when you offer those that are lame or sick, is that not wrong? Try presenting that to your governor; will he be pleased with you or show you favour? says YHWH of hosts. 9And now implore the favour of God, that he may be gracious to us. The fault is yours. Will he show favour to any of you? says YHWH of hosts. 10Oh, that someone among you would shut the temple doors, so that you would not kindle fire on my altar in vain! I have no pleasure in you, says YHWH of hosts, and I will not accept an offering from your hands. 11For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name is great among the nations, and in every place incense is offered to my name, and a pure offering; for my name is great among the nations, says YHWH of hosts.**

**12But you profane it when you say that the Lord's table is polluted, and the food for it may be despised. 13"What a weariness this is," you say, and you sniff at me, says YHWH of hosts. You bring what has been taken by violence or is lame or sick, and this you bring as your offering! Shall I accept that from your hand? says YHWH. 14Cursed be the cheat who has a male in the flock and vows to give it, and yet sacrifices to the Lord what is blemished; for I am a great King, says YHWH of hosts, and my name is revered among the nations.**

**<sup>1</sup>And now, O priests, this command is for you. <sup>2</sup>If you will not listen, if you will not lay it to heart to give glory to my name, says YHWH of hosts, then I will send the curse on you and I will curse your blessings; indeed I have already cursed them, because you do not lay it to heart.**

**<sup>3</sup>I will rebuke your offspring, and spread dung on your faces, the dung of your offerings, and I will put you out of my presence.**

**<sup>4</sup>Know, then, that I have sent this command to you, that my covenant with Levi may hold, says YHWH of hosts. <sup>5</sup>My covenant was with him, a covenant of life and well-being, which I gave him; this called for reverence, and he revered me and stood in awe of my name. <sup>6</sup>True instruction was in his mouth, and no wrong was found on his lips. He walked with me in integrity and uprightness, and he turned many from iniquity.**

**<sup>7</sup>For the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and people should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is the messenger of YHWH of hosts.**

**<sup>8</sup>But you have turned aside from the way; you have caused many to stumble by your instruction; you have corrupted the covenant of Levi, says YHWH of hosts, <sup>9</sup>and so I make you despised and abased before all the people, inasmuch as you have not kept my ways but have shown partiality in your instruction.**

The judgment brought down against the priests is described in terms of the traditional blessings and curses of the covenant (see Deuteronomy 27-28). Malachi's hope, of course, is that the priests will heed his message, repent, and so avoid the judgment that must eventuate if they continue as they are.

In verses 4-6 Malachi goes back to Levi, the founder of the priestly tribe, and describes, in ideal terms, the essence of the 'covenant' that YHWH made with his priests (verses 4-5; compare Jeremiah 33:21; Deuteronomy 10:9; 18:5; 21:5). Malachi shows no interest in the distinction between priests and Levites – a distinction important to the priestly code, but not to the Deuteronomists. Levi 'walked with' God (verse 6; see Enoch, Genesis 5:22, and Noah, Genesis 6:9). So should his descendants.

Priests are set aside for more than the offering of sacrifice. In verse 7 we are told that they are to 'guard' (שָׁמַר, šāmar) knowledge. People are to come to the priests to 'seek instruction' (תּוֹרָה, tōrah) from YHWH, for the priest is 'the messenger' (מַלְאָךְ, mal'āk) of YHWH of hosts'.

In verses 8-9 Malachi accuses the priests of failing to carry out these sacred duties in a manner that is in keeping with God's ways.

In his third oracle (verses 10-16), Malachi compares God to a father. He is following the tradition expressed in Deuteronomy 32:6 and Jeremiah 31:9. In the same passage Jeremiah also refers to God as ‘creator’. The new covenant promised in Jeremiah has not yet eventuated.

Five times in this oracle we have the word ‘faithless’(verses 10, 11, 14, 15, 16).

In verse 11 Malachi’s point seems to be that instead of honouring their marriage covenant with God, Judah ‘has married the daughter of a foreign god’. Instead of honouring their love-covenant with YHWH, they have given their love and devotion to another god.

Verses 14-16 may be continuing this metaphor. If so God is criticising Judah for being unfaithful to the covenant.

If the words are not meant metaphorically, Malachi is explaining that the lack of divine blessings in the community is because of infidelity to marriage. God made the married couple one (Genesis 1:27). Malachi underlines God’s purpose in instituting marriage. God gives life through the gift of his ‘spirit’. God wants those who, through marriage, have become ‘one flesh’(Genesis 2:24), to be a faithful people (‘a seed of God’).

God’s purpose is communion. God rejects (‘hates’) divorce (see commentary on 1:3). He hates the violence worn like a garment by those who faithlessly divorce their wives.

This does not contradict Deuteronomy 24:1-4, for there are situations in which there is no mutual ‘faith’. Malachi cannot be quoted as calling ‘faithless’ the breaking of a union where there is no faith.

**<sup>10</sup>Have we not all one father? Has not one God created us? Why then are we faithless to one another, profaning the covenant of our ancestors?**

**<sup>11</sup>Judah has been faithless, and abomination has been committed in Israel and in Jerusalem; for Judah has profaned the sanctuary of YHWH, which he loves, and has married the daughter of a foreign god. <sup>12</sup>May YHWH cut off from the tents of Jacob anyone who does this—any to witness or answer, or to bring an offering to YHWH of hosts. <sup>13</sup>And this you do as well: You cover YHWH’s altar with tears, with weeping and groaning because he no longer regards the offering or accepts it with favour at your hand. <sup>14</sup>You ask, “Why does he not?”**

**Because YHWH was a witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. <sup>15</sup>Surely God made you one? Both flesh and spirit are his. And what does the one God desire? A seed of God. So look to yourselves, and do not let anyone be faithless to the wife of his youth. <sup>16</sup>For I hate divorce, says YHWH, the God of Israel, and covering one’s garment with violence, says YHWH of hosts. So take heed to yourselves and do not be faithless.**

Where does one look for justice?

**2:17 You have wearied YHWH with your words. Yet you say, "How have we wearied him?" By saying, "All who do evil are good in the sight of YHWH, and he delights in them." Or by asking, "Where is the God of judgment?"**

**3:1 See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight – indeed, he is coming, says YHWH of hosts.**

**2 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 fullers' soap.**

**3 He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to YHWH in righteousness. 4 Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to YHWH as in the days of old and as in former years.**

**5 Then I will draw near to you for judgment; I will be swift to bear witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely,**

**against those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien,**

**and do not fear me, says YHWH of hosts.**

In his fourth oracle (2:17 - 3:5) Malachi confronts the sceptics in the community who have given up on the idea of divine justice. He accuses them of having 'wearied YHWH' (verse 17; compare Isaiah 43:24). They do not directly deny that God is just, but they claim YHWH sees those who do evil as being good. He even delights in them.

Things may look like that at present. Those who do evil may appear to be prospering (compare Jeremiah 12:1), but 'the Lord' is coming, and is sending before him a 'messenger'. They have God's word for it. 'Indeed, he is coming' (verse 1). They are to 'prepare the way' (see Isaiah 40:3; 57:14; 62:10). What this means is the subject of the following oracle (3:6-12).

Malachi 3:1 is quoted by Mark 1:2 and Matthew 11:10 in relation to John the Baptist and Jesus.

Malachi shows no interest in a general judgment. His focus is on YHWH's judgment of Judah. He will come to burn away (purify) whatever is not of God.

Malachi has just been accusing the priests. He asserts now that YHWH will come to purify them, 'until they present offerings to YHWH in righteousness' (verse 3).

In verse 5 judgment is widened out to include those who disregard the Torah: sorcerers, adulterers and those who lie under oath.

In line with the essence of Yahwism, divine justice will come down especially on those named in the second part of verse 5.

These various categories of evil are summed up in 'those who do not fear YHWH'. They have lost the sense of the sacred, and the awe that should characterize their behaviour.

Malachi's fifth oracle (3:6-12) is a call to repentance. The opening words link back with 1:2-5. The God who has not changed is the God who loves the 'children of Jacob'. It is this love that is the reason why they have not perished, in spite of their inconstancy (verse 7).

The call to 'return' is a quotation from Zechariah 1:3.

This time YHWH's complaint is that they are failing to bring to the temple a tithe of their livestock and of their harvest (verses 8-10; see Deuteronomy 14:22-29; 26:12-15; Leviticus 27:30-33; Numbers 18:21-32). Nehemiah covers the same issue (see Nehemiah 10:37-39; 12:44; 13:5; 13:10-13). Tithes were an essential element in the maintenance of the temple and the priests who served in it. Their experience of depression is the curse of the covenant (see Deuteronomy 28:45) for not keeping their side of the commitment.

Verses 10-11 promise blessings upon them if they are faithful to this command. They will see that YHWH passes the test. His justice will be apparent to all, even now, before the final day of vindication comes.

It will be apparent also to the foreign nations that Judah's God delights in his people, and that their land is 'a land of delight' (verse 12).

**<sup>6</sup>Indeed, I YHWH. I have not changed; therefore you, O children of Jacob, have not perished.**

**<sup>7</sup>Ever since the days of your ancestors 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?"**

**<sup>8</sup>Will anyone rob God? Yet you are robbing me! But you say, "How are we robbing you?" In your tithes and offerings! <sup>9</sup>You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me – the whole nation of you! <sup>10</sup>Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says YHWH of hosts;**

**see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing.**

**<sup>11</sup>I will rebuke the locust for you, so that it will not destroy the produce of your soil; and your vine in the field shall not be barren, says YHWH of hosts.**

**<sup>12</sup>Then all nations will count you happy, for you will be a land of delight, says YHWH of hosts.**

**<sup>13</sup>You have spoken harsh words against me, says YHWH. Yet you say, "How have we spoken against you?" <sup>14</sup>You have said, "It is vain to serve God. What do we profit by keeping his command or by going about as mourners before YHWH of hosts? <sup>15</sup>Now we count the arrogant happy; evildoers not only prosper, but when they put God to the test they escape."**

**<sup>16</sup>Then those who revered YHWH spoke with one another. YHWH took note and listened, and a book of remembrance was written before him of those who revered YHWH and thought on his name. <sup>17</sup>They shall be mine, says YHWH of hosts, my special possession on the day when I act, and I will spare them as parents spare their children who serve them. <sup>18</sup>Then once more you shall see the difference between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve him.**

**<sup>41</sup>See, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble; the day that comes shall burn them up, says YHWH of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. <sup>2</sup>But for you who revere my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall. <sup>3</sup>And you shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet, on the day when I act, says YHWH of hosts.**

This last oracle insists that there will be a final reckoning, when divine justice will be apparent. Verse 13 opens with an accusation that is even stronger than 2:17. In spite of all God's assurances of love, people are troubled by the fact that those who do evil are prospering, while they are suffering.

The answer to this is not something that is apparent in the present. But it will become apparent in God's good time. Their names have been written in 'a book of remembrance' (verse 16). They suffer now, but they are not forgotten by their faithful and just God.

They must know that they are God's 'special possession' (שְׂגֻלָּה, *s<sup>g</sup>gullâ*), a word that is found in the following texts:

If you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples.

– Exodus 19:5

YHWH your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession.

– Deuteronomy 7:6 (and 14:2; 26:18)

YHWH has chosen Jacob for himself, Israel as his own possession.

– Psalm 135:4

The numbering of the verses after verse 18 follows the Latin Vulgate. The Hebrew and the Greek Septuagint continue numbering as chapter 3, verses 19-21. These verses bring Malachi's oracle to its conclusion with an announcement of the coming day (4:1-3). Malachi show no interest in the judgment of the nations. His focus stays on Judah. Evildoers will be burned up in the fire of the 'sun of righteousness'. Those who revere YHWH will leap with joy. They cannot see God's justice working yet, but it will become apparent 'on that day when YHWH acts' (verse 3).

In truth, YHWH still loves Jacob (see 1:1). This is the message Yehud needed to hear.

In the Hebrew text and the Greek Septuagint Version these verses are numbered as 3:22-24. Most scholars judge them to be an editorial conclusion consisting of two postscripts. In verse 4 the editors include an appeal to Moses. Many of the expressions are distinctly Deuteronomic: phrases such as ‘my servant Moses’, the ‘statutes and ordinances’, ‘Horeb’, and ‘all Israel’. This postscript links Malachi (the last of the prophetic scrolls in the Hebrew canon) with the Torah.

This is followed in verses 5-6 with an appeal to Elijah, thus linking Malachi with the Former Prophets of the Deuteronomic History. In verse 5 we do not find phrases such as ‘the day when I act’ (Malachi 3:17; 4:3), or ‘the day when I come’ (Malachi 3:2; 4:1), but rather the expression ‘the great and terrible day of YHWH’ (quoted by Joel 2:31; see Joel 2:11).

Instead of Malachi’s vague mention of a ‘messenger’ that God will send (see 3:1), Elijah is named. This witnesses to the folklore that grew out of the legend of Elijah being swept up alive into heaven in a fiery chariot (see 2Kings 2:11). He is the one whom God will send to usher in the day of judgment.

In the early years of the second century BC Jesus Ben Sira drew on verse 6 to praise Elijah:

At the appointed time, it is written, you are destined to calm the wrath of God before it breaks out in fury, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and to restore the tribes of Jacob.

– Sirach 48:10

When that day comes, Judah has nothing to fear. Turning back to YHWH will restore family life and the handing on of traditions. Verses 5-6 are quoted by Luke 1:17. Malachi began by asserting YHWH’s love for Judah. He went on to speak of his people as his special treasured possession, and he concludes by assuring them that they have nothing to fear from the ‘great and terrible day of YHWH’, unless, as the concluding words warn, they fail to repent.

**<sup>4</sup>Remember the teaching of my servant Moses, the statutes and ordinances that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel.**

**<sup>5</sup>See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of YHWH comes.**

**<sup>6</sup>He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse.**

