

About Malachi
March 29, 2020

We are probably all most familiar with Malachi as being the last book in the Old Testament. That is, the Christian Bible ordering of the Old Testament. The Jewish Bible, divided into “The Law”, “The Prophets”, and “The Writings, ” puts 2nd Chronicles at the end. In both cases, the Testament ends with words of hope. For the Jews, those words are:

II Chronicles 36: 22-23: In the first year of king Cyrus of Persia, in fulfilment of the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah, the Lord stirred up the spirit of King Cyrus of Persia so that he sent a herald throughout all of his kingdom and also declared in a written edict, “Thus says King Cyrus of Persia: The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his people, may the Lord his God be with him! Let him go up.”

This was the end of the exile. The people of Judah, now called Jews, returned to Jerusalem. Not all of them; most remained in Babylon and many other places to which they had been scattered. But some did. They returned to find a desolated country, partially occupied by the Edomites and Samaritans. It was stony ground there around the ruins of Jerusalem; not the abundant land of milk and honey expected for the Restoration, the time in which God was going to act and return the Jews to a bountiful land and prosperity.

The exile that began with the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. (although some were taken off earlier, including Ezekiel). Babylonia fell to the Medes and Persians, to Cyrus the Great, in 539 B.C. As we just read, Cyrus made his proclamation in the first year after the fall of Babylon. Construction of the “second temple” began in 536 B.C., completed 20 years later. First few chapters of book of Ezra describes some of the details. But, the colony of Jews at Jerusalem remained small, just the city (still largely in ruins) and the lands in its immediate

vicinity. Life was hard. Samaritans and Edomites made trouble. Things stagnated. By the time of Malachi, best guess around 450 B.C., Jewish life in and around Jerusalem had reached a sad state of affairs.

The name “Malachi” means “My messenger”. It probably is not the prophet’s name, but an expression of his vocation, taken by later scribes to be a proper name. As you read Malachi, keep in mind the Jew’s situation. They were now a few generations after that supposedly glorious return. Life was hard. Where were God’s promises? Discouragement and Cynicism had set in. The priests, who were supposed to be the religious leaders of the community, were back to some of the practices we had read about before the exile. One exception: the Jews had absolutely turned away from idolatry. But they were not mindful of the messages of Amos, of Habakkuk, and of Micah. As we read of the corrupt priests in Chapters 1 and 2, we could just as easily have been reading about before the exile. And, their sin is even more significant because there is no king; the Jews are under the authority of a governor appointed by the Persian monarch. The priests are now the leaders. And if the shepherd is heedless for the flock... The situation is almost exactly as described in Nehemiah. When he came in 444 B.C. he found the wall still a ruin, and a demoralized populace, and a very slack observance of worship among not only the people but the priests.

Malachi appears with a message for the Priests, who he identifies as “sons of Levi.” (Later, after Ezra, the priests are identified as “sons of Aaron.”) He condemns their corruption in language very similar to that of Micah. But there is a difference in the World, now a couple hundred years later. Where Elijah or Amos or Micah might say, “Thus saith the Lord”, Malachi finds himself needing a different approach. There is a new spirit of “rationality” in the world. Perhaps in part an influence spread from the Greeks, perhaps in part the coming Zoroastrian religion of Persia, perhaps something inevitable given the course of civilization and diminishing distances even in the world of that time. Ideas traveled. People were no longer quite so content with, “Because God says so!”

Malachi uses a question-answer discussion. Sort of like our “Frequently Asked Questions” of today. Malachi asks these questions, and answers them. The questions are familiar. “Why is life so miserable when God has promised abundance?” “Why do the evil prosper and the good, us, God’s people, suffer?” Malachi has three answers (not given here in the order Malachi uses).

The first is the Deuteronomic reply, consistent with what Amos or Habakkuk or Micah would have said. “You are not doing good. You are being punished for your sins.” This is a view consistent with the blessings that will flow from obedience to God’s commands, and curses that can be expected from disobedience. There are limitations to this answer, limitations explored by Job, because bad things can happen to truly righteous people.

The second answer is that the evil are indeed punished. Malachi says (paraphrased), “Just look what happened to those nasty Edomites! They have been rejoicing over our misfortune since the Babylonians leveled Jerusalem.” Edomites are the children of Esau, Israel’s brother. The closest kindred the Israelites have, and as well a bitter enemy from the time of the kings. Malachi refers to the Nabatean Arabs conquest of Edom, and the destruction in history of the Edomites as a people. (The Nabateans eventually establish their capital at Petra. Herod the Great of Jesus’s time is a Nabatean.) Malachi is saying, “They were evil, and look where they are now. They are erased. God does act, and the evildoers are indeed punished.”

The third answer looks forward towards the future. Malachi warns, in Chapter 3 1-2:

“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 the Lord 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”

Do those words sound familiar? (Handel, of course, used the King James version.) Malachi is saying, “Judgment is coming.” (3:5) “Turn aside from your evil ways and be saved. Just as God has done for His people in the past.” (6-7)

The lesson book explores the themes in Malachi, and re-emphasizes God's concern for the poor, the widow, the alien, and the cause of justice. I won't go into further detail about that. Malachi is also remarkable for three thoughts that seem to first find expression in his writing. There is an assertion that true worship, even that of the heathen (!), is really also offered to God, who is the God not only of Israel but of all the earth. “For among the nations, from east to west, my name is great, and in every sacred place incense is offered to my name, and a pure offering; for among the nations my name is great, says the Lord of Hosts” (1:11). Malachi is saying the heathens, despite their ignorance, are giving more true and worthy worship than the Jews. And, this was a fact. Traditional paganism was in decline, being replaced by something better. People were searching for more meaning than bribing pagan gods could supply. Monotheism was becoming important in Persia. Greek philosophy would soon be scattered into the world. Now that traditional idol worship was being discarded, people were looking for God. And, many found what they were looking for in this God of the Jews, even if they would not be Jews themselves. Malachi is really the first to proclaim a universal monotheism in these words.

An interesting second point is Malachi's denunciation of divorce (2:16). Recall that at the time divorce was the privilege of the husband alone, and could leave the ex-wife with no family, no resources, and disgraced. (Deut 24: 1-4) It was, of course, subject to abuse. This anticipates the position taken by Jesus almost 500 years later.

A third point is that Malachi gives expression to the idea of the brotherhood of mankind in 2:10 and other passages. “Have we not all one father? Hath not one God created us? Why do we deal treacherously every man against his brother?” (Of course, this is properly read as applying to men and women alike, notwithstanding the narrowing of today’s usage in the media.) Malachi may have meant this in the context of Judaism, but the thought once spoken is broad, as broad as his previous comments that the heathen also worship God, often more sincerely than the Jews.

For us as Christians, the epilog of the book, for us both the “Book of the Twelve” (prophets) and the Old Testament is important and points the way to what is coming:

“Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. 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.”

The Jews of Jesus’s day asked if John the Baptist might be Elijah, the great prophet, come again to fulfil this prophesy. We as Christians read these words and answer, yes, he came before Jesus, in whom the Kingdom of God drew near, and was fulfilled. Yet, none of the events we look back on played out as people of that time had expected. Jesus’s life and ministry was less than what the Jews expected of the messiah, and yet was actually was much, much more. So it is that we, 2000 years later, can pray, “In Jesus Christ are forgiven.”

Prayer from our Lesson Book: *“Open our minds and our hearts to the prophet’s words from centuries past, words that convict us anew today. Amen.”*

I’m going to add, *“O God, thank you for the blessings of your amazing love, a love that shatters the boundaries of our construction, a love that reaches us and saves us even in the most trying times. Amen.”*