

### **Aquifer Open Study Notes (Book Intros)**

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### **Malachi**

Malachi had a multifaceted ministry. As a sensitive pastor, Malachi offered God's love to a disheartened people. As a wise theologian, he instructed the people of Judah in basic doctrine that emphasized God's nature. As a stern prophet, Malachi rebuked corrupt priests and warned of God's judgment. As a spiritual mentor, he called his people to more sincere worship and challenged them to live by the ethical standards of God's covenant. Malachi conveys God's simple but vital word to Israel: "I have always loved you" ([1:2](#)).

## Setting

Malachi wrote to Jews in the Persian province of Judea, probably during the reign of King Darius I of Persia (521–486 BC). Jewish exiles returning from Babylon had recently resettled in Judah, joining others who had not been deported.

At the time when Malachi preached, the Temple had been rebuilt, but it paled in comparison to Solomon's Temple. The priests and the Levites were the power brokers of Judah, yet worship at the Temple was in a sorry state. The apathetic priests actually led people into sin, not out of it. Worshipers offered inferior animals as sacrifices and neglected God's requirements for tithes and offerings. The hopes raised by Haggai and Zechariah for a revival of David's dynasty through Zerubbabel seemed to have disappeared.

Malachi confronted a people given to religious cynicism, political skepticism, and spiritual disillusionment. They expected prosperity ([Hag 2:7, 18–19](#)), a king from David's line ([Ezek 34:13, 23–24](#)), and the new covenant promised through Jeremiah ([Jer 31:23, 31–34](#)), but they saw none of these things. In the minds of many, God had failed his people.

## Summary

Malachi presents a brief theology of God intended to correct the wrong thinking of the people of Judah about their covenant relationship with the Lord. Malachi introduces his thesis—that God loves Israel (1:2)—in his first message (1:2–5). The prophet then debates this thesis with his audience in the five messages that follow. The second message (1:6–2:9), aimed specifically at the priests and Levites serving in the second Temple, affirms that God is the Lord and Father of all Israel and deserves true worship. The third message (2:10–16) extends the implications of God’s love to human relationships, especially marriage. The fourth message (2:17–3:5) highlights God’s justice, appeals for honesty in speech and in business, and seeks genuine social concern. The fifth message (3:6–12) emphasizes God’s faithfulness to his word and calls Israel to a similar faithfulness in worship, especially in the giving of tithes and offerings. The final message (3:13–4:3) reiterates God’s desire for Israel to be honest and faithful in worship, in view of the coming day of the Lord.

Malachi’s pastoral heart is evident in his preaching: He begins and ends with a message of encouragement (1:2; 4:2).

## Authorship

The book of Malachi is silent about its authorship, but it is assumed that the prophet Malachi wrote down his own sermons because of the statement in [1:1](#) (“the message that the Lord gave . . . through the prophet Malachi the message that the Lord gave . . . through the prophet Malachi”). We know nothing of Malachi outside of this book; even there, the only biographical information given is that he was a prophet ([1:1](#)).

## Date

Unlike many other prophetic books, Malachi contains no date formula that links the prophet's message to the reign of any particular king (e.g., [Zeph 1:1](#); [Hag 1:1](#); [Zech 1:1](#)). Malachi's language is similar to that of Haggai and Zechariah, and it seems likely that Malachi was a slightly later contemporary of these two prophets. It is possible (though not certain) that the battle between the Persians and the Greeks at Marathon (about 490 BC) prompted Malachi's message—the prophet may have interpreted the titanic struggle between East and West as a partial fulfillment of Haggai's prediction that God was about “to shake the heavens and the earth” and “overthrow royal thrones” ([Hag 2:21–22](#)). It is also possible that Malachi wrote later in the 400s BC.

## Literary Genre

The literary form of Malachi's prophecies is similar to legal procedures (or trial speeches) and disputations. A disputation pits the speaker against his audience in combative dialogue. In Malachi, the disputation typically features (1) a declared truth claim by the prophet, (2) a rebuttal by the audience phrased as a question, (3) the prophet's answer to the audience's rebuttal by restatement of his initial premise, and (4) the presentation of additional supporting evidence. The desired outcome in a covenant lawsuit and in disputation is to leave the opponent speechless by removing all grounds for argument. This rhetorical question-and-argument format gave rise to the dialogue method of exposition peculiar to the later rabbinic schools of Judaism (see also the teaching method of Jesus in [Matt 5:21-22, 27-28](#): "You have heard. . . . But I say, . . .").

## **Meaning and Message**

Malachi seeks to motivate people to conform to God's plan. Malachi's preaching has an overarching concern with the covenant that established a relationship between God and Israel, with its attendant obligations and responsibilities.

Three of Malachi's messages deal with right relationships. The prophet's premise is that right knowledge is essential to maintaining right relationships. He addresses right relationships in marriage by decrying divorce and encouraging marital loyalty. He also addresses right relationships in the community at large by focusing on honesty and integrity in the light of God's character.

Malachi calls God's people back to a right understanding of God as Israel's Father, Master, and covenant God. Malachi urges a return to right worship through participating in the Temple sacrifices with integrity. Malachi also encourages appropriate giving to God, who is gracious and generous in his response to those who are faithful.