

An Introduction to the Book of Malachi

Author and Title

The Hebrew name Malachi means 'my messenger', or perhaps 'messenger of (the Lord)' if Malachi is a shortened form of 'Malachiah' (2 Esdras 1:40). Based on the LXX and Targum Jonathan, some scholars have argued that Malachi in 1:1 ought to be understood as a title, 'my messenger', rather than as a proper name. It appears more likely, however, that Malachi is a proper name, as it is interpreted by many other ancient sources, 2 Esdras 1:40, the Greek translations by Symmachus and Theodotion, the Syriac Peshitta translation, etc. If so, the Book of Malachi follows the pattern of 14 other prophetic books in the Hebrew Bible: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the other 11 Minor Prophets, where the author is introduced by name in the opening verses using language similar to Malachi 1:1. Accordingly, 3:1a offers an important wordplay on the prophet's name: <<**See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me**>>. This wordplay suggests that Malachi's own ministry was intended to foreshadow that of the coming messenger, who is identified in the NT as John the Baptist.

Date

The Book of Malachi offers no clear pointer to the date of its composition. Nevertheless, most scholars agree that Malachi was probably a contemporary of Ezra and Nehemiah in the mid-fifth Century BC. This is supported by the implied existence of the temple (1:10, 3:1 and 3:8), which requires a date after its reconstruction circa 516BC. Further support is offered by the reference to a governor (1:8), since this term is often used for regional officials during the Persian period (539-332BC). The most compelling evidence for dating Malachi, however, is the substantial parallel between the sins reprov'd by Malachi and those reprov'd by Ezra and Nehemiah. These include corruption of the priesthood (Nehemiah 13:4-9, 13:29-31 and Malachi 1:6-2:9), marriage to idolaters (Ezra Chapters 9-10, Nehemiah 10:30, 13:1-3, 13:23-27 and Malachi 2:10-12), abuse of

the disadvantaged (Nehemiah 5:1-13 and Malachi 3:5), and failure to pay tithes (Nehemiah 10:32-39, 13:10-13 and Malachi 3:8-10).

Theme

Malachi's contemporaries may have been free from blatant idolatry and relatively orthodox in their beliefs, but theirs had become a dead orthodoxy. They were all too ready to make ethical compromises and to dilute the strenuous demands of proper worship. In response to the cynicism and religious malaise of his contemporaries, Malachi's prophecy comes as a wake-up call to renewed covenant fidelity.

Purpose

Malachi's ministry took place nearly a hundred years after the decree of Cyrus in 538BC, which ended the Babylonian captivity and allowed the Jews to return to their homeland and rebuild the temple (2 Chronicles 36:23). This was some 80 years after Haggai and Zechariah encouraged the rebuilding of that temple with promises of God's blessing, the engrafting of the nations, prosperity, expansion, peace, and the return of God's own glorious presence, as confirmed in Haggai 2; Zechariah 1:16-17, 2:1-13 and 8:1-9:17. To Malachi's disillusioned contemporaries, these predictions must have seemed a cruel mockery. In contrast to the glowing promises, the harsh reality was one of economic privation, prolonged drought, crop failure, and pestilence.

After the return from exile, Judah remained an almost insignificant territory of about 20 by 30 miles, or 30 by 50 km, inhabited by a population of perhaps 150,000. Although they enjoyed the benefits of Persia's enlightened policy of religious toleration and limited self-rule, the Jews acutely felt their subjugation to a foreign power (Nehemiah 1:3 and 9:36), and they suffered persistent opposition from their neighbours (Ezra 4:23 and Daniel 9:25). Judah was no longer an independent nation and was no longer ruled by a Davidic king.

Worst of all, in spite of the promises of the coming Messiah and God's own glorious presence, e.g. Zechariah 1:16, 2:4, 2:10-13, 8:3-17, 8:23 and 9:9-13, Israel experienced only spiritual destitution. Unlike biblical books from earlier periods, the postexilic Books of Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther are remarkably candid in their description of Judah as generally lacking miraculous evidences of God's presence. In contrast to both Solomon's temple and the prophetic promise of the restored temple (Ezekiel Chapters 40-43), the actual postexilic temple was physically and spiritually inferior. As Malachi 3:1 implies, the Most Holy Place in this Second Temple had no visible manifestation of the glory of God. Although God was certainly alive and well, as revealed by his remarkable providences in the Book of Esther, for example, it was a period in which God's people had to live more by faith than by sight.

Key Themes: Malachi's Sixfold Wake-up Call to Renewed Covenant Fidelity

Disputation	Reference	Summary	Focus
Disputation 1	1:2-5	Malachi begins by defending the reality of God's elective love for Israel, a love which calls for robust covenantal obedience and sincere worship as its proper response. Instead, the people were dishonouring God by their worthless offerings and the hypocritical formalism of their worship.	Israel is to remember the Law of Moses.
Disputation 2	1:6-2:9	Malachi exposes these offenses and rebukes the priests for condoning them and thereby violating the Lord's covenant with Levi.	
Disputation 3	2:10-17	Malachi condemns marriage to an idolater as infidelity against Israel's covenant with the Lord, and he condemns unauthorised divorce as infidelity against the marriage covenant between a husband and his wife, to which the Lord is witness.	
Disputation 4	3:1-7	Malachi broadens his indictment as he promises that the Lord will vindicate his justice. This will take place when 'the messenger of the covenant' comes to judge the wicked, at which time the Lord will function as a witness not only against adulterers, as in 2:10-16, but also against other offenders, and to purify his people so that their offerings will be acceptable at last.	Israel is to remember the promise of Elijah and the coming day of the Lord.
Disputation 5	3:8-15	Malachi returns to the subject of Israel's begrudging offerings. The people experienced material adversity and were under a curse, not in spite of their behaviour, but because of it. Accordingly, Malachi challenges them to conscientious tithing, which will be rewarded with divine blessing.	
Disputation 6	3:16-18	Malachi assures his grumbling contemporaries that evildoers, who seem to escape divine justice because of their prosperity, will yet be judged, while the Lord will deliver those who fear him.	
Summary	4:1-6	Malachi summarises the main points of his prophecy: remember the Law of Moses, the focus of disputations 1-3, and remember the promise of Elijah and the coming day of the Lord, the focus of disputations 4-6.	

History of Salvation Summary

Even though God has disciplined his people severely by means of the exile, he still intends for his name to be honoured among the Gentiles (1:11 and 1:14). God's chosen vehicle for bringing his name to the Gentiles is his people loving him faithfully. This is therefore the time for Israel to renew its commitment to the covenant.

Literary Features

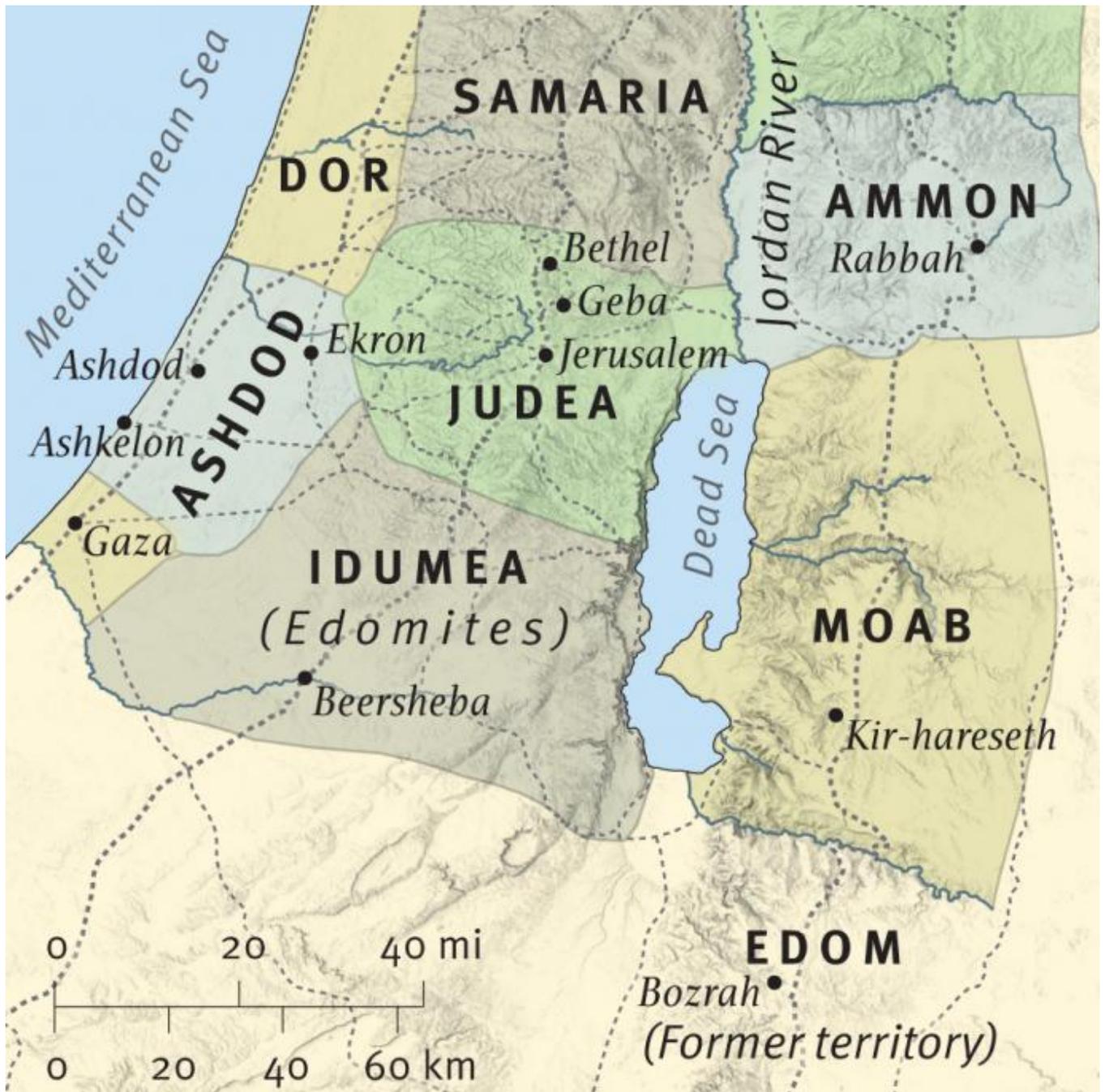
The content of the Book of Malachi places it in the category of prophecy, but the form in which that content is packaged is out of the norm for OT prophecy. The book is written entirely in prose. Further, the material is not embodied in the conventional format of oracles of judgement and salvation. The dominant genre is satire, an attack on vice in a discernible literary form, and with a satiric norm by which the criticism is conducted. The object of attack is half hearted and negligent religious service, which in the prophet's day took multiple forms, e.g. inappropriate offerings, untruth promoted by the priests, and the prevalence of divorce. The satiric norm is God's law. The primary vehicle in which the satire is embodied is a rhetoric of question and answer, as the people of Judah are pictured as asking a series of questions that God answers in an accusatory and condemning way.

One of the organising patterns is an accumulating litany of attitudes and actions that are offensive to God. Another is an expanding portrait of the coming Messiah and the blessings that he will bring. Finally, a common repeated pattern is as follows:

1. God voices an indictment of his people for bad behaviour.
2. The people are pictured as asking God how his charge is true,
3. God replies to the question, in the process of which he expands the charge. God's indictments are sometimes phrased as rhetorical questions.

The Setting of Malachi (circa 460BC)

Malachi likely prophesied several decades after the first exiles of Judah, now under Persian rule, had returned from Babylon to the minor province of Judæa and rebuilt the temple. Edomites had migrated northwest from their traditional homeland just south of Moab into the area immediately south of Judæa, and this land was now called Idumæa. Territory that once belonged to the Northern Kingdom of Israel had been divided into several different minor provinces, including Samaria.



Regional Map

Outline

The Book of Malachi is carefully structured in terms of a heading followed by six disputations and a conclusion. Each disputation is relatively coherent and is introduced by an assertion from either the Lord or the prophet. This is followed by an anticipated challenge from those being addressed, which is invariably introduced by the expression, 'But you say'. Each challenge, in turn, is answered with fuller substantiation by the Lord or by the prophet speaking on the Lord's behalf.

The book also has an unobtrusive concentric structure. One conspicuous literary indicator of this pattern is the double introductory assertion, But you say, and the anticipated response, which are found only in the parallel second and fifth disputations.

- a. Heading (1:1)
- b. Israel Preferred to Edom (1:2-5)
- c. Corruption of the Priesthood (1:6-2:9)
- d. The Covenant Profaned by Judah (2:10-17)
- e. The Coming Messenger (3:1-7)
- f. Do Not Rob God (3:8-15)
- g. The Reward of the Faithful (3:16-18)
- h. The Great Day of the Lord (4:1-6)