

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF MALACHI

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The book of Malachi begins with a "burden, the word of Yahweh to Israel by the hand of Malachi!" And that is all the information we have. Other prophetic books often tell when the prophet wrote, that is, during the reigns of certain kings. As we shall see, though, there were no kings in Israel when Malachi delivered his messages—they were a thing of the past, and of the future. There was only a governor. So how can we date this book? What clues do we have?

To answer some of these questions we can only look at the contents of the book and make an estimation of the date of its composition. A quick read through the book will tell us that the messages are intensely practical about sacrificial worship, priestly ministry, marriage and divorce, tithing, and the preparation of the coming of the Lord to judge the world and fulfill the promises of the covenants. We can conclude from the contents that there was no problem with idolatry in the nation—it too was a thing of the past. In fact, there is no mention of God's judgment on Israel for idolatry, namely, the Babylonian captivity. That was a thing of the past as well, long since forgotten by these folk. But they did have a temple and a functioning priesthood, even though it was not functioning correctly. On the basis of these observations we would date the book in the early post-exilic period.

The exile in Babylon ended in 536 BC. Many of the people returned to the land under the leadership of Zerubbabel, an heir apparent to the throne if there ever was one to inherit; Joshua the High Priest; and the prophets Zechariah and Haggai. By March 515 BC they had rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem, a major triumph for the people of God, but also a disappointment for those old enough to remember the splendor of the old temple that was destroyed. As the people settled in the land and tried to make a life for themselves; they became discouraged and disillusioned because the glorious prophecies about their regathering to the land and the building of the city and the temple seemed not to be fulfilled. And so in time as their confidence in the promises weakened, their commitment to the covenant began to lag as well.

About 455 BC Ezra returned to the land and promptly began a revival to bring the people back to the faith. The results of that spiritual work did not last very long, for in 444 BC Nehemiah was sent as governor and he found the same sins being committed that Ezra had tried to correct. Nehemiah's task was to continue the reforms and rebuild the walls of the city of Jerusalem, while enemies attacked them and their project. Nehemiah was called back to the palace in the East about 433 or 432 BC and remained there a few years. It seems most plausible to put the ministry of Malachi close to the time of Nehemiah's reforms and then his absence, because the messages address the same problems that Nehemiah had been working to correct. In Nehemiah we find that many had taken alien wives (13:23), and so too do we find this in Malachi (2:11); in Nehemiah the people were withholding their tithes (13:10), and so too did they violate the tithing laws in Malachi's day (3:8); Nehemiah had to deal with the divorce of legitimate wives (13:23, 27) and so did Malachi (2:15-16); and Nehemiah spoke of the neglect of temple service



(13:4-5, 11), and so did Malachi (1:12-13). We may conclude that while Nehemiah was there his reforms began to take hold, but when he was recalled there was a relapse, for he returned to find things had deteriorated again.

All this would suggest that Malachi wrote approximately between 440 and 420 BC. He was the last of the prophets to write, and his writing predicted the next great prophet who was to come to prepare the way of the Lord—John the Baptist. But we must remember that when we say he was a post-exilic prophet, we must note that he actually came a good hundred years after Zechariah and Haggai, and almost a generation after Ezra. Malachi is the last of the twelve minor prophets, but those twelve prophets stretch over a period of 400 years.

Malachi delivered his messages to expose and rebuke the sins of the people and admonish them to change. He found in the people an outward appearance of faith expressed in a perfunctory service but with no inward conviction or devotion. There was widespread skepticism as well, for the people complained that the earlier prophetic promises had not been fulfilled and divine justice was not present. So they were impatient for God to judge their enemies, especially the Gentiles, as well as those Jews whom they believed rebelled against the Lord, and as a result to deliver them from their current difficulties. But the prophet cut to the core of their problems—sin.