

SESSION THIRTY-THREE

MALACHI

A Synthesis of the Book

I. INTRODUCTION

In the book of Malachi, the last book of the Old Testament, the prophet gives a final word of counsel to the struggling post-exilic community. The name given in 1:1, Malachi (Heb מְלֶאכִי, *mal'ākī*), means "my messenger." There is some debate as to whether or not this should be taken as a personal name or rendered anonymously as "my messenger." The LXX, for instance, rendered this as "his messenger" (ἀγγέλου αὐτοῦ).¹ The Targum of Jonathan added the note that Ezra the scribe was "my messenger" in Malachi 1:1 (a suggestion followed by Jerome and even Calvin; cf. Malachi 2:11 and Ezra 10:2). Some have doubted the personal name, arguing that the ending (if it were a personal name) would more likely be "Yah," the shortened form for Yahweh (hence, *mal'ākīāh*). Yet, Smith correctly points out, "The word *mal'ākī* is comparable to other Hebrew names that end in *î*, such as Beerī, 'my well' (Gen. 26:34; Hos. 1:1) or Ethnī, 'my gift' (1 Ch. 6:41), and it is placed where one would expect to find the name of the author."² Hence, the translation by the name "Malachi" is an appropriate choice.

The date of the book is not certain, as there are no chronological notices dating any event to the reign of a king. There are clues within the book, however, which help us. The temple was standing and operational, and the reference in 1:8 to the "governor" (Heb מְהַאֵה, *pehāh*) suggests that Malachi lived in the Persian period after the completion of the second temple. Parallels with Ezra and Nehemiah confirm that Malachi comes from the same general period: (1) intermarriage with foreign wives (Ezra 9–10; Neh 13:23-27; Mal 2:11); (2) failure to pay tithes (Neh 13:10-14; Mal 3:8-10); and (3) social injustice (Neh 5:1-13; Mal 3:5). It is generally agreed that Malachi is from the 5th century BC, but even conservative scholars differ on a more precise date. Suggestions range from just before Ezra (ca. 460 BC) to a time after that of Nehemiah (ca. 400-350 BC). I will use the date 430 BC (though certainty is lacking). A date in this range, however, does explain the developments since the first return. Harrison explains,

Clearly the initial enthusiasm which must have attended the opening of the second Temple had diminished, and with a lessening of zeal came a more casual attitude toward the prescriptions of cultic worship. This degree of neglect also extended to the payment of requisite tithes (Mal 3:8-10), which were important for the support of both the Temple and the priesthood in the postexilic period.³

¹Other Greek translations (e.g., Aquila, Symmachus and Theodotion), however, translated this as *malachion*, "of Malachi."

²G. W. Bromiley, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), s.v. "Malachi," by G. V. Smith (3:226).

³Merrill C. Tenney, *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), s.v. "Malachi," by R. K. Harrison (4:42-43).

II. STRUCTURE AND STYLE

The book is basically structured around (1) an initial statement; (2) an objection to the statement; and (3) a detailed substantiation of the statement that ends with a promise, threat, or encouragement. The result is a series of oracles: 1:2-5, 1:6–2:9, 2:10-16, 2:17–3:6, 3:7-12, and 3:13–4:3. The final few verses (4:4-6) serve as a fitting conclusion to the preceding material. For further details on the structure of the book, see the book chart, Section VI at the end of this chapter. As for the style, Smith notes,

The style of the book resembles "prophetic disputations" . . . and the dialogue style of Haggai. These short and direct challenges put in the mouth of the people are rhetorical literary devices used to focus attention on underlying theological issues that motivate behavior.⁴

III. THEOLOGY

Smith's summary of the theological significance is quite helpful:

. . . Malachi was not a shallow legalistic scribe with no prophetic insight The book lacks any reference to widespread discouragement among the people because the glories of the messianic age had not come Two very common problems faced the community: economic depression (3:10f.), and a lack of sound theological teaching (2:6-8). Since the people had no theological foundation, the economic conditions led to a misunderstanding of God's character and thus to a perversion of morality and worship. Malachi provided the instructions they needed by emphasizing the lordship of God. God is like a father and master (1:6), a great king (v. 16) and creator (2:10,15); He loves those who fear and serve Him and judges the wicked (3:17). Because the priests failed to instruct the nation, the basis for morality, worship, and service did not exist, and many people did not fear or honor God. In Malachi God assured the people of His blessings on those who returned to Him, reminded them of His love, and promised that the "coming one," who would be preceded by Elijah, would refine the nation through judgment.⁵

Chisholm is more specific as to how this moral breakdown manifested itself and how this related to the principles of the covenant regarding blessing and curse:

As Israel's faithful and loving covenant Lord, He insisted on their loyalty to His covenant demands (4:4). The covenant required faithfulness to God and to one's fellow Israelites (2:10). However, Malachi's generation had violated the covenant by intermarrying with foreigners (2:11-12), divorcing their wives (2:14-16), and neglecting prescribed tithes and offerings (3:8-9). The priests, with whom God had made a special covenant (2:5,8), had even sinned by offering defiled sacrifices (1:6-14), misleading the people (2:8), and acting unjustly (2:9).

In accordance with the principles of the covenant, whereby obedience brought divine blessing and disobedience punishment, the Lord had placed the nation and the priests under a curse (2:1-2; 3:9). If the people failed to repent (cf. 2:1-4; 3:7), they would experience even worse consequences (cf. 2:3; 3:1-5; 4:1-3, 6). On the other hand, a proper response to God's admonition would bring a restoration of divine blessings (3:10-12).⁶

⁴Smith, 3:228.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Robert B. Chisholm, Jr., *Interpreting the Minor Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 292.

IV. THE THESIS AND PURPOSE OF THE BOOK

Once the structure, occasion and leading motifs have been established, it is possible to formulate a statement of the book's thesis and purpose. This, of course, presumes that the book is a unity and that it does have a fundamental message.

Undergirding the covenant disobedience was a sense of skepticism of Yahweh's love for the people. His love for His covenant people is stated in many places throughout the OT Scriptures, but it seems that this foundational truth was called into question in light of 1:2-5. Chisholm offers the following explanation: "Apparently the humiliation of the exile and the seemingly relative insignificance of postexilic developments had produced cynicism within the community."⁷ Any question of Yahweh's love, however, was quite unfounded. Furthermore, the people were still responsible to the Mosaic Law, and any disobedience (especially abuse of the temple sacrificial system) was a dishonoring of God's name. Consequently, disobedience to the Law could still bring on God's curses (cf. Deut 28–29). Furthermore, the Lord Himself was coming, and would bring judgment upon the wicked in the *day of the LORD*. In preparation for His coming, however, the LORD's messenger would come first!

THESIS - In spite of Yahweh's great love for Israel, the postexilic community was dishonoring God's name through their disobedience to the Law (as well as the neglect of the sacrificial system by the Levitical priests).

PURPOSE - To awaken the people from spiritual lethargy and unfaithfulness so as

- 1) to avoid God's curses and
- 2) to be prepared for the coming of the Lord and His messenger (He will reward the faithful and punish the wicked).

V. THE MESSENGER WHO PRECEDES THE LORD

To correct the disobedience of the people, the Lord is personally going to come in judgment (3:1ff.). In addition, He is going to send His "messenger" ahead of Him to prepare the way (3:1). We also observe that the book closes with the notice that "Elijah" is going to be sent before the *day of the Lord* (4:5-6).

This led to an expectation among the Jewish scribes that Elijah would come before the Messiah. Note Mark 9:9-13! Jesus explained that this had *a fulfillment* in John the Baptist (cf. Matt 11:7-14). Nevertheless, the prophecy was not *completely* fulfilled with John the Baptist (cf. Matt 17:10-13). There will be another in the spirit of Elijah that will come before the Second Coming to prepare the way for the Lord! Compare Revelation 11:1ff.

⁷Ibid., 279-80.