

Prepare

A Vintage Holiday series through the Book of Malachi

An Introduction
to the Book
of Malachi



VINTAGE PRESS

Prepare: An Introduction to the Book of Malachi

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Written by Jordan Hill and Dustin Turner.

Design, layout, and illustrations by Christopher Wilson.

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PREPARE SERIES OVERVIEW

The season of Advent and ultimately the birth of our Savior is upon us. This season and day is special every year. Advent is a season of anticipation, when we not only remember the birth of Jesus, but look forward to his return. But what are we doing to prepare our hearts for this special season and day? How do we spiritually prepare to remember the birth of Jesus and anticipate his return? Written some 400 years before Jesus, Malachi was God's final Old Testament message to Israel. Today, Malachi is still God's message for us—a message to prepare for Jesus. How will you prepare?

PURPOSE AND PLAN

CENTRAL ROLE OF AN OLD TESTAMENT PROPHET

When thinking about the primary role of an Old Testament prophet, “predicting the future” often is what first comes to mind for most modern-day readers of the Bible. However, further analysis of the Old Testament prophetic books, such as Malachi, reveals that “predicting the future” was only a portion of what some of the prophets did some of the time.¹ This then begs the question: What was the primary role of an Old Testament prophet if not to predict future events?

A prophet's primary role was to be a messenger or spokesperson on God's behalf. Being a prophet, in the simplest terms, meant to deliver whatever message Yahweh, the God of Israel, had called them to deliver, whether that be to Israel, to Israel's kings and leadership, or even to foreign nations and their kings.² So “Yes!”, sometimes their messages entailed predicting the future,

but their overall purpose in the biblical narrative involved much more.

Tim Mackie, the co-founder of the Bible Project, sheds light on the biblical prophets' primary role in several unique ways. For one, Mackie labels the prophets as “covenant watchdogs.” Playing off the modern-day equivalent of political watchdogs, the prophets were charged by Yahweh to hold his covenant people accountable to the foundations and principles of his moral law—mercy, justice, and faithfulness. Mackie offers another insightful descriptor: “poet lawyers.”³ While a large portion of the prophetic books communicate mainly via poetry, even those that do not, like Malachi, still speak using the legal format of an ancient Near Eastern courtroom—the listing of charges, the testimony of witnesses, the call for repentance, the decree of judgment against the guilty, and the pronouncement of hope for the righteous. One last observation Mackie makes is that the prophets were a minority report of sorts amongst Israel.⁴ Simply put, the Old Testament prophets were living faithfully to God's covenant law, but the overwhelming majority of their Israelite countrymen were not!

PROPHETS PLACE IN THE NARRATIVE

An Old Testament prophet's role only makes sense when paired with their unique place in the biblical narrative. The Old Testament prophets emerge at a pivotal point in the story. Their role as “covenant watchdogs” is developed as the story moves closer to the coming of Jesus.

So, how does the Old Testament narrative develop the role of the prophet? To begin, Yahweh made a unilateral covenant with Abraham (Genesis 12, 15). This covenant would result in the LORD restoring his divine blessing to all the nations of the earth through Abraham's family—Israel's future nation. Next, in the Exodus

narrative (Exodus 1–15), the LORD reveals himself to be the One True God of both heaven and earth as he frees Abraham's family from slavery in Egypt. He takes Abraham's family, now a nation of redeemed slaves, and enters into a marriage covenant with them at Mt. Sinai (Exodus 19–20). Yahweh promises to be their God; they promise to be His people set apart for His purposes of reconciling the nations unto himself.

Being the Lord's chosen people among all the other people groups of the world meant that these former slaves would now become a “kingdom of priests” called to live in obedience to Yahweh's rule. As such, the LORD issued ten primary laws or stipulations to the Sinai covenant, followed by 603 others (613 in total). Obedience to these covenant stipulations would bring about blessings; willful disobedience would result in a curse (Deuteronomy 28).

Within this kingdom of priests, Yahweh made a special covenant with Israel's priesthood, the Levites (Exodus 32, Numbers 8), and even more specifically with Aaron's line—the first high priest (Leviticus 8–9). This priesthood and its high priest would offer perpetual intercession and atonement to the God of Israel on behalf of the people for their failures to keep the covenant established at Mt. Sinai.

As the generations pass, the nation of Israel begins to groan for a human king to rule them like those of their Canaanite neighbors. Yahweh establishes a line of kings through Judah's tribe and now makes a special covenant with Israel's monarchy (2 Samuel 7, 1 Kings 8). From this royal line, a David-like king will one day come and bring God's kingdom blessings to all the nations (Psalm 2, 72, 89, 110, 132), thus fulfilling the covenant made long ago with Abraham.

While there are a few bright spots over Israel's history, ultimately, the Israelite people, including their kings and priesthood, miserably fail at keeping the covenant stipulations of Mt. Sinai. At this crucial junction in Israel's history, with all this preceding context, the prophets of the Old Testament take center stage in the Biblical narrative.

As the spokespeople for Yahweh, the prophets address the nation of Israel's long history of unfaithfulness to the Lord. Overall, each prophetic voice offers a similar critique. For starters, the prophets both individually and collectively accuse Israel of breaking their marriage covenant with Yahweh. As "covenant watchdogs," their list of charges includes the worship of false gods, leading to social injustices committed against the poor and marginalized (e.g., the widows, orphans, and immigrants) amongst them. The prophets also accuse the priests of making a mockery of the temple worship and the kings of making unwise military alliances with foreign kings. Next, collectively, the prophets call Israel to repentance, which coincides with Yahweh's worship alone and the correction of societal injustices. Lastly, as a whole, the prophets announce the coming of "the day of the Lord." This day refers to the historical events that Yahweh will use to judge evil and vindicate the righteous. In the eyes of the Old Testament prophets, this day of the Lord will be a day of both bad and good news. The bad news is that Yahweh will bring justice against human rebellion. For the unrepentant, this most certainly means exile.

In contrast, the good news for the righteous remnant means that Yahweh will bring about restoration on the other side of exile. This restoration will eventually lead to a new covenant people (Jeremiah 31, Ezekiel 36) living under the rule and reign of the future, messianic king. This king will rule from Jerusalem, and his kingdom will

bring healing to the nations.⁵ In full expectation of the day of the Lord, the prophets' collective voice proclaims both judgment and hope, but always in that order. As we come to Malachi's book, we should read this work in the context of the grand narrative, remembering the primary role and collective critique of the Old Testament prophets.

MALACHI SPEAKS

The first generation of post-exilic Jews returning from Babylon had rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem and re-established a community there.⁶ The expectation now surrounding this re-established Jewish community in Israel was that, with the temple having been rebuilt, the promised messianic king would arrive, ushering in his universal rule.⁷

For the Jews of Malachi's day, now the second generation of post-exilic Jews living in Jerusalem, the promised restoration of God's kingdom—in their estimation—was not going according to plan! As one commentator puts it, their hopes “had crashed on the rock of reality.”⁸ Enemies, such as the Edomites and the Samaritans, plagued them. Droughts and famines ruined their crops. Instead of autonomy, they remained a vassal state to the Persian Empire, a pagan kingdom.⁹ They suffered while evil empires, like the Persians, seemed to prosper. Where was their God? Where was the restored kingdom that the LORD's prophets had promised?

Israel's disillusionment led to community-wide frustration and apathy.¹⁰ Simply put, they felt abandoned by the Lord, who had left promises unfulfilled. Their disappointment led to them questioning the very love and justice of the Lord (1:2, 2:17). Their apathy led to hypocritical service (3:6–9) and cheap worship (1:6–8). Their frustration produced a whole host of moral compromises leading to sins in their personal lives (e.g., marital and spiritual infidelity) and their community lives

(e.g., injustices against the poor, widows, orphans, and foreigners).¹¹

Against this backdrop, Malachi speaks. The prophet accuses both the priests and the people of breaking their covenants with Yahweh. He condemns their sin and the excuses they offer as a defense. He calls them to seek genuine repentance, especially considering the coming day of the Lord. For on that day, “the messenger of the covenant” will come, serving as a refiner’s fire sent to purify the community. Evil will be judged while the faithful remnant will be healed.

DATE

In 539 BC, the Persians became the dominant empire in the ancient Near East. They succeeded the Babylonians who, decades before, had devastated Jerusalem, destroyed the temple of the Lord, and taken the Jews into exile in Babylon. Now under the Persians’ reign, the exiled Jews were allowed to return to their ancestral homeland and rebuild the temple of the Lord, which was rebuilt in 516 BC.¹²

Following the temple’s reconstruction, the prophet Malachi spoke to Israel. A critical clue that places Malachi’s voice after the reconstruction of the temple in Jerusalem is the prophet’s rebuke of the priests offering sacrifices at the temple (Malachi 1:6–2:9). While no specific date has been agreed upon, conservative approximations provide the date range of 515–458 BC. This places Malachi’s message after the rebuilding of the temple but preceding the reform ministry of Ezra in Jerusalem. When held alongside the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, Malachi offers a “parallel description of the religious and social decay in the post-exilic Jewish community” as “all three confront the problems of

intermarriage with foreigners, abuses associated with the priesthood, temple services, the tithe, the Sabbath, and the oppression of the poor."¹³

GENRE

The book of Malachi is composed of a series of speeches arranged in a question-and-answer format, or otherwise known as "disputation speeches."¹⁴ This style utilizes a rhetorical exercise to communicate ideas or truths. Other Old Testament authors pre-dating Malachi utilize this format, but not to the extent of Malachi. Readers of the Bible may also recognize and appropriately match this question-and-answer communication style with the New Testament book of James and Paul's letter to the Romans.

How do the biblical authors communicate using this format? To begin, the speaker makes a truth claim. In turn, an objector sets forth a rebuttal, usually in the form of a question. The speaker responds to the question raised by expounding, in much greater detail, on the truth claim originally made. Claim–objection–response. Specific to Malachi's prophecy, the speaker is Yahweh/the LORD (speaking through the prophet), and the objector is Israel.

Here is a brief example from the book of Malachi showing the general flow of this question-and-answer (or disputation) style of communication: (Malachi 1:2–3):

Claim: "I have loved you (Israel)," says the Lord.

Objection: But you ask, "How have you loved us?"

Response: "Was not Esau Jacob's brother?" declared the Lord. "Yet I have loved Jacob (aka Israel), but Esau I have hated, and I have turned his hill country

into a wasteland and left his inheritance to the desert jackals."

In this example, Yahweh (the speaker) claims that he loves Israel (the objector). However, Israel, frustrated by their national circumstances, raises an objection to this claim: "How have you loved us?" In other words, "Where is the proof, Yahweh? It appears to us that you have abandoned us among the nations!" Yahweh answers their retort by asking Israel to take a long, hard look at one of their closest neighbors, the Edomites. He wants Israel to compare his dealings with them to his dealings with Edom. He has restored the nation of Israel; Edom he has left in ruins!

OUTLINE

The most basic outline for Malachi follows the six disputations (question-and-answer) speeches presented in the book. This pattern is relatively easy to follow and offers excellent insight into the major themes and theological touchpoints presented in this prophetic work. The following outline is adapted from the ESV Global Study Bible.¹⁵

- I. Prologue (1:1)
- II. Six Disputation Speeches
 - A. First Disputation (1:2-5)
 1. The prophet defends God's covenantal love for Israel.
 - B. Second Disputation (1:6-2:9)
 1. The prophet criticizes the priests for their allowance of improper sacrifices to be offered by the people and for corrupting Israel's corporate worship of Yahweh.

C. Third Disputation (2:10–16)

1. The prophet speaks to both the marital infidelity and the accompanying spiritual infidelity of the people. Israelite men were divorcing their Israelite wives to marry foreign women. These women were corrupting the men to worship foreign gods instead of Yahweh. In this way, Israelite men were breaking their marriage covenant with Yahweh as well with the wives of their youth.

D. Fourth Disputation (2:17–3:5)

1. Where is the God of justice? The prophet announces the coming of the messenger of the covenant. This messenger will come to judge the wicked and to purify God's people.

E. Fifth Disputation (3:6–12)

1. The prophet criticizes the people for withholding their full contribution of tithes and offerings to the temple of the Lord.

F. Sixth Disputation (3:13–4:3)

1. The prophet assures the people that God will come to judge the wicked, who currently seem to prosper even though they perpetrate evil. In doing so, God will save those who fear him, thus showing a distinction between the righteous and unrighteous.

III. Conclusion/Appendix (4:4–6)

A. Remember the Law of Moses

- B. The Prophets (represented by Elijah) herald the coming day of the Lord.

Three additional notes concerning the outline/structure of the book of Malachi. First, biblical commentators have taken notice of the chiasmic structure of Malachi's six disputation speeches over the years.¹⁶ A chiasmic pattern is a literary technique often utilized by Biblical writers to connect common motifs and themes in

their writings. Here is the chiastic outline for the book of Malachi:

Prologue (1:1)

A: First Disputation (1:2–5)

B: Second Disputation (1:6–2:9)

C: Third Disputation (2:10–16)

C': Fourth Disputation (2:17–3:5)

B': Fifth Disputation (3:6–12)

A': Sixth Disputation (3:13–4:3)

Conclusion/Appendix (4:4–6)

For example, in this chiastic pattern, the first and sixth disputations (the As) share common themes and sub-themes drawn upon by the prophet. Both the first and sixth disputations deal with the Lord's covenantal love; proof of his covenant love is restoration for the righteous and destruction for the wicked.

Second, biblical commentators have also observed a major division in Malachi coinciding with the Conclusion/Appendix (4:4–6). They cite that the central collective theme of the first three disputations coincides with the call to remember the Law of Moses, while the major collective theme of the last three disputations coincides with the call to be prepared for the coming day of the Lord heralded by Elijah.¹⁷

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK OF MALACHI

REMEMBER THE TORAH (4:4)	First Disputation (1:2–5)
	Second Disputation (1:6–2:9)
	Third Disputation (2:10–16)
REMEMBER THE PROMISE OF ELIJAH AND THE COMING DAY OF THE LORD (4:5–6)	Fourth Disputation (2:17–3:5)
	Fifth Disputation (3:6–12)
	Sixth Disputation (3:13–4:3)

Lastly, the conclusion of Malachi's book (4:4–6) is what biblical scholars refer to as a “literary seam.” The 39 books of the Old Testament underwent an editorial and organizational process throughout history. These seams have been strategically appended at major transition points in the biblical narrative and function to pull the story together.

What is the significance of this literary seam in Malachi? It calls the reader to remember back to the end of the Torah (4:4) that prophesies a greater-than-Moses figure to come. It simultaneously points the reader forward with the prophetic hope (4:5–6) of the Lord's coming heralded by an Elijah-like prophet.¹⁸ As Christians, we know these figures to be Jesus and his herald, John the Baptist. So, this literary seam functions to show how the Law and the Prophets are a unified story that ultimately points to Jesus.¹⁹

THEOLOGICAL THEMES

GOD

"The book of Malachi is primarily a theology proper, a treatise on the nature and character of God."²⁰ Malachi must remind the Jewish people who their God is. The people doubt the character of God and in turn live contrary to his ways. Malachi begins with a reminder of God's love for the Jews. Malachi 1:6 teaches that the LORD is the "father" of Israel as well as Israel's "master" and "king" (Malachi 1:14). Similarly, God is judge, purifying his people (Malachi 3:2-3). Knowledge of God is essential to how the people of Israel were to live. "Each of the issues Malachi addresses relates to the people's failure to honor and fear Yahweh in response to his love, and to live out their unique covenant responsibility in the midst of the nations."²¹

COVENANT

The Jews' knowledge of God flows from their covenant with God. As noted above, the covenant relationship is the context in which Malachi wrote and the people of Israel lived. In the Scriptures, the covenant relationship is best understood as "a solemn commitment, guaranteeing promises or obligations undertaken by one or both parties, sealed with an oath."²² Any covenant, and particularly God's covenant with Israel was "intensely personal, one in which the relationship is primary."²³ The covenant is important to Malachi because it reminds the people of the relationship they have with the Lord, and more importantly what the Lord has done for them. Sadly, despite such a relationship, the people of Israel neglect their covenant with the Lord in two primary areas.

Worship

Regarding worship, there was a failure with the priestly leadership which led to a failure of the people. In Malachi 2:5–9, the prophet reminds the priests of their calling and their failure:

“For the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and people should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts. But you have turned aside from the way. You have corrupted the covenant of Levi, says the LORD of hosts” (Malachi 2:8–9).

Such poor leadership results in the Jews failing to worship the LORD. In Malachi 3:6–12, God indicts the people of Israel for robbing God in their tithe. They were simply failing to give God what is his, ultimately a failure in worship.

Relationships

The Israelites covenant failure, however, extended beyond worship. While they failed to adequately love God, similarly they struggled to love people as well. Malachi mentions two primary areas of neglect: marriage and justice. The people of Israel had made divorce too easy and had failed to remain loyal to their marriage vows. Malachi “calls attention to the sacred nature of the husband-wife relationship by placing the covenant of marriage (Malachi 2:14) within the context of the covenant between God and Israel (Malachi 2:10).”²⁴

Similarly, the Jews continued to oppress the weaker of society—the widow, orphan, and foreigner. The people accused God of injustice and care, but God shows them they, in fact, had been unjust and careless with their own people. Therefore, “God will come and administer justice to the poor, the widow, the orphan and the foreigner—the very people

who have been trampled and defrauded by those selfishly desiring the divine visitation."²⁵

DAY OF THE LORD

Divine visitation in Malachi, and the rest of the Minor Prophets, is most often associated with the Day of the Lord. Israel expected the Day of the Lord to be a positive moment, but the prophets often connect the Day of the Lord with judgment more than anything else. In Malachi, the Day of the Lord

is a day that the people whom Malachi addresses seem to deny will come, but Malachi assures them that it surely will. It will be a day that refines God's people and transforms their worship (3:2-4), a day where the righteous will be spared and shown compassion (3:17), when they will be healed, blessed and vindicated (4:2). Yet it will also be a day when the arrogant and evildoers will be consumed with fire (4:1) and destroyed (4:6).²⁶

Unique to the prophecy of Malachi is the "messenger" sent to prepare the way for the LORD's coming. This messenger is compared to the former prophet, Elijah, in Malachi 4:5. Understood from the perspective of Jesus, we know the messenger of the LORD to be John the Baptist (Luke 1:7; Matthew 17:10-11). John the Baptist prepared the way for the appearance of the LORD--Jesus Christ himself. "For the Christian, this 'Day of the LORD' is not only future, but is also past. In the NT, there is a sense in which the expectations surrounding the OT 'day of the LORD' are fulfilled first and foremost in the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus."²⁷

RESOURCES FOR ADDITIONAL STUDY

TECHNICAL COMMENTARIES

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David W. Baker, *Joel, Obadiah, Malachi*, NIV Application Commentary. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006.

Micah Fries, Stephen Rummage, and Robby Gallaty, *Exalting Jesus in Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi*, Christ-Centered Exposition. Nashville: B & H, 2015.

Andrew E. Hill, *Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012.

INTERNET RESOURCES

The Bible Project

<https://bibleproject.com/explore/malachi>

Mark Driscoll

<https://realfaith.com/sermon-series/malachi>

John Piper

<https://www.desiringgod.org/scripture/malachi/messages>

J. D. Greear

<https://summitchurch.com/message/malachi-healing-love>

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²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴Tim Mackie and Jon Collins, “Prophets as Provokers” Bible Project Podcast, April 22, 2015.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Adamson, *Malachi*, 848–849.

⁷Blessing Boloje and Alphonso Groenewald, “Literary Analysis of Covenant Themes in the Book of Malachi,” *Old Testament Essays* vol. 28, no. 2 (2015): 257–282.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Adamson, *Malachi*, 848–849.

¹⁰Boloje and Groenewald, “Literary Analysis of Covenant Themes in the Book of Malachi,” 257–282.

¹¹Adamson, *Malachi*, 848–849.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Mackie and Collins, “What Prophecy Is For.”

¹⁴Anthony R. Petterson, *Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi*, *Apollos Old Testament Commentary*, ed.

David W. Baker and Gordon J. Wenham (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), 309.

¹⁵“Malachi’s Sixfold Wake-up Call to Renewed Covenant Fidelity,” *ESV Global Study Bible*, <https://www.esv.org/resources/esv-global-study-bible/chart-39-01/>.

¹⁶*NIV Study Bible*, 257–282.

¹⁷Boloje and Groenewald, “Literary Analysis of Covenant Themes in the Book of Malachi,” 257–282.

¹⁸Miles Van Pelt, *Lecture 7: Seams in the Canonical and Covenantal Structure*, <https://www.biblicaltraining.org/library/seams-canonical-covenantal-structure/biblical-theology/van-pelt-blomberg-schreiner>.

¹⁹Mackie and Collins, “What Prophecy Is For.”

²⁰Andrew E. Hill, “Malachi, Book of,” *Dictionary of the Old Testament Prophets*, ed. Mark J. Boda and J. Gordon McConville (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 530.

²¹Petterson, *Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi*, 312.

²²Paul R. Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath: Covenant in God’s Unfolding Purpose*, *New Studies in Biblical Theology*, ed. D. A. Carson (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007), 43.

²³Petterson, *Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi*, 311.

²⁴Hill, “Malachi, Book of,” 531.

²⁵Andrew E. Hill, *Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi*,

Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, ed. David G. Firth (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 338.

²⁶Petterson, *Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi*, 314.

²⁷*ibid.*, 388–389.

