

## **THE BOOK OF MALACHI**

### **Lesson 1, Introduction**

As with all the other Hebrew Bible prophets (that is, the so-called Old Testament prophets), Malachai speaks not only to the wayward Hebrews of his era, but rather to all people of all eras. I think, as I look around at the place and trajectory of world events and history in our day and time, his words have urgent and most pertinent meaning for us all, if only we'll hear them.

Among the themes of Malachai, the one that grabs my attention above all the others is the failure of the Hebrew religious leadership to know truth and to speak truth. The Priesthood is the primary target of Malachai's disputations. They had grown lax, yet again; they had adopted paganized doctrines to teach and practice instead of God's recorded Word... yet again... and were leading the people towards yet another catastrophe unless a significant repentance and change of direction happened. How very applicable his words are to the modern state of both Judaism and Christianity.

I say "modern state" advisably, because for a long period of time, some of the great Believing theological thinkers who had the courage to do so have been warning and attempting to expose not only what is called Christendom for what it actually is, but also for what its beginning really was. Few have paid attention, and more often these men have been marginalized and left in the shadows so as not to disrupt huge and complex religious systems put in place long ago, designed more to bring about the agendas of men than the will of God.

One of these great thinkers is Soren Kierkegaard, who has greatly bothered the Church for nearly 2 centuries. Even so, he has been heavily quoted (and often misquoted), and his many works utilized by Christian Theological institutions since the mid-1800's, so profound are some of his thoughts. And, yet, they have also been cherry-picked to avoid the things he said that they did not like or that, frankly, condemned these same theologians and Church governments for their perversions of Biblical truth. To summarize who this man was and to best explain what academic disciplines were his specialties, which of course combined to greatly affect his point of view, I want to use the

secular Wikipedia so as to avoid religious denominational and doctrinal contamination. Here is a quote from their expose on him.

( [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Søren\\_Kierkegaard](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Søren_Kierkegaard) )

***"Kierkegaard's theological work focuses on Christian ethics, the institution of the Church, the differences between purely objective proofs of Christianity, the infinite qualitative distinction between man and God, and the individual's subjective relationship to the God-Man Jesus Christ,<sup>[5]</sup> which came through faith.<sup>[6][7]</sup> Much of his work deals with Christian love. He was extremely critical of the doctrine and practice of Christianity as a state-controlled religion (Caesaropapism) like the Church of Denmark. His psychological work explored the emotions and feelings of individuals when faced with life choices.<sup>[8]</sup> Unlike Jean-Paul Sartre and the atheistic existentialism paradigm, Kierkegaard focused on Christian existentialism."***

Before I quote Kierkegaard himself, let me explain an important term used in Wikipedia's brief expose. Existentialism is a family of philosophical views and inquiry that explore the human individual's struggle to lead an authentic life despite the apparent randomness, chaos, and incomprehensibility of our existence as we humans experience life in the real world. So, existentialism examines meaning, purpose, and value, and where our thoughts about these things come from, how we decide which to adopt, and what roles they play in our actual daily lives. Thus, here is what Kierkegaard concluded about Christianity *the institution* as a competing source of meaning and purpose for living an authentic life. Again, I am bringing this before you because this is essentially the foundational reasons for Malachai's disputations and criticisms of the Priesthood in his era, which are meant for Bible readers to understand as expanding in scope over time to include all the official religious institutions that purport to represent the God of the Bible and His Son, Yeshua of Nazareth. I urge you to give all your focus to these few sentences.

***"Christendom is an effort of the human race to go back to walking on all fours, to get rid of Christianity, to do it knavishly under the pretext that this IS Christianity, claiming that it is Christianity perfected.***

***The Christianity of Christendom... takes away from Christianity the offense, the paradox, etc. and instead of that introduces probability, the plainly comprehensible. That is, it transforms Christianity into something entirely different from what it is in the New Testament, yea, into exactly the opposite; and this is the Christianity of Christendom, of us men.***

***In the Christianity of Christendom, the Cross has become something like a child's hobby-horse and trumpet."***

I imagine you got the sense of this. But, due to the era this was written and the high vocabulary of academia used at that time, let me assist a bit in explaining what is being said. Here Kierkegaard first speaks of the brand of Christianity that our Church institutions teach and practice. He means it in the sense of a supposed-Christianity that is not the authentic Christianity that Christ taught. Christendom is the general label he uses to call the combined, vast Christian Church network composed of many institutions that had spread around the world. Some of these were State religions whereby the king was both head of state and head of the Church. I regularly use the term Constantinian Church to more or less refer to same thing he does when he says "Christendom". So, to him, Christendom is the State institutional religion begun during Constantine's era when he, too, declared this new religion for gentiles to be the State religion of the Roman Empire, and this religion's government to be defined and controlled by the Bishop of Rome in collaboration with the Roman Emperor. Using Kierkegaard's labels, then, the idea is that Christendom claims to teach the authentic faith of Christ, but in fact they do not. It is so far away from authentic, that he says it is nearly the opposite, and it turns the Cross into some childish toy to be made into whatever seems pleasurable.

To reduce this quotation down to its basic essence, it is that when looked at not so much microscopically, but rather simply on the basis of what all can see

and hear are the actual practices of the Church, its teachings and its effects, what the Church (Christendom) espouses, teaches, and demands of its adherents is the virtual opposite of the faith that Christ lived and taught. And, I can tell you that many great theologians and Believing thinkers long before Kierkegaard and well after him have been saying the same thing but to little avail. The Church has become so powerful and headstrong that it merely bats away all objective criticisms and continues its path of indoctrination of popular, but unsound, religion even if its core principle of faith in Jesus is true and solid.

Just as in the Old Testament Bible era when the Hebrew faith leaders time and again would stray from the truth and institute, instead, their manmade traditions and agendas, and when God would respond by sending Prophets with warnings to them to return to the true faith, so during the last 1500 years or so, a number of men of courage attempted to bring various reform movements to Christendom. Sometimes this resulted in the creation of new denominations. But, generally speaking, as these newer denominations grew in numbers (if they survived at all), the leadership soon succumbed to the illness that inherently affects all humans; that is, our hearts are sick, and wicked beyond self-repair. So, Church leadership of these reformed Churches devised ambitious agendas outside of God's will that again began to override God's recorded truth.

In the 1960's and 70's the Jesus Movement arose, and it was a good thing that brought countless thousands to the cause of Christ and also caused many Church leaders to repair and reform their agendas to re-include the nearly-lost components of evangelism and biblical authenticity. Of course, as typical, a few new denominations arose from this newest reform and over the next 40 years most of them also succumbed to human agendas and consequently their effectiveness has all but vanished.

In the 2000's a new movement has sprung up that goes by various names, including the name Seed of Abraham chooses, which is Hebrew Roots. And, so, I begin today's introduction to our study of the Prophet Malachai with a warning to us all who call ourselves Hebrew Roots, Jewish Roots, or Messianic: listen very carefully to Malachai's message. What God began as something

good can be quickly tarnished by human hands. Malachai's message was not against the institution of a Priesthood as originally ordained by The Father, but rather against what it had become. And, the negative outcomes always... and I stress ALWAYS... begin by men...leadership...straying slowly, and then at a quickening pace, step-by-step, away from the strict truths and commands of the Bible, only to be replaced by the subjective thoughts of those men who think they have been divinely inspired by new truths and commands that modifies or replaces the older and original ones. The reality is that new truths that replace the older and original biblical truths is an oxymoron. The new truths are not truth at all.

With that premise in mind, let me set the historical background for our study. There is no consensus that a person named Malachai wrote this book. Malachai in Hebrew means "my messenger" or possibly "my angel". And even the word Malachi itself is what is called an apocopated form. Before you scurry off to a dictionary, all that apocopated means is that it is a shortened form of a word or a phrase that usually is constructed by dropping the ending of that word or phrase. It is a common literary and grammar technique used in most languages. For instance, the common English word "photo" is but an apocopated form of the word "photograph".

The longer form of **Malachai** is **Malachiyah** which means "messenger of God" or perhaps "messenger of Yehoveh". This has resulted in some Bible scholars thinking that this indicates that Malachai isn't a proper name of a Prophet, by rather the book's title is actually meant to be "Messenger of Yehoveh", which includes no one's name. In fact, today, the preponderance of commentators no longer believe that Malachai is the proper name of a particular Prophet who wrote this book; rather, the author is anonymous much the same as with the New Testament Book of Hebrews.

The Greek Septuagint that was created in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C. (which is but a Greek language translation of the Hebrew Bible), translated Malachai as "by the hand of his messenger". Rashi and later Judaism, as well as Jerome and Calvin in Church history, say that Malachai is not the author's personal name. These sources believe that **malachai** is simply a title for Ezra the scribe (that is, the same Ezra that is the author of his own Bible book). There is no other

person in the Bible named Malachai, so, there is good reason to suspect that it was not a person's proper name. That said, even later Jewish Tradition seemed to eventually swing back the other direction to decide that although his name was unique, still Malachai was the proper name of the Prophet who wrote this book. Some of the biggest names in modern Christian scholarship have done the same. I am taking the position from my own research that Malachai is indeed the formal name of a specific Prophet, admitting that this cannot be taken as a certainty. Although, he would certainly be unique among Prophets because no book of biblical prophecy has been handed down through the ages from an anonymous author. Either way, this doesn't demean or cast doubt on the authenticity or spiritually inspired nature of the book.

Although Malachai is far more straightforward prose and less reliant on symbolism as compared to the book we just concluded... Zechariah... which is mostly poetry and symbolism... nonetheless because the book is so ancient, and based on a very unique Hebrew culture, and written in an ancient noun-less form of Hebrew, then the many early translations of it in different languages have translated the Hebrew text with some differences among them. Therefore, when arriving at an accurate English text for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is best to look at all those various older texts, taking something of value from each to arrive at the most probable and originally intended interpretation.

In addition to us having the book in Hebrew that is based upon the Masoretic Hebrew text of around 1000 A.D., we also have a few fragments of Malachai from the Dead Sea Scrolls, but they are so limited and incomplete that not enough can be drawn from them to be helpful, other than to confirm for certain that the book was originally written in Hebrew, and that it had to have happened well before the Qumran Dead Sea Scrolls sect came to be. And further that the book order of the Minor Prophets as we have it today was the same in that ancient, pre-Christ time.

So, in addition to the ancient Hebrew texts of Malachai, there are also very old Greek, Syriac, Aramaic and Latin versions. Interestingly, the Latin (also known as the Vulgate) and the Masoretic Hebrew texts match so closely that they offer a good witness of their accuracy. Therefore, other than for the typical

unintended copyist errors that are normal and natural for hand-written copies of the Bible in the pre-printing press era, what we have today for Malachai is quite good and reliable. That said, we must always factor in (especially as concerns the scores of English translation Bibles that are offered) is the denomination and ideological mindsets of the publishers. They each have agendas that can and do cause translations to be bent to uphold their particular doctrines, traditions and pre-conceived notions. We'll do our best to filter those out.

Malachai is one of the 12 books of the so-called Minor Prophets; in fact, it is the final book of the 12 and Malachai is considered as the last Old Testament Prophet. I'll remind you that the term "minor" was not meant to denote lesser value or importance compared to the Major Prophets but rather referred only to the books' shorter length. The person Malachai was a Jew who returned from Babylon under the leadership of Zerubbabel according to the Jewish Talmud. He, along with Haggai and Zechariah, are called Second Temple Prophets because of their association with the reconstruction of the Temple in Jerusalem and the restoration of the Hebrew faith in the land of Judah (which at that time, was a province of Persia called Yehud). Haggai, Zechariah and Malachai are often seen as sort of a trilogy and very likely the authors of these books not only knew of one another but possibly collaborated to some small level.

Dating Malachi is a bit dicey because the only historical event mentioned in it that can be reasonably dated is the destruction of Edom. But even that is problematic, because there were a couple of different destructions of Edom, the first in the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. that happened at the hand of Babylon. The 2<sup>nd</sup> and more complete destruction were by the Nabatean Arabs that came later in the 5<sup>th</sup> century. The closest thing to a consensus for dating Malachai is that the Prophet prophesied somewhere in between Ezra and Nehemiah (that is, between 458 and 445 B.C.). Some do argue for an earlier date (around 500 B.C.), and others think that Malachai prophesied after Nehemiah, which would place him around 435 B.C. I don't find it particularly critical which of these dates might be the most precise; Malachai's message remains true, and it remains the same regardless where within that time frame it was written. That said, I see Malachai as having more resemblance to the concerns of Nehemiah

than of Ezra. We find Malachai and Nehemiah both speaking about the problem of general wrongs within the Jewish society of the returning exiles, as well as the corruption of the newly reinstituted Priesthood. Apparently, due to the influence of 7 decades in Babylon, intermarriage between Jews and other ethnicities had also begun to run rampant, which of course naturally introduced the problem of bringing pagan, non-biblical morals, ethics, and god-worship into the newly formed families.

Because the Persian emperors had agreed to help financially with the rebuilding of the Temple complex and parts of the city of Jerusalem, and because there was no tithing occurring during the 70-year exile period, the paying of tithes to the Priesthood by the returned Jews had not revived. And, because of the exile and the relatively new return, observing Sabbath properly had also become an afterthought. Nehemiah and Malachai both addressed these issues as well.

I have stated on numerous occasions that the lives of the Israelites were not lived in a bubble. They were part of a multi-cultural, interconnected, and vibrant world. They knew their neighbors, and their neighbors knew them, and there was much communication and interaction. Especially as concerns the broader Middle East and Mesopotamia, what happened to one nation usually had an effect upon others in the region. And since nations are nothing but collections of individuals, then world events of course helped shape the background, context, thoughts, and decisions of everyday Israelites as well as those of their Prophets, Priests, and civil leaders. There were national moods then, as now. People could feel confident about the future, or pessimistic. All of this and more shaped conversations and what concerned people day by day. It even had an effect on their vocabulary.

The most dominant background context for Malachai was the Persian Empire, because the place the Jews now lived... the former Judah... was but a backwater Persian province named Yehud. And Yehud provided Persia with only a single significant reason for the King and Emperor to pay any attention to them at all: geographically, it was the land bridge between their much more important province of Egypt (to the south) which connected it to the rest of their Empire (to the north and east). Therefore, despite the often-stated



teaching that somehow Kings Cyrus, Darius, and later kings of Persia showed great deference to Yehud by sending money to rebuild their Temple, and even appointing a Jew to be their governor, this is simply not so. Providing these funds and encouragement were merely standard Persian governing policies carried out throughout their empire. In reality, they paid little attention to Yehud because the place just didn't matter much to them. It brought them no wealth or resources of any kind, nor was it highly populated such that it provided soldiers for their army; things which were always the higher priority for conquerors. All they wanted in Yehud was for a peace, calm, and loyalty to the king of Persia.

Very likely either Xerxes or Artaxerxes was in power when Malachai wrote; or perhaps he even wrote under the transition of the one to the next. Darius who came before Xerxes had died around 485 B.C. at age 64. Darius spent the greater part of his reign in a power struggle with both the Greeks and the Egyptians. This matters because it effected Yehud and its Jewish residents. Was this constant warring all around them the prophetically foretold "shaking of the nations" that would lead to Jewish independence? What was the people of Yehud to think when the Persians were surprisingly trounced in battle by the Greeks at Marathon? And, depending on the earlier or the later date that one accepts as when Malachai wrote (and I think it was the later date, following Nehemiah), then we have these wars and battles of the Persians, and the rise of the Greeks and the rebellions of Egypt, that did NOT lead to what they thought and hoped it would: freedom and restoration of Judah as a sovereign nation under a Davidic King. This meant to most Jews that Haggai's prophecies had failed. Their living conditions were not only not improving, if anything they had deteriorated. Crop yields had NOT risen. More Diaspora Jews were NOT pouring back home. Their economic circumstances had NOT improved. And while their present governor was a Jew, he was not from the line of David. The favor they had expected from Persia, and their change of fortune, had not come about. So, how were they going to accept Malachai's divine messages from God? This is the milieu into which Malachai's prophecies were delivered.

When the approximately 50,000 Jews returned home from Babylon following their 70 years of exile, it had been to a much-diminished province, which consisted of only around half the territory of the former Judah they had left.

This was during Haggai's prophesying period. They encountered a mixed population of mostly non-Jews... with a high percentage of Samaritans... that opposed them and resented their presence. There was but minimal economic activity occurring because as God had promised, when His people weren't in the Land, the Land would not prosper. So, the returnees experienced a long period of economic hardship, something Haggai said would change. By Malachi's time it had not... at least it had not for the better. Even more, the Persian kings heavily taxed them, and the overlord of the Persian satrapy of which they were part (called Eber-Nahara) levied his own heavy tax upon them in addition. So, what Ezekiel and Haggai seemed to promise... the return of a Davidic king to rule over a prosperous Judah... hadn't come about by the time Malachi brought God's latest Word to the people.

Now, ask yourselves: what happens when a state or territory goes through seemingly never-ending poverty conditions and you have lost all confidence and hope for positive change? You seek who to blame. So, who failed the people more? The Prophets? Their Jewish governor? The Priesthood? God? In Malachi's time it was the Levitical Priesthood that held the most local power over their lives and fortunes because the High Priest had been given new and more authority by the Persians that went beyond his former authority granted by God that was primarily over the religious institution of the Temple. The High Priest of Yehud held more sway than the civil governor. No doubt this had something to do with Malachi's message being aimed squarely (or at least mostly) at the Priesthood. In the end, those Jews who still held onto their faith in Ezekiel's and Haggai's prophecies now believed that the predictions were for an undetermined future time. That is, the expected apocalyptic Day of Yehoveh was delayed. Therefore, so was the arrival of a Davidic king delayed. The result is doubt and uncertainty, of course, and it brought on the greatest disappointment.

On another front, we must remember that Israel's previous Prophets (for the most part) delivered their messages to certain people or to an Israelite king. Beginning with Haggai, then Zechariah, and finally Malachi, this changed. Now the emphasis was directed to the Jewish people in general and to the Priesthood specifically. Why the Priesthood? Because (as we just discussed) the Priesthood had a position of more political and religious and social power

at this time than the primary civil leader (the governor) of the province. And, God found the Priesthood to be more than lacking; they had perverted their God-given roles, and become corrupt. They suddenly found themselves in God's crosshairs... at least according to Malachai's message.

We've just come from studying a prophetic book (Zechariah) that had the greatest mention in the New Testament of any Old Testament Prophet. Malachai falls at the other end of the scale: there is no mention of Malachai. That said, there are a number of quotes or paraphrases from Malachai's book, and some pretty obvious allusions to the words and thoughts used by Malachai. For example: in Romans 9:13 we read **"Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated"**. In Malachai 1:2-3 we read: **"Yet I loved Jacob, but Esau I hated"**. Then there are allusions that are likely to have come from Malachai at least in spirit, such as Luke 6:46: **"Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord', and refuse to do what I say?"** In Malachai 1:6 we read: **"A son honors his father and a servant his master... if I'm a master, where is the respect due me?"** There are at least a dozen other statements in the New Testament that fall within that range. So, despite not hearing his name, we can *hear* the echoes of Malachai in the New Testament, even if sometimes they are a bit faint.

In Judaism, there are standard occasions when Malachai is read in Synagogue services. For instance, in the Torah portion cycle, when reading Genesis 25:19 – 28:9, it is read with Malachai 1:1 – 2:6 as the Haftorah. Another is in the reading of Malachai 3:4 – 24 as the Haftorah when read together with the Torah Portion assigned for the Sabbath that occurs at the time of Passover. For those who might not know, Tradition has divided the Torah (the first 5 books of the Bible) into 54 **parashot** or "portions", read in order, with one read every weekly Sabbath beginning with Genesis. A supplement to that Torah reading is what is what called Haftorah, which are excerpts from the various Prophets, both Major and Minor. It is especially interesting to me that on the Sabbath that is nearest to Passover when Malachai is read we encounter 3:22 which reads: **"Remember the Torah of Moshe my servant, which I enjoined on him at Horev, laws and rulings for all Isra'el."**

This injunction found late in the Book of Malachai was there for the reason that the failure to read the Torah and to teach the Torah fell squarely upon the Levitical Priesthood. I mentioned early in our introduction that of the themes of Malachai that stand out, what grabs my attention is the severe chastisement of the Priesthood for their laxity and for directing the people in tradition and doctrine rather than in God's Word. It is with sadness and trepidation that the words of Kierkegaard come flooding out of their pages in regard to the leadership failures of Christendom that have turned it into something unrecognizable as a biblical faith that claims it gets its marching orders from Jesus. Kierkegaard's thoughts can be directly associated to Malachai's 3:22 injunction to read and follow the ways of the Torah as given on Mt Horeb. Do you remember his stinging words that I spoke to you but minutes ago? ***"The Christianity of Christendom... transforms Christianity into something entirely different from what it is in the New Testament, yea, into exactly the opposite..."*** If the shoe was on the other foot and Malachai had spoken Kierkegaard's words in his day, he would have said something like: "the Hebrew faith of the Levite Priesthood transforms the Hebrew faith into something entirely different from what is in the Torah and the Prophets, yea, into exactly the opposite". Kierkegaard's statement and Malachai's message echo the same sentiment and warning to God's people. The Priesthood in general didn't listen, and neither has Constantinian Christianity. It is critical that the Hebrew Roots and Messianic communities... and especially our leadership... don't find ourselves deserving of this same accusation because we neglect obeying the Word of God and instead embrace and highlight traditions and customs in their place.

Malachi's little book is but 3 chapters long (some Bibles divide it up to make 4). Perhaps its brevity and straightforward statements make it a bit easier to read and understand. Yet, just like the other 11 Minor Prophets, longer or shorter doesn't matter if we don't look at them carefully, study them in their Hebrew context, and take their words to heart. We are blessed in that we have the record of hindsight (something most Jews didn't have in ancient times) to realize the accuracy of the Prophets admonitions and predictions. Finally, by our day, so much of what the ancient Prophets prophesied has come true, historians have recorded it, and now remaining Redemption history has set

itself into motion for the few remaining prophecies to come about... likely sooner than later.

There is much contained within the book that leads us to imply that almost certainly Malachai was a priest... probably a lesser priest. At least, that is my personal conclusion. That is not a unique or new conclusion; it can be traced back to early Judaism among some of the Sages who suspect this (as do I) for no other reason than he seems so intimately familiar with the failings of the Priesthood and so knowledgeable of the covenant; something that the average Israelite in his era would have known little of. After all, the ONLY access people in his era had to the Holy Scriptures was whatever the priests determined to orally teach them. So, the people had no means to fact-check the priests and no way to hold them accountable, which is so unlike Believers in our time can do because God's Word is readily available. Yes, these words of Malachai are God's message. But, they came from the mouth and hand of a human being. Thus, the human perspective always gets intertwined in prophecies to some degree.

One profound thing God has taught me in my nearly 8 decades of life is that I can speak of something better and more authentically to others, if I have first experienced it myself. I can speak of sin, because I have sinned. I can speak of redemption, because I have been redeemed. I can speak of loss and failure, because I have experienced both. I can speak as a layperson in a congregation because I have been one. And I can speak as a faith leader and Bible teacher, because God has allowed me to have that experience as well.

In Malachai's words, my life experience makes me sense his personal acceptance of the failures of his own assigned duties as a priest, likely sometime earlier in his life (and maybe not all that much earlier because he seemed have been a Prophet for but a very short time). He seems to understand that he was made a Prophet for a single purpose: to relay a very focused message from The Father. But now as a Prophet and a former priest, he has the opportunity to speak from life knowledge and experience the authentic truth that God has shown him as one who was culpable and recognizes it.

Malachai speaks from a covenant perspective. His moral stance is objective, based on the Law of Moses. His message is primarily one of rebuke and condemnation (rather typical for Prophets) for disobeying the covenant. The moral and spiritual condition of the returned exiles and their religious leadership are nearly identical to that of our Christian institutions of our day. So, just as I am regularly characterized by many Christians as nothing but a Church-basher, so was Malachai looked upon as little more than a Judaism-basher by the religious leadership and the bulk of the common public. Therefore, some listened to him, but the majority did not.

And yet, despite the strong words of divine rebuke, the first words of God's message to Israel through Malachai were: "I love you". And, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century that message and truth still applies to the gone-astray Christianity, and to every strain and segment of Believers faith in the God of Israel and His Son, Yeshua, no matter what we might call ourselves. Next week we'll begin chapter 1.