

CHAPTER XVI

MALACHI

THE STRUCTURE OF MALACHI

“ I HAVE LOVED YOU ”

- A. The Proof of God's Love—Ch. 1: 1-5.
- B. Obstacles to the Enjoyment of God's Love—Ch. 1: 6-3: 12.
 - 1—Chs. 1: 6-2: 9. Lack of Respect and Reverence towards God.
 - (a) Ch. 1: 6-14. By the People.
 - (b) Ch. 2: 1-9. By the Priests.
 - 2—Ch. 2: 10-16. Inhumanity and Apostasy.
 - 3—Chs. 2: 17-3: 6. Despising of God's Promises and Commandments.
 - 4—Ch. 3: 7-12. Withholding of Tithes.
- C. God's Loving Protection of the Pious in the Day of Judgment—Chs. 3: 13-4: 3.
- D. The Final call to Repentance—Ch. 4: 4-6.

The Prophet and His Message.

MALACHI means “My Messenger” or “My Angel,” or if it is abbreviated, as is just possible, “The Messenger of Jehovah.” Either is a highly improbable name to give to a child. We shall be almost certainly correct in regarding the book as anonymous, and Malachi as a title which the prophet gave himself, perhaps because he deliberately wished to efface himself.¹ Not merely a great reformer like Calvin, but most of the Church Fathers, including Jerome, many of the early rabbis, the Targum (the official Jewish translation into Aramaic) and the LXX (second century B.C.; though not the later added heading) all fail to see a proper name here and regard the book as anonymous. In addition the New Testament never quotes him by name. On the other hand there have been those from at least the second century A.D. who have looked on Malachi as a proper name. We have no hesitation in following the vast majority of modern scholars in regarding the book as anonymous.²

It is obvious that Malachi is later than Haggai and Zechariah, for the Temple has been rebuilt. He is hardly likely to

¹ See HDB and ISBE, article Malachi.

² Exceptions are Pusey: *The Minor Prophets VI*, p. 167, who thinks, “It may be that he framed it for himself” (*sic!*), and Young, p. 275f.

be later than Nehemiah, for the sins that he rebukes are just those that Nehemiah had to deal with. Pusey looks on him as contemporaneous, "Yet he probably bore a great part in the reformation, in which Nehemiah co-operated outwardly . . ."¹ This hardly fits in with the general impression created by Nehemiah. Others place him in the interval between Nehemiah's two governorships, but this presupposes an immediate slump in the behaviour of the people which again is hardly suggested by Nehemiah. On the other hand there are problems connected with the activity of Ezra and Nehemiah which would keep us from all dogmatism. Personally we prefer a date not much before 450 B.C., shortly before the reforms were begun.

Beyond the fact that he probably moved in the Temple circles there is nothing that we can infer about "Malachi" personally. His book is entirely in prose and carefully and skilfully put together.

His message concerns God's love. In the difficulties of the post-exilic community, which were so contrary to the high hopes with which they had returned, and which had decreased but little after the rebuilding of the Temple, in spite of the glowing promises of Haggai and Zechariah, it was easy to doubt the love of God. "Malachi" is concerned to show that there is proof of God's love, that the enjoyment of that love was being hindered by the sins of the people, and how the love would reveal itself in the future.

The Proof of God's Love (1: 2-5).

The supreme proof of God's love to the Jew was His choice of Jacob in grace. "Malachi" points out that the same principle was operating in his own day, for even if the Jew was weak, Edom was weaker still. For the situation mirrored here see p. 96.

"But Esau I hated" (ver. 3)—as Snaith has pointed out² the love of God in the Old Testament is, above all, election love. Since in old Hebrew there were no intermediate shades, not to elect, not to love, was to hate.

Obstacles to the Enjoyment of God's Love (1: 6-3: 12).

The love of God, which made Israel His firstborn (Exod. 4: 22), expected respect and reverence from His children. Where these did not exist, the love of God could not be experienced. This wrong attitude of the people was shown in five different ways.

(1) There was the gross disrespect shown to Jehovah (1: 6-14) by bringing Him sacrifices without heart-respect (ver. 7), of a quality unworthy of the Persian governor's table

¹ Pusey, *op. cit.*, p. 169.

² *The Distinctive Ideas of the Old Testament*, ch. VI.

(ver. 8), and by treating the whole matter as indifferent and a burden (ver. 12f); some even descended to gross deceit (ver. 14). Far better no sacrifices at all (ver. 10). Though the priests are specially addressed, for it was they as guardians of the altar who made such behaviour possible, it is clear that we are dealing with a widespread attitude among the people.

This was the worse because of the growing respect with which Jehovah was being regarded wherever the dispersion extended (ver. 11). This famous verse is interpreted along three lines.

(a) The A.V. in common with most of the early Church Fathers and those moderns who tend to be traditionalists look upon it as a prophecy of the spread of Christianity. Linguistically this is entirely possible, but it does not do justice to the context.

(b) Some moderns, specially among the more liberal, take it to mean that Jehovah accepts all true and sincere worship and sacrifice as though it had been knowingly addressed to Him. This would suit a treatise on comparative religion better than an exposition of the Old Testament and cannot fairly be extracted from the prophet's language.

(c) The most likely interpretation—which does not rule out (a) as a deeper fulfilment—is that the dispersion, which even then was more zealous than those who had returned, cf. the work of Ezra and Nehemiah, was making the name and worship of Jehovah widely known. Since incense symbolizes prayer, and the offering is the *minchah*, the meal or gift offering, which could metaphorically be applied to all gifts to God, no actual Temple sacrifices need be envisaged.

(2) The priests are then specially arraigned (2: 1-9) for their neglect of their special privileges as teachers of the Law (vers. 7ff). So high do they stand in God's economy that the priest is called the angel of Jehovah of hosts (ver. 7—A.V., R.V. messenger; the context prevents any misunderstanding). We can see that we are in the twilight of prophecy, for the priest is now to stand alone as the expounder of the already revealed will of God. It should be noticed that the stress is not on sacrificing, which spiritually was not the chief priestly task, cf. Deut. 33: 8ff, where it is mentioned last.

(3) The inhumanity of the people (2: 10-16), which was a contradiction of God's love, was specially shown in the divorce of their wives, and this became apostacy by their subsequent marriage with heathen women (ver. 11). "Malachi" is not seeking to set aside the regulations of Deut. 24: 1-4 about divorce, but their enforcement in their true spiritual sense. The phrase "wife of thy youth" suggests a marriage of long standing; if there had been anything to justify divorce, it would have shown itself much earlier; in addition after these

years it would be very difficult for her to find another husband. These divorces were just treachery. Since no woman was allowed to come to the altar, ver. 18 is a powerful metaphorical expression. The divorces were probably in order to marry the heathen women.

The Old Testament obviously looks on monogamy as the ideal, and we do not get the impression from it that divorce was common; the better elements in Jewry were always against it. The famous dictum in the Mishnah, "And the School of Hillel say: [He may divorce her] even if she spoiled a dish for him, for it is written, Because he hath found in her indecency in *anything*. R. Akiba says: Even if he found another fairer than she, for it is written, And it shall be if she finds no favour in his eyes . . ."¹ is a legal argument. These men did not act according to their argument, nor would they have encouraged others so to act.

(4) There was disbelief in the reality of Jehovah's promises and threats and much open sin (2: 17-3: 6). The former reminds us of Zeph. 1: 12. These will be dealt with by the coming of the Angel of the covenant (3: 1. R.V. mg.), *i.e.* the Angel of Jehovah, in the judgment of the Day of the Lord. The promise that closes this section (3: 6) may seem out of place until we remember that even the judgment of God is a sign of His love and an accomplishing of His purpose. It was the sinners that would be burnt out, not the whole people.

(5) Finally the people were withholding His dues from God (3: 7-12). There can be no question of the prophet's trying to bribe the people (ver. 10ff). It is prophetic logic that if the barrier to the enjoyment of God's love is removed, the gifts of His love will be enjoyed as well.

God's Loving Protection of the Pious (3: 13-4: 3).

Since the disloyal element in the people exists and persists (3: 13ff), there must be judgment. But the loyal have been noted (3: 16) and in the day of judgment they will be preserved (3: 17), so that the difference between the two parties will be clearly seen. The result of judgment will be the triumph of the righteous (4: 2f).

The Final Call to Repentance (4: 4ff).

A fitting end to the prophetic books. It looks back to the revelation of God on which the whole prophetic message is based and forward to the fulfilment of all the prophetic hopes. It offers the choice of repentance (ver. 6, see R.V. mg.) or the ban. In the Synagogue ver. 5 is read a second time after ver. 6 to avoid ending with the ban, cf. Isa. 66: 23f, p. 62, but it is only Jesus Christ, the fulfilment of the prophets, who can raise the ban.

¹ *Gittin*, ix, 10.