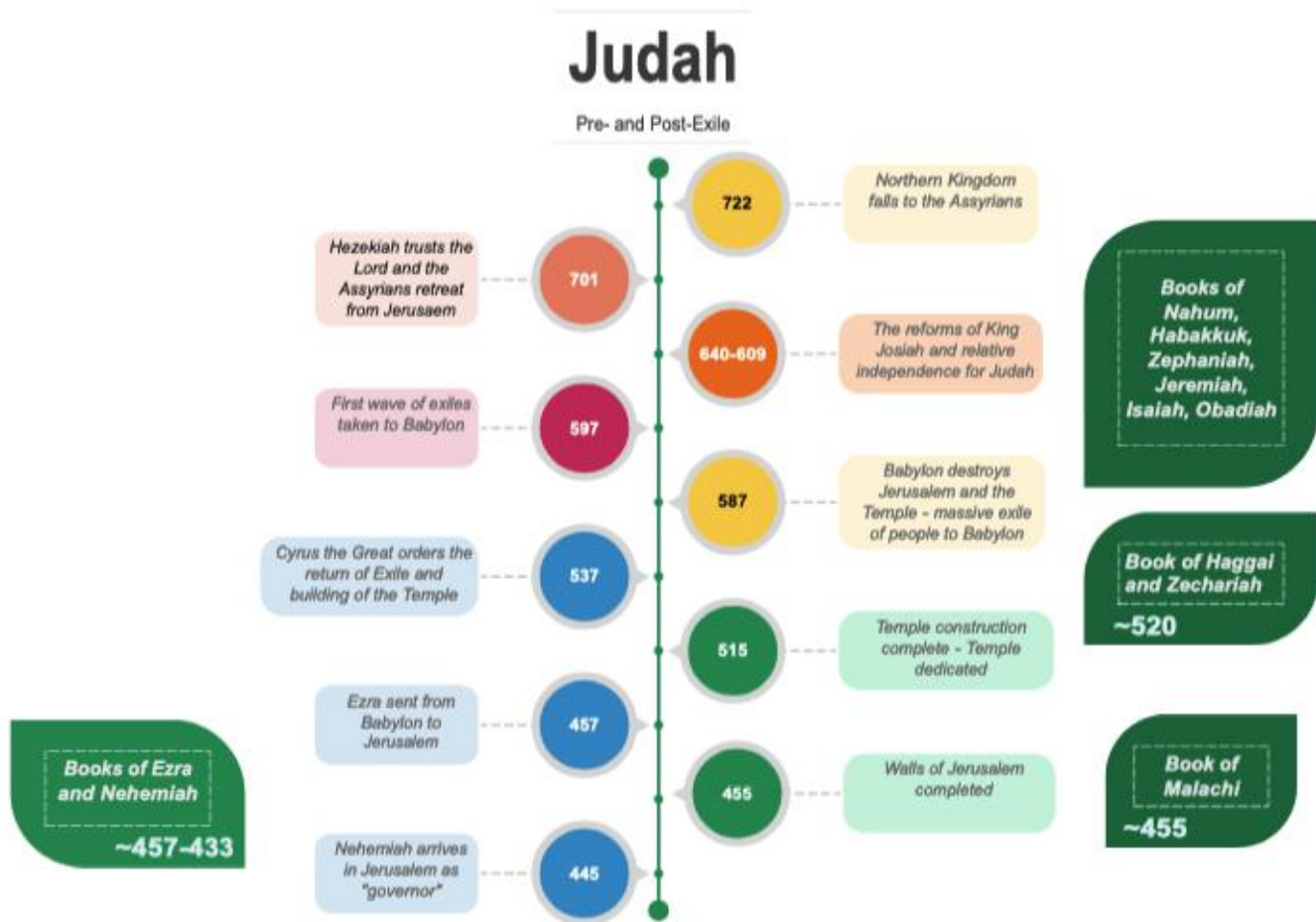


Haggai and Malachi

Historical Background: The nation of Judah had been destroyed and many of them were exiled to Babylon in 587 AD. The Persian king, Cyrus, issued a decree that the exiles could return in 537. The first of the returnees arrived in 586 and reconstructed the altar of burnt offering that same year. In 586, the returnees laid the foundation for the new temple (a.k.a ‘the second temple,’ or ‘Zerubabel’s temple’). However, they encountered opposition to this project (Ezra 4:1-5), work stopped, and the reconstruction of the temple was neglected. Haggai’s ministry began ~16 years after work on the temple had been stopped. 4-5 years after Haggai’s ministry, the second temple was completed.



The Book of Haggai

Date of Authorship: Haggai was kind enough to write which year, month, and day that the word of the Lord came to him (relative to the reign of the Persian king Darius) and we have every reason to believe the text of Haggai was recorded at the same time. Because historians can confidently date Darius’ reign, we know that the events in Haggai occur between Aug 29th and Dec 18th of 520 BC. There is no means of knowing what happened to Haggai after 18 December 520. Once temple building began in earnest he had fulfilled his mission, and, having in Zechariah a successor to continue the work, he withdrew from the scene.

Author: Haggai is a prophet who is mentioned in Ezra 5:1 and 6:14. His ministry is contemporary to Zechariah. The book tells us little about the prophet, which is hardly surprising as the book is relatively

short. Was he a young man, who had returned with his parents in 538 BC? If he was a child at that time the omission of his name from the list in Ezra 2 would be understandable. Had he been in Babylon at all? According to Jewish tradition he had lived the greater part of his life in Babylon. Partly on this tradition and partly on inference from Haggai 2:3, the majority opinion that when he prophesied he was a very old man who had seen the temple before its destruction, and was given the most important task of his life just before his death.

Purpose: The year 520 BC was one of crises for Jerusalem. It was not the kind of crisis obvious to all, as when a threat of invasion shocks a whole population into action, but the dangerous state of moral paralysis which accepts as normal conditions that demand drastic changes. Unless a man of vision and determination can intervene in time there is no hope of recovery.

The Jews who returned from Babylon had been given to expect the very desert to burst into flower (Isa. 35:1). Instead they found the desert encroaching on their fields and orchards as one year of drought succeeded another. The consequent food shortage and poverty had taken the heart out of those who might otherwise have been eager to rebuild. Three centuries earlier Amos had commented on freak weather conditions and blighted harvests (Amos 4:6f.), teaching that these had been God's warning signs, which Israel had been too self-confident to recognize. Though the circumstances were different Haggai saw in the recurrent droughts a divine rebuke. Unlike Amos he found himself confronted with a people conscious of their need and prepared to admit their failure. They accepted Haggai's diagnosis of their situation as from God, reorganized their lives accordingly, and set to work.

Haggai is sent by God to compel the people of Judah to resume the construction of the Temple. His initial message is well received, yet he still has work to do. God continues to speak through Haggai to encourage the Israelites even though their building was not as large or magnificent as Solomon's temple, and he also warns them to not stain or make unclean their building with unfaithful hearts and hands. Haggai's final prophecy is a reassurance that God's eternal promise regarding the Davidic covenant will be fulfilled, and a recognition that this fulfillment has already been realized in part in the leadership of Zerubbabel (himself a descendant of David).

The Message

Haggai was a man of one message. He represented the God whom he loved to call the Lord of hosts, the source of all power, the controller of armies, on earth and in heaven. It followed that his word had authority; the weather obeyed his commands (1:11); the whole universe was in his grasp and would one day be shaken by his hand (2:6, 21).

This same God was consistent in his dealings with men. Though they disregarded Him, He never gave them up. When they failed to fulfill his will He made life hard for them so that they would seek him (1:5). When they committed themselves to his service he took pleasure in the fact and was glorified (1:8). He changed men's attitudes (1:14) and by his Spirit abode among them (2:5). He would transform the work they did for him, and cause the nations to supply gifts of gold and silver, all of which belonged to him by right (2:8).

Haggai listed no catalog of gross sins. The Jews who returned to Jerusalem appear to have been law-abiding at this time, restrained still by continuing memories of the exile. What was lacking was dissatisfaction with things as they were, and the consequent drive to initiate action. Resignation killed faith. The ruined skeleton of the temple was like a dead body decaying in Jerusalem and making everything contaminated (2:10–14). How could the offense be removed? By a concerted effort to rebuild, which would be proof and pledge of a change of attitude from resignation to faith. Once priorities had

been put right the presence of the Lord among them would be evident from the prosperity that would accompany both their building and their agriculture (2:9, 19).

This assurance of the Lord's present salvation and future purpose pervades Haggai's message and marks him out as a genuine prophet. He can see the bare walls of the ruined temple clothed with the silver and gold presented by the nations (2:7–9). Zerubbabel, the governor and temple builder, is the coming Davidic ruler, or at least his representative in the contemporary scene (2:21–23). God's universal kingdom, in which the warring nations find their peace in capitulating to him (2:22; cf. 7–9), is the ultimate goal of history, but Haggai sees it beginning in his own time as personal and community affairs are submitted to God's rule. It is not just that everything will turn out right in the end, but that the unchanging God is working out his purposes now: '*My Spirit abides among you; fear not*' (2:5). Thus present obedience sets God's people in line with fulfillment of his ultimate purpose, and his Spirit fills them with the conviction that they are experiencing in a small measure 'realized eschatology'.

The Book of Malachi

Whereas most of the prophets lived and prophesied in days of change and political upheaval, Malachi, Zechariah and their contemporaries were living in an uneventful waiting period, when God seemed to have forgotten his people enduring poverty and foreign domination in the little province of Judah.

Zerubbabel and Joshua, whom Haggai and Zechariah had indicated as God's chosen men for the new age, had died. True the temple had been completed, but nothing momentous had occurred to indicate that God's presence had returned to fill it with glory, as Ezekiel had indicated would happen (Ezek. 43:4). The day of miracles had passed with Elijah and Elisha. The round of religious duties continued to be carried on, but without enthusiasm. Where was the God of their fathers? Did it really matter whether one served him or not? Generations were dying without receiving the promises (cf. Heb. 11:13) and many were losing their faith.

Date of Authorship: Malachi was written to the Israelite community in Jerusalem which had returned from Exile. The absence of any reference to the rebuilding of the temple, and the fact that worship has degenerated into mere routine suggest that some considerable time has passed since its rebuilding took place. Socially, conditions are reminiscent of the time of Ezra-Nehemiah. There is the same unwillingness to part with money for the temple funds (Mal. 3:8; cf. Neh. 10:32–39; 13:10); advantage was being taken of the poor and oppressed (Mal. 3:5; cf. Neh. 5:1–5); and, most characteristic of all, intermarriage with non-Jewish families was threatening the survival of the covenant faith (Mal. 2:10, 11; cf. Ezra 9:1, 2; Neh. 13:1–3, 23f.). This parallel evidence leads most scholars to a general consensus that Malachi belongs to the same approximate period as Ezra and Nehemiah.

Author: The name Malachi literally means "my messenger" and is a name found nowhere else in Scripture or in lists of names. This leads some to wonder whether this is a proper name or a generic title for a prophet. Some ancient Jewish and Christian writers considered this book to be the work of Ezra (Targum, Jerome, & the Babylonian Talmud), but that theory is not well supported. We know very little about Malachi the man.

Purpose: Malachi speaks to a grumbling community who seem to be annoyed and dissatisfied by God. The structure of the book is organized around complaints of the people that Malachi is responding to. Malachi's response to the Israelite people reminds them of the great love that God has shown for Israel

above other peoples, His incredible and miraculous provision for them, their own unfaithfulness that continues to this day, and a promise to purge or cull the people of God to bring about righteous followers.

Fundamental to Malachi's teaching is the concept of covenant. It is implicit in the opening theme, the Lord's love for Israel (1:2–5), and the book ends with a call to fulfill the obligations of the covenant as expressed in the law (4:4). The Lord, who initiated the covenant, and on whose dependability it was established, is the central figure and chief spokesman. Out of a total of fifty-five verses, forty-seven record in the first person the address of the Lord to Israel (the exceptions being 1:1; 2:11–15, 17; 3:16). This use of the first person presents a vivid encounter between God and the people, unsurpassed in the prophetic books.

By virtue of the covenant relationship the Lord refers to himself as a father and implies that Israel is his son (1:6; 3:17; cf. 2:10). His desire is to bless his sons with all good things (3:10–12). He wants them to find true satisfaction and be like the ideal priest portrayed in 2:5–7, accepting daily his gifts of life and peace, responding with awe to the privilege of belonging to him, and in his turn passing on to others the good things he enjoys. A living relationship with the Lord is utterly essential if Israel's covenant destiny is to be fulfilled.

Twice Malachi specifies sin as covenant-breaking: the priests corrupted the covenant of Levi (2:8) and the people as a whole profaned the covenant of their fathers (2:10). Far from responding with warmth and spontaneity to the personal love shown to them, both priests and people were apathetic, bored with worship (1:13) and mean in their giving (3:8). In short, they despised the Lord (1:6), cheated him of vows and robbed him of dues (1:14; 3:8). Having failed to love God, they also failed to love their neighbor. A broken relationship with God led on to broken relationships in human society, intermarriage and divorce being the examples of unfaithfulness quoted by Malachi. The objection to intermarriage was not on racial but religious grounds. Surrounding nations worshiped 'a foreign god' (2:11), and therefore to enter into marriage alliances with them was *ipso facto* to be unfaithful to one's own covenant God (2:10). Similarly, divorce was hateful to God because it involved breach of covenant. Malachi's description of marriage to the wife of one's youth as companionship (2:14) bears incidental witness to a high view of family life, based on the lifelong partnership of one man with one woman. The wife is valued for the worth of her own personality and not merely for her physical attraction. The upbringing of children is a shared responsibility (2:15) and children are to honor both parents (Exod. 20:12). Thus family relationships illustrate love and loyalty, and make the divine covenant comprehensible to man, while divorce, by contrast, typifies broken faith and severed relationships.

There are certainly notes of judgment intended to warn individuals so that none based hopes of salvation on a false confidence, but was prepared for the testing fires which even the faithful had to expect (3:3). The God of justice (2:17) is about to do a new thing. His intervention will in some way bring the nations to worship him (1:11), he will come to his temple (3:1), appropriately heralded by a forerunner, and there will perform his twofold task, to refine and to judge (3:2–5). Ultimately all that resists the refining process will be burnt up (4:1). This eschatological expectation was not presented as some distant goal but as an imminent event, and so acted as a powerful spur to repentance and reformation of life in preparation for the 'great and terrible day of the Lord' (4:5).

Malachi has nothing to say about the judgment of the nations. His concern is to keep faith alive in Israel, and the nations are not part of his brief (1:1). This does not mean that he was indifferent to the wider world. He knew that the Lord's dominion extended beyond Israel (1:5) and that all nations were to

witness the intervention of the Lord, acknowledge him and fear him (1:14; 3:12). They would even bring him a pure offering, surpassing the levitical sacrifices, which were never so described (see commentary on 1:11), but meanwhile his burden was to urge Israel to be true to the covenant lest history should culminate in destruction instead of blessing.

Malachi's remarkable ethical thrust has lost none of its cutting edge through the passing of time. His teaching, both negative and positive, strikes at the heart of nominal, easygoing Christianity as it did that of Judaism. Malachi's prophecy is particularly relevant to the many waiting periods in human history and in the lives of individuals. He enables us to see the strains and temptations of such times, the imperceptible abrasion of faith that ends in cynicism because it has lost touch with the living God. Even more important he shows the way back to a genuine, enduring faith in the God who does not change (Mal. 3:6), who invites men to return to him (3:7), and never forgets those who respond (3:16).