Malachi: The Passionate Prophet of Pursuing God’s Righteous Best

The Background and Historical Setting:
1. Like many of the prophets of Israel who emphasized the unequivocal “Thus says the LORD,” Malachi unhesitatingly and passionately addresses the spiritual immaturity and even idolatry in Israel most likely (no datable persons or events are mentioned) during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah (which was around ___ and ___ BC (see 1:8 where the reference to the “governor” indicates it may have been during the Persian period and 4:4 points toward Ezra’s ministry of seeking to restore respect and adherence to the law—Ezra 7:14, 25-26; Neh. 8:18); some date between Ezra and Nehemiah while others would date in 433 BC, between Nehemiah’s two visits to Jerusalem. Similar issues are addressed by these 3 leaders of Israel during the Persian period: marriage to foreign wives, neglect of the tithe, a degenerate priesthood, and degrading social sins.

2. Malachi emphasizes the theme of ________ Israel’s relationship with the one true God of heaven and earth, beginning with the reminder of God’s covenant love (1:2-5)—see also covenant references to “Levi” (2:5-9), “the fathers” (2:10), “marriage” (2:14), and “the messenger” (3:1).

3. Malachi spoke to a disillusioned and discouraged people whose experience was nothing like their understanding of the glorious promises found in the earlier prophets. Their doubts caused them to “break faith” with their covenant God so Malachi seeks to challenge them to return to living the obligations of the covenant, rooted in their faith who has every right to “dispute” with them (the _______ style is prominent in this book)—note the uncommonly frequent use of the first person (“I”) by the LORD in addressing the people that adds a sense of _______ and _________ to the message (1:2; 2:2; 3:5, 6, 10, 17; 4:5).

4. The larger historical context includes Cyrus, King of Persia who in 539 BC Cyrus turned against Nabonidus and captured Babylon, in part because Cyrus was more respectful of Marduk and other Babylonian deities than the unpopular Nabonidus. Cyrus would issue his decree in 538 BC (the Cyrus Cylinder was discovered in March 1879 in Babylon/Mesopotamia) allowing those conquered peoples living in exile to return to their own homeland with their sacred objects (the Jews did have “idols” but were given the sacred temple vessels). However, it took many years before large numbers of Jews would return to Jerusalem, in part because after about 70 years, they had become comfortable with living in Babylon.

5. While the Persians should never be considered “democratic,” many of the kings did take a more lenient approach to ruling conquered peoples, giving much more freedom than most preceding empires.

The Book as a Whole and the Prophet Himself:
1. It is the 12th book in “The Book of the Twelve” (the 3rd of the post-exilic prophets) in the Hebrew Bible but nothing is known about Malachi apart from his book…is the title his name, which means “__________ messenger,” or was this book written by Ezra the scribe (see the Targum of Jonathan)? However, since the name is mentioned (1:1; 2:7; 3:1), this would be the only book NOT to have been named after the author so perhaps it is best to understand that indeed a prophet named Malachi who passionately preached God’s covenantal righteousness is the best path for everyone to follow (Malachi contains several references to the nations outside Israel (cf. 1:5, 11, 14; 3:12).

2. One of the most pervasive characteristics of this book is its use of rhetorical Questions, utilizing what would become a popular rabbinic teaching tool of “__________ and __________” (see the NT use of rhetorical questions to make a point: Matt. 3:7; 11:7-9; 12:26-27; Luke 14:5; John 18:38; Rom. 3:1-4; 6:21; 7:7; Gal. 3:21; Heb. 1:14). Otherwise, this book contains short paragraphs of various themes in straightforward language that would be easily understood even if hard to receive its truth!

3. Theologically, Malachi stands with the other prophets whose focus is the person and work of God Himself—the God of truth and righteousness who calls His people to live their lives in obedience that glorify Him for a witness to the world in anticipation of the Messiah’s forerunner (3:1; 4:5)

The Outline: Pursue God’s Best...
I. by ___________ Himself and His Love! (1:1-5)  
II. by ___________ in Holy Worship (1:6 - 2:9)  
III. by ___________ Him in your Family (2:10-16)  
IV. by ___________ His messengers (2:17 – 3:5)  
V. by ___________ in faith (3:6-12)  
VI. by ___________ faithfully within the community (3:13-18)  
VII. by ___________ expectantly the Day of the LORD (4:1-6)

The Prophet’s Purpose: To proclaim that the people of God must pursue God’s righteous best as a witness to the world of His unfailing love and wait expectantly for His coming.

Key Verse: “I have loved you,” says the LORD… Remember the law of my servant Moses…. Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes.” (2:2; 4:4-5)