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## **CERTIFICATE COURSE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT**

### **UNIT 23: BETWEEN THE TESTAMENTS**

#### **TEXTBOOK READINGS:**

Read chapter 39 “Malachi,” in *Discovering the Bible*.

#### **BIBLICAL TEXT:**

Read the specific texts as they are cited in the following material.

#### **BACKGROUND AND PERSPECTIVES:**

After their return to the land of their fathers, the Jewish exiles experienced a brief religious revival in the form of the rebuilding of the temple and the activity of Ezra and Nehemiah as well as that of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah. This was followed by the prophetic work of Malachi (examined below), but that there were deep problems within Jewish society and a lack of general religious dedication among many is clear in the messages of the final books of the Old Testament. Soon afterwards, the leaders raised up by God and the light of prophecy that he had given in this period ended. It would be four long centuries before the light eventually returned – in New Testament times – and Israel now entered a dark age in which it fell under the control of one major power after another. These dark centuries from approximately 400 BC to the birth of Jesus consisted of:

The Persian period – which was already starting to wane

The Alexandrian period – of Alexander the Great and his Hellenistic (Greek culture) successors

The Egyptian period – when the region was controlled by Hellenized Egyptian rulers

The Syrian period – a low point at which the Jews were actively martyred by their Syrian enemies

The Maccabean (or Hasmonean) period – a brief interlude of independence but with ongoing wars

The Roman period – when Israel became part of the Roman Empire.

The dark centuries essentially went from bad to worse as time progressed, but the absorption of Israel into the empire of Rome – brutal though it was – actually brought relative stability and peace at the end of this era and set the stage for the events of the New Testament. However, the long intertestamental decline did not mean that all religious dedication had left Israel. The exile had a lasting effect on the Jewish people, and the period connecting Malachi to Matthew saw an increase in great religious fervor among many. Some of the developments of this period are particularly important in understanding the background to the New Testament.

Many Jews began to peruse the word of God with zeal, studying the Hebrew Scriptures intently, looking for and confirming the reason for the captivity and their subsequent troubles. Following in the tradition of the scribe Ezra, a new order of scribes developed. In their earliest stages they concentrated on simply preserving and teaching the Scriptures, and as time progressed they began to produce the literature known as the Mishna (the laws which had been passed down orally and not recorded in the biblical books) and the Gemara (a commentary on the Mishna). These two collections were later developed and combined to form the Jewish Talmud. In this same period, many of the apocryphal or deuterocanonical books were written from about 150 BC to about AD 70. These books include 1 and 2 Esdras, 2 Esther, the Wisdom of Solomon, and a number of others. Many contain historical and geographical inaccuracies and anachronisms, as well as some obviously fanciful accounts, however, and were rejected by those Jews intent on maintaining the purity of the Scriptures.

During this time, the Aramaic language commonly spoken throughout much of the Near East became the everyday language of the Jewish people, and Hebrew became more and more a religious language somewhat akin to Latin in the modern world. This tended to make for an increasing divide between the professional Bible scholars and scribes who could read and understand the scriptures in their original language and the common people who relied on interpreters. As the intertestamental centuries progressed, the Hellenistic Greek language began to replace Aramaic in many settings, and this was the era in which the Hebrew Scriptures were translated into the Greek Septuagint version (third through the first centuries BC) that would later be quoted by Jesus and Paul and used by many early Christians.

Another major development during this period was the beginning of the synagogue (Greek “assembly”). After the destruction of the temple, these places for assembly were instituted in order to allow formal worship and to provide schools for the education of Jewish children as well as centers for adult study of the Scriptures. The synagogues grew in importance so that by New Testament times, they were at the heart of Jewish life and the people’s worship. The synagogues also became central to the evolution of the Jewish religion itself as it began to change in post-exilic times.

The exile almost completely cured the Jewish people of idolatry, which they recognized as the primary reason for their captivity. After the return they never returned to the idolatry of the nations around them and they began to be increasingly cautious about all aspects of religious life. This led to the avoidance of use of the personal name of God, Yahweh, out of fear of its misuse, and the substitution of the names “Elohim” (God) and “Adonai” (Lord) for the historic covenant name of Yahweh. It also led to the making of an increasing number of additional religious rules and regulations aimed at avoiding breaking the laws of God. Unfortunately, the process became extreme, and the spirit of the law often became lost in a compulsiveness that lay at the heart of the rules developed by the Pharisees from about 165 BC on.

Despite the growth of the synagogues, the temple remained at the center of Jewish identity and was certainly a matter of national pride. Thus, by the close of the era, when Roman rule allowed for stability and construction, King Herod of Judah (72-4 BC – see Note 1), was able to expand the initially small Second Temple into a major edifice far greater in size, and doubtless far larger even than the original temple of Solomon (see image below). Construction began in 20 BC and continued after Herod’s death, so that by the time of Jesus it had been undergoing development for almost forty-six years (John 2:20). The importance of the temple and the priestly class that served it led to the development of the powerful Sadducean party which often competed with the Pharisees in matters of Jewish political and religious life and which would also be an important part of the background to early Christianity.



Model of Herod's temple by Michael Avi-Yonah. Image: Juan R. Cuadra.

## UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT:

The book of Malachi seems to stand at the close of the Old Testament period and is significant at various levels, so we provide a summary of some of its key aspects here.

**MALACHI**, "My messenger," is probably a shortened form of *Malakhiyah*, "Messenger of Yahweh," as we see from the name of the book in the Septuagint which calls it "His Messenger." As such, Malachi may not be an actual name, but the title of the author, as it is to be understood in Malachi 1:1.

The date of Malachi is also somewhat uncertain, though clearly it was written after the exile, as it uses the Persian term *peha* "governor" (Malachi 1:8), which would only be understandable during the era of Persian control of Judah. The same verse mentions the rebuilt temple, so the book must also be later than 515 BC. Finally, the themes of the book suggest it came after Haggai and Zechariah, which is why it closes the canon as the last book of the Christian Old Testament.

Judging by what Malachi writes, after they had been restored to their land and their temple worship renewed, the commitment of many of the people to God began to wane. Malachi describes a serious situation in which a sizeable percentage of the population seems to have become disenchanted with their religion, either because of the exile itself or the conditions after it, or perhaps both. The extent of this disenchantment is seen in the fact that Malachi opens with the people of Israel questioning God's love for them (Malachi 1:2 – see Note 2). Malachi then accuses the people – and particularly the priests – of failing to give God the respect he deserves in their giving of inferior and blemished sacrifices (Malachi 2:1) – a sure sign that the lack of love was really on the part of the people themselves, not on God's part.

Next Malachi addresses the matter of divorce and wrongful remarriage. It is often noted that he looks at this issue both as a social problem ("Why [are we] ... being unfaithful to one another?" – Malachi 2:10) and a religious problem ("Judah has desecrated the sanctuary the Lord loves by marrying women who worship a foreign god" – Malachi 2:11). Unlike Ezra and Nehemiah, under different circumstances, Malachi preaches the maintaining of relationships rather than their severance.

Malachi next reproves the people's attitude of questioning God's justice by quoting their own sayings, such as "All who do evil are good in the eyes of the Lord, and he is pleased with them" or "Where is the God of justice?" (Malachi 2:17). He warns that God will bring justice to them as a refining fire if they do not repent of their wrongful attitudes as well as their actions against others (Malachi 3:5) and against God himself (Malachi 3:8-14).

Yet Malachi also assures the faithful among the people of God's good intentions toward them (Malachi 3:16-4:3) and closes his book with a promise that God will send Elijah again before the day of the LORD begins (Malachi 4:5-6).

### **KEY THEOLOGICAL CONCEPTS:**

The lessons we can learn from Malachi and the intertestamental period that followed his ministry are both humbling and inspiring. On the one hand, God's words to Israel through Malachi are a somber assessment of the whole Old Testament period: "Ever since the time of your ancestors you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them" (Malachi 3:7). Sadly, this has been one of the most consistent patterns we have seen throughout Old Testament history – from Eden to Babylon and beyond. Yet on the other hand, Malachi records God's unfailing desire to continue to work with those who honor him and to fulfill his plans for his people. There are few more encouraging words in the Old Testament than Malachi's assurance of this:

Then those who feared the LORD talked with each other, and the LORD listened and heard. A scroll of remembrance was written in his presence concerning those who feared the LORD and honored his name. "On the day when I act," says the LORD Almighty, "they will be my treasured possession. I will spare them, just as a father has compassion and spares his son who serves him." (Malachi 3:16-17)

Malachi also reveals interesting glimpses of the movement of God in history. As the Jewish nation began to move more and more toward exclusivity in its social and religious life, we find God placing more and more stress on the inclusion of all peoples in his plan. The prophet Isaiah and some others spoke important words concerning the eventual inclusion of the gentiles, but Malachi exhibits a great development of this thought with words such as "Great is the Lord—even beyond the borders of Israel!" (Malachi 1:5), "My name will be great among the nations, from where the sun rises to where it sets" (Malachi 1:11), and "I am a great king," says the Lord Almighty, "and my name is to be feared among the nations" (Malachi 1:14).

Malachi's words also provided a light on the path forward – one that would shine beyond the dark centuries after his time: "I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the LORD Almighty" (Malachi 3:1). This positive looking forward to a messianic hope made Malachi a treasure of faithful people during the intertestamental age. It is also the reason that the short book of Malachi is quoted or alluded to some twenty times in the New Testament – why it has more quoted verses within the space of four contiguous chapters than any other book of the Old Testament.

Malachi closes his book, as we saw, with the famous promise that God would send Elijah again before the day of the LORD (Malachi 4:5-6) when God would next intervene in human history. It might not be possible to think of a more fitting way for the Old Testament to end – than with the promise of one who would usher in the New (Matthew 11:11-14, Luke 1:17).

\* Note 1: Herod the Great was born in Idumea to the south of Judah, and his father was an Edomite whose ancestors had converted to Judaism. Although ethnically an Arab, through shrewd and sometimes brutal methods Herod rose to power and became king of Judah. But by Herod's time the Romans had taken control of the area of Judea and Syria, and Herod ruled only at the discretion of Rome – a situation underlying many of his actions such as his erection of a golden eagle (the widely hated symbol of Roman might) at the entrance to the temple.

\*Note 2: This attitude of questioning God's love for Israel was clearly developed sometime after the return from the exile. In the psalms composed in the early post-exilic period, we find a very different attitude as is seen in examples such as "LORD, you have been favorable unto your land: you have brought back the captivity of Jacob" (Psalm 85:1 KJV2K), and "When the LORD turned again the captivity of Zion, we were like them that dream. Then was our mouth filled with laughter, and our tongue with singing ... The LORD has done great things for us; and we are glad" (Psalm 126:1-3 KJV2K).

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## **REVIEW AND REFLECTION:** (complete in your notebook)

### **Basics:**

1. List some of the religious developments of the Jews during and after the exile.
2. Why did many Jews seem to become disenchanted with God after the return from the exile?
3. Summarize the role of Herod the Great at the end of the intertestamental era.

### **Looking Below the Surface:**

In what ways does Malachi's prediction of the Messiah refer to a time of judgment as well as blessing?

### **Everyday Applications:**

What encouragement can we take from the book of Malachi regarding the many problems of the age in which we live today?

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