

# **Dr. Dave Mathewson, New Testament Literature,**

## **Lecture 5, Christmas and the Canon**

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This is Dr. Dave Mathewson presenting New Testament History and Literature, lecture 5 on Christmas and the Canon.

All right, let's go ahead and get going. We've been looking at the, although I want to move through this quickly so we can get to the New Testament text themselves, is we've been looking at the environment around the New Testament or the environment out of which the New Testament grew, trying to set the stage for you historically, politically, religiously, culturally, what was going on leading up to and during the time of the production of the New Testament.

So, it's necessary to understand the New Testament more clearly. It's helpful to understand some of the background and environment that helped produce it, or at least the situation in which it was produced. And again, how the New Testament is affected by that, how it interacts with that, how it may critique that environment, etc.

So, we won't just look at this and then set it aside, but hopefully, this material will be referred to quite often as we begin to look at the New Testament documents themselves. We ended last week by looking at, beginning to look at some of the cultural-historical environment and how that actually affects the way we interpret a selected New Testament text. I just looked at a couple of examples as samples for you to see how understanding the background may actually cause us to read some of the text very differently than we might be used to.

But let's open with prayer and then we begin talking a little bit about the Christmas story as an example of how our background, our environment, our culture, and even our traditions, religiously, theologically, and historically, often shape how we read the Christmas story, how we sometimes fill in some of the gaps in understanding the story, but how looking at the text again and maybe reading it at times and through the eyes of how First Century readers may have read it or at least understanding how our background influences the way we read the story and maybe seeing if there are alternative ways to look at it as well, ways that might not be so colored by our background, our tradition, etc.

But let's begin with prayer and then we'll finish that up and move on to ask a couple of other questions related to the way we read and interpret the Old Testament. All right.

Father, thank you for the privilege of studying your word in an academic setting, but one that hopefully is far more than academic but will inform the way we read it as your people, the way we read it as your word, understanding that by reading it in its context in some ways we are respecting the way you chose to reveal yourself, realizing that you revealed yourself in a very specific historical location, in a very specific religious and political environment, and to very specific persons, and that understanding that will help us to come to a greater understanding and appreciation of your word and how that continues to speak to us today. So, we pray that you will guide our discussion, and guide our thoughts. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

All right. So we looked at the Christmas story from the standpoint of a fairly traditional way of approaching it and I tried, we talked a little bit about several of the common ways of answering these questions and a common way of conceiving of the Christmas story that is largely, a lot of it, colored by our traditions and the way we've been led to read the story and to hear it, but I suggested that when you go back and look at the text itself is that a number of these features, especially in light of its environment, a number of these features may require different answers to them.

For example, we said, especially the second one, the inn, and the innkeeper, is obvious when you read the text, not only is there no mention of an innkeeper, but the word inn actually comes from a Greek term that is better translated as a guest room. So, Mary and Joseph did not go to an inn and pay for lodging for the night or the time, but instead, they stayed in a guest room of a house that probably belonged to a relative of theirs. The fact, again, the last one we ended on, the fact that it says there was no room for them in this guest house, so when the time came for Mary to give birth, she gave birth to a son, and she laid him in a manger, we'll talk about that because there was no room for them in the guest room.

All that needs to mean is not that Mary and Joseph traveled to Bethlehem and stayed in the stable the entire time, they probably very well, may have very well stayed in this guest room, but when it was time for the baby to be born, who wants to have a baby in a room that you're sharing with a number of other people? So they went to the only quiet and private place in the house, which would have been the stable, where the manger was kept. Now, the stable, though again we envision this large spacious roomy area with all cows and sheep and all these things around Jesus, the reference to the stable, although again it doesn't clearly say a stable, it only refers to Jesus being laid in a manger. Most likely what that is referring to, is most houses would have had a small, it may have been kind of a closet-like structure or even a lean-to on the side of the house, where things like the manger were kept and other material for tending the sheep and animals and things like that.

And again, so where Mary and Joseph went was probably not to some cave, it probably was not some elaborate barn or structure somewhere behind the house, but probably was a small room or lean-to, a small stable attached to the back or the

side of the house. And in that stable, they no doubt would have found, among other things, a manger, which is basically a feed trough, as most of you know. However, I've looked at it, I had a picture of one, and I'm not sure what happened to it, I can't find it in my PowerPoint, but I've noticed a number of pictures of feed troughs or mangers that have been uncovered, and interestingly, a very common type of manger was a small, actually a small stone, it would have been a hole carved out of a rock.

And you can imagine, if Jesus was placed in a manger that was a rock, a stone, this adds more to the humility and humiliating circumstances under which Jesus was born. Once again, we've domesticated it, we often picture Jesus in this nice wooden cradled box-type thing on stilts that has hay coming out of it, and is probably as comfortable as the bed I sleep in almost. But it's possible, Jesus if he's laid in this manger, it could have been this rock, this stone, with a hole hewn out in it, and again, they would have poured the grain in there, and that's what the cattle or the livestock would have eaten out of.

So, once again, we often, when that reference to Jesus being laid in a manger, have rather elaborate pictures of what that looked like, but it probably would have been much more humiliating and much more down to earth. If this is some small lean-to at the side of the house, again, the only quiet and private place Mary could find to give birth to Jesus, and if he would have perhaps been laid in this stone, this large rock with a hole hewn out in it, that's the only place they found to lay Jesus. So, anyway, the point is, often when we approach text, we need to be aware of the fact that we often approach them with our own assumptions.

Sometimes they're unstated. Sometimes our assumptions are subconscious. We're not aware of how our background is influencing the way we interpret.

At other times, we're reading things in light of how we've been taught to read them, how we've been taught by our churches, how we've grown up. Sometimes our own cultural background, and our own experiences all influence the way we read the text, and that's necessary. That's not bad, and that's not wrong.

It's just reality. But we need to be aware of the fact that that is happening, and we need to be open to letting the text and letting our study of the historical background and the religious and historical and political and climate and cultural background, we need to let that challenge our assumptions and challenge the way we read a text, and perhaps cause us to look at it in a different light. So, just realize that it's, in my opinion, no one can interpret anything with complete objectivity.

This notion that somehow you and I are a dry sponge just waiting to objectively soak up data, unencumbered, unhindered, and unfiltered by our biases is simply untrue. If

you were just a blank sponge, you couldn't understand anything. It's our experiences and knowledge that help us to grasp things.

At the same time, we must be aware of that that does influence the way we read, and to let the text of Scripture challenge and transform the way we think about it and the way we read it, to try to understand it in light of the way God intended it, and in light of the way the first human authors intended it, in light of their culture and their background, rather than first of all, in light of ours. Now, that leads us to another issue, to back up to the section prior to the Christmas story retold. What does it mean? What does it mean to read the New Testament critically? Most of us, when we hear that, would tend to shy away from equating reading the Bible with critical, that is approaching the Bible critically, or perhaps as you read your New Testament introduction textbook, you're introduced to different methods of criticism, like historical criticism, and textual criticism, and redaction criticism, source criticism.

Those are different labels for different approaches to interpreting the New Testament. And the question is, as Christians who affirm that the Bible is in some sense the word of God, what place do critical methods or a critical approach play, what role might it play in reading the New Testament? Or as Christians, should we have nothing to do with it? So, first of all, what does it mean to read the Bible critically? The problem is how we define that word, because usually when we hear the word criticism or approaching something critically, what usually comes to our mind? Or what do we think of in terms of what that involves or what that looks like? So, if you hear the word critical, what pops into your mind? Skeptical. Skeptical.

So, a critical approach to the New Testament is one that's going to be skeptical of it. Anything else? Much more literal. A very different way of looking at it.

Anyone else? Yeah. Very analytical, using other material, and other sources to try to help you understand the text. So, you see those three very different ways of looking at criticism.

Usually, the problem is when we think of criticism, we often think of the first mention of skeptical or destructive. So, a critical approach is one that is critical in terms of being skeptical, denying, doubting, or trying to undermine and call into question. And indeed, a lot of critical approaches to the Bible amount to nothing more than that.

Yet there's another way to look at it. Criticism also entails looking, analyzing a text, or analyzing the New Testament text in an effort to understand them more correctly and to provide justification and reason for why we think we do. So, in that regard, the opposite of criticism is not being more godly or pious.

The opposite of criticism would be to be naive and just to accept something without having a reason to do so. So, when we talk about approaching the Bible critically, from that standpoint, I hope all of us will learn to be critics of the New Testament. Not from the standpoint of undermining it or being skeptical, but from the standpoint of asking questions of the text and asking why we think the way we do.

Why is it that I think this text means this? Or why do I think the New Testament says this? And providing justification and reasons for understanding it, which is again, that's part of the reason why we're looking at the historical, cultural, and religious background to try to form, to try to give us material and background to bring to the text to help us understand it better and more fully. And so, in this class when we may talk about different methods of criticism, hopefully, we'll understand that, not in terms of being destructive and doubting and denying and being skeptical, although it can do that, but more along the lines of providing justification and reason for the conclusions we draw. That is, not just to hold to something because I think that's the way or I was taught that way, but for these reasons or to provide justification.

From that standpoint too, one of the questions or criticisms I often hear from students is that in college it's easy to treat the New Testament or it's easy to treat the Bible like a textbook. I'm not so sure that's a bad thing. I actually think that's a good thing.

It's necessary and desirable because it shows that we're thinking critically. It shows that we're coming to grips with a document that is very different from us, that was produced in a very different place and location in a different environment. And the solution is not to stop treating the Bible like a textbook.

The solution is not to stop there, but to work hard at integrating what we learn in the classroom into our devotional lives, into our worship, into our own personal reading of Scripture, to make sure that is based on the kinds of methods and things we learn in the classroom. So again, hopefully, at times the Bible will seem like a textbook and that's natural and desirable. But the problem is, that's not the problem.

The problem is if we stop there and we fail to do the hard work of integrating it into our lives today, into the social, historical, religious, and political environments that we find ourselves in today. Now before we kind of circling around and hopefully get closer and closer to examining the documents themselves, before we do so, one other issue, kind of more general, and that is, how did we get our New Testament? And actually, an entire class could probably be devoted to addressing that issue. But how is it that the documents that we now have, Matthew through Revelation, that are part of our Bibles, how is it that we arrived at that? Or how did those books precisely come down to us as the New Testament? Recognizing that they're actually, in the first century, there were a number of other documents that the New Testament was, books were not the only ones written.

There were numerous documents written leading up to during and after the time of the New Testament. So how did these 27 documents, Matthew through Revelation, get included in the New Testament? And again, my treatment of it is going to be very cursory and it's just to give you a broad perspective and kind of understanding on how that came about. The starting point is obviously the fact that after, just assuming for now the book of Revelation was the last book written in the New Testament, remember the fact that it comes last is not because it was written last necessarily.

The New Testament is arranged logically. It's not arranged in the order the books were written, it's arranged logically. And so, Revelation logically comes last.

But it probably was chronologically, that one of the Gospel of John was probably the last, either of those two would have been the last one written. Now, let's assume just for a moment the book of Revelation was the last book written. After John wrote Revelation, the church did not wake up the next day with a New Testament sitting on their laps.

They did not wake up the day after Revelation was written with a list of New Testament documents that they called the New Testament. In fact, again, we saw the very first day of class, New Testament was not a term that was applied to what we call the New Testament until a little bit later. So, the church did not wake up with a Bible, a New Testament in their laps.

They already had the Old Testament. You don't have to read very far into the Gospels to see Jesus' references to the Law and the Prophets or the Law and the Prophets in the writings and quoting Old Testament texts and the New Testament authors all quoting Old Testament texts. So, the church already came with a Bible that we call the Old Testament, though they wouldn't have called it that necessarily.

But what about this thing we call the New Testament? Where did it come from? Again, it certainly would have been easier if God had simply provided a list of, here's the books I want you to include in the New Testament. But He did not work that way. Instead, what you see is the process of determining the New Testament was actually fairly long and drawn out.

And it wasn't until roughly the fourth century that we have the fourth century we have finally reference to the complete list of the New Testament. So it appears that God actually worked through a rather historical and normal process of debate and actually whipping out amongst the members of the church what documents they would accept as authoritative scripture. Now, the first thing to be said is the church has a New Testament, again, I'm using the words New and Old Testament just

because those are common words to use and I realize that's not what they would have been called in the first century.

They didn't have a New Testament yet and they probably wouldn't have called the other ones, our Old Testament, they would not have called the Old Testament. But again, what was the justification for even, if they had what we call the Old Testament, why did they need a New Testament? What's the justification for an additional group of writings? Well, again, it seems the reason is because as we saw back again on day one, the relationship between the Old and New Testament is one of promise and fulfillment. The Old Testament anticipates a day when God will establish a new covenant where he will send a deliverer, a savior, a messiah to restore his people and to reestablish a covenant to establish new covenant because the Old Covenant had failed or rather Israel had failed under the Old Covenant.

The Old Testament prophets promise a time when God will restore his people and bring about a new creation. He will send his deliverer, a messiah who will sit on David's throne and who will establish a new covenant and inaugurate a new covenant with his people. Now, in that Jesus Christ is the one who fulfills that, it's natural that just as there was a body of writings that testified to God dealing with his people in an Old Covenant, it's natural in that that Old Covenant scripture, what we call the Old Testament, in that it anticipates a time when God will establish a new covenant under a messiah with his gathered and restored people, it's natural that those writings that testify to that new covenant fulfilled in Christ would also be considered as scripture alongside the Old Covenant scripture.

So, the New Testament is not just an appendix, it's not kind of an add-on, it's actually kind of the climax and fulfillment of the Old Testament scripture. Again, it is a group of writings that just like the Old Testament is writings that testify to God's Old Covenant dealing with Israel, now in that that has been fulfilled in Christ with the inauguration of a new covenant and with the coming of Jesus as a messiah, it's natural that those documents that testify to that would also be considered alongside as authoritative scripture. Now, what is meant by the word canon? Literally, and I can't remember if your textbook talks about this, the word canon literally meant a reed, so we're not talking about an implement of warfare, canon, the Greek word meant a reed, and by extension you can see that that reed would have been used for measuring things, a certain section of reed would have functioned like a yardstick as a unit of measurement.

Further, by extension, the word canon then could refer to a collection of writings that measured up. So, when we refer to the New Testament canon, we're referring to a collection of authoritative writings, a collection of writings that measured up or met the criteria, the measurement for being considered as authoritative scripture. That's all that we mean by the New Testament canon, the group of writings that functions as authoritative scripture for the people of God.

Now, where did it come from? Again, how did this emerge? There's been a fairly persistent resurgence lately of a view, and it kind of found a very popular expression not long ago with the production of the Da Vinci Code, some of you have read it, and I'm sure most of us are past that and on to other things, but a few years ago when Dan Brown wrote the Da Vinci Code, it actually popularized a fairly common approach among some scholars of the New Testament, and that is the idea of a group of authoritative writings, a canon, really did not emerge until much, much later. In the first two or three centuries of the early church, there was a diversity of documents and a diversity of religious perspectives under the umbrella of Christianity, and none of them were viewed as correct. They kind of all competed and vied for attention, and it really was not until Emperor Constantine in the fourth century decided which books, whether everyone would agree with that, the way Da Vinci phrases it is immaterial, and of course he was writing a fictional book anyway, but that's a fairly common perspective.

It wasn't until sometime later that the church, the most powerful group in the church, decided here's what Christianity is going to look like, and here are the documents that we will consider as scripture, and everything else was kind of swept under the rug. And that's a fairly popular view of a common conception, that in the first three, two, three centuries, Christianity was very diverse and even competing perspectives. There was no one group of writings considered scripture.

There were a lot of different writings, and again, it wasn't until sometime later that basically the winners won. The winners determined what Christianity looks like. However, to look at some of the New Testament evidence, it seems that although the church did not wake up with a canon, a well-formed list of writings in their lap the next day after Revelation was written, and instead it actually took a process of nearly 300 more years to determine the extent of the New Testament, the documents that the church now realizes as scripture, it's not true to say that that process only occurred later.

It appears that in some respects it was already underway. For example, this comes from one of your New Testament documents, the letter of 2 Peter, and here's what 2 Peter says, and 2 Peter probably written well after Paul's life, the apostle Paul. Peter says, so also our beloved brother Paul, who's probably been martyred and put to death by this point, our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, speaking as he does in all his letters.

There are some things in them that are hard to understand. Well, that's comforting. If Peter had a hard time understanding it, then maybe I can be excused for not being sloppy and not trying, but at least if I find some things difficult.

But he says he's written some things that are hard to understand, which the ignorant twist as they do the other scriptures. Now, two things that are interesting about this, number one, is Peter already, again, this is written, the date of his letter varies, but it's written well before the end of the first century, written before the book of Revelation sometime. But it appears that not long after Paul's death, Peter is already aware of a group of Paul's letters that are circulating.

He doesn't tell us how many there are that he's aware of. He doesn't tell us the extent of this collection of Paul's letters. He doesn't tell who knows them or how widely they've been spread, but he assumes that his readers, Peter, and his readers at least, know of a group of letters that Paul wrote already.

And again, this is long before, this is before the end of the first century, by 20, 30, 40 years or so, something like that. The second thing is notice that Peter seems to equate them with the other scriptures. In the New Testament, the word scriptures or writings has almost become a kind of a technical term, not quite, but a term referring to the Old Testament.

So, Peter is aware of a group of Paul's letters circulating and he apparently is equating them with scripture. He sees them in some way on the same level as the Old Testament scripture. Now, Peter is far from telling us that, oh, now we have a new canon that we're forming alongside the Old Testament, but certainly he sees a group of Paul's writings and letters already emerging that can be treated alongside the Old Testament.

The other thing I would add to this is, although the New Testament authors do not seem to be aware for the most part of, again, of a group of writings that they're going to call the New Testament, just like the Old Testament, there are hints, at least in some of them, some of the writers do give hints that they're writing something that will be considered as authoritative scripture. For example, one example of this I think is the book of Revelation, which ends in chapter 22 and verses 18 and 19. The author ends, I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book, so John's only referring to his book, not the whole New Testament.

If anyone adds to them, God will add to that person the plagues described in the book. If anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away that person's share in the tree of life. Now, what I want to draw attention to is those words adding and taking away, and there's a curse if you add to the word or take away from the word, that is language that comes from the Old Testament law.

And so it's as if John sees the book of Revelation as having the same level of authority as the Old Testament law. That is, there was a curse, as was true in the

book of, this language comes out of Deuteronomy, to add to or subtract from the word of God. John, that comes right out of the book of Deuteronomy.

And there was, if you added to or subtracted to the law of Moses, there was a curse and there was a blessing for obeying it. Now John applies that same language to his own document. In other words, John seems to be aware that he is writing something on the same level as Old Testament scripture.

So again, it's not quite true that no one in the first century had any idea of what constituted scripture. It was just kind of a free-for-all until later on, several centuries later. But already some writers think that they are writing something along the analogy of the Old Testament.

Another interesting text is the Apostle Paul, whose letters form the bulk of the New Testament, at least as far as the number of documents or writings. In one of his documents, 1 Corinthians 14, 1 Corinthians 14 is a section we'll look at in more detail when we get to that book. But it's a section where Paul's instructing the church as to how they are abusing spiritual gifts.

When they gather for worship, they abuse spiritual gifts, particularly tongues. And Paul now is telling them how they should correct that and how they should go about utilizing spiritual gifts when they gather for worship. And Paul says something very interesting in verses 37 and following.

Notice how he ends. This is at the end of his instructions for giving spiritual gifts. And he never quotes the Old Testament, although he may allude to it.

I shouldn't say he doesn't quote it. He does in one place back earlier in chapter 14. But he's basically just giving his own instruction.

Here's what I want you to do. And here's how he ends the chapter. Anyone who claims to be a prophet or to have spiritual powers must acknowledge that what I am writing to you is a command of the Lord.

Anyone who does not recognize this is not to be recognized. Interestingly, Paul equates his own instructions with a command of the Lord. How he thought that he doesn't tell whether this somehow was a revelation or he doesn't say.

But nevertheless, Paul thinks that his own instructions are authoritative and are to be listened to and obeyed in the same way one would the Old Testament. So, Paul and other writers very early on, at least some of them, not all of them, not all the New Testament writers, but some seem to be aware that they're writing something more than just a normal everyday communication, but something that is to be taken with the authority of one of God's apostles or one of God's spokesperson or the

authority of the Old Testament. So, the first stopping point is even within the New Testament itself, there seems to be an awareness of an emerging kind of canon consciousness, that there's at least a consciousness of a group of writings that will function as authoritative scripture.

The next stopping point, again, I'm painting very broad brushstrokes, is a man named Marcion. A man named Marcion. Marcion was known, he was a famous historical figure that emerged a couple hundred years after the writing of the New Testament.

Marcion basically decided to put together, again, you can imagine kind of the question, well, in which documents will the church hear the authoritative voice of God? Which documents will we consider as scripture that testifies to the new covenant revelation of God through his son Jesus Christ? Which documents will we consider as authoritative witnesses to that? An individual named Marcion answered that question, and he did so in this way. He basically, very, very simply, Marcion believed this. He thought that the God of the Old Testament was not the same God of the New Testament.

He thought they were different. The God of the Old Testament was basically a God of judgment and law. The God of the New Testament, a God of grace and love, something like that.

And so, what happened is, when Marcion read the New Testament, anything that sounded too much like the Old Testament, he got rid of. He thought, well, that's not worthy. The God of the New Testament is the God of love and grace, etc.

So, anything that sounded too much like the Old Testament, Marcion got rid of. And interestingly, he ended up with a very limited canon or collection of New Testament writings. I think it was basically a very abbreviated and revised version of Luke and Paul's letters.

Everything else got axed because it sounded too much like the Old Testament. So Marcion came up with a very limited canon. But the reason he's important is because now there are a number of reasons, but now it's going to be more and more necessary because of this kind of thing to answer that question.

Well, which documents will the church accept and consider as authoritative scripture? The first reference that we have, at least an extant reference, again, that doesn't mean that this is the first time anyone ever thought of this. It just means it's the first written text that we have testifying to the 27 books that we recognize today. Matthew through Revelation was written by an early church father.

Remember we talked about the church fathers, those church leaders basically from the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th centuries. And we have their writings. Many of them have copies of the writings.

You can read them, English translations of them. One of the church fathers was named Athanasius. Athanasius was a leader who had the habit of every year addressing the church, and by church, I don't mean just one church meeting in a building, but the church at large and widespread, addressing the church with an Easter letter.

And one of his Easter letters, one of his Easter letters in 367 AD, one of his letters, he addressed the issue of the books that he would consider as New Testament, or those books that the church... And again, this was not just his command of what they should do. It's more of a summary of what the church largely was thinking and accepting as the New Testament. He said Athanasius said, again, we must not hesitate to name the books of the New Testament.

They are as follows. And again, I'm not going to read this, but you can see he has the four Gospels, Acts, and interestingly, his orders a little bit differently than the 14 letters of Paul. Interestingly, he includes Hebrews with that.

And then finally, John's Apocalypse or the Book of Revelation. So, this is the first attested list of the 27 books that we now accept as a New Testament. Again, that does not mean this is the first time anyone thought that.

It's just the earliest in written form that we have evidence of this. I mentioned another one, later on, about 30 years later, one of the early church councils. In the early church, as different false teachings and different problems and issues arose, the church would often call councils to whip out some of these issues.

And in one of those called the Council of Carthage, the Council of Carthage also lists the 27 books identical to Athanasius' lists of the New Testament. So, by the end of the fourth century, it appears that there was a fairly beginning to emerge a clear consensus of which books would be considered to belong to this group of authoritative texts that we call the New Testament, that testified to God's new covenant revelation in the person of Jesus Christ. Again, the thing I'd emphasize, it's interesting that God chose to work through a very human process of debating and working out and whipping this thing out, rather than, again, just throwing the next day after Revelation was written, the church waking up and God simply throwing the list in their lap, is he worked through very human processes to bring about an understanding and conception of which documents would the church consider as authoritative scripture.

An interesting question I think I have in your syllabus is, by what criteria would they decide that? I mean, what criteria apparently did the church use, again, to decide which documents will we accept? And the first thing to say about this is, I don't think I have a PowerPoint slide in this. No, I don't. There's a reason I have that Peanuts cartoon I'll show you in just a moment.

It's not an accident. At least I hope it's not. First of all, the church did not apparently operate with like a checklist, and so they brought in Matthew and they went down the list.

Yep, it meets five of the criteria. We'll accept it. And they brought in Mark.

Yep, it's fine. And then they brought in some other document. It missed a couple, so we have to throw it out.

And they had all this pile of documents, and the ones that passed the test emerged, and the others kind of got thrown out. That's not the way it worked. They didn't appear necessarily to be working with a checklist and measuring documents against them.

At the same time, what we know historically is that still, these documents did seem to meet certain criteria or at least seem to measure up to a certain understanding. And there were at least three. There could have been more, but there are at least three that I want to draw attention to that a document seemed to have to reflect if it would be considered authoritative scripture.

The first one was conformity. It was a document that must conform. The teaching must conform to the teaching of Jesus and the teaching of the apostles.

It must conform to the gospel. There was already, read the New Testament. Long before there was a New Testament, there was clearly a conception of the gospel that the apostles passed on and they preached and they taught.

So, anything that did not conform to this, anything that deviated from this would probably be called into question. Those documents that testified to this and conformed to that would be considered as scripture. Another important one is universal acceptance.

That is the church as a whole must accept, must recognize that this document is scripture, and must find value in it. Documents that seem to emerge from or only be accepted by exclusive sects or groups probably would not be accepted. But those documents that the church as a whole seem to find valuable and seem to find as authoritative.

And finally, for the most part, a document must be written by one of Jesus' apostles or written by one of their associates. So obviously a book by someone like Paul or Peter is going to be a good candidate for being in the New Testament. Or a book by someone like Mark, who as tradition has it, was a close associate of Peter or was an interpreter of Peter.

Or Luke, who is known to be an associate of Paul. So, most of the New Testament documents are ones produced by an apostle or someone closely associated with one. So again, just to demonstrate that it seems very early on there emerged in the church a consciousness of a group of writings that testified to this new covenant relationship in Christ.

This new covenant relationship anticipated by the Old Testament, now inaugurated in Christ, that a group of documents would grow up around that that testified to that. And there's an emerging consciousness of that already, that although it took nearly 300 years before the final form of it emerges, is nonetheless the church was... Historically it always knew where it could turn to find authoritative scripture and to hear the voice of God continue to speak to them. And intriguingly God chose to once again work through the human processes and mechanisms of history in order to bring about a recognition of those documents that the church recognized as authoritative scripture.

Now the next question is, how do we read that or how do we interpret this group of writings we call the New Testament canon? By calling it a New Testament canon, the danger is one could be tempted to view it as kind of a monolithic block. That is to treat, again, to treat the New Testament as basically a homogenous group of documents that quite simply resemble each other. You read them the same way, they have the same content in them, and you kind of read them in the flat without seeing any variation or difference.

At the same time, what is unique, and I think a testimony to God's wisdom but also to the church, the church's desire to preserve a canon of the New Testament in all its richness and diversity, is the fact that although we claim the New Testament is one book, at the same time it is a diversity of texts that not only address a variety of issues and topics that are written at different times but are comprised of diverse literary types. I always thought it'd be interesting to stop and think, which we won't, but it'd be interesting to stop and think if God chose to reveal himself in the 21st century, what means he would use, literary or otherwise, to reveal himself. In the first century, God revealed himself through the normal, common, and standard literary genres or literary types of the first century.

A genre is, if you speak French or study French, genre means a type or kind. It's frequently applied in literary criticism and biblical studies to types of literature, to different kinds of literature that can be grouped together because they share

recognizable features such as letters or novels or poems or things like that, to use very broad categories. The same is true of the New Testament.

It's comprised of a diversity of literary types, and that's where this comes in. Now, most of us, we look at this and automatically we recognize what we're looking at. You're looking at a cartoon.

More specifically, you're looking at a Peanuts cartoon. More specifically, I'm focusing on written documents. What are the indicators, just to show how every day you make decisions on genre, and that interprets the way you read something, even though you're unconscious of the way you do it? What features clearly indicate to you that you're looking at a cartoon, as opposed to a historical documentary or a sports, the sports section of the paper, or something else? Then we'll look at the impact that has on how you understand this.

What are the features of this text? You probably will have to think because, again, you do this subconsciously. You don't stop and think, now this is a cartoon for this and this reason. You just recognize what it is and you jump into it because that's part of our shared cultural code and understanding.

The fact that it's comprised of segments of pictures, a sequence of pictures and that it's drawn. In other words, these aren't photographs. These aren't actual photographs of some person.

They're caricatures or they're pictures that have been drawn. Again, if you saw someone that resembled this physically, that would be grotesque. We recognize that that's okay for cartoons.

They're caricatures. The fact that you have these sequences of frames that depict movement is one indication that you're dealing with a cartoon. Anything else? Besides the fact that it says peanuts, we recognize that's a kind of cartoon.

Yeah, you got the bubbles. That's the way they depict speech or thought, by the word bubbles on the top of the frames. So, all of those things cause us to automatically recognize that this belongs to a certain literary genre of a cartoon.

Now, the problem is with the New Testament, we're often dealing with literary genres that we are not familiar with. These are genres that the first readers would have grasped and been familiar with, but that may be a little bit more foreign to us. Even ones that have some analogy to our day, such as Paul's letters.

Most of us still read and write letters, but the letters in the first century may have been put together differently or may have functioned in a little bit different way or had different parts to them than that we're used to. So, when we look at the New

Testament, then we're going to have to understand, again, not only the historical, political background, religious background, the cultural background, but also the literary context. Understand what kind of literary genres New Testament authors utilize, genres that were common in their own day and that most people would have, much like us, simply not thought much about, but that we might have to think more intentionally about what literary genres did the authors use and how does that affect the way we interpret a text.

And we'll give some examples of that. For example, I'm convinced the book of Revelation will be misunderstood unless you understood, at least partially understood, the literary genre in which it was communicated and how the first readers would have grasped and understood that. So, for the literary genres of the New Testament, the basic literary types, again, the first one is one that most of us are fairly familiar with, yet, again, they still may have conventions that are somewhat different from the way we write and read narrative or stories today.

The Gospels and the book of Acts, although I don't want to lump them all together and say Acts and the Gospels are identical necessarily, they do both belong to the literary type of narrative. So, we must read them not as recipes or not as scientific descriptions and documents of an experiment, nor as epistles or straightforward descriptions, but we have to read them as authors communicating through the medium of story. I'm convinced that those who are best able to understand the Gospels often understand how novels and how narrative and story work.

And when you understand how a narrative and story works, how it communicates, you're often better able to understand and read the Gospels. Again, because the authors communicate through the story. The key is to understand why the authors write. What were they trying to do by putting together the stories they did? In other words, out of everything that Jesus said and did, why did the authors write and include what they did? It's interesting when you read Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, hopefully, you've figured this out by now, none of them tell you everything Jesus said and did.

Except for Luke, none of them tell you anything about Jesus as a child. And Luke only says something very briefly. Most of them jump right into his adult ministry.

And only two of them tell you about his birth. So, the Gospel writers are not writing biographies in the sense that we're familiar. They're writing first-century biographies that could be selective.

That is, the authors, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, had an intention, a theological intention, something they wanted to say to the church about Christ, some issues they were addressing, and they only included those events out of the pool of information. All the information they had about Jesus' life, his birth, his life, his

teaching, his death, and resurrection, they included the information and put it together in a way that communicated and met their purpose. As we'll see, in my opinion, that's why we have four Gospels.

Why didn't the church just kind of have an amalgamation of one big Gospel? Someone actually tried that very early on in the church. It's because all four Gospels present complementary but very different approaches to who Jesus is. And without any of them, we would be impoverished in some regards as to our understanding of Christ.

So we need to understand that the Gospels are narratives, stories written after the standards of first-century biographies. And again, the Gospels don't come out and say, this is what you should do, but instead, they illustrate it by telling a story. They teach through the medium of narrative or story.

Another good way to become more familiar with stories is to analyze movies. If you can analyze how movies work, and how they communicate their point, you'll become a better adept, I think, at reading novels. Through things like repetition, and dialogue.

Again, the writers of a narrative don't come out and tell you exactly, this is what I'm saying. They do so by telling a story. By understanding the story, how narratives work through dialogue, repetition, sections where the author spends more time, et cetera.

And you often see that in movies. Not long ago, I don't know if any of you watched it, just here not too long ago, they kind of had, I think it was the 25th anniversary of the Back to the Future movies by Michael J. Fox. Maybe some of you watched those.

The first one, the very first one was a very first date I went on with my wife, to watch Back to the Future 1. And it's interesting to watch that and see how the story works. The main idea that I think that the movie's trying to get across, it's repeated a couple of times, it's repeated in dialogue a couple of times, especially towards the end of the movie, and then it's illustrated in a number of interesting things. And that is, I think the main idea of the movie is, you can accomplish anything if you just use your head.

That phrase is actually included in a couple of lines. And does anyone remember the very last scene? This happens a couple of times. The head plays a key role, especially when the doc, he's fallen down and has a band aid on his head, he's hit his head.

Does anyone remember right at the end when Marty McFly's in the DeLorean and he's got to get the thing up to a, he's got to get the car, he's got to start it and leave the starting line at a certain point, and he's got to get it up to 88 miles an hour so he'll be propelled back into his day, into the future. And the car stalls right when the

alarm, he has an alarm in his car that's supposed to go off to tell him when he's supposed to leave, and the car stalls just as that goes on, as the alarm goes off. Does anyone know how he gets the car started? Anyone remember? He hits his head on the steering wheel.

So, you have, through repetition of different scenes, through crucial dialogue, the emphasis on you can do anything if you use your head. And that's kind of how narrative works. So, we'll look at that when we look at the Gospels, how repetition and things like that help us to understand what's the main point of the biographies, the narrative of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

All right, we have three other literary topics.

This is Dr. Dave Mathewson presenting New Testament History and Literature, lecture 5 on Christmas and the Canon.