

Dr. Dave Mathewson, New Testament Literature, Lecture 4, Judaism and Social Values

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This is Lecture 4 in Dr. David Mathewson's New Testament History and Literature on Judaism and Social Values.

Dr. Mathewson. Let's open with prayer. And then we've been this week and probably the next week, we've been looking at the background and environment in preparation for looking at the New Testament documents. We've been trying to sketch a very broad picture, politically, historically, religiously, and today, culturally, concerning what was going on leading up to and focusing especially on the time period in which the New Testament was written as kind of establishing the background and foreground for why the New Testament was written. Again, realizing that the New Testament grew out of very specific historical, religious, and cultural circumstances influenced by them, responding to them, critiquing them, etc.

We focused mainly recently on the religious background and we saw that from both the Greco-Roman in the Greek world and the Roman world that now was the dominant empire and also from the Jewish world there were various religious options and influences available. But we also saw that religion and politics were not easily distinguished. Especially that was true in the Greco-Roman world loyalty to Rome carried religious implications with it as well.

So, you didn't have that strict division between religion and politics that we often might be inclined to think of. So today I want to wrap that up and start to also focus on a little bit about the cultural background. What were some of the dominant trends? Again, painting very broad strokes, what were some of the dominant trends socially, some of the social values that govern the way people related to each other, and the way people lived and thought that had an influence on some of the things we read in the New Testament? Then I want to also give you a couple of examples of New Testament text where understanding the historical, geographical, and cultural background might make a little bit of a difference in the way we actually read it.

But let's open with the prayer first. Father, again, we are mindful of the enormity of the task of attempting to understand what is nothing less than your very word and revelation to us. So, we ask for your enablement to think clearly about it, to bring all that we are and all that we have and our best thinking to the task of trying to discern your revelation to us, not only to your people in the first century but how you continue to speak in your word to your people today. In Jesus' name, we pray, amen.

All right, one thing I want to do before focusing on the cultural background, you'll notice a section in your notes following our discussion of the Jewish religious slash

philosophical slash political options. I by saying a lot, because of that, a lot of scholars are often prone to talk about Judaisms.

That is, there seem to be a variety of types of, or at least movements within Judaism, at least some parties, not that everyone had to belong to one of them. There does seem to have been a common Judaism, but a number of parties within that. But related to that I have a section in your notes called The Literature of Judaism.

And I don't want to look at all of that. I just want to touch upon two or three of these that you might be familiar with or you might encounter in your reading, just so you understand. When I was growing up, I used to think that the New Testament was the only book that was ever written in the first century.

But actually, the New Testament is just part of a whole body of literature that grew up leading up to during and even after the time of the New Testament. And it can often help us to understand what people were thinking or how they interpreted God's promise, how they understood what it meant to be a Jew or to be God's people. And that often provides insight into how then we read the New Testament and what the New Testament authors may have been thinking or doing or responding to as well.

I just want to highlight three of these. The first one is number two in this literature of Judaism, and that is what is known as the Mishnah. As legend has it, along with this, you have to go back to the Old Testament now, along with the law that was given to Moses, you remember, especially the books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy spell out the Mosaic legislation, the law that God gave to Moses.

Along with the written law, as legend has it, there was an oral tradition or oral law that was given to Moses as well. But the point I want to make it along with the written law, there grew up a body of oral commands and oral law and oral tradition that was passed down orally rather than in written form. But about 200 AD, so this is roughly 150 to 100 years after the period of writing the New Testament, about 200 AD, this body of oral literature was then written down and codified in written form in a document known as the Mishnah.

You can find the Mishnah, an English translation of it, in our library. But although it comes, you may wonder why are we talking about a document that's a hundred years or so later than the New Testament. Because it contained information that was passed on orally, it may often reflect how Jews and others were thinking about different issues already in the first century, even though it was codified and written down about 200 AD.

So that's what the Mishnah is. Along with the written law given to Moses, there was a tradition of oral law that grew up around it, and that oral law finally was committed

to writing in this document that we know as the Mishnah. Another piece of writing you need to know about is the next to the last one, the Targums.

The Targums basically arose like this. In the land of Palestine, as the Aramaic language, you hopefully remember from the Old Testament that the Old Testament was written primarily in what language? Everyone knows Hebrew, except for a couple of small sections in the Old Testament, which were written in Aramaic. The Old Testament was written in Hebrew.

However, as the people in Palestine began to speak Aramaic, there was a need, especially as they met in their synagogues for worship, as the Bible was read and explained and expounded, there was a need to do so in their language, the language of Aramaic. Eventually, these Aramaic translations and paraphrases were also codified and written down. Although at first they kind of took the forms of sermons and oral presentations, they too were committed to writing in the forms that we now know as the Targums.

Again, they came a couple hundred years after the New Testament, but they still may embody what Jews in the first century thought and how they interpreted and understood the Old Testament. So, the Mishnah, again the written record of the oral law that was passed on in Judaism, the Targums, kind of the Aramaic paraphrases, and translations of the Old Testament that were also written down. The final one we've already talked about, but a final one that's important is the Dead Sea Scrolls.

We talked about the Essenes and the Qumran community. The documents that we have that testify to the Qumran community, I showed you the picture of that cave. There are a series of caves where they uncovered these documents that we know as the Dead Sea Scrolls.

These documents contain a number of interesting things. Some of these documents are actually commentaries, for example, on Old Testament passages to demonstrate how the founding of the Qumran community was actually anticipated and foretold in the Old Testament. So, they would often take prophetic literature and it'd kind of be a commentary to show that the prophets actually anticipated the founding of this Qumran community.

Remember, the Qumran community was upset not only with Roman rule but with the way things were going on in Jerusalem. They thought Jerusalem and the temple were corrupt. And so, they went off, they separated themselves, and withdrew into the wilderness to start their own sect, their own movement within Judaism.

And to justify that, they often appealed to Old Testament passages to show that they were the true fulfillment of what the prophets were talking about. They were the true temple of God. You also find documents related to, for example, there was a

rather strict regime that had to be followed to be a member of the Qumran community and even periods of testing.

You would kind of work up to levels and pass the test in order to be kind of a full member of the Qumran community. One interesting one I was reading the other day is if, I think I told my kids this as well, when you were, if you had a child that rebelled, you took them to the elders, and the kid got stoned to death because of the way he acted. So, you have commands like that.

How are they to act and live within this community, within the Qumran community? So, the Qumran documents are important because they tell us at least what some Jews during this day, were thinking, how they interpreted the Old Testament, what did they understand when they thought of a coming Messiah, etc. So, there, Judaism has a rich body of literature, and these are only three examples, the Mishnah, the Targums, and the Dead Sea Scrolls, that help us paint a picture of the Jewish religion and Judaism and the people of God, what they thought, what they taught, how they lived in the first century during the time when the New Testament emerged. And again, we'll often refer back to some of these documents that may help us understand and illuminate certain sections of the New Testament.

Now, having talked a little bit about the political climate and environment, and then the religious climate environment, both in the Greek and Roman world, as well as the Jewish world as well, I want to talk a little bit about, again, very, very generally about the cultural environment, thinking in terms of what cultural codes determined or dictated the way people related to each other and the way they lived. What things did they value culturally that influenced the decisions they made and how they related to each other? The importance of this is that at times their cultural values were very, very different and distinct from our own. And so, when you read a text, especially an ancient text like the Old and New Testament, part of the difficulty is when we read certain cultural references, the tendency might be even unwittingly to read them and interpret them in light of our own cultural values and experiences.

Instead of first trying to distance ourselves and recognizing the distance that has to be traversed in order to understand the text in light of its own cultural codes and values that would have determined the way people thought interacted and lived their lives. And again, I simply want to note a couple of those or three of those social values. The first one is what I've labeled avoid shame at all costs.

This stems from the idea that probably more than we're often used to today conformity was a very important, in a sense, cultural code or value. That is, avoiding shame at all costs. If you lived in the first century, it was incumbent upon you to act in a way that was honorable and did not bring shame upon yourself or your family at all costs.

Again, it was basically society that determined what constituted shameful behavior, and what constituted honorable behavior. And you were to act according to those norms. So, in a society where sometimes we're used to being our own person and flaunting society's norms, in the first century, you didn't do that.

You conformed to appropriate cultural standards. So, avoid shame at all costs. Act in a way that is honorable.

If your character was the honor, your honor was called into question, you acted in a shameful way. You had to do what was necessary to restore your honor. For example, in the New Testament, all the Gospels, especially the Synoptic Gospels record Jesus being questioned, especially towards the end of the Gospels, right before Jesus' arrest and crucifixion.

Often, the Gospels record Jesus in conflict with some of the groups we talked about, the Pharisees and the Sadducees. And often what they do is they try to trap Jesus by asking questions. And I think the way to approach those questions is not only to see them just as trying to trip Jesus up, but on the other hand, those questions are also meant to challenge Jesus' honor.

In a society and culture that prized honor and maintaining one's honor above all else, living according to the appropriate codes of honor, if the Pharisees and Sadducees could get Jesus to trip up, if they could challenge his honor and bring shame upon him, then that would be a good thing in their eyes. So, interestingly, then Jesus often challenges their honor by asking questions right back. Another way that you could bring shame upon yourself, for example, is if someone did something to you, this will go, this goes along with a third cultural code or value we'll look at in a moment.

But if someone did something to you, like give you money or a place to provide you with a job or something like that, to fail to show gratitude, to fail to show gratitude in the appropriate way was to bring dishonor upon yourself. It was to act shamefully. So again, it was honorable to speak well of and to acknowledge and just show extreme gratitude to someone who had bestowed certain benefits on you financially or otherwise.

So, avoid shame at all costs. One other example, there's an interesting parable that Jesus teaches. If you remember it, the man who was in bed at midnight and someone, actually his neighbor, someone came to his neighbor's house and asked him for bread, somebody who was traveling again, which the honorable thing to do was to accept that person in and provide for them.

It would bring shame upon you to turn that person away. But this person has no bread and again, it would be shameful for him not to provide a meal. So, he goes to his neighbor's house who happens to be sleeping and his family on the floor and he

knocks at the door and it says that that person who was sleeping, although he didn't want to get up, he did.

That meant perhaps stepping over his children and family and waking them up, but he did so. Why? Because it would have been shameful for him not to get up and meet this person's need and to give his neighbor bread so that his neighbor could feed the other person. So, this idea of acting in a way that's honorable, avoiding shame at all costs, was an important cultural value.

Another one, no person is an island. To simply summarize it, more important than who you were as an individual was the group that you belonged to. So your family, your extended family, et cetera, was far more important than who you were as an individual.

And some cultures in our world have an easier time of understanding that than others do. The last one is patrons and their clients. This seemed to be a very significant cultural dynamic in the first century.

And how it went was this, a patron, and you need to know these two terms, and this cultural dynamic will crop up in a number of places in the New Testament, especially when we get to the book of 1 Corinthians. This seems to be all over the place at times. But the patron-client relationship in the first century went like this.

And it's wrapped up a little bit with the first one, avoiding shame at all costs. The patron-client relationship went like this. A patron was usually, although the wealthy elite were a minority in the first century, we'll see that in just a moment, a patron was a wealthy member of society.

What a patron might choose to do is bestow or extend some of those benefits to someone who did not have as much or who had less to do or further down the socioeconomic ladder. So, a patron who is wealthy might choose to fund something for the entire city, might choose to maybe provide work or financial benefits or help for someone who is in not so good a position financially. And that was the patron.

The client was the person that person was helping. So, the patron is a wealthy individual. The clients are the lesser-to-do individuals that the patron is helping and reaching out to and extending financial benefits.

In exchange for financial benefits, the client was expected to basically speak well of that person and support that person, perhaps politically, because of what he had done. So again, to fail to show extreme gratitude when a patron has extended a financial benefit or otherwise, as a client, to fail to show extreme gratitude to the patron, again, was unthinkable and was to pour down shame upon yourself for acting in a very dishonorable way. So that patron-client dynamic, patrons being wealthy

individuals, the clients, those lesser to do that they may choose to extend benefits to in exchange for their support and in exchange for basically going around and boasting about how wonderful they were in the city so everyone would know what a good deed they have done.

So that was kind of the patron-client dynamic in the first century. And as I hope to show you, that dynamic lies behind some of the problems that Paul was addressing in the book of 1 Corinthians. And we'll see how that works out.

In relation to those three cultural dynamics, more generally, just to very quickly and in cursory fashion kind of sketch the dominant classes in the first century, again, to focus on just three for the time being, and again, I don't want to suggest these are airtight or that there's not more to be said. But generally, I want to focus on three classes. The first would be the wealthy elite.

Again, most of the wealth in the first century would have been concentrated in the hands of an elite few. And again, they were for the most part very few. Most of the people would have fallen under the second category of the poor, that is people who were just trying to eke out an existence day to day.

Most of these were at times peasant farmers who, again, were simply trying to make an existence, literally wondering where their next meal was coming from. So, when Jesus told his disciples to pray, give us today our bread for today, give us today our daily bread, or it could even give us our today, our bread for tomorrow, his readers would have understood exactly what he was talking about. Literally, roughly 70% of the population during that time were persons just struggling to eke out an existence, living day to day, and sometimes often wondering where their next meal was coming from.

The last category would be the slaves. And the Greco-Roman world was known for practically being built at times on its system of slavery. Although in the first century, slavery ran a gamut.

Oftentimes when some of us think about slavery, if you're historically enlightened a little bit, we think in terms of post-Civil War, United States Civil War, that is where slavery was mainly racially motivated. In the first century, it wasn't. You didn't become a slave because you belonged to a certain race or something like that.

There were a number of reasons you became a slave. One of them was because you could no longer afford to make a living. For example, one way you might make a living is by being a farmer and by renting a field, and part of your produce would go to paying the rent.

If you had a failure in the crop, for example, then you would be unable to pay your rent and you ended up having to sell yourself into slavery. Sometimes though, slavery in the first century would have been a positive experience. Some slaves had very good living conditions and ate fairly well.

Some of them even had opportunities to buy their freedom. Some of them were given responsibility. On the other end of the spectrum were the slaves that would have been conscripted for service in the mines in Rome, which was very brutal and very, very brutal conditions and probably a number of conditions in between.

Slavery was very significant in the Greco-Roman Empire and was just part and parcel of first-century Rome. But again, probably a variety of slavery ran the gamut from fairly good conditions to rather poor conditions as well. So that just, again, kind of gives you a rough sketch of the social and economic makeup of what it was like to live in the first century.

Again, significant is the fact that about 70 percent of the people or so were very poor. And by poor, I mean, what are we going to eat tomorrow? Before I move on, I want to give a couple of examples of how cultural, even geographical, historical background helps to illuminate reading a text, a New Testament text. But before we do, just any questions on the cultural background or the kind of economic status? Yeah.

Sure. Yeah. No, that's a very good point.

What that means is that kind of the short answer, which if you want the long answer, sign up for biblical hermeneutics. See, this class gives me all kinds of opportunities to plug biblical studies. But the kind of the short answer is that understanding the cultural environment is simply understanding the reality of the fact that God chose to reveal himself not in our contextual or just general terms for everyone to understand.

But God chose to reveal himself at a specific point in time. So, we need to, first of all, understand what that means and what that looks like. How does that make a difference in the way we understand the text? So, once we've come to grips with how God has revealed himself and what that meant to the original persons to which he revealed himself, then we're able to branch out and ask, then based on that, how do I, recognizing this is still the abiding word of God, how do I make application of that to my life? So, it's not, let's understand it in its first century and leave it there, nor is it, let me just read this text and see what I think it means.

But it's, let me ask, what did God intend to communicate to his first readers? And then having understood that, how does that continue to speak to God's people today in a very different environment? But I think at times we'll misunderstand the latter.

It's easy to apply it incorrectly or understand it incorrectly if we haven't first understood it in light of the original context in which God communicated. So it's kind of both ends.

How did God communicate himself and reveal himself to his first listeners and readers in a very specific context? And once we've wrestled with that and understood that, then we can ask the question, how does God continue to speak to his people today, even though in a very, very different context? Very good question. And we talk quite a little bit more about that in, again, biblical hermeneutics at a little more involved level. Very good question.

And by the way, the other thing will help you, the very last chapter in Craig Blomberg's book, *Making Sense of the New Testament*, will also help you answer that question. That's kind of what it's directed at. How do we take a very culturally conditioned historical revelation of God to his people, and how does that continue to speak? As you said, the Word of God is active and living.

How does it continue to speak to all people at all times? All right. Two examples from the New Testament. One of them you're probably familiar with, and you may already know, be familiar with some of the things I'm going to say about it, but it's worth taking another look, just because it illustrates so well how we often interpret a text primarily through our own lenses, which is not bad.

If you didn't have any lenses at all to look at the New Testament, even if they're your own, you could never understand it. So, it's necessary to have some perspective from which to approach the New Testament. But to realize that sometimes to allow the New Testament to correct that perspective, and to help us to read it and understand it again as God originally communicated to his people, so that we can more accurately then apply it to the life of God's people today.

When we read, especially narrative, but when we read, reading is often also the process of filling in the gaps. If I wrote everything I was thinking and everything that I wanted to communicate to you, writing would be a never-ending process. When I communicate with you, I assume certain things on your part.

I assume that you're going to know certain things, and I assume that you are going to have the right perspective, the right background, and the right tools to understand what I'm going to say. So, what I say to you is usually only the tip of the iceberg of everything I intend to communicate. And again, I'm relying on you to fill in the blanks, in a sense.

That's especially important when we read biblical text because likewise, there are what are often called gaps in the text. And by that, I simply mean, again, the biblical writers did the same thing. They assume that their readers knew certain things.

They didn't have to explain the meaning of every word, and every historical, cultural feature, and value, and this and that. They assumed the readers would fill in the appropriate details to make sense of the revelation and what they were saying. Now, the difficulty is, as 21st-century readers, when we read a text, we are inevitably going to fill in those details, and kind of fill in the blanks or the gaps with our own cultural ideas, values, and background.

And so when we come to the biblical text then, it's worth asking, it's worth reminding ourselves, what might be some of the different historical, cultural, and geographical features that will help me to read this? Not just in line with my own assumptions, and my own viewpoints, but how the original author, and how the original readers would have first understood it. How would they have read it? What cultural background? What historical things? What geographical things would have influenced the way? What was the author assuming that would have influenced the way the readers would have read the text? And again, I want to give you a couple of examples. One of them is found in Luke chapter 10 and verses 25 through 37.

And I'll read that for you, and most of you probably know what it is already, but some of you as soon as I start reading will recognize it. Jesus was teaching, and then verse 25 of Luke 10 begins, Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. Teacher, he said, what must I do to inherit eternal life? He said to him, Jesus said to him, what is written in the law? What do you read there? And the lawyer answered You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.

And Jesus said to him, you have given the right answer, do this and you'll live. But wanting to justify himself, the lawyer asked Jesus, who is my neighbor? Then Jesus replied, and instead of giving him a nice airtight definition and saying, well, here's what a neighbor is, let's look at what the word neighbor means, and then I'll define what a neighbor is, and we'll put parameters around what neighbor is so you can understand. Instead, Jesus responds as he often did by telling a parable, and this is the parable of the Good Samaritan.

And you know the story well, someone is traveling on the road to Jericho, thieves jump him and beat him and strip him, take everything he has, and he's left there half dead and bleeding. A priest walks by and goes on the other side of the road because again, a priest is not allowed to touch a corpse. He couldn't be sure that this guy was alive or dead, so he didn't want to risk being defiled by touching a corpse, so he went on the other side of the road and walked by, same with the Levite.

The next person who comes by is a Samaritan, and the Samaritan stops and provides aid for him, binds his wounds, takes him to a motel, and even offers to pay for his

upkeep until the guy's better. And then Jesus at the end says, and go and do likewise. So, we read this parable as a nice illustration of what it means to be a neighbor.

Who is my neighbor? It's anybody that's in need, and we need to be a good neighbor to anybody that is in need. And in fact, this parable has often become kind of a springboard for using the term Samaritan for different benevolent societies. Even sometimes hospitals are called the Good Samaritan Hospital or the Samaritan Hospital.

Years ago, there used to be a Christian insurance company called the Good Samaritan, etc. So, you know what I'm talking about. That's where you get that idea, even in our secular society, about a Good Samaritan.

It comes from this parable. The difficulty is, I'm not sure that's what Jesus meant and how his readers would have first understood it. It seems that in our day, we have domesticated and sanitized the person of the Samaritan.

If you remember from your Old Testament survey, the Samaritans have a long history, going all the way back to the exile of Israel and their captivity, where the resulting people that were left over in the city of Samaria were what some people call half-breeds. They were not full-blooded Jews. So that's one strike against them.

The Jews would have looked down on them because they were not purebred or full-blooded Jews. In other words, they weren't the true people of God. But more than just that, the history of the relationship between the Jews and the Samaritans was not a good one.

There was no lost love between them, and there were a number of occasions where the relationship between them was very bad. So, when Jesus makes a hero out of a Samaritan, any Jewish or any Greco-Roman reader who was familiar with the Old Testament would have recognized right away that the hero of this parable was the most unlikely person that they would have thought that Jesus would use as a hero. Again, we have so domesticated and sanitized the Samaritan that we don't get the full force of this parable anymore.

A good Samaritan would simply have been unacceptable. He would not have been a good Samaritan. Samaritans were disgusting, so disgusting that you would do anything to avoid traveling through Samaria because they were unclean and were not on good terms with the Jews.

So, when Jesus makes the Samaritan the hero, that would be unthinkable. The closest parallel today might be that, again, I'm not talking about how we necessarily view these people, but how society in general sometimes views them, is to make the hero of this parable a homosexual with AIDS or a Muslim jihadist terrorist. To make

that person the hero of this parable, would be more what Jesus was doing by making a Samaritan the hero of this parable.

He was taking a person that, not himself, but many in that day despised and saw as disgusting and making that person the hero. So, the point of this parable is not just a nice reminder for us to be a neighbor and to show love. It's perhaps the point is more that your neighbor is often your worst enemy, the person that you despise and hate.

Another example, another example of how this time more the cultural, even geographical, background helps us to understand a text. In the very last book of the Bible, in the very beginning of this last book, the book of Revelation, the first chapters two and three are a series of seven letters, or more accurately seven messages, seven prophetic messages to seven churches. The seven churches were located in Western Asia Minor, which is modern-day Turkey.

In most of these cities, work has been, you know, they've made archaeological discoveries and found the ruins of much of these locations. The cities like Ephesus, Smyrna, and Thyatira. And one of those cities was one of those cities that the author addresses is found in chapter three and verses 15 and 16.

It was the city of Laodicea. Laodicea was one of the cities in Western Asia Minor. Again, Western modern-day Turkey in the first century.

And the author of Revelation brings a message from Jesus Christ to the city. And here's what he has to say to them. I'll read verse 14 and then 15 and 16 are the verses I want to focus on.

And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write the words of the Amen. This is a reference to Christ. The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the origin and the beginning of God's creation.

So that's how Christ is described. Now here's what Christ says to this church in this city named Laodicea. I know your works that you are neither hot nor cold. I wish that you were either hot nor cold. So because you are lukewarm and neither hot nor cold, I'm about to spit you out of my mouth. What I want to focus on is the imagery of hot and cold and lukewarm.

In other words, what is Jesus saying? Well, simply they're not hot or cold, they're lukewarm. And because of that, he's about to vomit them out of his mouth. They're disgusting.

Obviously, Jesus is not talking literally, he's using that to refer to their spiritual status. They are lukewarm in the same way that one does not like to drink lukewarm water. And it's not just it's lukewarm, it's probably the idea it's putrid and disgusting.

So that Jesus says, I'm about to vomit you out of my mouth. That's the way Jesus viewed the church in this city called Laodicea. But what does he mean by calling them hot and cold and saying, you're not hot or cold, you're lukewarm? Revelation 3, 15-16, hot, cold, or lukewarm.

The way we usually read it, and at least the way I was always taught to read it, is that hot, these terms refer to the spiritual temperature of the Christian. So hot is a positive thing. In our Christian jargon, we might say someone is on fire for Christ or on fire for the Lord.

So hot is a positive thing. Cold is its binary opposite. And cold is negative.

To be cold is to be turned off to Christ and to be apathetic and not care at all. And lukewarm is kind of a mixture, it's in between. And so when we apply that template to Revelation 3:15-16, what Jesus is saying, is you're neither hot nor cold, you're lukewarm.

He's saying, you're neither hot, that is you're not, again to use kind of modern-day jargon, you're not hot, you're not on fire for Christ, and you're not cold, you're not turned off to Christ, or you're not against Christ or opposed to Christ. Instead, you're lukewarm, you're kind of wishy-washy right in the middle. You're riding the fence, and you won't take a stand for Christ, and you won't take a stand against Christ.

And then interestingly, the author goes on and says, I wish you were hot or cold. In other words, he's saying then, I wish you were either hot, that you would take a stand for me, or I wish you were cold. At least take a stand against me, but don't remain kind of lukewarm and wishy-washy and riding the fence and in the middle.

And so even today, you probably hear people talking about lukewarm Christians. That means they're kind of indifferent, they don't know which way to go, they're kind of right in between, they're not on fire for Christ, they're not cold against Christ, but they're just kind of sitting there in the middle. And now the author wants them to take a stand for or against Christ, but don't stand there in the middle.

Has anyone ever heard it understood like that? A few of us have, yeah. And again, that's usually what we think of when we think of lukewarm. However, I am convinced that that is not what the author intended to communicate.

Instead, here's where we need to understand a little bit about the environment in the first century. Laodicea was a unique city because it lacked what was a very important requirement for any first-century city, and that was to be built near a good water supply or water source. Question? Laodicea? I probably can't.

L-A-O-D-I-C-E-A. Okay, there we go, thanks. All right, where was I? The city of Laodicea lacked an important requirement of a first-century city, and that was a good water supply.

Most cities would be built near a place where they had easy access to good water. Instead, because of that, Laodicea actually had to have its water piped from outside of the city. And as I understand it, excavations have even uncovered a duct system that would have piped water into Laodicea.

I'm not exactly sure where they got all their water, but the point is, since they didn't have a good water supply, they brought it from the outside in. The problem was, by the time the water got there, it was rather lukewarm and tepid and kind of stale and stagnant. It really wasn't suitable for drinking.

In other words, it was lukewarm. So, what's going on is John is using an image, a metaphor, that his readers could identify with. He's not, first of all, thinking about spiritual temperature, hot and cold for Christ or in the middle.

He's, first of all, starting from the culture and the geography of the city of Laodicea. So, he tells them, he compares them to lukewarm water. Why? Because they understood that.

They had their water piped because they didn't have their own water supply, they had it piped in. And by the time it got there, presumably, again, it was stale and stagnant and lukewarm, and it wasn't good for drinking. Thus, Jesus said, you're like your own water supply.

It's so disgusting, I'm about to spit you out of my mouth. That's how appalled Jesus was at their activity. Now, what about the hot or cold? Again, we need to read this not from the perspective of our spiritual experience or the way we use these terms in our spiritual jargon, but instead, we need to understand it in light of the first-century city of Laodicea.

Interestingly, there were two cities near Laodicea that were also known for their water supplies. One of them was a city named Hierapolis. Hierapolis was well known for having these hot springs that were, again, I've never been there, but I've seen pictures, and I understand that they have these, or they would have had these hot springs kind of at times in the hillside that were of medicinal value, and people would travel from all over to come to bathe in this water and utilize it for healing.

And again, Hierapolis was well known for that, for its hot water that had healing properties and medicinal value. There was another city that was not too far from Laodicea, a city named Colossae. We'll talk about that city later because Paul wrote a letter to the church at Colossae.

You know it as the letter to the Colossians. But Colossae was also well known in the first century for its water supply, but it was known for its cold, refreshing, pure water, and water that was good to drink. And again, it had a reputation for that.

So, for readers living in the first century, what are they going to think of? In light of that background, what will they think of when they hear hot and cold and lukewarm? I am convinced it looked more like this. Hot and cold are both positive things. Basically, Jesus, through John, is saying to the church that You're neither hot or cold.

He's saying you're not like the water of Hierapolis, the hot water which is valuable for healing and has medicinal value. And neither are you like the cold, refreshing, pure water of Colossae. Instead, you're like your own water that is lukewarm.

That is, you're disgusting. So lukewarm is not in between hot and cold. Both hot and cold are positive metaphors.

And lukewarm is the exact opposite. It's negative. So don't read this in light of our experience with hot being on fire for Christ, cold being against him, and lukewarm in the middle.

No, hot and cold are good things in this context, and lukewarm is a bad thing. It's the complete opposite. A better analogy in our modern day would be, instead of using the imagery of spiritual temperatures, at least when you take a shower or, guys when you shave, you like to use hot water.

No one likes it unless you've been working out and sometimes it feels nice to have a little bit cooler water. But generally, we like hot water. Or when you sit down to drink coffee or tea, no one likes tea or water or coffee that is lukewarm.

You like it hot. Maybe some of you do. Or why does a waitress come around to the table and keep filling up when you have water? Because no one likes stale water that's been sitting there.

They like it refreshed. And that's the imagery here. Hot and cold are both good things.

And Jesus is telling them, I wish you were like the water supply of Hierapolis or Colossae. They're good and desirable and valuable. But instead, you are like your own water supply, which is lukewarm, the water that gets piped in, which is absolutely good for nothing.

So, these Christians are not, the Laodicean church is not wishy-washy or riding the fence. They are about as far gone as you can get. They're acting, and Jesus is, again, so upset with them.

He says I'm about to spit you, vomit you out of my mouth. You're useless. You're no good for anything.

So, understanding, excuse me, understanding a little bit about the background and culture of a text often can have a profound effect on the way we read it and may end up, helping us to understand in a way that's very different from the way we might understand it if we read it in light of our own cultural background and historical background and values. Any questions on either of those texts? Does everyone see that? And I'm not asking you to agree with what I've done. I'm just suggesting that there's a different way to read this text in light that's probably more consistent with, again, if you're a first-century Christian living in Laodicea, these images would have immediately been relevant to you.

You would have recalled your own water supply, but the water supply of surrounding cities was very good in contrast to your own inferior water supply. So hopefully as we look through the New Testament, as we begin to look through the individual New Testament books, we'll look at some other examples of how often reconstructing the background historically, religiously, and politically can aid us in having a clear understanding of the text and how then that can be applied to God's people today. One other thing I want to talk about, I do want to look briefly at one other text.

Actually, I think I'll do that now because it fits very well with this, and that is to skip over the next section in your notes. We'll come back to that Monday, but I want to talk a little bit about the Christmas story, the Christmas story revisited. So, let's revisit the Christmas story, and again, I want you to pay attention to how often some of the gaps that need to be filled in when we think about the Christmas story, we often fill in with things from our own background, our own understanding, even our own traditions and upbringings and the way we've been taught to read it.

So, the Christmas story is retold. Here's a nice picture of undoubtedly what it looked like in the first century when Jesus was born. Except they would have been real figures, but there's Jesus, and notice the comfortable setting and all the hay, and notice how light it is, and there the shepherds with their animals around, there are the three wise men, and even an angel graced the manger scene with his or her presence.

And so, the manger scene is nicely sanitized for popular consumption, and this is the picture we often carry around in our heads, and this is the picture then we use to read and interpret Luke 2 and Matthew 2, where we find the record of the Christmas story. Now, what I want to do is go back and look at the Christmas story and try to

ask the question, in what ways may we have filled in around the details with things from our own tradition, our own assumptions, the way we've been taught to read the story, and maybe try to look at it a little bit differently and ask, what might it have looked like given a first-century reader? How might they have heard it and read it? What might we be assuming? So, let's go back and look at the text. Again, the two places where Jesus' birth is specifically referred to, the only other places where Jesus' birth is specifically referred to, I think there's a reference in Romans 1, there's a reference to Galatians of Jesus being born of a woman, there's a reference in Revelation chapter 12.

No one ever reads that during Christmas time, but there's a reference to Jesus' birth in Revelation chapter 12. But other than that, I'm sorry, you can tell where my mind is. Matthew chapter 2 and Luke 2 are the most detailed accounts of the birth of Jesus Christ and the events surrounding them, including chapter 1 of each of those books as well.

But let's go back and look at those. I want to look at several features of this common depiction of the manger scene and how we might have filled in the details in a way that may not necessarily reflect how first-century readers would have understood this or what may have actually taken place. So, the Christmas story retold, the easiest one I think to dispense with in that picture was the presence of the three wise men.

And I think most of you, hopefully by now realize two things. Number one, there would have been no wise men present at the manger scene when Jesus was born. Matthew chapter 2 clearly tells us that the wise men came to Jesus' house.

The fact that Herod killed all the baby boys two years under suggests that Jesus was probably between one and two years old by the time the wise men who were actually foreign astrologers came and visited Jesus. The second thing is that there's no mention at all of how many there were. There's only a mention that they brought three gifts, gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

And when we get to Matthew, I'm going to explore why those three gifts and why that's significant. But most likely there were far more than three wise men that came to visit Jesus. But obviously, again, hopefully, you know by now, they didn't come to the manger.

They came a year or two later to Jesus' house in Bethlehem. And Matthew tells us that he was an infant, a child, not a baby, as Luke does. So, number one, there were no wise men.

There probably weren't three of them anyway, but they didn't show up at the manger scene. The star stayed over at their house. No, it would have been. Again, I

actually want to talk more about that when we get to Matthew 2, but it's probably connected with the fact that they're astrologers and there's other things going on.

There's other things going on with the mention of the star, but I want to talk about that more when we get into Matthew. We'll spend a little bit of time on Matthew 2 and what's going on in that story of Jesus, his birth, his being in Bethlehem, leaving for Egypt, and coming back. There are a number of Old Testament things going on in that text that we'll explore.

And Herod? I mean, I don't think there's any relationship. Again, we'll look at that when we get to Matthew 2, but they simply go to the most natural place to figure out where to get more information and where this Messiah is to be born. Let me just look at a couple of other ones.

We won't finish this, but this is another easy one, I think, an inn and an innkeeper. Most of our English translations say that Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, go to Bethlehem and they have Jesus in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn. Often we've constructed this story of Jesus, of Mary and Joseph going to an inn and they get turned away because the no vacancy sign is on and the innkeeper sends them to the only place.

I actually heard a sermon. I read it. I didn't really hear it.

I read a sermon once that was based on this idea of the innkeeper turning Jesus away. And the idea was, are we going to turn Jesus away as well? However, first of all, the easiest one is there's simply no mention of an innkeeper in Luke 2. Second is that word that is translated in, Greek word, and there's actually been two translations that have been produced within the last year that have finally changed this. That word, that Greek word that is translated in is a word that actually means a guest room.

So, where Mary and Joseph went was not to an inn. Most likely a city of such insignificant size as Bethlehem may not even have had an inn. I'm not sure, but Mary and Joseph did not go to an inn or a motel.

They went to a guest room probably in the house of a relative. And so, no innkeeper and there's no inn. Again, that word is used elsewhere in Luke clearly to refer to a guest room, not an inn.

So, they probably go to a relative's house and they have a guest room or guest house where Mary and Joseph are to stay. One other thing, when did Mary have the baby? Again, this is rather insignificant, but we think of Mary as nine months along when she rode into the donkey in Jerusalem and then that night out comes Jesus. It may not have happened that way.

The author doesn't tell us how long they were actually in Bethlehem before Jesus was born. There's no indication specifically as to whether they have Jesus that night perhaps, or was it a month or two or more later? That's possible as well. The text does not tell us how long they were in Bethlehem before Mary had the child.

The one other thing, interestingly, is the fact that there was no room in the, not the inn, the guest room. Interestingly too, it doesn't tell us, the text does not say that Mary and Joseph never stayed in the guest room. In fact, Mary and Joseph very well could have stayed in the guest room.

The problem was there would have been other people in there as well. And maybe they stayed in there until it was time to have the baby. And Mary, who wants to have a baby when there are all these other people around? The guest room was too crowded.

There was no room. So, we don't need to think of Mary and Joseph living in the manger in the stable the entire time. They may have stayed in this guest room and then as the contractions got closer and she knew she was going to have the baby, it was too crowded.

And then they went to this manger, the only private place they could find. So again, listen to the text carefully and don't go beyond what it says, but make sure we're not reading it solely in light of our own assumptions and traditions.

This is Lecture 4 in Dr. David Mathewson's New Testament History and Literature on Judaism and Social Values.