

Dr. Dave Mathewson, New Testament Literature, Session 3, Religious and Social Values Resources from NotebookLM

1) Abstract, 2) Audio podcast, 3) Briefing Document, 4) Study Guide, and 5) FAQs

1. Abstract of Mathewson, NT Literature, Session 3, Religious and Social Values, Biblicalelearning.org, BeL

Dr. Mathewson's lecture explores the political and religious landscape of the first century during which the New Testament was written. It examines how Roman rule and Hellenization influenced Jewish and Christian identities. The lecture outlines various religious and philosophical movements, including Platonism, Stoicism, Cynicism, and magic, that competed with early Christianity. The lecture also discusses the role of emperor worship and its conflict with Christian beliefs. Finally, Dr. Mathewson turns to movements within Judaism, such as the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and Zealots, highlighting their diverse responses to Roman rule and their interpretations of what it meant to be God's people. Understanding these competing ideologies and socio-political forces helps to contextualize the New Testament's message and its challenge to the status quo.

2. 22 - minute Audio Podcast Created on the basis of Dr. Mathewson, NT Literature, Session 3 – Double click icon to play in Windows media player or go to the Biblicalelearning.org [BeL] Site and click the audio podcast link there (Old Testament → Major Prophets → Daniel).



**Mathewson_NTLit_S
ession03.mp3**

3. Briefing Document: Mathewson, NT Literature, Session 3, Religious and Social Values

Okay, here's a briefing document summarizing the main themes and ideas from Dr. Mathewson's lecture on the religious and social values of the New Testament era.

Briefing Document: New Testament Religious and Social Context

Main Themes:

- **Intertwined Political and Religious Landscape:** The lecture emphasizes that understanding the New Testament requires recognizing the inseparable connection between political and religious power in the first-century world.
- **Competing Religious Ideologies:** Christianity emerged and developed in competition with various religious and philosophical movements, including Platonism, Stoicism, Cynicism, magic, pagan religions, Gnosticism, and emperor worship.
- **Jewish Responses to Foreign Rule:** The lecture explores how different groups within Judaism (Scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes/Qumran community, and Zealots) responded to Roman rule and the perceived contradiction between God's promises and the realities of foreign oppression.
- **Subversive Nature of Early Christianity:** The lecture argues that the New Testament often uses language and concepts that directly challenge or subvert Roman power and ideology.

Key Ideas and Facts:

- **Hellenization and Roman Rule:** The lecture notes the lasting impact of Hellenization (the spread of Greek culture under Alexander the Great) and the subsequent dominance of the Roman Empire. "Rome was the superpower of the day. You could live virtually nowhere to escape its influence and its impact." This political context shaped the questions and challenges faced by both Jews and Christians.
- **Platonism and Dualism:** Platonic thought, emphasizing a dualism between spirit and matter, influenced the religious landscape. "The physical world was seen as only a reflection of, only a shadow of the true spiritual reality." This led to a focus on the spiritual over the physical, which the lecturer suggests the New Testament sometimes reacts against.

- **Stoicism and Acceptance:** Stoicism promoted the acceptance of circumstances and living in harmony with the material world, infused with a divine order called "logos." The lecture emphasizes that the key to contentment was "simply realizing that you can't control everything and there's nothing you can do, and simply to accept the way things are."
- **Cynicism and Simplicity:** Cynicism called for a rejection of wealth and comfort and a pursuit of a simple, unconventional life, critical of the status quo.
- **Magic and Manipulation:** Magic involved attempting to manipulate or invoke the power of the gods through correct formulas and incantations. The lecture connects this to Jesus's teachings against babbling prayers and suggests it may have influenced how some perceived Jesus's demon-casting. "Magic in the first century was a way of sometimes manipulating or calling upon and availing yourself of the power of the gods by using the correct formulas."
- **Oracles and Divine Guidance:** Oracles, like the Oracle of Delphi, were places where people sought answers and guidance from the gods through priestesses.
- **Pagan Religions and Polytheism:** The Greco-Roman world was polytheistic and tolerant of various gods, including gods of fertility and patron deities of trades. "Most Greco-Roman cities would have had a variety of temples that you could go to and worship for a variety of reasons."
- **Gnosticism and Secret Knowledge:** Gnosticism, which became more prominent in the 2nd century, viewed the material world as evil and emphasized salvation through secret knowledge ("gnosis") possessed by an elite few. "Salvation comes about by the possession of a secret knowledge that belongs to an elite few."
- **Emperor Worship and Allegiance:** The practice of worshipping Roman emperors, either posthumously or during their reign, was prevalent and blurred the lines between religion and politics. Temples were built in honor of emperors, and participation in events honoring the emperor was often expected. "There was no separation of church and state. But instead, religion and politics were closely intertwined."
- **Jewish Sects and Their Responses:**
 - Scribes:** Focused on studying and interpreting the Torah. "Let's study the Torah."
 - Pharisees:** Emphasized strict observance of the Mosaic law and moral purity. "Let's separate."

- **Sadducees:** More accommodating to Roman rule, often comprised of the elite members of society. "Let's accommodate."
- **Essenes/Qumran Community:** Withdrew from society to pursue purity and await God's intervention. "Let's withdraw."
- **Zealots:** Advocated armed resistance against Rome. "Let's fight."
- **Subversive Language in the New Testament:** The lecturer suggests that the New Testament authors used titles like "Lord," "Savior," and "gospel" in reference to Jesus Christ, knowing these were also titles attributed to the Roman emperor. "It may not be insignificant that the New Testament authors use that terminology...they may also be aware that they are using language that is subversive to the Roman Empire." This was a way of challenging Roman authority and asserting Jesus's true authority.
- **Paul as a Zealot:** The lecture posits that Paul showed zealot tendencies, and "was a good example of a first-century terrorist."

Implications:

- Understanding the religious and social context of the New Testament provides crucial insights into the challenges faced by early Christians and the messages conveyed in the New Testament texts.
- The lecture suggests that early Christianity presented itself as an alternative to Roman power and ideology, using subversive language and concepts to assert the lordship of Jesus Christ.
- The diversity within Judaism also serves as a reminder of the complex religious landscape in which Christianity emerged.

4. Study Guide: Mathewson, NT Literature, Session 3, Religious and Social Values

Religious and Social Values in the First Century: A Study Guide

I. Key Concepts & Themes

- **Hellenization:** The spread of Greek culture, language, and thought under Alexander the Great.
- **Roman Rule:** The political and social context of the New Testament, marked by foreign occupation and its impact on Jewish and Christian identity.
- **Political and Religious Intertwining:** The inseparability of political and religious power in the first-century world.
- **Competing Religious Ideologies:** The diverse range of religious and philosophical options available in the first century, including Platonism, Stoicism, Cynicism, Magic, Oracles, Pagan Religions, and Gnosticism.
- **Emperor Worship:** The practice of deifying Roman emperors, posing a challenge to Christian allegiance to Jesus Christ.
- **Jewish Responses to Foreign Rule:** The various ways Jewish groups (Scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes/Qumran Community, Zealots) responded to Roman rule and the perceived lack of fulfillment of God's promises.

II. Quiz (Short Answer)

Answer each question in 2-3 sentences.

1. What was Hellenization, and how did it impact the world of the New Testament?
2. Describe the relationship between political and religious power in the first century.
3. Explain the key ideas of Platonic dualism and how it influenced views on salvation.
4. What is Stoicism, and how did it impact the views of people in the first century?
5. What were the main beliefs and practices of Cynicism?
6. How was magic understood in the first century, and what role did it play in society?

7. What was the function of oracles in the Greco-Roman world?
8. Describe the characteristics of pagan religions in the first century.
9. What were the core tenets of Gnosticism, and how did it differ from traditional Jewish beliefs?
10. Explain the significance of Emperor worship, and how did this practice impact early Christians?

III. Quiz Answer Key

1. Hellenization was the spread of Greek culture, language, and thought following the conquests of Alexander the Great. This process resulted in a blending of Greek and local customs, influencing everything from philosophy and art to politics and religion in the world of the New Testament.
2. In the first century, political and religious power were deeply intertwined. Rulers often used religious beliefs to legitimize their authority, and religious institutions could wield significant political influence. The emperor, for example, was often viewed as divine, blurring the lines between religious and political allegiance.
3. Platonic dualism posits a separation between the spiritual and material realms, with the spiritual being considered the true reality and the material world a mere shadow. This thinking influenced views on salvation by emphasizing the escape from the physical body or world to attain the spiritual reality, devaluing the material aspect of human existence.
4. Stoicism was a philosophy emphasizing that all existence is matter infused with a divine order (logos). Stoics aimed to achieve contentment by accepting their circumstances and not responding with extreme emotions. Stoicism valued living in harmony with the physical world, accepting that one cannot control everything.
5. Cynicism called for a simple and unconventional life, rejecting wealth and physical comfort. Cynics were critical of popular culture and the status quo, pursuing an ascetic lifestyle in protest against societal norms. Some believe that Jesus had cynical tendencies.
6. Magic in the first century involved manipulating or invoking the power of gods through specific formulas and rituals. It was also used to ward off demonic beings or cast out demons. Magic held a prominent role in the Greco-Roman world.

7. Oracles in the Greco-Roman world were places, often shrines or caves, where people sought divine guidance through priestesses or priests. People asked questions about their future, seeking answers from the gods. However, answers were often ambiguous.
8. Pagan religions in the first century were polytheistic, with a multitude of gods associated with various aspects of life, such as fertility, work, and well-being. Cities contained temples dedicated to these different deities, and worship often involved showing gratitude for the gods' provisions.
9. Gnosticism, emerging fully in the 2nd century but with roots in the 1st, posited that the material world is evil and created by a lesser god, while the spiritual world is good. Salvation, according to Gnosticism, is achieved through secret knowledge (gnosis) that allows one to escape the physical world and attain a spiritual existence.
10. Emperor worship was the practice of deifying Roman emperors, with temples built in their honor and allegiance expected from citizens. This practice challenged early Christians, who believed that worship was due to God alone, creating tension and conflict between religious and political obligations.

IV. Essay Questions

1. Analyze the ways in which Roman rule impacted Jewish identity and religious practices in the first century. How did different Jewish groups respond to Roman oppression?
2. Compare and contrast Platonic dualism and Gnosticism. How did these philosophies influence views on the nature of reality, the human body, and salvation?
3. Discuss the role of magic and oracles in the first-century Greco-Roman world. How did these practices reflect people's understanding of the divine and their attempts to influence the world around them?
4. Explore the significance of emperor worship in the first century. What were the political and religious motivations behind this practice, and how did it challenge the early Christian community?
5. Evaluate the extent to which the New Testament writings can be interpreted as a response to, or a subversion of, Roman ideology. Provide specific examples to support your argument.

V. Glossary of Key Terms

- **Canon:** A set of texts, or books, which a particular religious community regards as authoritative scripture.
- **Cynicism:** A philosophical movement that emphasized living a simple and unconventional life, rejecting wealth and societal norms.
- **Dualism:** A philosophical or religious concept that divides reality into two distinct and opposing principles, such as spirit and matter, good and evil.
- **Emperor Worship:** The practice of venerating Roman emperors as divine beings.
- **Essenes:** A Jewish sect that withdrew from society to live in secluded communities, emphasizing ritual purity and strict observance of the law.
- **Gnosticism:** A religious movement that believed in a dualistic worldview, with salvation achieved through secret knowledge (gnosis).
- **Greco-Roman World:** The cultural and historical period in which Greek and Roman influences were dominant, particularly in the Mediterranean region.
- **Hellenization:** The spread of Greek culture, language, and ideas throughout the ancient world.
- **Logos:** A Greek word meaning "word" or "reason," used in Stoicism to refer to the divine order permeating all matter, and in Christianity to refer to Jesus Christ.
- **Magic (in the 1st Century):** The practice of manipulating or invoking the power of the gods through specific formulas and rituals.
- **Oracle:** A person or place believed to provide wise and prophetic counsel or predictions of the future, usually thought to be divinely inspired.
- **Pagan Religions:** The polytheistic religious beliefs and practices prevalent in the Greco-Roman world.
- **Papyrus:** A material made from the papyrus plant used for writing in ancient times.
- **Pharisees:** A Jewish sect known for their strict adherence to the law and their emphasis on oral tradition.
- **Platonism:** The philosophy of Plato, which emphasized the distinction between the material world and the world of ideal forms.

- **Qumran Community:** The Jewish sect associated with the Dead Sea Scrolls, known for their communal living and strict religious practices.
- **Roman Empire:** The political entity that dominated the Mediterranean world during the time of the New Testament.
- **Sadducees:** A Jewish sect associated with the Temple priesthood and the upper class, known for their conservative views and rejection of oral tradition.
- **Scribes:** Professional students and interpreters of the Old Testament law.
- **Stoa:** A covered walkway or colonnade in ancient Greek architecture, associated with the philosophical school of Stoicism.
- **Stoicism:** A philosophical school that emphasized virtue, reason, and acceptance of fate.
- **Zealots:** A Jewish sect that advocated for armed rebellion against Roman rule.

5. FAQs on Mathewson, NT Literature, Session 3, Religious and Social Values, Biblicalelearning.org (BeL)

Frequently Asked Questions: Religious and Social Values in the First Century

- **What was the significance of Roman rule in the first century, and how did it affect the Jewish people?** Roman rule dominated the political landscape, with the Roman Empire encompassing a vast territory. This foreign rule created tension for the Jewish people, who struggled with how to maintain their identity as God's people while living under pagan oppression. The unfulfilled promises of a Davidic king added to this struggle, as Caesar ruled instead. The New Testament writings often grapple with these questions of identity, faithfulness, and the apparent contradiction between God's promises and the reality of foreign rule.
- **How were religion and politics intertwined in the first century?** Religion and politics were deeply intertwined, especially concerning the Roman emperors. Emperors were often viewed as deities, and emperor worship became a common practice. This created a conflict for Christians, who struggled to balance their allegiance to the emperor with their devotion to Jesus Christ. The use of terms like "Lord," "Savior," and "Gospel" for both the emperor and Jesus further highlights this tension and the subversive nature of early Christian language.
- **What is Platonic dualism, and how did it influence religious thought in the first century?** Platonic dualism, stemming from the teachings of Plato, posits a separation between the spiritual and physical realms. It views the physical world as a mere shadow of the true, spiritual reality. This belief led some to prioritize the spiritual over the physical, sometimes even denigrating the body. The lecture suggests that certain New Testament passages may be reactions against this type of thinking, particularly concerning the idea of salvation focusing solely on the soul.
- **What is Stoicism, and what were its main tenets?** Stoicism, originating from the Greek word "stoa" (column), was a philosophical movement that emphasized acceptance and contentment regardless of circumstances. Stoics believed that everything was composed of matter infused with a divine order called "logos." They advocated for living in harmony with the natural world, accepting what could not be controlled, and avoiding extreme emotional reactions. The key to contentment, according to Stoicism, was simply accepting things the way they were.

- **What is cynicism, and what did it advocate?** Cynicism called for a simple and unconventional life, marked by criticism of the status quo, especially wealth and comfort. Cynics pursued a simple life, often rejecting material possessions and comforts. Some scholars even suggest that Jesus had cynical tendencies, evidenced by his critique of society and his advocacy for a simple life.
- **How was magic understood and practiced in the first century, and how might it have influenced perceptions of Jesus?** Magic in the first century was not mere illusion but a means of manipulating divine power through specific formulas and incantations. Magical texts, like the papyri, contained names of gods to be invoked and spells for various purposes, such as warding off demons. This context might have shaped perceptions of Jesus, particularly his exorcisms. Some may have viewed him as another type of magician, casting out demons through supernatural means.
- **What were the main responses to Roman rule and foreign oppression among Jewish groups in the first century?** Various Jewish groups responded differently to Roman rule. The Scribes focused on studying and interpreting the Torah. The Pharisees emphasized strict observance of the Mosaic law and moral purity. The Sadducees, often well-to-do, accommodated Roman rule. The Essenes withdrew into secluded communities to maintain purity and await God's intervention. The Zealots advocated armed resistance against Rome. These diverse responses reflect different interpretations of what it meant to be God's people under foreign oppression.
- **What was Gnosticism and how might it have influenced the religious landscape during the first century?** Gnosticism, though fully developed in the second century, had roots in the first century. It shares similarities with Platonic dualism, positing that the material world is evil and the spiritual world is good. Salvation, according to Gnosticism, involves escaping the physical world through secret knowledge (gnosis) possessed by an elite few. The Gnostic Gospel of Thomas attributes Gnostic teachings to Jesus. Some scholars argue that certain New Testament writings respond to Gnostic ideas.