

Dr. Dave Mathewson, New Testament Literature, Session 5, Christmas and Canon Resources from NotebookLM

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

1. Abstract of Mathewson, NT Literature, Session 5, Christmas and Canon, Biblicalelearning.org, BeL

Dr. Mathewson's lecture explores the historical and cultural context of the New Testament, emphasizing the importance of understanding the environment that shaped its creation. **The lecture uses the Christmas story as an initial example**, demonstrating how tradition and personal assumptions can influence interpretation and advocating for a critical approach to reading scripture. **The focus then shifts to how the New Testament canon was formed**, examining the historical process by which specific books were recognized as authoritative. **Finally, it concludes by addressing the diversity of literary genres within the New Testament**, arguing that understanding these genres is crucial for proper interpretation of scripture.

2. 15 - minute Audio Podcast Created on the basis of Dr. Mathewson, NT Literature, Session 5 – 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_Session05.mp3

3. Briefing Document: Mathewson, NT Literature, Session 5, Christmas and Canon

Okay, here is a detailed briefing document summarizing the main themes and important ideas from the provided lecture excerpts, including relevant quotes:

Briefing Document: Dr. Dave Mathewson, New Testament Literature, Lecture 5: Christmas and the Canon

Overview:

This lecture by Dr. Dave Mathewson focuses on two primary areas: 1) Understanding the Christmas story in its historical and cultural context and being aware of how our own backgrounds influence its interpretation, and 2) Examining the formation of the New Testament canon and how it impacts our reading and understanding of the New Testament texts. The overarching theme is the importance of critical engagement with scripture, recognizing both our inherent biases and the need to understand the historical, cultural, religious, and literary contexts in which the texts were produced.

I. Re-Examining the Christmas Story:

- **Main Idea:** Our traditional understanding of the Christmas story is often shaped by traditions and assumptions that may not be entirely accurate when viewed in light of the historical and cultural context of the first century.
- **Key Points:**
The Inn: The Greek word translated as "inn" is better understood as a "guest room," implying that Mary and Joseph were likely staying with relatives. *"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 Stable:** The "stable" was likely a small, private room or lean-to attached to the house, rather than a large barn. The manger was likely a stone trough. *"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 "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."*

- **Humility:** Recognizing the reality of these details (likely a small, stone manger in a small space attached to the house) emphasizes the humility of Jesus' birth. *"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..."*
- **Our Own Assumptions:** The lecture stresses awareness of how our background and assumptions influence our interpretation. *"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..."*
- **Objective Interpretation:** Complete objectivity in interpretation is impossible. *"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."*

II. Reading the New Testament Critically:

- **Main Idea:** A "critical" approach to the New Testament should not be solely defined as skeptical and destructive. Instead, it involves analyzing the text to understand it more correctly and providing justification for our understanding. *"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."*
- **Critical vs. Naive:** The opposite of a critical approach is being naive and accepting something without reason. *"The opposite of criticism would be to be naive and just to accept something without having a reason to do so."*
- **The Bible as a Textbook:** Treating the Bible like a textbook in an academic setting is not inherently bad; it encourages critical thinking. The key is to integrate what is learned academically into one's personal devotional life. *"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."*

III. The Formation of the New Testament Canon:

- **Main Idea:** The New Testament canon was not established instantaneously but developed over a historical process of debate and discernment within the early church. *"So, the church did not wake up with a Bible, a New Testament in their laps. They already had the Old Testament...Instead, what you see is the process of determining the New Testament was actually fairly long and drawn out."*
- **Old and New Testament Relationship:** The New Testament is not just an appendix to the Old Testament but the fulfillment of its promises. *"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."*
- **Canon Definition:** The word "canon" refers to a collection of authoritative writings that "measured up" to certain criteria for being considered Scripture. *"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."*
- **Challenging the Da Vinci Code Narrative:** The lecture refutes the idea that the canon was solely a product of later political maneuvering (e.g., by Emperor Constantine). There was an early awareness of certain writings holding authority. *"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."*
- **Early Evidence: 2 Peter:** This letter references a collection of Paul's letters and equates them with "other scriptures." *"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...which the ignorant twist as they do the other scriptures."*
- **Revelation:** The author of Revelation uses language similar to the Old Testament law about adding or taking away from the word, suggesting a sense of the book's authority. *"I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book...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."

- **1 Corinthians:** Paul equates his instructions with a "command of the Lord."
"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."
- **Marcion's Influence:** Marcion's attempt to create a limited canon based on his rejection of the Old Testament God forced the church to clarify which documents it considered authoritative.
- **Athanasius and the Council of Carthage:** By the end of the fourth century, there was a consensus on the 27 books of the New Testament, as evidenced by Athanasius' Easter letter in 367 AD and the Council of Carthage.
- **Criteria for Inclusion:Conformity:** Alignment with the teachings of Jesus and the apostles.
- **Universal Acceptance:** Widespread recognition and value within the church.
- **Apostolic Authorship/Association:** Written by an apostle or a close associate.

IV. Interpreting the New Testament Canon:

- **Main Idea:** The New Testament is a diverse collection of texts written in various literary genres, which require us to vary our reading and interpretation.
- **Literary Genres:** It is important to recognize the different literary genres within the New Testament (e.g., narrative, letters) and understand how those genres influenced the author's communication. *"It's comprised of a diversity of literary types, and that's where this comes in."*
- **The Gospels as Narrative:** The Gospels are narratives, or stories, not just straightforward descriptions of events. The authors selected and arranged material to communicate a specific theological purpose. *"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."*

Key Takeaways:

- **Context is Crucial:** Understanding the historical, cultural, religious, and literary context of the New Testament is essential for accurate interpretation.
- **Be Aware of Biases:** We must be aware of our own assumptions and biases and allow the text to challenge them.
- **Critical Engagement:** Engage with the text critically, seeking to understand it more deeply and provide justification for our conclusions.
- **Diversity of Genres:** Recognize the diversity of literary genres within the New Testament and how it affects interpretation.

4. Study Guide: Mathewson, NT Literature, Session 5, Christmas and Canon

New Testament Literature: Christmas and the Canon - Study Guide

Quiz

Instructions: Answer the following questions in 2-3 sentences each.

1. How does our background (culture, tradition, experience) influence our reading of the New Testament?
2. According to the lecture, what is a more accurate translation of the Greek word traditionally translated as "inn" in the Christmas story, and what implications does this have?
3. What does it mean to read the Bible "critically"?
4. Why is it useful to "treat the Bible as a textbook"?
5. Why did the early church need a "New Testament" when they already possessed the Old Testament?
6. What is meant by the term "canon" when referring to the New Testament?
7. What evidence exists within the New Testament that suggests an awareness of certain writings possessing authoritative status, akin to scripture?
8. Who was Marcion, and why is he important in the discussion of the New Testament canon?
9. Name the three criteria the early church would have considered when deciding which writings to accept as the New Testament canon.
10. Briefly explain why it is important to understand the different literary genres present within the New Testament?

Quiz Answer Key

1. Our background influences our interpretation through unstated assumptions, subconscious biases, and prior teachings. It's not inherently negative, but awareness is crucial for allowing the text and its context to challenge our preconceived notions.

2. The Greek word is better translated as "guest room." This suggests Mary and Joseph stayed with relatives rather than paying for lodging at a commercial inn.
3. Reading the Bible critically doesn't necessarily mean being skeptical or destructive. It involves analyzing the text to understand it correctly and providing reasons and justification for our interpretations.
4. Treating the Bible as a textbook encourages critical thinking and engagement with its historical and cultural context. It helps us grapple with a document that is very different from our own cultural milieu.
5. The New Testament was seen as the fulfillment of the Old Testament's promises. It testified to the new covenant established through Jesus Christ, making it a natural complement to the Old Testament scriptures.
6. "Canon" refers to a collection of authoritative writings that "measure up" to the standards for being considered scripture. It represents the collection of texts recognized as authoritative for the Christian faith.
7. 2 Peter references a collection of Paul's letters circulating and equates them with "other scriptures." The book of Revelation uses language similar to Deuteronomy, suggesting its author viewed it as possessing comparable authority.
8. Marcion was an early Christian figure who rejected the Old Testament God and compiled a limited New Testament canon. He forced the early church to consider which books to accept as authoritative scripture.
9. The three criteria were conformity (to the teaching of Jesus and the apostles), universal acceptance (by the church as a whole), and apostolic authorship or association (written by an apostle or their close associate).
10. The New Testament comprises various literary genres (narrative, letters, etc.), each with unique conventions. Understanding these genres is crucial for proper interpretation, preventing us from misapplying or misinterpreting the texts.

Essay Questions

1. Discuss the significance of understanding the historical, cultural, and religious context of the New Testament for interpreting its message. Provide specific examples from the lecture to support your claims.
2. Explain the process by which the New Testament canon was formed. What factors influenced the selection of books, and what role did figures like Marcion and Athanasius play in this process?
3. "No one can interpret anything with complete objectivity." Elaborate on this statement, using examples from the lecture to illustrate how our own backgrounds and experiences shape our understanding of the New Testament.
4. The lecture identifies three criteria that the early church appeared to use when determining which writings to include in the canon. Discuss each of those criteria in detail and explain the historical evidence to support the idea that those criteria were used.
5. Analyze the lecture's discussion of literary genres within the New Testament. How does recognizing different genres influence our interpretation, and what challenges do modern readers face in understanding these ancient forms of communication?

Glossary of Key Terms

- **Canon:** A collection of writings recognized as authoritative scripture. From the Greek word meaning "reed," used as a measuring stick.
- **Critical Approach (to the Bible):** 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.
- **Guest Room (as opposed to "Inn"):** A translation of the Greek term traditionally rendered as "inn," suggesting that Mary and Joseph stayed with relatives rather than at a commercial establishment.
- **Historical Criticism:** A method of analyzing the Bible that examines the historical context in which the texts were written and the historical events they describe.
- **Literary Genre:** A category of literature characterized by particular form, style, or content (e.g., narrative, letter, poetry).
- **Manger:** A feeding trough for animals.
- **Redaction Criticism:** A method of analyzing the Bible that focuses on how the authors or editors of biblical texts shaped their material to convey a particular message or point of view.
- **Source Criticism:** A method of analyzing the Bible that seeks to identify the sources used by the authors or editors of biblical texts.
- **Textual Criticism:** A method of analyzing the Bible that compares different manuscripts of biblical texts to determine the most accurate and reliable original wording.
- **Universal Acceptance:** The recognition and validation of a document as authoritative scripture by the church as a whole, rather than by exclusive sects or groups.

5. FAQs on Mathewson, NT Literature, Session 5, Christmas and Canon, Biblicalelearning.org (BeL)

Frequently Asked Questions About Interpreting the New Testament

1. Why is understanding the historical, cultural, and religious context of the New Testament important?

Understanding the historical, cultural, and religious context is crucial because the New Testament was produced within a specific environment. This environment shaped the way the New Testament authors wrote and the way the first readers understood the texts. By understanding this background, we can avoid reading our own assumptions and biases into the text and instead understand it as the original authors intended.

2. How can our own traditions and cultural backgrounds affect our understanding of the New Testament?

Our traditions and cultural backgrounds significantly influence how we interpret the New Testament. We often approach texts with pre-conceived notions shaped by our upbringing, religious teachings, and cultural norms. These assumptions can sometimes lead us to misunderstand or misinterpret the original meaning of the text. Being aware of these influences allows us to approach the text more objectively and consider alternative interpretations.

3. What does it mean to read the New Testament "critically," and how does this differ from being skeptical?

Reading the New Testament "critically" involves analyzing the text to understand it more correctly and providing justification and reason for our interpretations. This is different from being skeptical, which involves denying, doubting, or undermining the text. A critical approach encourages asking questions of the text and seeking reasons for why we think it means what we do, rather than simply accepting interpretations without question.

4. How did the New Testament canon (the collection of authoritative books) come into being?

The New Testament canon did not appear overnight. It was a gradual process that took place over several centuries. Initially, the early church relied on the Old Testament as scripture, but as they recognized Jesus as the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies, writings about Jesus and his apostles began to be recognized as

authoritative. The process of determining which books would be included in the New Testament canon involved debate and discernment within the church, and it wasn't until the fourth century that a complete list of the 27 books was widely accepted.

5. What criteria did the early church use to determine which books should be included in the New Testament canon?

While the early church didn't use a formal checklist, certain criteria influenced their decisions. These included: 1. **Conformity:** The teaching in the document had to align with the teachings of Jesus and the apostles. 2. **Universal Acceptance:** The church as a whole had to recognize the document as valuable and authoritative. 3. **Apostolic Authorship/Association:** The document was generally written by an apostle or someone closely associated with one.

6. Why is it important to recognize the different literary genres within the New Testament?

The New Testament is not a monolithic block but a collection of diverse literary types, such as Gospels (narratives), letters (epistles), and apocalyptic literature (Revelation). Recognizing these different genres is crucial because each genre has its own conventions and ways of communicating meaning. Misunderstanding the genre can lead to misinterpretations of the text.

7. How should we approach reading the Gospels as a unique literary genre?

The Gospels are narratives written according to the standards of first-century biographies. They are not exhaustive accounts of everything Jesus said and did but rather selective accounts that emphasize certain themes and theological purposes. We should analyze the Gospels by paying attention to the elements of storytelling, such as repetition, dialogue, and the author's selection of events, to understand the main points the authors are trying to communicate about Jesus.

8. What is the significance of the Book of Revelation and how should we approach understanding the text?

The book of Revelation is a unique text that must be understood within the apocalyptic literary genre. The language used in Revelation is symbolic and not meant to be taken literally. Understanding the context and genre of this book is essential to grasping what the author was trying to communicate to the first readers. There seems to be an importance for Revelation to stand on the same level of authority as the Old Testament.