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Session 2 - History and Hellenization

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Welcome to the explainer. Today, we're going to tackle one of the most influential collections of documents in history. We're going to break down what the New Testament is, how it's put together, and maybe most importantly, the incredible world that shaped it.

All right. So where do we even begin? Well, let's start with the name itself, the New Testament. Now, when you hear that word Testament, what's the first thing that pops into your head? For most of us, I bet it's something very specific and probably has to do with lawyers.

Yeah. We think of a last will and testament, right? That legal document that decides who gets what after someone passes away. But, and this is a huge but in the context we're talking about, the original meaning was something else entirely.

So get this, the phrase New Testament was actually coined way back around the year 2000 by a guy named Tertullian. He was translating this Greek word, *diatheke*, into Latin. The Latin word he chose was *testamentum*.

But here's the kicker. *Diatheke* doesn't really mean will. It means covenant.

So the New Testament isn't about a new will. It's about a new covenant, a whole new kind of agreement or relationship between God and people, all centered around Jesus. And that one little word change from will to covenant completely reframes how we should think about the Old and New Testaments.

It's not about old and busted versus new and improved. Not at all. It's about a story of promise and fulfillment.

The Old Testament is the promise, the setup, the building of suspense. And the New Testament is the fulfillment, the climax of that epic story. You could actually see this idea spelled out perfectly right at the beginning of the book of Hebrews.

It talks about how God spoke in the past through prophets, but now has spoken through his Son. It's painting a picture of one continuous story, with the New Testament being the grand finale that was promised all along. Okay.

So if it's one big story told across 27 different documents, that leads to the next logical question, right? How are these 27 books actually arranged? Are they in the order they were written? And you might be surprised to hear this, but nope, not even close. It's not chronological at all. The book of Matthew, which kicks the whole thing off, definitely wasn't the first one written.

That honor probably goes to a letter like First Thessalonians or maybe James. See, the order we have today is totally intentional, but it's designed to tell a story logically, not chronologically. And this logical flow is really brilliant when you see it.

First, you get the four gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. That's the foundation, the life story of the founder, Jesus. Then comes the book of Acts, which is like the sequel showing how this new movement exploded and started to spread.

After that, you've got all the letters, which were written to guide and instruct these new growing communities. And then it all wraps up with the book of Revelation, a massive symbolic vision of how all of history finds its ultimate climax. So now we know what it is and how it's organized, but that just leads to a bigger question.

Why? Why is this story told in this way? Well, to answer that, we have to remember that these books weren't written in a vacuum. They were forged in a very specific time and place under the pressure of some massive historical forces. And believe it or not, to really get the world of the New Testament, we have to jump in our time machine and go back more than 300 years before Jesus was even born.

Our story starts with one man, Alexander the Great. He wasn't just a military genius who conquered most of the known world. He had an idea, a world-changing idea that set the stage for everything that came later.

And that big idea was something called Hellenization. See, Alexander didn't just want to conquer lands. He wanted to unite them under a single culture, Greek culture.

He intentionally spread the Greek language, Greek customs, and Greek religion everywhere. And the result? For centuries, everything in that part of the world was soaked in Greek influence. You just couldn't escape it.

But then Alexander died unexpectedly, and his massive empire shattered. The land of Israel found itself stuck in the middle, caught in a brutal tug of war between two of the successor kingdoms. This conflict eventually led to a famous event, the Maccabean Revolt, which gave the Jewish people a brief heroic taste of independence, right before the next global superpower showed up on their doorstep, Rome.

And by 63 BC, it was all over. Rome was in charge. And this is so crucial to understand.

Every single word of the New Testament was written by people living under the giant, unmissable shadow of the Roman Empire. But here's the fascinating irony. As oppressive as Roman rule could be, it accidentally created the perfect incubator for a new idea to spread like wildfire.

Think about it. Thanks to Alexander's Hellenization, there was a common language, Greek, that everyone in business and government used. Thanks to Rome's military might, there was the Pax Romana, the Roman peace, which made travel safer than it had been in centuries.

And Rome built all these incredible roads and shipping lanes that connected the entire empire. The conditions were perfect for a message to go viral. So you've got this whole

backdrop, right? The leftover Greek culture clashing with the on-the-ground reality of Roman soldiers and Roman laws.

All of this created this constant underlying tension for both Jews and the first Christians. It forced them to grapple with a really fundamental question about who they were and where their loyalties truly belonged. And that question is this: how do you live faithfully for God when Caesar is in charge? To what extent do you blend in? How much do you resist? When the New Testament authors talk about the kingdom of God, it's not just a spiritual idea.

It's a direct counterpoint to the kingdom of Caesar. This tension, this question of allegiance, is the central conflict that animates almost every single page of the New Testament. It's the question they were living with and the question they were trying to answer.