

New Testament Literature

Session 2: History and Hellenization | Dr. Dave Mathewson

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Abstract

In this lecture on New Testament history and literature, Dr. Dave Mathewson explores the historical, political, and cultural backdrop surrounding the New Testament documents. He defines the New Testament as the climactic fulfillment of God's redemptive covenant established through Jesus Christ rather than a legal last will. He outlines the logical structure of the canon and traces critical historical developments—from Alexander the Great's policy of Hellenization to Seleucid oppression under Antiochus Epiphanes, the Maccabean Revolt, and Roman rule under client king Herod the Great—demonstrating how early Christians navigated their covenant identity within a pagan empire.

Outline

I. Introduction and Purpose of the Course

- A. Setting the historical, political, and cultural context for the New Testament
- B. Contextual nature of biblical inspiration (documents written within the ebb and flow of historical events)
- C. Opening prayer: engaging God's Word in its original historical situation

II. Defining the Term "New Testament"

- A. Modern legal usage vs. biblical usage
 - 1. Modern context: "Last Will and Testament" (legal distribution of property after death)
 - 2. Tertullian (late 2nd–3rd century) as the first Church Father to apply "Old" and "New Testament" to scripture collections
- B. Etymology and biblical concept of Covenant
 - 1. Latin testamentum translating Greek diatheke (meaning "covenant")
 - 2. Definition of covenant: agreement or relationship God establishes with His people
 - 3. New Testament as testimony to God's new covenant relationship fulfilled in Jesus Christ
- C. Relationship between the Old and New Testaments
 - 1. Avoiding pejorative views of "Old" as worn out, outmoded, or defective
 - 2. Framework of Promise and Fulfillment (e.g., Hebrews 1:1–2)
 - 3. Responsibility of New Testament scholars/readers to understand Old Testament foundations

III. Physical Characteristics of Ancient New Testament Manuscripts

A. Examination of ancient Greek papyri/manuscripts (e.g., 3rd/4th-century John 1 manuscript)

B. Three key features of ancient uncial texts

1. Script written entirely in capital letters (uncials)
2. Scriptio continua (no spaces or divisions between words)
3. Complete absence of standard punctuation (periods, commas, question marks)

C. Appreciation for textual scholarship and English translations

IV. The Logical (Non-Chronological) Structure of the New Testament Canon

A. Logical arrangement vs. order of composition

1. First written books: James or 1 Thessalonians (not Matthew)
2. Arrangement of Pauline epistles primarily by length (e.g., Romans first as longest)

B. Sequential flow of the canon

1. The Four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John): natural bridge from Old Testament; life and ministry of Jesus
2. Book of Acts: expansion of the Christian movement from Jerusalem to the broader Greco-Roman world
3. Letters of Paul: epistles written by converted Pharisee/terrorist Saul/Paul from Romans through Philemon
4. General Epistles: letters from other prominent apostles (Peter, James, etc.)
5. Book of Revelation: climactic culmination of history and God's redemptive plan for the cosmos

V. Political and Historical Backdrop of the New Testament Era

A. Alexander the Great and the Hellenistic Era (~330 BC)

1. Rapid military expansion across the Mediterranean and Near East
2. Policy of Hellenization: spread of Greek language, culture, and religion
3. Development of the Septuagint (LXX): Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament

B. Post-Alexandrian Power Struggle: Ptolemies vs. Seleucids

1. Ptolemies (Egypt/South): relative peace and stability for Judea
2. Seleucids (Syria/North): oppression and hostility toward Jewish customs
3. The Crisis under Antiochus Epiphanes IV (175–163 BC)
 - a. Looting and desecration of the Jerusalem Temple
 - b. Sacrificing a pig on the altar and dedicating the Temple to Zeus
4. The Maccabean Revolt
 - a. Judas Maccabees leads successful rebellion against Seleucid forces
 - b. Purification and rededication of the Temple (origin of Hanukkah)
 - c. Brief ~80-year period of Jewish independence

C. The Roman Empire and First-Century Judea (63 BC onward)

1. Roman conquest of Judea under Pompey in 63 BC
2. Governance through client kings: reign of Herod the Great
 - a. Paranoia and cruelty (drowning rivals, execution of Bethlehem infants in Matthew 2)
 - b. Heavy taxation to fund massive building projects (Jerusalem Temple expansion)

3. Three major imperial contributions affecting the New Testament world
 - a. Universal common language: Koine Greek uniting everyday conversation and commerce
 - b. Pax Romana (Roman Peace): empire-wide stability and security
 - c. Advanced infrastructure: extensive road network and communication systems
4. First-century Christian life under Roman rule
 - a. Initial Roman tolerance while perceived as a sub-sect of Judaism
 - b. Persecution as localized and sporadic rather than uniform empire-wide campaigns
 - c. Core theological challenge: maintaining covenant fidelity to Jesus as Lord under pagan imperial rule