

New Testament Literature: Religious and Social Values

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Sponsored by Biblicalelearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Keywords

Hellenization, Stoicism, Cynicism, Magic, Polytheism, Gnosticism, Emperor Worship, Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes

Abstract

In this lecture, Dr. David Mathewson explores the intertwined political and religious environment of the first century as a critical context for reading New Testament literature. He surveys key Greco-Roman philosophical and religious frameworks—including Platonic dualism, Stoicism, Cynicism, magic, pagan polytheism, emergent Gnosticism, and emperor worship—demonstrating how early Christianity both engaged with and subverted imperial claims. Furthermore, he outlines distinct Jewish responses to Roman oppression and unfulfilled covenantal expectations, categorizing movements such as the scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes/Qumran community, and Zealots. Ultimately, the lecture highlights that Christianity emerged as a subversive movement that repurposed imperial vocabulary and navigated a complex matrix of social and theological values.

Outline

I. Introduction and Context of First-Century Religious and Social Values

- A. Transition from purely political overview to religious environment
 - 1. Artificial nature of separating politics and religion in the ancient world
 - 2. Intertwined relationship between political power and religious power
- B. Purpose of historical and background study for New Testament reading
 - 1. Beyond academic exercise: equipping believers to understand divine revelation
 - 2. Appreciating original historical context to understand how Scripture speaks today

II. The Greco-Roman Political and Religious Backdrop under Roman Rule

- A. Extent and influence of the Roman Empire
 - 1. Spread of Hellenization starting with Alexander the Great (Greek language, culture, and thought)
 - 2. Emergence of Rome as the dominant superpower surpassing Alexander's conquests
 - 3. Inescapable impact on all regions, including Jerusalem and Palestine
- B. Core theological and identity dilemma for God's people ("Israel")

1. How to maintain identity as God's people under pagan rule
2. Addressing unfulfilled covenant promises (e.g., promised Davidic King vs. sitting Caesar)
3. New Testament as a theological response to living in an unredeemed, oppressive environment

III. Major Philosophical and Religious Movements in the Greco-Roman World

A. Platonic Dualism

1. Sharp distinction/dualism between immaterial spirit and physical matter
2. Physical reality viewed as merely a shadow or reflection of spiritual reality
3. Salvation conceptualized as escape from the physical body into true spiritual realm
4. New Testament contrast: affirmation of bodily creation and resurrection versus spiritualized dualism

B. Stoicism

1. Name derived from stoa (architectural colonnades/columns in Greek architecture)
2. Philosophical reliance on Logos as a divine world-soul permeating all physical matter
3. Pursuit of contentment: accepting circumstances without extreme emotion, remaining unmoved like a pillar

C. Cynicism

1. Call to cultivate an unconventional, simple life critiquing status quo and popular culture
2. Rejection of wealth, social comfort, and societal expectations
3. Comparison to counter-cultural aspects of Jesus' life and teaching

D. Magic and Spells

1. Widespread practice focused on manipulating or invoking gods through formulas and incantations
2. Papyri discoveries (magical papyri) containing unpronounceable divine names
3. Use of magical formulas to ward off or exercise/cast out demonic spirits
4. New Testament context: contrast with Jesus' teaching on prayer (Matthew 6) and public perception of His exorcisms

E. Oracles

1. Sacred sites (e.g., Oracle of Delphi) visited to consult priestesses for divine guidance
2. Inquiries ranging from military strategy and agriculture to personal decisions and marriage
3. Characteristic ambiguity of prophetic responses given by deities

F. Pagan Polytheism and Temples

1. Highly pluralistic and polytheistic culture tolerating multiple local and patron deities
2. Civic requirement to honor gods responsible for crop fertility, trade, and safety
3. Prominent civic temples (Temple of Artemis at Ephesus, Temple of Apollo at Corinth) and private household altars

4. Initial Roman tolerance of Christians as Jewish sect; tension arose when viewed as distinct, exclusive, and challenging imperial authority

G. Emergent Gnosticism

1. Origin from gnosis (knowledge); full system developed in 2nd century, but roots present in 1st century
2. Dualistic belief that material world is evil, created by a lesser rebellious deity
3. Salvation defined as acquiring secret esoteric knowledge (gnosis) for an elite few to escape physical realm
4. Example: Gnostic Gospel of Thomas portraying Jesus as a teacher of secret Gnostic wisdom

H. Emperor Worship (Imperial Cult)

1. Convergence of religion and politics without separation of church and state
2. Evolution from posthumous deification to living emperor worship (e.g., Domitian)
3. Local build-up of imperial temples and pressure to demonstrate civic loyalty
4. Subversive early Christian vocabulary repurposing imperial titles:
 - a. Kurios (Lord), Soter (Savior), and Theos (God) applied to Jesus rather than Caesar
 - b. Euangelion (Gospel/Good News) shifted from imperial announcements to the reign of Jesus Christ

IV. Religious, Philosophical, and Political Options in First-Century Judaism

A. Concept of "Common Judaism" versus "Judaisms"

1. Shared foundation: monotheism, covenant, circumcision, Sabbath, and Mosaic Law
2. Diverse internal responses to Roman oppression and unfulfilled divine promises

B. Scribes ("Let's Study Torah")

1. Professional scholars, experts, and copyists of the Old Testament
2. Tasked with interpreting and applying Mosaic Law; evolved into later rabbinic tradition post-70 AD

C. Pharisees ("Let's Separate")

1. Focused on personal, moral, and ceremonial purity through rigorous law observance
2. Highly respected and influential; anti-Roman in principle, awaiting divine renewal through purity

D. Sadducees ("Let's Accommodate")

1. Wealthy, aristocratic, and priestly elite in Jerusalem society
2. Pro-Roman accommodation aimed at maintaining political status quo and power
3. Denied bodily resurrection; collaborated with Pharisees to oppose Jesus

E. Essenes / Qumran Community ("Let's Withdraw")

1. Total physical withdrawal into desert community (Dead Sea) due to perceived temple corruption
2. Strict communal regulations, Sabbath observance, and preservation of Dead Sea Scrolls (e.g., Cave 4)

3. Self-conception as a living spiritual temple awaiting end-times restoration by God

F. Zealots ("Let's Fight")

1. Militant/insurgent faction advocating violent resistance against Roman authority
2. Belief that taking up arms would prompt divine intervention to establish God's kingdom
3. Pre-conversion Saul of Tarsus as an example of violent zeal against threats to ancestral religion

V. Conclusion: Early Christianity in Its First-Century Environment

- A. Christianity emerged not in isolation, but at the intersection of Greco-Roman and Jewish worlds
1. Repurposing contemporary language to challenge Roman imperial claims
 2. Presenting Jesus as the true fulfillment of God's unfulfilled promises
- B. Historical awareness essential for grasping theological depth and contemporary application of New Testament literature