

Judaism and Social Values

New Testament Literature — Session 4

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Abstract

In this lecture, Dr. Dave Mathewson explores the Jewish literature and primary social values that defined the first-century Mediterranean world during the emergence of the New Testament. He highlights key literary backgrounds—including the Mishnah, Targums, and Dead Sea Scrolls—alongside foundational cultural dynamics such as avoiding shame, collective group identity, patron-client relationships, and socioeconomic stratification. Mathewson demonstrates how modern readers frequently fill textual gaps with contemporary assumptions, misinterpreting passages like the Parable of the Good Samaritan, the letter to Laodicea, and the Christmas nativity narrative. By reconstructing the original historical, geographical, and cultural setting, he establishes a framework for discerning authorial intent and applying biblical revelation accurately today.

Outline

I. Introduction and Context Setting

A. Purpose of Lecture 04

1. Investigation of historical, political, religious, and cultural backgrounds preparing for New Testament studies.
2. Recognition that New Testament writings emerged from and responded to specific historical circumstances.

B. Intersection of Religion and Politics

1. Absence of strict modern separation between political allegiance and religious devotion.
2. Imperial loyalty in the Greco-Roman empire carried explicit religious expectations.

II. Literature of First-Century Judaism

A. Plurality within Jewish Movements ("Judaisms")

1. Coexistence of common Jewish faith alongside distinct parties and theological sects.
2. New Testament as one part of a broader body of active Jewish literature.

B. The Mishnah

1. Codification of oral traditions and commands given alongside the written Mosaic Law.

2. Committed to writing around AD 200, preserving first-century Jewish thought and legal debate.

C. The Targums

1. Aramaic translations and paraphrases of Hebrew Old Testament scriptures.
2. Developed for synagogue worship as Aramaic became the spoken vernacular in Palestine.

D. The Dead Sea Scrolls (Qumran Community)

1. Discovered in Qumran caves, detailing the life and theology of a separatist Essene sect.
2. Contains biblical commentaries interpreting Old Testament prophecy as fulfilled in their community.
3. Outlines strict community regulations, testing periods, and messianic expectations.

III. Dominant Cultural Values and Social Codes

A. Avoid Shame at All Costs (Honor-Shame Dynamic)

1. Cultural priority placed on societal conformity and maintaining personal/family honor.
2. Social obligation to defend and restore honor when publicly challenged.
3. Gospel conflict stories: Religious leaders' questions designed as public honor challenges to Jesus.
4. Duty of expressing gratitude: Failing to acknowledge benefits brought severe public dishonor.
5. Parable of Midnight Friend (Luke 11): Host gets bread at midnight to avoid the shame of failing hospitality.

B. Collectivism ("No Person is an Island")

1. Inherent priority of group identity (family, clan, city) over individual autonomy.

C. Patron-Client Relationships

1. Patron: Wealthy individual extending economic, legal, or social benefits to lower-status recipients.
2. Client: Recipient obligated to offer public praise, political support, and vocal loyalty.
3. Crucial backdrop for understanding apostolic epistles (e.g., 1 Corinthians).

IV. Socioeconomic Structure of First-Century Greco-Roman World

A. The Wealthy Elite

1. Minute fraction of the population concentrating virtually all land, wealth, and governance.

B. The Poor (Peasant Majority)

1. Approximately 70% of the population living on daily subsistence levels.
2. Context for Jesus' prayer: "Give us today our daily bread."

C. Slaves

1. Economic backbone of Greco-Roman society; not based on race or ethnicity.
2. Varied paths to slavery: war, debt, crop failures, or voluntary self-sale for economic survival.
3. Broad spectrum of conditions ranging from brutal mine labor to respected, high-responsibility positions.

V. Hermeneutical Principles for Reading Biblical Texts

A. Historical and Cultural Distance

1. God revealed Himself at specific historical points using original cultural frameworks.
2. Danger of unreflective reading: modern readers fill textual "gaps" with contemporary cultural assumptions.

B. Two-Step Hermeneutical Process

1. Step 1: Discern what God intended to communicate to the original first-century audience.
2. Step 2: Determine how that timeless revelation speaks to contemporary believers today.

VI. Case Studies in Contextual Interpretation

A. Case Study 1: Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37)

1. Modern Misreading: Sanitizing the Samaritan into a generic charitable helper or benevolent figure.
2. First-Century Context: Historical animosity and contempt between Jews and Samaritans ("half-breeds").
3. Original Impact: Making a Samaritan the hero was shocking and offensive to Jewish listeners (akin to a modern sworn enemy).
4. Core Point: True neighborliness extends love to the very enemies society despises.

B. Case Study 2: Letter to Laodicea (Revelation 3:14–16)

1. Modern Misreading: Equating "hot" with zealous, "cold" with hostile/apathetic, and "lukewarm" with indecisive.
2. Geographical Context of Laodicea:
 - a. Laodicea had no natural spring; piped water via aqueduct arrived tepid, stagnant, and putrid ("lukewarm").
 - b. Hierapolis: Renowned for hot springs with medicinal/healing value (positive metaphor).
 - c. Colossae: Renowned for cold, pure, refreshing drinking water (positive metaphor).
3. Correct Interpretation: Both "hot" (medicinal) and "cold" (refreshing) are positive; "lukewarm" represents useless, putrid complacency deserving rejection.

C. Case Study 3: The Christmas Nativity Narrative (Matthew 2 & Luke 2)

1. Wise Men (Magi): Foreign astrologers visiting a home 1–2 years later (Matthew 2), not present at the manger birth; number unspecified.
2. The "Inn" and "Innkeeper": Greek katalyma refers to a private house's "guest room", not a commercial hotel; no innkeeper mentioned.
3. Birth Setting: Overcrowded guest room led Mary and Joseph to move to the private lower residential section/manger for childbirth.