

New Testament Literature - Christmas and the Canon

New Testament History and Literature, Session 5

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Abstract

In this lecture, Dr. Dave Mathewson explores how historical and cultural context is essential for properly interpreting the New Testament, illustrating this by re-examining the traditional Christmas narrative through first-century housing realities. He then traces the formation of the twenty-seven book New Testament canon, explaining how church consensus, early apostolic awareness, and key historical figures led to its official recognition by the late fourth century. Finally, Mathewson introduces the role of literary genre in biblical interpretation, demonstrating how recognizing the narrative structure of the Gospels and Acts equips readers to understand the theological intent of the biblical authors.

Outline

I. Historical and Cultural Environment of the New Testament

- A. Contextual foundation for interpretation
 - 1. Setting the stage politically, religiously, and culturally
 - 2. Understanding background prevents misinterpretation and uncovers intended meaning
- B. Case Study: Re-examining the Christmas Narrative (Luke 2)
 - 1. Challenge of pre-understandings, tradition, and subconscious biases
 - 2. The "Inn" (Katalyma) and Guest Room
 - a. Lack of mention of an innkeeper in the Greek text
 - b. Translation of katalyma as "guest room" rather than commercial inn
 - c. Cultural lodging in private homes of relatives in Bethlehem
 - 3. The "Manger" (Phatne) and the Stable
 - a. Privacy during childbirth vs. crowded guest room
 - b. Nature of first-century stables as small lean-to structures or rooms attached to homes
 - c. Mangers as carved stone or rock feeding troughs rather than wooden cradles
 - 4. Methodological implications: allowing historical evidence to challenge assumptions

II. Critical Approaches to the New Testament

- A. Defining "Critical" in Biblical Studies

1. Distinction between skepticism/destruction vs. analytical/justified reasoning
 2. Avoiding naive acceptance by evaluating evidence and providing rationale
- B. The Bible as a Textbook and Devotional Integration
1. Academic analysis as a necessary step for historical distance
 2. Integrating academic learning into personal devotional life, worship, and practice

III. The Formation of the New Testament Canon

- A. Justification for a New Covenant Scripture
1. Old Covenant background: promise, fulfillment, and new covenant expectations
 2. Continuity between Old Testament expectations and New Testament fulfillment in Christ
- B. Definition of "Canon"
1. Etymology: Greek kanon meaning "reed" or "measuring rod"
 2. Applied definition: collection of authoritative writings that measure up to the standard
- C. Historical Development vs. Modern Misconceptions
1. Critique of late-conspiracy theories (e.g., Da Vinci Code / Emperor Constantine narratives)
 2. Early canonical consciousness within the New Testament era
 - a. 2 Peter 3:15-16 equating Paul's letters with "other scriptures"
 - b. Revelation 22:18-19 invoking covenantal warnings from Deuteronomy
 - c. 1 Corinthians 14:37-38 Paul claiming apostolic authority as a "command of the Lord"
- D. Key Historical Milestones
1. Marcion (2nd Century): created a restricted canon rejecting the Old Testament and modifying Luke/Paul
 2. Athanasius' 39th Festal Letter (367 AD): earliest extant list containing all 27 New Testament books
 3. Council of Carthage (397 AD): formal ratification of the 27-book New Testament canon
- E. Criteria for Canonical Recognition
1. Conformity (Orthodoxy): alignment with apostolic teaching and the established gospel
 2. Universal Acceptance (Catholicity): widespread recognition and use across churches
 3. Apostolicity: authorship by an apostle or a close associate of an apostle (e.g., Mark, Luke)

IV. Literary Context and Genres in the New Testament

- A. Importance of Genre in Interpretation
1. Definition of genre: recognizable type or kind of literature sharing standard features
 2. Modern analogy: interpreting a Peanuts cartoon through visual codes (panels, speech bubbles, caricatures)
- B. Specific New Testament Genres
1. Narrative (Gospels and Acts)
 - a. Communicating theology through story rather than abstract formulas
 - b. First-century biographical conventions: selective content for theological purpose

- c. Reason for four distinct Gospels: complementary theological portraits of Christ
 - d. Narrative mechanics: analyzing dialogue, repetition, character development, and structural emphasis (e.g., movie analogy)
2. Preview of remaining genres (Epistles, Apocalyptic/Prophecy)