

New Testament History and Literature

Lecture 29: The New Covenant and the Epistle of James

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Abstract

Dr. Dave Mathewson explores the theological continuity between Old Testament prophetic promises and their inauguration in the New Covenant through Jesus Christ. The lecture outlines how all blessings of salvation—including the indwelling Holy Spirit and divine enablement for obedience—operate within an "already but not yet" eschatological framework, anchored historically by the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 AD. Transitioning to the Epistle of James, Dr. Mathewson examines Martin Luther's historical misgivings about the letter, demonstrating instead how James functions as an authoritative letter to Jewish Christians in the dispersion. By drawing heavily upon Old Testament wisdom literature and Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, James addresses practical Christian living through endurance in trials, control of speech, and active compassion for the impoverished.

Outline

I. Introduction and Opening Prayer

- A. Dedication of semester progress and spiritual discernment
- B. Hermeneutical objective: Understanding original reader intent to bridge application to contemporary believers

II. The New Covenant in Old Testament Context and New Testament Fulfillment

- A. Old Testament Covenantal Progression
 - 1. Covenant roots established at Creation (Genesis 1–2)
 - 2. Historical series of covenants thwarted by human sinfulness
 - 3. Prophetic anticipation of an ultimate restoration covenant
- B. Prophetic Foundation of the New Covenant
 - 1. Jeremiah 31: Unmediated, direct personal knowledge and presence of God; complete forgiveness of sins
 - 2. Ezekiel 36–37: Divine gathering from nations, spiritual cleansing, heart of flesh, and indwelling Spirit
- C. Key Innovations and Characteristics of the New Covenant
 - 1. Direct experience of God without human mediation
 - 2. Ultimate and final cleansing/forgiveness of sin

3. Internal spiritual enablement and divine motivation for statutory obedience

D. New Testament Application to Salvation

1. All NT blessings (justification, redemption, Spirit baptism, sealing) inextricably tied to the New Covenant
2. Impossibility of enjoying salvation apart from Christ's inauguration of the New Covenant

E. The "Already But Not Yet" Eschatological Structure

1. Kingdom of God: Present experience of divine rule alongside awaited future fullness
2. New Creation: Already present in Christ (2 Cor 5:17), awaiting ultimate consummation
3. New Covenant: Inaugurated in Hebrews 8; climaxing in Revelation 21:3 (fulfilling Ezekiel 37)
4. The Holy Spirit as the earnest down payment of final redemption

III. Historical Horizon: The Destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple (70 AD)

A. Historical Context and Turning Point

1. Escalation of Roman subjugation following 63 BC conquests
2. Destruction of Jerusalem and temple in 70 AD as a pivotal historical, religious, and literary marker

B. Significance for Dating New Testament Documents

1. Argument from silence: Absence of temple destruction mention in certain epistles
2. Case study of Hebrews: Focus on Tabernacle wilderness model rather than physical Jerusalem Temple

IV. Introduction to the Epistle of James and Its Historical Reception

A. Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation Watershed

1. Luther's prioritization of Pauline justification by grace through faith alone (Romans, Galatians)
2. Conflict with James 2:24 ("justified by works and not by faith alone")
3. Luther's questioning of James's canonical value ("epistle of straw")

B. The Canonical Legacy and Reading Order

1. Contemporary tendency to view James through a Pauline filter
2. Historical canonical variations: Early 4th/5th-century manuscripts placing Catholic Epistles before Paul

V. Authorship, Audience, and Socioeconomic Context of James

A. Authorship Attribution

1. Identification of James as the brother of Jesus and leader of the Jerusalem church (Acts 12, 15)
2. Historical and church tradition support for apostolic authority

B. Destination and Audience

1. Address: "To the twelve tribes in the dispersion" (James 1:1)
2. Interpretational options: Metaphorical reference to the Church vs. literal Jewish Christians exiled from Jerusalem

C. Socioeconomic Realities

1. Widespread severe poverty and exploitation by wealthy landowners
2. Primary ethical directive: Care for vulnerable populations (orphans and widows in distress)

D. Epistolary Genre

1. Traditional first-century letter openings and formal greetings
2. Structural alignment with authoritative "Letters to the Dispersion" sent from Jerusalem leadership

VI. Core Themes and Literary Character of James

A. Resemblance to Jewish Wisdom and Proverbial Literature

1. Similarities to Old Testament Proverbs in form, ethical maxims, and thematic coverage
2. Thematic triad introduced in Chapter 1 and recycled throughout the letter:
 - a. Testing and endurance in the midst of trials (James 1:2–4, 12; 5:7–11)
 - b. Poverty, wealth, and practical generosity (James 1:9–11, 27; 2:1–13; 5:1–6)
 - c. Wisdom and control of speech/prayer (James 1:5–8, 19–20, 26; 3:1–12; 4:11–12)

VII. The Use of Jesus' Oral Tradition in James

A. Literary Intertextuality with the Jesus Tradition

1. Absence of written Gospel dependency; reliance on circulating oral tradition
2. Concentrated parallels with Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7)

B. Specific Structural and Thematic Parallels

1. Blessing on endurance under trial/persecution (James 1:12 // Matthew 5:10–12)
2. Condemnation of hoarding earthly riches and decay of treasures (James 5:1–3 // Matthew 6:19–20)
3. Patience in suffering following the example of the prophets (James 5:10 // Matthew 5:11–12)

VIII. Conclusion and Preview: Reconciling James and Paul

A. The Verbal and Formal Tension

1. Paul (Galatians 2:16): Justified by faith in Christ, not by works of the law
2. James (James 2:24): Justified by works, and not by faith alone

B. Methodological Hermeneutics

1. Rejecting forced harmonization that collapses James into Paul
2. Analyzing unique historical contexts and distinct theological usages of "faith", "works", and "justification"