

Dr. David Mathewson, New Testament Literature,

Session 4: Judaism and Social Values

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Welcome back, everyone. Today we're going deep, really deep, into some fascinating material from a New Testament literature lecture by Dr. Dave Mathewson. Ooh, Dr. Mathewson.

Yeah. He's always got something interesting to say. You know it.

This one's all about getting a handle on the cultural backdrop of first-century Rome and how it all fits together with Judaism back then. I'm in. I think you're going to love this one.

It really challenges some assumptions. Like, did you know the Christmas story you think you know might be very different from what the original text actually says? Hmm, that's intriguing. I always love when we dig into those classic stories.

And get this, what does lukewarm water have to do with being a Christian? Lukewarm water. Okay, now you've really piqued my curiosity. Yeah, stick with us.

This lecture has some real surprises. So first things first, let's talk about the sources. I think many of us, when we think of first-century Jewish writings, we immediately jump to the New Testament.

Right, that's kind of the go-to, isn't it? It is. But Dr. Mathewson, he introduces us to this whole world of other texts that can really shed light on this period. So beyond the Bible itself, what kind of stuff are we talking about? Exactly.

We're going beyond the Bible. And these aren't just, you know, obscure footnotes either. They give us valuable insights into Jewish beliefs and practices, both before and during the time the New Testament was actually written.

So it helps us see the New Testament not in isolation, but as part of this bigger conversation that was happening within Judaism. Exactly. It's all about context.

Right. So what are some of these other texts that Dr. Mathewson highlights? Well, one example is the Mishnah. Okay, the Mishnah.

Remind me, what's the Mishnah again? Sure, sure. So it wasn't actually written down until around 200 AD. Okay.

But it's this compilation of oral traditions that were passed down for generations. So even though it was written later, it gives us this glimpse into Jewish thought and practice from an earlier period. Okay, so it's kind of like a window into how people were already thinking back then, even if the actual writing came later.

Precisely. And it's packed with insights into everyday life and religious observance. Can you give us an example? Like, what kind of specific stuff does it talk about? Sure.

For instance, the Mishnah has these really detailed discussions about purity laws. You know, what foods were considered clean or unclean, rituals for purification, all that kind of thing. Those laws were a huge part of life for Jewish people in the first century, weren't they? Absolutely.

They permeated every aspect of daily life. So when we read about Jesus interacting with Pharisees who were concerned about ritual purity... Right, right. ...we can better understand where they were coming from.

Exactly. It gives us a much deeper appreciation for the context of those interactions. Yeah, I'm starting to see how this all fits together.

So what other texts are we looking at? Another interesting one is the Targums. The Targums, okay. And these are Aramaic paraphrases of the Hebrew scriptures that were used in synagogues.

Paraphrases, so like translations? Yeah, kind of. You see, Hebrew was becoming less common among everyday people. So they needed something they could understand.

Exactly. So Aramaic paraphrases were needed so people could understand the scriptures during worship. That makes total sense.

It's like how we might use modern translations of the Bible today. Exactly. It's a reminder that language and culture are always in flux.

What was relevant in one time might not be as easily accessible in another. Absolutely. Now, Dr. Matthewson also mentions the Dead Sea Scrolls.

And, of course, we've touched on those in a previous Deep Dive. Oh, yeah, the Dead Sea Scrolls. They're always a fascinating topic.

Always. But what new insights does he offer this time around? Well, he goes beyond just, you know, describing what the scrolls are and really digs into what they reveal about the community that produced them, the Qumran community. The Qumran community, right.

The group that separated themselves from mainstream Judaism. And the scrolls give us this glimpse into their beliefs and practices, right? Exactly. For example, we see evidence of their very strict rules and their unique interpretations of scripture.

Some of their practices, like their emphasis on ritual purity and their belief in a coming apocalyptic battle, were quite different from other Jewish groups at the time. So it's like getting this sneak peek into a whole different way of life, a different expression of Judaism. Absolutely.

And it really underscores that Judaism in the first century wasn't monolithic. There was a lot of diversity of thought and practice. That's so interesting.

So these texts are really helping us understand the broader context of Judaism in the first century. But what about the social and cultural climate of that time? How did that influence the world of the New Testament? Well, you know, Dr. Mathewson argues that three core values really shaped how people interacted back then. And these values were quite different from what many of us might consider important today.

Okay, I'm all ears. What were these core values? Lay it on me. So first and foremost was the importance of avoiding shame.

Avoiding shame. Uh-huh. In first century Roman culture, conformity to social norms was extremely important.

And maintaining your honor was absolutely paramount. So questioning someone's honor was a really, really big deal. Oh, huge.

It was seen as a direct attack on their character and standing in the community. You know, that makes me think about the Gospels and how often we see Jesus directly challenging the authority and teachings of the Pharisees and Sadducees. That's a great connection.

Yeah. Dr. Mathewson suggests that those confrontations were seen, at least in part, as attacks on the honor of these religious leaders. They were being publicly shamed, which would have been a huge deal in that culture.

Exactly. Okay, so avoiding shame. That's one core value.

The second one is that your group identity mattered way more than your individual self. So not like today, where we're all about you, do you, and all that. Not at all.

Your family, your community, your religious group. These were the defining factors in your life. It's hard to even imagine that, isn't it? It really is.

Individualism, as we understand it today, just wasn't the concept back then. So we've got avoiding shame and prioritizing group identity. What's the third core value that Dr. Mathewson brings up? The third one is this complex system of patrons and clients.

It was a system of mutual obligation and gratitude that went way beyond just financial transactions. Okay, so it wasn't just about money. Right.

A wealthy patron might provide favors, protection, and financial support to a client. Okay. In return, the client was expected to show unwavering loyalty, support, and public acknowledgment of the patron's generosity.

So it was like a whole social system with its own set of rules and expectations. Exactly. And we'll see how this dynamic plays out in really interesting ways as we get deeper into the New Testament, particularly in the Book of Corinthians.

Okay, I'm definitely intrigued. But before we move on, can we just take a quick look at the overall social structure of the Roman Empire? Sure. Who had the power? Who were the main players? And how did all this impact the lives of everyday people? Just to set the stage a bit more.

Absolutely. So at the very top, you have the Roman Emperor and the wealthy elite, a tiny, tiny fraction of the population, but they controlled most of the wealth and power. Then you had a middle class of merchants, traders, and skilled artisans- not wealthy, but not desperately poor either.

And below them. The vast majority of people, something like 70% of the population, were the poor, mostly peasant farmers trying to scrape by. And they lived with this constant threat of salmon disease exploitation.

So when Jesus talks about daily bread in the Lord's Prayer, it would have had this very real and immediate meaning for these folks. Absolutely. They were literally worried about having enough to eat each day.

Right. And of course, we can't forget about the slaves. Right.

Slavery was a huge part of Roman society. It was. Dr. Matheson points out that it wasn't always what we picture today.

You know, it's important to remember that Roman slavery wasn't based solely on race, as it tragically became in later centuries. People became slaves for a variety of reasons: debt, capture and war, or even just being born into slavery. And the conditions of slavery varied widely.

Some slaves were treated horrifically, working in mines or on large agricultural estates. Others, especially those who worked in households, might have had more tolerable conditions, even the possibility of earning their freedom eventually. It's a reminder to always look deeper and challenge our assumptions, isn't it? Absolutely.

Now, with this understanding of social values and the structure of Roman society, we're ready to dive into some specific examples of how all of this shapes our understanding of the New Testament. And I have a feeling it's going to be eye-opening. Oh, definitely.

Get ready for some surprises. But before we get to those examples, Dr. Matheson throws us a bit of a curveball. He wants us to revisit the Christmas story, the one we all think we know so well.

The Christmas story. OK, I'm intrigued. What's the twist? He wants to challenge some of the assumptions we've brought to it.

You know, we grew up with the sort of picture-perfect image in our minds. Yeah. But Dr. Matheson is going to make us rethink what we think we know about that night in Bethlehem.

OK, I'm ready. Let's separate fact from tradition and see the Christmas story with fresh eyes. You got it.

All right, let's do it. Let's talk about Christmas. OK, so the Christmas story.

I feel like we grow up with this, like, picture-perfect image of that night in Bethlehem, you know, but I'm sensing that it might not be entirely accurate. You're right. You know, we often fill in the gaps with our own kind of cultural assumptions and traditions.

Dr. Matheson starts by pointing out how that classic image we have- Mary and Joseph, baby Jesus, shepherds, wise men all gathered around the manger isn't actually supported by the biblical text. Wait, really? So that image, like the one we see on Christmas cards and in nativity scenes, that's not how it went down. Not exactly.

For instance, the wise men, they weren't there at the manger when Jesus was born. Matthew's gospel tells us they arrived much later, maybe even a year or two after Jesus's birth. And they visited him at a house, not a stable.

No wise men at the manger. Wow. You know, I've always wondered, like, how many wise men were there anyway? Yeah, that's a good question.

The Bible doesn't actually specify a number. The tradition of three wise men comes from the three gifts they brought: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. The symbolism of those gifts is definitely worth exploring.

But we'll save that for a future deep dive into Matthew. Oh, I like it. A teaser for a future episode.

OK, so no wise men at the birth. What about the inn? Was there really no room at the inn? Ah, that's another detail that often gets misconstrued. The Greek word translated as inn actually refers to a guest room, likely in a relative's house.

There's no mention of a separate inn building or an innkeeper turning them away. So maybe the situation wasn't so much about, you know, being turned away, but more about overcrowding in the family's guest room. Exactly.

It helps us imagine the scene more realistically, right? They were a young couple traveling to a new place, likely staying with family and facing the uncertainties of childbirth in a crowded situation. Hmm. That makes a lot of sense.

It's a much more human and relatable picture, for sure. So if they weren't turned away at an inn, why was Jesus born in a manger? You know, that's still a bit of a mystery, but there are some possibilities. Maybe the guest room was simply too crowded, or maybe the manger provided a quieter, more secluded space for Mary to give birth.

It's interesting to consider, like, those practical considerations might have actually played a role. Yeah, it really highlights how the details we fill in, you know, they often say more about our own cultural baggage than what the text actually tells us. 100%.

And this whole emphasis on understanding the original context, it ties in perfectly with another example. Dr. Mathewson brings up a passage from the Book of Revelation. It's the message to the church in Laodicea, where they're called lukewarm, and it's, well, it's definitely not a compliment.

Right, right. I've heard that passage before. Usually, lukewarm Christians are seen as those who aren't fully committed to their faith, kind of stuck in the middle.

Right. That's the common interpretation. Hot equals good Christian, cold equals nonbeliever, and lukewarm, you know, falls somewhere in between, kind of wishy-washy.

But Dr. Mathewson suggests that this understanding completely misses the cultural context. Okay, so what's the missing cultural context? Tell me more. Well, it all comes down to Laodicea's water supply.

See, unlike nearby cities with fresh springs or rivers, Laodicea had to pipe its water in from elsewhere. And by the time it reached the city, the water was often, well, it was lukewarm and stagnant. So it wasn't about spiritual temperature at all, but about actual water.

Exactly. And to make matters worse, Laodicea was situated near these two other cities known for their water. You had Hierapolis, which had these healing hot springs.

Oh, yeah. And Colossae, known for its refreshing cold water. So hot and cold water- those were both good things in that context, which means lukewarm wasn't just a bit wishy-washy.

It was actually the worst possible state for the water to be in. Yes, you got it. The Laodicean Christians, they weren't just mildly indifferent.

They were useless and stagnant in the eyes of Christ, just like their city's water. Not a good look. I mean, that's a powerful image.

It completely changes my understanding of that passage. It really underscores how important it is to consider the historical and cultural background when reading the Bible. It really is.

We can't just impose our own modern interpretations on these ancient texts. Absolutely. Okay, I'm completely with you on that.

These examples are so insightful. I do have one more question about the Christmas story, though. Dr. Matthewson hinted that Mary might not have given birth immediately after arriving in Bethlehem.

Right. Why is that significant? I think it's more about challenging those ingrained assumptions we talked about earlier. You know, we tend to picture Mary riding into Bethlehem on a donkey, nine months pregnant and giving birth that very night.

But the Bible never actually says that. Huh. So they could have been in Bethlehem for days, weeks even, before Jesus was born.

Precisely. And this isn't about any specific, like, theological point. It's more about highlighting the human element of the story.

They were a young couple traveling to a new place and facing, you know, the uncertainties of childbirth. It makes their experience all the more relatable. It reminds us that these weren't just, like, characters in a story.

They were real people living real lives. Exactly. And I think that brings us back to the importance of approaching the Bible, you know, with humility, curiosity, and a willingness to question our assumptions.

Yeah. Yeah. It's amazing how those seemingly small details can completely shift our perspective on these familiar stories.

Yeah. It's like we've been looking at this, you know, tapestry, but only now are we starting to see all the intricate threads that hold it all together. Exactly.

And it makes the whole picture so much richer and more meaningful. So as we wrap up this deep dive, what's the one key takeaway, you know, that you hope our listener walks away with? I think the biggest takeaway is this. Don't be afraid to, you know, question your assumptions.

The Bible is a complex and multifaceted text, and it's full of surprises when we take the time to understand its historical and cultural background. So it's about going beyond the surface level, you know, digging deeper and engaging with the text in a more critical and thoughtful way. Precisely.

And as we've seen today, that deeper engagement can lead to some truly fascinating discoveries, discoveries that can completely change how we understand these, you know, familiar stories. Absolutely. So to kind of wrap things up, Dr. Mathewson leaves us with a thought-provoking question.

Given what we've learned about first century social values, the importance of honor, group identity, and the patron-client system, how might that influence our reading of other New Testament passages? It's a challenge to look at those familiar stories with fresh eyes. And, you know, consider how those cultural values might have shaped the way early Christians, you know, understood and lived out their faith. It's like he's giving us a key to unlock even more layers of meaning in the Bible.

That's the beauty of studying the New Testament. You know, there's always more to discover, more layers to uncover, more insights to gain. Well said.

This has been an incredible exploration, and I feel like we've just scratched the surface. Oh, for sure. But it's been my pleasure to dive in with you.

And remember, the journey doesn't end here. Keep diving deep, keep questioning, keep discovering the richness of the New Testament. Yes.

And to our listeners, we'd love to hear from you. What stood out to you in this deep dive? What assumptions did you find yourself questioning? Share your thoughts and join us next time for another fascinating exploration. Until then, happy diving.