



# TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Class Notes

## 5 - The New Testament: History within Second Temple Judaism

David Anguish

Recommended survey: Robert L. Cate, *A History of Bible Lands in the Interbiblical Period*. Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1989. (Used copies available from Amazon; abebooks.com.)

### History: Currently Out of Favor

- **1970:** "What scares me about this generation is the extent to which ignorance is their armour. If know-nothingness goes on much longer, somebody will yet emerge from a commune having discovered . . . the wheel." - Mordecai Richler<sup>1</sup>
- **2019:** "The past is presumed dead and gone, and the present is leapfrogged altogether for an imagined improvement of the future. But while the past is certainly past, it is far from dead. It is hugely powerful in the present, even when the present is reacting vehemently to the past. The past is always present in a person's awareness of self, in their conscious and unconscious memory, in the character they have built through their choices, in their patterns of speaking, and of course in additional ways such as guilt carried over from misdeeds in the past. As William Faulkner wrote in *Requiem of a Nun*, 'The past is never dead. It's not even past.'" - Os Guinness<sup>2</sup>

### "This Has Not Been Done in a Corner"

- I. The New Testament Events Happened in History.
  - A. The early Christians consistently said that the events they reported and which gave rise to their faith were real events that occurred in history and therefore could be verified (and falsified!).<sup>3</sup>
    1. 1 John 1.1-3 — *That which* was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— <sup>2</sup> the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us— <sup>3</sup> *that which* we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.
    2. Acts 26.26 — For the king [Herod Agrippa II-AD 49-92] knows about these things, and to him I speak boldly. For I am persuaded that *none of these things has escaped his notice, for this has not been done in a corner* (cf. Luke 1.1-4).

- B. "Most of the writers of the NT grew up in a world of 'Second Temple Judaism,' the time between the temple's reconstruction (516 B.C.) and its final destruction (A.D. 70). This period introduced changes into the political structure, culture, and religion of the Old Testament world." - J. Julius Scott<sup>4</sup>
- C. "It is not too much to say that every serious attempt to understand the Scriptures must be historically oriented. Only by being acquainted with the political, social, and religious background of the biblical era can the student understand *the allusions to contemporary culture* that *the biblical writers assume* will be obvious to their readers." - Bruce Metzger; emphasis mine<sup>5</sup>

## II. Examples of "Allusions to Contemporary Culture."

- A. "Let it be clear at the outset that of all the 'helps' that assist the reader to understand the New Testament, the Old Testament is by far the most important. In that earlier collection of books, one finds the religious presuppositions and historical background without which the thinking and experiences of the New Testament writers cannot be understood." - Bruce Metzger<sup>6</sup>
  - 1. While true, Old Testament history concludes ca. 430 BC; Herod the Great died in 4 BC.
  - 2. History did not stop in the interim.
- B. Selected examples from Acts.<sup>7</sup>
  - 1. The Old Testament in the Jerusalem beginnings.
    - a) The apostles wanted to know if Jesus was going to "restore the kingdom to Israel" (1.6), i.e., was he going to complete the story / expectations from the Old Testament?
    - b) In Acts 2 and 3, Peter explicitly connected Jesus and the church to the Old Testament (2.14-36; 3.12-26).
    - c) Beginning with Abraham, Stephen reviewed Israel's history and expectations (7.1-53).
  - 2. But there are multiple "allusions to contemporary culture" (Metzger) in Acts that we can fully understand only if we are aware of the more recent history of the Jews (ca. 430-4 BC).
    - a) Acts 2.9-11 — Why were there Jews at Pentecost from across the ancient world?
    - b) Why did they have synagogues and why were they scattered throughout the world?<sup>8</sup>
      - (1) Luke-Acts includes 34 references to synagogues (15 in Luke: 4.15-16, 20, 28, 33, 38; 44; 6.6; 7.5 [built by a *Roman centurion*!]; 8.41; 11.43; 12.11; 13.10; 20.46; 21.12).
      - (2) Acts mentions synagogues 19 times, in 10 places: Jerusalem (6.9; 24.12); Damascus (9.2, 20); Salamis, Cyprus (13.5); Pisidian Antioch (13.14, 43); Iconium (14.1); Thessalonica (17.1); Berea (17.10); Athens (17.17); Corinth (18.4, 26); and Ephesus (18.19; 19.8).
      - (3) We also see a general reference to synagogues across the Gentile world (15.21) and references to multiple synagogues where Paul had persecuted Christians, which we know included Israel and Syria (Damascus) (22.19; 26.11).
    - c) The account of the trials of Peter, John, and then all the apostles following the healing of the lame man (Acts 3) includes allusions to other things without precedent in the Old Testament that cannot be understood without (and are understood better when we have) an awareness of the events in the Second Temple historical period.
      - (1) Captain of the temple (4.1; 5.24).
      - (2) Sadducees (4.1; 5.17) and a Pharisee (5.34).
        - a) Notice the Sadducees' concern that the apostles "were proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead" (4.2);<sup>9</sup> compare that with Paul later using the issue of resurrection to drive a wedge between the Sadducees and Pharisees (23.6-9).

- (3) Multiple references to "the council," the Sanhedrin (συνέδριον; *sunedrion*) and the authority it had to try the apostles and administer punishment to them (4.15; 5.2, 27, 34, 41; cf. 6.12, 15; 22.30; 23.1, 6, 15, 20, 28; 24.20).
  - (4) The rulers Herod [Antipas] and Pontius Pilate are mentioned (4.27; cf. 3.13; 13.28).
  - (5) Barnabas is identified as "a Levite, a native of Cyprus" (4.36) (not Palestine).
  - (6) Gamaliel mentions two popular uprisings led, respectively, by "Theudas" and "Judas the Galilean . . . in the days of the census" (5.36, 37). Who were they? What happened? What census?<sup>10</sup>
  - (7) The seven special servants were chosen because of a complaint lodged by the "Hellenists" (6.1). Who were they? How were they different from "the Hebrews"?
  - (8) Stephen was opposed by members of "the synagogue of the Freedmen" along with "Cyrenians and . . . Alexandrians" and some from "Cilicia and Asia" (6.9). Obviously, they were Jews with an established synagogue (or more than one?) in Jerusalem. How are we to explain that?
- C. The above are examples of the many things that were influenced and/or developed during the Second Temple/intertestamental period.<sup>11</sup>
1. The better we know the history of that period, the more capable we will be of understanding the New Testament.
  2. This involves more than knowing a facts about synagogues, Jewish sects, and so on; it entails understanding of the nuances and dynamic of the first century setting.
  3. Bearing in mind that they overlap—and that political actions and cultural aims influenced religious ideas and practices—we can group the areas of impact into three categories.

### Areas Impacted by the Second Temple Events

#### III. Political Structure.

- A. The various ruling nations sought control of Palestine because of its location at the eastern end of the Mediterranean, its roads that formed the trade routes from Egypt to the other major power centers in the east and west, and its resources (temple treasures, taxes, etc.).
- B. The degree of control varied: from more lenient (Persians, Ptolemies) to domineering (Seleucids, Romans). But except for the brief Maccabean-Hasmonean period (164-63 BC), the Jews were not self-governing.
- C. World politics were always a factor on conditions in Palestine.
  1. The Greeks displaced the Persians and then the descendants of the Greek empire (Ptolemies, Seleucids) pushed back and forth through Palestine.
  2. From the divided Greek period onward (beginning 323 BC), the Roman presence loomed in the background as they moved closer to gaining control of the region; by the late 3rd century BC decisions were made based on what Rome allowed, dictated, or might do.

#### IV. Culture.

- A. The Greeks were committed to spreading what they believed was their superior culture, including their language, but also their views of humanity and religion.
- B. Many of the Jews were open to the Greek influence and ways, but others saw Hellenism as a corruption of their true religion.

1. The Seleucids and later the Romans often misunderstood the Jews, misread the willingness of the populace to be Hellenized, or miscalculated the nature of their religion and extent of their fervor.
- C. Within Palestine, the willingness to compromise by some and the determination to honor the law and resist external influences by others led to divisions and acrimony that had an impact on every area of Jewish culture and made the people more difficult to govern.
- V. Religion: affected by politics, culture, and the debate over compromise.
  - A. *Institutions and practices*: synagogues, the relation between temple (ritual) and law (orthodoxy and ethics), the language of their Scriptures (the Septuagint), the presence of Gentiles (god-fearers) in synagogue services, festivals (Dedication/Hanukkah), and so on.
  - B. *Ideas and expectations*: the writings of the period (e.g., Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha, Dead Sea Scrolls) developed *themes* related to orthodoxy, how to live, hope for the future,<sup>12</sup> response to Hellenism and foreign control (antagonism toward tax farmers began in the Ptolemaic period), secularization of the priesthood (e.g., the Teacher of Righteousness in the Dead Sea Scrolls), etc..
    1. For example, the merger of the high priesthood with secular rule—and appointment of men to the office who were not descended from Zadok—led some to push back. Eventually, the differences hardened into the religio-political parties we see in the New Testament era.
  - C. *Parties and attitudes*.
    1. By the first century AD, there were Sadducees and Herodians who were open to Hellenism, Pharisees who were keepers of the laws (and their oral interpretations that began as fences to help people stay far from violating it), and Zealots (and from the AD 50s onward their sub-group the sicarii, political assassins) who had different religious beliefs, views toward their political rulers, and interest in political power and influence.
    2. All of these attitudes had roots in and were responses to events in the previous centuries (particularly the first century BC); together they produced a seething climate of turmoil and unrest that created problems for both the Romans on the one hand and Jesus and his followers on the other.<sup>13</sup>

January 15, 2020  
www.davidanguish.com

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> From Richler's review of Richard Neville's *Play Power* in the *Guardian Weekly* (Feb. 28, 1970), in John R. W. Stott, *Your Mind Matters* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1972), 8.

<sup>2</sup> Os Guinness, *Carpe Diem Redeemed: Seizing the Day, Discerning the Times* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019), 89-90.

<sup>3</sup> By "falsified," I am referring to the fact that, once a claim that something really happened in history is made, it is subject to scrutiny and runs the risk of being exposed as false and discredited. As Charles C. Anderson wrote, "It cannot be stated too strongly that Christianity is an historical religion, and that it is so intimately tied to history that if the historical credibility of its sources were to be proven false, it would at once collapse as a possible claimant for our loyalty" (*The Historical Jesus: A Continuing Quest* [Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972], 55).

<sup>4</sup> J. Julius Scott, Jr., "The Time Between the Testaments," *ESV Study Bible*, ed. Lane T. Dennis (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 1783.

<sup>5</sup> Bruce M. Metzger, *The New Testament: Its Background, Growth, and Content*, 3rd ed., Revised & Enlarged (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003), 13.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>7</sup> I could also illustrate this from the Gospels, but chose Acts because several examples are found relatively close to one another in one section of the book.

<sup>8</sup> The answer is found in the reality of the Diaspora, the origin and importance of which Robert Cate explained: “From the time of the Babylonian captivity (586-539 BC), Jewish refugees began to settle all over the ancient world. While maintaining their racial and religious identity, they also assimilated much of the new cultures where they lived. This group of scattered Jewish settlements permeated the entire world [from Mesopotamia and around the Mediterranean]. They became known as the Diaspora. . . . They were concerned with what happened in and to the Holy City [Jerusalem]” (Robert L. Cate, *A History of Bible Lands in the Interbiblical Period* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1989), 15-16.

Scholars of previous generations typically held the view that the Hellenistic Judaism outside Palestine was mixed with Greek influences while Palestinian Judaism was considered uncontaminated and therefore “normative.” Recent studies have discredited that understanding, taking note of the fact that “strong Hellenizing influences [that] were at work in Palestine, and Diaspora communities continued to regard themselves as Jewish and can in no way be thought of as somehow less genuine” (P. R. Trebilco and Craig Evans, “Diaspora Judaism,” *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, ed. Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000], 282).

See the earlier comments cited from Craig Blomberg about the use of the Greek language in Palestine, cited in part 2, of this series (“Origins, Persian, and Greek [Part 1]” p. 3). The Greek influences in Palestine that began with Alexander the Great, became more pronounced in the second and first centuries BC and continued into the first century AD.

<sup>9</sup> The phrasing in Acts 4.2 puts emphasis on the fact that the Sadducees were especially annoyed that the apostles were proclaiming a belief in the possibility of a resurrection, not that Jesus had been raised. The phrasing thus points to the ongoing disagreement between Sadducees and Pharisees about the *possibility* of resurrection.

<sup>10</sup> In one sense, the failed revolutionary movements referred to in Acts 5.36-37 were not part of the “intertestamental” period, having occurred after the birth of Jesus. Josephus (*Antiquities* 18.1.6 [§ 23]) reported that Judas led a tax revolt in AD 6 (thus the reference to the “census” in Acts). The Theudas mentioned by Gamaliel is unknown. A man by that name did lead a movement at a later date (AD 44-46; see Josephus, *Antiquities* 20.5.1 [§ 97]), but that was after the time of Gamaliel’s speech in Acts 5. For a short summary of the events, see the note in the *ESV Study Bible*, 2091.

<sup>11</sup> Our survey ends with the destruction of the temple in AD 70. Most conservative scholars date the end of the New Testament period to the mid-90s, and in fact many things were in play during those years that had an impact on the church’s history through the end of the first century (and into the second). Cate helpfully extended his treatment through the time of the second and final Jewish revolt in AD 135. See his last chapter, “The End of the Hebrew State,” pp. 152-161.

<sup>12</sup> Cate points out that, until the time of the Maccabees, there was apparently no widespread belief in resurrection among the Jews. He notes further that, when it developed, it was a grassroots movement with a different outlook toward life that made people more willing to be die for their beliefs than compromise (Cate, 65, 82).

<sup>13</sup> Thus the need to be rid of Jesus because of [a] his threat to political influence (cf. Mark 11.18; John 11.48-50), [b] his failure to advocate a rebellion against the Romans, and [c] his unwillingness to accept humanly devised traditions that, however well intentioned in their formulation, had hardened into a law beyond God’s law (cf. Mark 7.1-13). Another result was the later struggle in the church between Christian Jews who insisted on Jewish orthodoxy from all converts (cf. Acts 15.1-6; etc.), a position that is traceable at least in part to attitudes that had developed and hardened in response to political and cultural decisions in the Second Temple era.