Setting the Stage for the New Testament

Open your Bible to Galatians chapter 4. Galatians 4 occurs right after a passage about the history of redemption in chapter 3. Paul says in verse 4 of chapter 4, “When the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts. The Spirit cries out, ‘Abba! Father!’ So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and since you are a son, God has made you an heir.” In the fullness of time—at just the right moment historically, and also in terms of the life of the covenant people of Israel—God sent His Son, born of a woman, born under the law.

We learn a lot from this passage about the world of the New Testament. One thing we see immediately is the sweeping influence of Greek culture. This letter is written in Greek. It is not written in Aramaic. Paul uses not only the Greek language, but also Greek conventions of letter writing. Paul uses the conventions of Greek rhetoric in the way that he structures his letters. Roman culture is another influence. We see imagery in the letter to the Galatians that picks up what is going on in Roman culture about slavery in particular. I want to point out that each sect or school of the Jews—the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Essenes, and various groups that formed later into a military coalition called the Zealots—had different views about the land of Palestine in relation to Roman rule. All the different sects in Judaism had different ways in which they viewed what was going on in Palestine in relation to Rome. They each had different views about the leadership of the temple since the Hasmonean period, which we will talk about a little later. We also read that Jesus was born under the law. Each sect of Judaism had different views about the practice of Torah and how that practice might influence the arrival of “the Kingdom or rule of God” to set things right in the world and to return the land of Palestine to Jewish control. In this way, Galatians 4 gives us a little glimpse of the setting of the New Testament.

In this lesson, we will talk about those influences. We will outline the primary pillars and structures in the world in which the documents of the New Testament were produced. The New Testament is not like a Delphic oracle, a revelation that just dropped out of heaven. Rather, the New Testament arose as a collection of writings in the context of specific historical and social settings. Each particular narrative or letter was shaped by social conventions, conventions of literary genre, a range of vocabulary, and different inter-texts that are quoted or alluded to by the writers of the New Testament. These inter-texts are primarily from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, but of course, not the Old Testament alone. The New Testament also displays influence by the Greek poets. We can, perhaps, see the influence of Homer in the way that Luke depicts the sea voyages in Acts. So the pillars that framed the world of the New Testament shaped the way that the New Testament documents were produced. We will talk about Alexander the Great and the sweeping influence of Hellenistic culture. We will talk about the very important event of the Hasmonean revolt in the middle of the second century before Christ and the major impact that had on Jewish identity. We will talk about the rise of Rome and the house of Herod, and we will talk a little bit about the leadership structure of Roman occupation in Palestine. We will also discuss the influence of a Jewish apocalyptic worldview, the influence of Messianic expectation in the fullness of time. All of these things influenced the writings of the New Testament.

The Influence of Hellenism

Alexander the Great was the son of Philip of Macedonia. He was a student of Aristotle. At the time, Greek culture consisted of a number of different city-states. Under Alexander’s father Philip, and later under Alexander’s leadership in particular, these city-states were brought together. As a result, a massive army was formed. The army was formed first and foremost to address the Persian threat, but under Alexander’s military and managerial genius, his army swept through the Mediterranean basin,
across Syria-Palestine, into Mesopotamia and Asia as far as India. Alexander’s cultural revolution began in 332 BC, for as his conquests spread so did the influence of Hellenism, Greek language, and art and education. The rise of Hellenism had a dramatic influence on the Mediterranean basin, the world of the New Testament.

For one thing, the language in which the New Testament was written is *koine* Greek. *Koine* is a Greek word that means “common.” At first, these different city-states each had their own dialect, and so there were dialects of Attic and Doric and Ionic, the dialects of classical Greek. But under Alexander these city-states formed one army. For them to work together as an army, these dialects began to collide and merge as a common language. Moreover, the people groups they conquered throughout the Mediterranean basin and Asia began to learn and speak Greek as a second language. This was necessary for them to do business together. The language of commerce, the *lingua franca*, was *koine* Greek. The height of the influence of *koine* Greek was from the first century BC through the first century AD.

In addition to language, we see other influences from Hellenistic culture. Through his managerial genius, Alexander believed that local religions and local governments should be allowed to rule themselves as much as possible. He felt this would help to prevent revolt in his empire, because people could continue to cultivate their own customs and traditions. As much as possible, they made decisions for themselves. However, Alexander had a vision to place institutions that produced Greek culture within these different regions, and so Greek schools and trade guilds were established. We also see the growth of Greek games and the influence of Greek theater, architecture, and art. These elements were not happenstance but part of a very intentional program of “Hellenization.” By teaching Greek rhetoric and Greek stories, like those written by Homer, in schools, Greek culture spread across the regions and generations.

Local traditions began to be integrated with the influence of these elements of Greek culture. In the major cities throughout Asia Minor and Syria-Palestine, theaters were built. Schools were built, and they began to influence the way that children were trained. The Greek games began to influence the way that local festivals were celebrated. Yes, the people still had their local regional god like Cybele, but they began to integrate Greek gods into the expression of their local rituals. For the Mediterranean people of the first century, these festivals, rituals, and games formed one integrated public identity; they were not compartments of life. The ancient people did not share our post-Enlightenment notion of the separation of different aspects of culture. We tend to think of politics as being distinct from religious expression and the economy as distinct from both. They did not see things that way. The world of the New Testament is a world filled with gods, and these gods were directly involved with political leadership, the way you eat your meals, the way you harvest your crops, and the way you understand your own medical health. There was a complete integration of religious values, political values, familial values, and even the way in which you take care of your body, for example, in the Greek games. It is important to understand this mindset if you want to understand the New Testament.

**The Makings of the Maccabean Revolt**

Alexander the Great died in 323 BC, and this led to a great division among his generals. The rule of the Ptolemies and the Seleucids influenced the world of the New Testament. In 300 BC, one of Alexander’s generals founded a very important city in Syria—the city of Antioch. The city of Antioch would, of course, be very important for the advance of Christian mission, but first Antioch would serve as the place where Rome would assert its power and influence over the entire region.

Not all of the descendants of the exiled Jews had returned to Palestine. In fact, major communities remained in Mesopotamia and in places like Egypt, where refugees had fled. The community in Egypt
had a particularly strong influence in the city of Alexandria. There, the second Ptolemaic ruler, Ptolemy Philadelphus, wanted to understand the law codes of the different ethnic groups in the city of Alexandria. To understand the law of the Jews, he commissioned the translation of the five books of Moses into Greek. He did this not only to understand Jewish customs, but also to curry political favor so they would be easier to manage. The result was that Diaspora Jews could use the Septuagint, as it would be called, in their synagogue worship, for reading and for the education of their children. The translation of the Old Testament into Greek began in 250 BC, and around 150 BC, the entirety of the Old Testament was translated into Greek.

The Seleucid ruler, Antiochus the Great, defeated the Ptolemies in 198 BC, which brought Palestine under Seleucid control. This is important because you have probably heard or read about his successor, Antiochus IV, also known as Antiochus Epiphanes. He was called “Epiphanes” because he saw himself as a manifestation of the divine. Underestimating Jewish sensibilities, Antiochus built a pagan agora in Jerusalem and began to trade the high priesthood to the highest bidder in order to govern Palestine. Eventually, he set up pagan worship in the temple. On the face of it, anyone who knows the Ten Commandments and understands the anti-iconic nature of Jewish religion would expect this to be highly offensive to the Jews. But, Antiochus was probably not trying to offend the Jews intentionally. He was just taking another step in this idea, which started with Alexander the Great, of integrating local religions with one’s own religion. Antiochus IV probably thought that he could extend his influence in Syria-Palestine by accommodating the gods of the area—in this case, the God of the Jews—to his own religious beliefs and practices.

In December of 167 BC, “the abomination of desolation,” foretold in Daniel 11 (and also mentioned by the Maccabees, and of course by the Gospel writers) ignited the Maccabean revolt. This began a resurgence of Jewish national identity. The books of 1 and 2 Maccabees tell the stories of Mattathias and his family. Mattathias was a country man, and the local Jews in Modin were giving in to Antiochus’s program of accommodation. However, Mattathias would have no part in it and resisted to the point of violent intervention. He killed those who were going to sacrifice a pig. His five sons then escaped, went into hiding, and Judas Maccabeus and his brothers led the first cleansing and rededication of the temple, which happened only three years later, in 164 BC.

This cleansing of the temple is the basis of Hanukah, the Festival of Lights. In John 10:22, we see a reference to the rededication of the temple and the reassertion of Jewish control in Jerusalem. But, before Jewish independence from the influence of the Seleucids could be achieved, Jonathan, another one of Mattathias’s sons, would provoke a division among the Jews. This rift probably marks the beginning of the Essene sect. You see, Jonathan was not a Zadokite. Priests are supposed to be from the line of Zadok, but Jonathan accepted the high priesthood. By doing so, he consolidated leadership of a Jewish group over Jerusalem again, but the Essenes took offense. It violated Scripture, and so many of them left Jerusalem. They were not going to take part in temple worship that was led by a non-Zadokite priest. This was probably the beginning of the community that produced the Dead Sea Scrolls—the Essene community.

Simon, another one of the sons of Mattathias, achieved independence in 140 BC and filled three governing positions simultaneously—commander of the army, priest, and governing leader of the people. Simon’s son, John Hyrcanus, would rule Jerusalem for almost 30 years. During the course of that time, he set off a dispute between the Pharisees and the Sadducees. After John’s death, family dysfunction disassembled the Hasmonean dynasty and provided an opportunity for Pompey and Rome. They seized Jerusalem in 63 BC, producing another instance of “the abomination of desolation” when Pompey brought his standards into the Jerusalem temple. This Roman general brought Roman rule to
Palestine. But, before I discuss the influence of Roman power on the world of the New Testament, I must follow up a bit on these Jewish parties that began to gel in the Hasmonean period— the Essenes, the Sadducees, and the Pharisees.

**Varieties of Judaism in the First Century**

The exile of the southern kingdom took place in 598 BC; the return under Cyrus was in 538 BC, but not everyone came back. In fact, most Jews did not come back. The influence of Hellenism under Alexander the Great and the establishment of the Greek schools diluted Jewish identity and law-keeping. In the northern part of the Judean hill country, many Jews were afraid to express the marks of Jewish identity because of Antiochus’s attempts to expand his influence. Many Galileans had stopped keeping kosher laws and circumcising their sons. When the Hasmoneans took charge, however, they sought to reverse this, circumcising men and boys by force, if necessary.

What should we make of this? Was this a religious revival? Actually, it was more of a territorial claim. Because politics and religion were closely integrated, their ostensibly religious action made a territorial claim to mark extended boundaries for their kingdom. So, the marks of Jewish identity were resurgent under the Hasmoneans, and certain marks came into prominence—circumcision, food purity laws, and Sabbath keeping. Those three in particular became very, very important, and they would influence the discussions that we find in the New Testament. For example, when Paul went to Galatia, there was a major discussion over circumcision and a confrontation with Peter over the food laws. This historical backdrop illuminates why they were at issue.

Under the Hasmoneans, there was indeed a reassertion of Jewish religious identity, but their motivation was not purely religious. They were trying to consolidate power. As a result, they ignored things like the Zadokite requirement for the priesthood, and some Jews took offense. There began to be a diversification or fragmentation within Second Temple Judaism. N. T. Wright calls it a “pluriform Judaism.” Other scholars have gone so far as to call them “Judaisms.” It is very important to understand that in the world of the New Testament, in the first century, you cannot simply talk about “the Jews” or Jewish identity. You have to remain aware of at least two things: 1) Judaism was significantly Hellenized and 2) Judaism was variegated. Already the primary means of educating children in the synagogue system was through the Greek translation of the Old Testament; that gives you just one little window into the influence of Greek culture. We are not talking about any sort of pure Judaism in the first century. We are talking, first, about a Hellenized Judaism, and second, about a variegated Judaism. In other words, there were various Jewish groups or sects (hairesis in Greek) who had different postures toward different key aspects of Jewish identity.

Let us talk about these **four different groups** and the different ways they responded to the law, the land of Israel, the temple, and the Jews’ hope of restoration/salvation. First, with regard to the law, the Pharisees developed practices and case studies that ignited a renewed focus on the law. N. T. Wright says that the Pharisees pursued an “intensification of Torah” that they believed would usher in the kingdom of God. For example, the food purity rules in the Law legislated only for the priesthood began to be practiced by non-priests. In other words, the law does not require that laypeople perform certain washings or avoid certain foods. The law only says that priests need to do these things, but the Pharisees took up those practices and added them to Jewish piety. You might describe it as “law-plus.” There began to be this development of “the traditions of the elders.” That is what Jesus confronts in Mark 7. While the Pharisees recognized the authority of other parts of the Hebrew Scriptures—the prophets and the writings—they emphasized these traditions of the elders. They began to emphasize identity markers of food purity, circumcision, and Sabbath-keeping, but they did not just remain in Jerusalem. Their
success and growing influence was tied to sort of a grassroots educational system out in the villages and highways and byways. They allied with themselves with the _am ha-aretz_, the “people of the land.”

Now the Sadducees were different. We will look at them by comparison and contrast. In terms of the law, the Sadducees were the “Moses-only” people. They were not interested in these “traditions of the elders,” and they were not interested in the prophets or the writings, either, as far as giving them authority as Scripture. So, the only books that held Scriptural authority for the Sadducees were the five books of Moses. How do we see Jesus engaging the Sadducees? What does he quote to them about the resurrection, for example? He quotes from Exodus 3, saying, “I am who I am; I am the eternal God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” He engages the Sadducees on their own turf with their own authorities. If they would not recognize the prophets and the writings as authoritative, then Jesus would engage them by quoting Moses.

What about the land? Well, the Sadducees were the landlords, the landowners, and that is another significant distinction from the Pharisees. The Sadducees controlled a lot of property and therefore had a lot of influence over the Jewish council, the Sanhedrin, as well as over the priests in the temple. The Sadducees were political pragmatists. In Jerusalem, they were forced to deal with other landlords, their overlords—the Seleucids, the Romans—and so they engaged them.

What about the temple? As I have already said, the Pharisees were focused on law-keeping, but they held out a Davidic hope, the hope of 2 Samuel 7, that one day again there would be a Davidic king on the throne. They had a sense of Messianic expectation and hope, but they also had a belief in the resurrection—not just the renewal of Israel, but the resurrection of the body. Of course, in the book of Acts we see Paul exploit that difference between the Sadducees and the Pharisees in his confrontation with the leaders in Jerusalem. The Sadducees do not believe in the hope of resurrection, nor a Messianic, Davidic hope; therefore they engaged in a great deal of political compromise.

Now the Essenes and the Zealots are different still in relation to these four aspects of Jewish identity—the law, the land, the temple, and the hope. The Essenes revered a particular interpreter of the law who was very important for their practice, the Teacher of Righteousness. The thing to be aware of is that Qumran is not the only place where the Essenes lived and had influence. In fact, before Christ, before the Essenes began their departure, there was a large Essene section in Jerusalem, but in terms of the Qumran site, the Teacher of Righteousness was the interpreter of the law. Because of the influence of the Seleucid power and Roman power, they viewed themselves as still being in exile. Furthermore, because of the Hasmonean corruption of the priesthood, they viewed the Temple worship as fraudulent. As a result, one of the marks of Essene identity is found in Isaiah 40:3, which is about a voice crying in the wilderness. In their view, this was not John the Baptist. In their view, they were the voice crying in the wilderness, preparing a way for the Lord. Their community was that voice, expecting the reign of God. While accepting the ideas of priestly representation, the sacrifices, and the festivals, they were not going to practice them under non-Zadokite leadership. So they had another expectation, an expectation of a priestly Messiah who would restore Zadokite leadership. They had an apocalyptic hope, a sort of fatalism, about the in-breaking of God. They saw that they could not influence or control the things that were going on in Jerusalem, and so they looked for an in-breaking from the outside. They looked for God to come in victory and to bring triumph to the children of light over the children of darkness. How did they believe that would happen? In a similar way as to the Pharisees, the Essenes promoted an intensification of Torah. However, for the Essenes, their very disciplined food practices and multiple washings and baptisms and oath-taking all derived from the Teacher of Righteousness and their Manual of Discipline. Since they were outside Jerusalem, they had their own polity. It was called the Manual of Discipline. It set up a process every year for the renewal of their vows to be part of the community. It set
a strict process for how new people would come into the community, and so we see their response to the law through that lens.

Now let us turn for a moment to the Zealots. It is important to note that we cannot really talk about a Zealot group in the same way that we can talk about the Sadducees and the Essenes and the Pharisees. Those three groups were well formed in the first century before Christ. The Zealots were not. The Zealots really did not become a coherent political force, a military insurgency, until the latter part of the first century, in the time leading up to the Jewish War that began in 66 AD. At first, those known as Zealots were a group of thieves who wanted to rob people on the roads and avoid paying taxes. Some of them saw injustices under the rule of the Seleucids and the Romans, and they responded by stealing, killing, and destroying to disrupt things, but they had no coherent organization. There were just little groups, and the coherent organization of the Zealots did not come until the last third of the first century. Their political appeal was rooted in their harsh criticism of Roman taxes and their daring to carry out political assassinations. There was a group within the Zealots called the Sicarii, who performed silent assassinations of soldiers and sympathizers with daggers in the midst of large crowds in Jerusalem.

So these four different groups responded in different ways to these four aspects of Jewish identity—the law, the temple, the eschatological hope, and the land of Israel.

**Roman Rule in Palestine**

In 63 BC, Roman rule was introduced in Palestine with Pompey’s victory in Jerusalem. Soon after that, Palestine came under the influence of Caesar Augustus. Caesar Augustus had influence that was similar in extent to that of Alexander the Great. Augustus was able to consolidate power in relation to the Roman senate and in relation to the Roman military. He was also able to introduce massive building campaigns that would serve as supply lines for his military forces. In other words, the great network of Roman roads that was expanded under Augustus was built first and foremost so that Roman military power could be well supplied.

Through the military, Roman control spread to various regions, and Roman control had different manifestations. Sometimes a city would be completely colonized, or sometimes there would be a Roman governor, so there were different approaches to the way they managed a region. Then, when Roman military outposts were scattered throughout the Mediterranean basin, all the various infighting and the various regional squabbles were put to rest, for the most part. The massive superiority of Roman military power brought what is called the *Pax Romana*—the Roman peace.

You must understand, however, that this Pax Romana came at a very heavy price. The peace of Rome was not easy or pleasant. How was the peace of Rome asserted? How were these various groups brought under control? In Palestine, the various rebellions were brought under control by instilling fear through very violent, intimidating punishments, including crucifixion. For example, with the death of Herod the Great in 4 BC, just after Jesus’ birth, there was a grab for power in the region. Very near where Jesus lived in Nazareth, about four miles away, a well-developed, Hellenized Roman city flourished, the city of Sepphoris. You could say that Nazareth was a bedroom community to Sepphoris, which is probably the place where Jesus and Joseph did most of their carpentry work. What happened at Sepphoris at the death of Herod the Great was that many people vied for power. But, Rome secured the power vacuum through intimidation; they crucified almost 1000 people on the road between Nazareth and Sepphoris. In the very body of Palestine there were gouging marks of Roman power at the very time of Jesus’ birth. Yes, there was peace. The sea lanes were open, the pirates were put down, the brigands on the roads were brought under control, and the economy began to boom—especially in Roman colonies like Corinth and Philippi—but the peace of Rome came at a very heavy price.
Let us talk a little bit about the relationship between the house of Herod and Roman power. Antipater befriended Julius Caesar and supported him against Pompey in 48 BC and, of course, Caesar was assassinated by members of the Roman senate and others in 44 BC. Antipater’s son was Herod the Great. At first, Herod the Great supported Mark Antony against Cassius, but then in a very astute, pragmatic way transferred his allegiance to Octavian, Caesar Augustus. Herod’s reward was to gain control of Palestine in 31 BC. To curry favor and consolidate his rule, Herod the Great undertook massive building projects. He established his primary palace at Caesarea Maritime on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea where he built a beautiful Greek theater. His most important public works project, however, was the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem. To a certain degree, he wanted to endear himself to those whom he was ruling, but he was also paranoid and ruthless, as we see in the killing of all the children in Bethlehem with the visit of the Magi. Herod the Great finally went insane. He lost his mind, because he suspected everybody of trying to usurp power from him. He set up a massive network of tax collectors and spies and even had his own children and wife killed because of his suspicions.

After Herod died in 4 BC, his sons were granted control of his territory when Caesar recognized Herod’s will. Archelaus was over Samaria, Judea, and Idumea. Antipas was over Galilee and Perea, and Philip was over Gaulanitis, Trachonitis, and Auranitis. Archelaus very quickly lost control. His brutal rule resulted in an uprising, then his banishment in 6 AD. Rome did not want to have to manage crisis after crisis. They needed stability, and so if you are a local ruler, you have to strike a balance between intimidation and civil order to stay in power. Archelaus did not strike that balance, and his banishment led to the rule of Roman procurators like Pilate in Judea.

Philip, another one of Herod’s sons, rebuilt Caesarea Philippi, and his good rule ended right about the time of Jesus’ crucifixion. Antipas was the Herod before whom Jesus was on trial. He administered two areas—Galilee and Perea, where Jesus ministered—and he was the one who married Philip’s wife Herodias and came under the condemnation of John the Baptist. Now the Nabatean king also was angry about that, because Herod was married to one of his daughters as well, so Herod Antipas was banished by Caligula in 39 AD. So, there was a symbiotic relationship between Rome and the house of Herod beginning with Herod the Great’s father, Antipas the Idumean, continuing with Herod and the rule of his sons at the time of Jesus. So Herod the Great built the temple, his son Antipas married Herodias, though Philip had been her first husband. Herod Agrippa, the grandson of Herod the Great, killed James and imprisoned Peter. Finally, Agrippa II is the one who heard Paul’s defense. It is difficult, but we have to keep all these Herods straight in terms of the four generations of Herod’s house who influenced events recorded in the New Testament.

**Hellenistic Religions**

It is hard for us, as children of the Enlightenment, to really understand two things about the first century. First, it was a world that was completely inhabited by gods. There is a Greek word that we see in the New Testament, in the book of Galatians and again in the book of Colossians. The word is stoicheia. It is translated many different ways: “elementary spirits,” “elements of the universe,” or “elements of the cosmos.” Here is the idea: The basic elements of land, wind, water, and fire play a large role in understanding all different aspects of Hellenistic religious groups. Different gods controlled the seasons of planting and harvest and blessed the process in an agrarian society. We must remember that many people in the first century were subsistence farmers, and they believed that the gods’ actions determined whether or not they were going to die of starvation or whether they would be able to store grain for future years. As a result, a lot of the different religions had to do with trying to bring some sense of control to the elementary spirits. Some thought that there were actually angelic beings or spirits that stood behind these different elements of land, water, wind, and fire. Others thought that various gods
controlled various things. But the idea is that in terms of one’s personal health, one’s ability to be able-bodied and to work the land, to bring some sense of control to engage these various powers, these religions tried to deal with the \textit{stoicheia}. They were very concerned with the influence of these powers over the rising and falling of the harvests and one’s own medical health and well-being. We understand that without a lot of the personal hygiene and medical technology that we take for granted, their lifespan was not as long. Death at a very young age was very common. The death of children was also common. If you were a parent, you just resigned yourself to the fact that some of your children would die before you. So the first-century world was a world of gods, and that is one thing that is very hard for us to understand.

**Jewish Apocalypticism**

A second thing that is hard for us to understand is an \textit{apocalyptic worldview}. It is hard for us to really capture a sense of the in-breaking of the reign of God and the expectation of that in Judaism. We are so modernized, and many of us are Westernized. For example, think about how often you think of heaven. Do you have a sense of something, anything, that is just right on the other side of this reality? Do you have a sense of the nearness of God’s reign in its full glory? That is the sense of expectation that Jewish apocalyptic literature fostered. A lot of our modern views of heaven are very influenced by Greek dualism. This would be the belief that salvation is escape from this world. What is really important is the human spirit or the individual’s soul, and so salvation is about escaping the trauma and the brutality of this existence. A lot of the Greek mystery religions, the Gnostic religions, were like this, but that is not the Jewish worldview. The Jewish worldview holds that God created the world good, and so the in-breaking of the reign of God is not about taking people away to heaven, but it is about renewing the earth and renewing the heavens. It is about remaking this world—the physical world, the political world—in a way that sets everything right. It is about remaking the world in a way that reveals the reign of Israel’s Creator-Redeemer God over Palestine and indeed over the whole cosmos. So it is hard for us as modernized, post-Enlightenment, educated people to have a sense of the palpable nature of the world of gods and of the nearness of the kingdom of God that permeated the world of the New Testament.

I just want to say a couple of other things about the apocalyptic worldview and how that was integrated with political issues as well. It is important for us, when we come to concepts like “the kingdom of God,” to understand that the kingdom of God is not just a religious matter. I do not know how you read the New Testament, but I know that as I was growing up in the church, it was a long time before I began to understand the political implications of Jesus’ teaching on the reign of God. For example, as we appreciate the integration of all aspects of life in the first-century world—religious issues, educational issues, economic issues—it helps us to gain a sense, then, of what Jesus was getting at by preaching from Isaiah 61 in Luke 4 about matters of social justice and how they are related to the establishment of God’s righteousness. To be sure, Jesus says that righteousness is about the forgiveness of sins, personal justification before God. But, righteousness is also, according to Jesus, a matter of the restoration of the created order under the good reign of God. Jesus’ teaching about the kingdom of God also has to do with the way people use their crops and the way people share their clothing. His teaching has to do with the need of people who are ostracized from society, even for religious reasons, to be healed and restored. The sick need to be healthy so they can worship in the Temple, but also because they need to work to provide for their families. So we need to see through the lens of an integrated, mutually impacting aspect of the various dimensions of life. We must not compartmentalize religious matters from political or economic matters, and yet when we do that, we want to preserve the spiritual issues as well. We do not want to bracket those out, either.

When we come to this matter of apocalyptic worldviews and the in-breaking of the reign of God, we see some important documents in the lead-up to the New Testament. One of those documents is called the
Psalms of Solomon. The Psalms of Solomon was written by a Pharisee some time between 63 and 40 BC. Chapter 17 of the Psalms of Solomon speaks of an earthly kingdom. When we are talking about the kingdom of God, we are talking about both a heavenly and an earthly kingdom. We are talking about throwing out unjust rulers—whether they are Roman or Seleucid or Jewish, for that matter—and establishing righteous rule over the land, over the use of resources. We are talking about establishing just wages and the opportunity to see the Jubilee system work—the return of tribal lands to various family groups that reminds Israel that land is not just a commodity to be exchanged but that it is owned by God. The Psalms of Solomon mentions Pompey’s sacrilege in the Temple and refers to Sadducees as sinners because of their influence on the priesthood. It also describes the Spirit-endowed Messiah who will have a two-part mission—1) throw out the Roman and Sadducee overlords to reestablish Jerusalem and her temple, and 2) regather all the tribes. In the Psalms of Solomon, this Messiah is Davidic. He is the Messiah who is talked about in 2 Samuel 7, Jeremiah, and Isaiah, a Root of Jesse.

The book of Daniel, the book of Enoch, 2 Esdras, 4 Ezra, and 2 Baruch are examples in the Scriptures and in the inter-testamental literature of the apocalyptic appearances of the Son of Man, a preexistent figure who represents Israel and who comes from the throne of God on God’s behalf to reestablish justice in the land of Palestine. In this literature, there is not necessarily a direct reference to Davidic rule. The way in which this is talked about is that you see various world powers represented symbolically. One of the features of apocalyptic literature is the representation of threatening world powers in animal imagery, and so for example we see the beast of Daniel. Another of the features of apocalyptic literature is that you see Israel’s God referred to as the God Most High. In other words, while other gods are recognized, Israel’s God, as He relates to the nations and as He relates to threatening military powers, is the God Most High. Then you will often see two other features of this apocalyptic literature. You will see a messenger, either an angelic figure like Gabriel in the book of Daniel or the angelic figures we have in the book of Revelation, or you will see a messenger like Daniel himself or like Enoch, a revered figure who will give guidance and who interprets these visions.

So apocalyptic literature is a genre that was born in the context of a loss of hope in the political system. There is a sense of the dominance of some other world power, and that dominance is so severe that there is nothing that the captive people can do about it. So that is why we see the situation we see in the book of Revelation, for example. Under Roman rule, Christians were beginning to be killed, and so you see this vision of the martyrs underneath the throne in the Revelation. Apocalyptic literature indicates a maintaining of hope in God and a hope that God will set things right, but there is a loss of hope in the sense of that happening through political reform. The change will happen through an in-breaking of the reign of God. Thus we need to talk a little about the kingdom of God and the concept of the kingdom of God as it is influenced by this notion of an apocalyptic worldview.

Time did not stand still with the Old Testament. If you were to draw the scrolls of the Old Testament on the left and then draw a New Testament codex over on the right, in between the two is the development of Old Testament traditions, traditions about Enoch, Abraham, Joseph, and Daniel. In the New Testament, when writers make reference to these traditions, then though we must give the heaviest weight to the way things are articulated in the Old Testament, we have to recognize that Paul, Jesus, and the other New Testament writers were also engaging the intertestamental period. So, for example, in Galatians 4, Paul picks up this notion of the symbolism of Isaac and of Hagar and Sarah and their children, and he talks about it as an allegory. But why does he talk about it that way? Genesis does not tell the story that way; it is not an allegory in Genesis. It is because the Judaizers are telling the story of Hagar and of Sarah through the lenses of traditions that developed between the testaments, so Paul has to engage that. In some ways, Paul has to debunk them. Though we must give weight to the Old
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Testament, we cannot ignore intervening traditions if we hope to understand the New Testament properly.

We will mark the end of the first lesson here, and then we will pick up next time with the lesson on the canon.