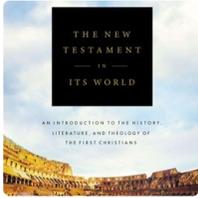


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What are the Catholic Letters about?

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Delving Into The New Testament In Its World - Eternity News

Welcome to the fifth in a six-part series delving into the benchmark book The New Testament In Its World.

Co-author Michael Bird takes us through the text he wrote with N.T. Wright, this episode focusing on the Catholic Letters - the collection of epistles following Paul's letters that embrace the church at large and offer a balance to some of the Apostle's more controversial teaching. In addition, Mike shows how these letters provide us a more detailed view of the world in which the New Testament was written.

On the chopping block are important questions like,

- * Why is it important that we have other authors in the New Testament?
- * What is the difference in the audience that Paul and the Catholic Letters address?
- * Is there a sense in which the Catholic Letters balance out the Letters of Paul?

You can buy a copy of The New Testament In Its World [here](#).

If you're following along with The New Testament In Its World, this episode covers key issues in Part VII: The Early Christians and the Mission of God:

1. The canonical function of the Catholic Epistles

Transcript

The New Testament In Its World With Mike Bird The Catholic Letters are not the after-dinnerments. They are a feast all on their own merit. Welcome to The New Testament In Its World, a super series based on the brilliant book by the same name.

My name is Mark Hadley and I'll be leading you through the brain of one of the authors Dr. Michael Bird, Lecture and Theology at Australia's Ridley College. Along with Tom Wright, Mike has written The New Testament In Its World, but he's also authored about

30 books in the field of Biblical studies. First of all, though, this morning what we really want to know is what sort of tea he's drinking.

This morning, Mark, I'm having English Breakfast, the Mildura Blend. It's one of my, it's actually probably my favorite English breakfast tea. Now, explain to me what is the differentiation between English breakfast tea, bog standard, and English breakfast tea from Mildura.

I don't know, it just has a slightly different taste. I don't know the exact recipe or what it is or whether they sprinkled in the sweat of AFL players. I don't know what it is, but it's got a distinct flavour and I like it.

It certainly would have a distinct flavour if AFL players were involved. Okay, well, this morning's topic, what are Catholic Letters about? What are the Catholic Letters about? So, there are Catholic Letters in the Bible, which was a surprise to me. Is that where we get all of our teaching about the Pope? That is not where we get our teaching about the Pope.

In fact, the New Testament says nothing about the Pope. It does talk a little bit about the Apostle Peter, and, you know, on this rock I will build my church, but nothing explicitly about the Pope. When we mean Catholic Letters, we're not actually talking about the Roman Catholic Church.

We're talking what Protestants would normally call the General Epistles, which is roughly from, well, goes from the Book of Hebrews, all the way through to the Letters of John. So, effectively, those letters that weren't written by Paul? Pretty much so. Pretty much so.

The other cast of apostles and authors who contributed to our New Testament. Just as an aside, do we know much about all of those authors? Are we fairly certain about those authors? Or is it one of those situations where every academic has a different idea about who wrote it? Oh, every academic has a different idea about different things all the time. Take the Book of Hebrews.

I mean, many in the early church, particularly in the West, in the Latin church, thought Hebrews was close enough to Paul's letters to be written by Paul. So, a lot of people, even in the King James Bible, used to call it, you know, the Epistle of Paul to the Hebrews. The only thing I can say with certainty about the letter to the Hebrews, it was not written by Paul.

That's literally the only thing. That is the only thing I could be certain about. After that, have no idea.

Was it someone like an apollus, maybe even a proscilla? Who knows? We just don't know. We don't know. Someone probably connected with the Pauline Circle, but it's definitely not Paul.

And Hebrews actually is a very good link between the Pauline-ledic collection and these Catholic epistles since Hebrews seems to be in some ways, perhaps influenced by Paul. It's got a very big focus on the atonement and the death of Christ, but the author also kind of goes in their own direction. They're very big on the exaltation of Jesus, the priesthood of Jesus, Jesus as being greater than the angels and that type of thing.

And there's a lot of exaltations not to fall away, not to go back to Judaism as a kind of safer social location since Jews rather than Christians have a better relationship with Roman authorities and that type of thing. So Hebrews is a really good entree into the Catholic letter collection. And the collection would be that there's more exaltation in the rest of the Catholic letters? What are you connecting it with? Well, Hebrews is kind of similar to Paul in some respects, but also similar to the rest of the Catholic letters.

Each of the Catholic letters is very, very different. I mean, they're doing different things like the letters of John, you've got three letters of John, one of which is a fairly circular letter to various churches around Asia Minor. Then you've got one letter, second John, it's written to a specific church and then third John written to a specific individual.

You've got first Peter, which is written for a number of churches in northern Turkey. And across these, there's a number of common themes. There's a big connection between the Old Testament and the Christian gospel.

That's a big theme across all the Catholic letters. Big themes about enduring, undersuffering and hardship. I mean, you find that in the Epistol of James, you find that in one Peter, you find that also in Hebrews.

There's also a big connection with remaining faithful to Jesus, that type of thing, and a lot of exhortations towards avoiding contamination from the world, remaining faithful to God and to Christ. So Hebrews is a good kind of book that gives you a little bit of some Pauline themes, but kind of also prepares you for a lot of the similar stuff that's going to happen in the rest of the Catholic letters. Well, speaking of similar stuff, do the authors of the Catholic letters actually know each other? Are they a crew, so to speak? Yeah, well, I wouldn't put them as a kind of a posse or kind of like a boy band or a girl band.

It's not like it's the Spice Girls or anything like that. I mean, if you've got Peter writing first, Peter and the Apostle John or an analogous John writing his letters, I think many of them did know each other or they were known to each other. In the case of Hebrews, we don't know.

We don't know at all. It'd be good if they kind of got to every year, had an annual conference every year where they got together and discussed all their writings and all their letters and literary activities. But that would be a good conference.

I mean, it'd be terrific getting someone like Luke and Paul and John to sit down and have

kind of like a podcast or a panel discussion on what it means to be a follower of Jesus. But that's the task of biblical theology to try and bring those voices together and see what we could say if they came up with a joint statement. Well, that takes us into your speciality.

But let me have a look at the history for a moment of surrounding the Catholic letters. Let me see. We've got seven to eight letters and then those ones which Paul added.

Does that make for a very literate community? Does it sound to be a lot of written records there? Or is that say the opposite? No, the early Christians seem to have been very bookish. Now, depending on how you measure it, literacy rates in the world would be between between five to 15%, depending how you define literacy. Are you able to write and read at the level of like Homer as opposed to write a little bit of graffiti on a wall that, you know, Herodias is a doofus or something like that? There's all those different types of literacy.

But the Christians seem to have been particularly bookish. They were really into reading, writing, copying and sharing literature. Now, obviously, that's partly indebted to their Jewish heritage because they had a very high view of the Jewish scriptures, mostly in their Greek form that we call the Septuagint.

But they also wrote their own literature, their own books about Jesus. They wrote letters to one another. They copied these letters.

They carried around. They shared them with others. And that's when you get this sort of burgeoning growth of Christian literary activity that then crystallizes into the New Testament and in many senses even continues into the second or third, fourth centuries.

And it's certainly helped by the invention of new media, which is something like the Codex, which is the creation of a type of a small book. So rather than use scrolls where you only write on one side, and if you've got like a 30 foot scroll, it takes a long way to kind of literally scroll through where you want to get up to. But whereas a book, it's a little bit more even.

And so you get this sort of new culture, the invention of the Codex that became a very popular. And Christians really do use these for their little collections of things like the four Gospels or the Paul's letters, or the Catholic letters themselves become their own discrete collection called the Apostolas. And it's the Catholic letters together with the Book of Acts become this little, if you like, a Volume 3 of the New Testament collection.

So it's very much like a pocket reading. Once we get the Proto book. Yeah, basically that's the way to put it.

This is kind of like the Proto book. I mean, they don't have the printing press yet, but this is kind of a new media that is, I think, far more useful. And one interesting thing about

Christians is they try to do everything they could to make reading more user friendly, because in some senses, the ability to read, write, copy was kind of a liters.

And you wanted to guard that. So at one sense, you wanted to make it hard as possible to kind of use and handle these works. Christians seem to have wanted to democratize the ability to use media like writings and try to make it easier by offering sort of a hint, indenting columns, giving little notes for readers and that type of thing.

So they tried to make reading a lot easier for people, particularly for those who may have been literate, but didn't belong to the elite literary class or the sort of scribal class in the ancient world. The professional scribe or copyist. Well, speaking of the ancient world, in a previous episode, you talked about how valuable it was to have Paul's letters to inform us about the world itself in which Paul was writing.

How valuable is it to have these other voices? So what sort of visions of the ancient world do they actually give us? Yeah, we learn quite a lot. Let me give you an example. In the case of first Peter, you learn a lot about the plight of slaves in the ancient world.

I mean, Peter is writing to Christians, many of whom are slaves and are in a position of servitude, often exploitation of all sorts, and he's trying to encourage them in their faith in that kind of situation. And the Epistle of James, that seems to be written, I suspect, to Christians in rural Galilee or maybe Syria or something like that, and he's giving them a series of exhortations about how to have a faithful Christian, dare I say, synagogue of their own kind in that context. It's a very Jewish world he's writing to, with Jewish concerns, Jewish allergies to certain things, but it's suffused with content that's very similar to the teaching of Jesus and he offers his own exhortation to the audience.

And then you get some of the things, like what is it like to be a person in Syria or Galilee, where the landless Paul can be exploited, where the rich can drag you into court, that type of thing. So there's a whole bunch of windows into that world, which in turn I think helps us understand what the authors are saying, what they're on about, and maybe give us a few tips as to how we can apply the New Testament today. Okay, so we've got rural Jewish audiences, there's one particular audience, we've got people who are actually within the heart of the empire itself.

Are there any other particular audiences that get drawn out by these letters? Well, I mean, here's the irony, the Catholic letters are called the Catholic letters because it's assumed they were written for a universal audience. Okay, so in that sense the Catholic, the reality is I don't think any of them were truly intended for a universal audience, they were all intended, I think, for a specific audience. So the book of Hebrews I think was intended for Christians largely in Rome or Italy, at least, exhorting them to remain faithful in light of persecution and pressure to revert back to Judaism.

I think the Epistle of Jude is written to Christians in Palestine, probably in the aftermath

of the Judean-Roman War. First Peter is written to people I think in Northern Asia Minor. The Epistles of John I think are written to people, churches, individuals in southwestern and southern Asia Minor.

James, as we just said, is written to people in probably a Galilee or Syria or something like that. Now there's a little bit of guesswork in him, not saying this is 100% certain, but these are fairly reasoned and our best educated guesses. There is a certain specificity or particularity in the audience they're writing to and you can kind of pick that up when you read the individual letters.

You get a sense, though I guess from church life itself, the common explanation is these letters were written to be passed around. Are you saying that's the case or are you saying that that was more like a byproduct of the world itself that they did end up getting passed around? I think they were indeed passed around. I don't know whether they were intended.

Like the person who wrote to the Hebrews, I was very conscious of this being sent to the initial audience. May not have thought about how this would be used elsewhere. Now Hebrews is a good example of a text that although it was focused on a specific context or a specific time, it says things which resonate through the church in other places throughout the ages, like hold fast to Jesus.

Look to the great hall of faith, look to those who are faithful ahead of you. Remember Jesus, his ascension is like an anchor for your soul, that type of thing, so there's things that would obviously resonate with people far away from the original audiences, both in space and time. Probably the one letter that was intended to be circulated wider was the first epistle of John, but that I think was written for a network of churches within Asia Minor itself.

I don't know whether John was thinking about this having read in Spain or even in Sydney in the 21st century, but that was a letter that was meant for sharing and reading and publicly in churches that type of thing, but it just went wider than the Johannine network. So I notice in your book there's a sense where the Pauline letters are balanced out by the Catholic epistles. Can you describe that balance to us? Yeah, I mean there was a scholar called David Newenhouse who wrote a book a few years ago called *Not by Paul Alone*, and it's basically a great title by the way, and it's a great way of summarizing the Catholic letters, because you know you've got your what's called the Tetra Evangelium, which is the four gospels, and you can add acts on to that if you like.

Then you've got Paul's letters, and Paul is pushing certain themes pretty hard, particularly in places like Galatians and Romans and Philippians, justification by faith apart from works of the law was saved by grace, not by works, and then you get some of the Catholic authors are saying, "Okay, look, that's not wrong, but let's make sure we knew it's there." And that's why someone like the author of Hebrews adds very, very

clearly a whole series of arguments, very intricate, very weaved together with parts of the Old Testament about the necessity of perseverance, you know, of keeping on the trucking in the faith if you'd like. In the fifth century Bishop or Guston of Hippo wrote a work about the correct relationship between faith and works. He declared at one point, "Even in the days of the apostles certain somewhat obscure statements of the apostle Paul were misunderstood, and some thought he was saying this, 'Let us do evil that good may come from it.'" Romans 3 verse 8. Because he said, "Now the law intervened that the offense might abound, but where the offense has bounded, grace has abounded yet more." Romans 5 verse 20.

Since this problem is by no means new and had already risen at the time of the apostles, other apostolic letters of Peter, John, James and Jude are deliberately aimed against the argument I have been refuting and firmly uphold the doctrine that faith does not avail without good works. In the second chapter of James, you get the impression, well at least I get the impression, that James is not attacking Paul per se, but he does want to attack a distortion of Paul. Paul himself was aware that his teachings could be taken in an antinomian direction.

That's to say, "Look I've been saved by grace, therefore I can just go on being morally lax or licentious because I'm under grace not law." Paul was aware of that. Paul was aware of that in both chapter 3 verse 8 and chapter 6 verse 1 of Romans. He kind of tackles that view, "Let us do evil that good may abound, as some people slandersly accuse me of saying." Or, "Shall we go on sitting so that grace may increase?" Paul was aware that his teaching could be taken in a somewhat licentious direction, or as a licensed for being comfortable in sin land, rather than living comfortably in grace land.

And James I think is dealing with that kind of distortion in chapter 2 of his own epistle. If there was one thing you'd like people to walk away with when they think of the Catholic epistles, what is it that you'd like them to keep? I think one of the number one things to take away would be that there is a series of exhortations to the churches, that on the one hand have the imprint of a specific time, a specific location, specific issues and concerns, and yet they're also very, very applicable to the church in every age. Now whether that's in Hebrews, that's in 1 John or Jude, I mean give a couple of examples.

Let's take the epistle of Jude. I think this is written to a group of churches, somewhere in Palestine after the Judean rebellion, where some other people have come in and because of their own, dare I say licentiousness or their kind of moral laxity, they're potentially corrupting the congregations there. And Jude's telling them don't have anything to do with them, okay? You know, hold fast to the faith once delivered to the saints.

And then he adds a whole bunch of things about the necessity of perseverance. Now you could argue that that exhortation I think is relevant in every age. Or you could take something about the epistles of John, the first epistle where you've got the big themes of

love, love of your fellow brother and sister in Christ, and holding to the truth of the gospel.

Now if you want to think of two things that sum up what churches and Christians should be about, love and truth really should be paramount. So these are parts of the New Testament, or ordinary get neglected. People know about them vaguely, but there really is a treasure stuff.

So you know, don't think that once you've got two Paul's letters, you've really had the lion's share of the New Testament and the rest of the New Testament is the after-dinner mints. That's probably what I would say. The Catholic letters are not the after-dinner mints, okay? They are a venerable feast all on their own merit.

Michael, thanks very much this morning for just explaining all of that and the Catholic letters to us. If you would like to hear more about what Mike has to say about the New Testament, I'd encourage you to dig back into the rest of the episodes of the New Testament in its world. And we'll actually have extra notes relating to the book itself inside of the show notes, so it's another one way to get a brief summary of what's going on in that particular book before you dive into it for yourself.

Until the next time though, we'll be actually looking at our next topic, which is how do we live out the New Testament based on Mike's book itself. So we'll look forward to chatting to you then.

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