

Naked Bible Podcast Transcript

Episode 21

Taking the Bible's Own Context Seriously (Part 6 of 6-part series): Books for Second Temple and NT Study

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Summary

In the last podcast, I recommended the best books and reference sources for understanding the religion and culture of the ANE for OT study. This episode wraps up my overview of taking the Bible's own context seriously by immersing oneself into the intellectual worldview of the biblical writers by taking a look at books dealing with the literature of the Second Temple period for NT study. Scholars who are steeped in this material have produced fine material for explaining how the Second Temple period worldview contributes to NT interpretation. My goal in this episode is to direct you to some of the best reference works and monographs in that regard to enrich your NT study.

Transcript

Welcome again to the Naked Bible Podcast.

In the last episode of the podcast, I recommended the best books and reference works for understanding the religion and culture of the ancient Near East as it pertains to Old Testament study. This episode wraps up my overall overview of taking the Bible's own context seriously through immersing yourself into the intellectual output of the era that the biblical writers actually lived in. This time, we're going to take a look at the books that deal with the literature and the context of the Second Temple period—in this case, for New Testament study.

Scholars who have spent a lot of time in this material have produced a lot of fine stuff—a lot of *great* stuff, actually—for explaining how the Second Temple period worldview contributes to New Testament interpretation. In the process, they also get into how the Old Testament itself informs New Testament interpretation. My goal in this episode is to direct you to some of the best reference works and monographs pertaining to the context of the Second Temple period and what that does for New Testament interpretation. As before, you can find the resources that I'll mention here on the Naked Bible Podcast website (www.nakedbiblepodcast.com). Look under the "Bibliography" tab for links to all these works [or use the live links in this transcript].

Just like I did last time, I'm going to start with my most recommended materials. These are going to be reference works that any serious student of the Bible who cares about understanding (in this case) the New Testament in context... You will own these if you really want to pay attention to this—if you want to go beyond Bible *reading* to something that's genuinely Bible *study* and then paying attention to the actual biblical context (not some other context) when you do your Bible study.

Reference Works

In the last podcast episode, we were introduced to something called the Intervarsity Press (IVP) *Bible Dictionary Series*. They had several volumes related to the Old Testament. Well, they also have several volumes related to the New Testament. These are highly recommended. I use them all the time. They're just wonderful resources. The first one is edited by Joel Green and it's called [Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels](#) (digital [version](#)). It does a great job of situating the Gospel material and all sorts of academic questions and issues about the Gospels in a Second Temple period context and an Old Testament context. Another one edited by Hawthorne is the [Dictionary of Paul and His Letters](#) (digital [version](#)). That's followed by the [Dictionary of the Later New Testament & Its Developments](#). The editor for that is Laansma (digital [version](#)). And Craig Evans also edits a broader volume in this series called the [Dictionary of New Testament Background](#) (digital [version](#)). All of these are highly recommended. They're excellent. They have great discussions, they're coherent, they're informed, and also very good bibliography.

One more source here is edited by Carol van der Toorn. It's the [Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible, Second Edition](#) (digital [version](#)). We mentioned this one in the last episode for our Old Testament context. You should realize that this reference work (DDD, as we know it) includes the New Testament. So it's the whole Bible. You will find very specific article entries on, let's say, Paul's terminology for divine beings, like the elements (Greek word is *stoicheia*). You will find very specific entries with great bibliography and, again, contextualizing the discussion (as it ought to be).

Moving on from that. Amy Jill Levine is the editor of something new called [The Jewish Annotated New Testament](#). This is essentially a New Testament study Bible, but the editors and the writers of the notes in this study Bible are all Jewish scholars. This will help you get an informed New Testament reading through Jewish eyes. Again, this is a recommended work. I know several people who have either gone through the whole thing or almost the whole thing by now and just love it. It's not going to be a scholarly work, per say, but it will give you a broad overview of the Jewish context for what you're reading in the New Testament.

Lastly in this category (reference materials), I'm going to include a book by Simmons called [Peoples of the New Testament World: An Illustrated Guide](#). If you listened to the last episode, there was a book called *Peoples of the Old*

Testament World. This is sort of a counterpart. It's going to go through all the major groups or players in the New Testament—things like Roman soldiers, centurions, Pharisees, Sadducees, Zealots, the Samaritans—different groups that you encounter. It has short descriptions of what's going on with that term, who these people are (again, with good bibliography). It has pertinent commentary related to where these individuals show up in the New Testament and how you need some background information to understand their importance.

Monographs

Let's go to monographs now (single volume works) on specific things related to studying the New Testament in context—again, the context of the Old Testament and the context of the Second Temple period.

General Works on Second Temple Context

First some general works on Second Temple context.

Oscar Skarsaune has two books that I have listed here. One is called [Jewish Believers in Jesus: The Early Centuries](#) and the other one is called [In the Shadow of the Temple: Jewish Influences on Early Christianity](#). (digital version)

These are broad, sweeping works. They have lots of pages. They're very detailed, and they go through the New Testament—the major sections, period by period, the literature, the ritual, the culture—pretty much anything you can think of as it pertains to life in the first century as you would encounter it as either a Jew or a Jewish believer in Jesus (someone living at the dawn of the Early Church). Both of them are excellent and I recommend them.

David Flusser has two volumes. These are going to be written at a more academic level. They might be a little more dense than Skarsaune; that is by design. These two works would make good reference works. I don't know that you'd want to read them straight through, but you might. The first one is called [Judaism of the Second Temple Period: Volume 1, Qumran and Apocalypticism](#) (digital version). You can tell by the title that it's fairly focused. Qumran, of course, is the location where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found. Apocalypticism is the belief that the end of the world was impending. So there's a lot of that sort of material at Qumran and floating around in the Second Temple period, and that informs parts of the New Testament. The second volume is [Judaism of the Second Temple Period: Sages and Literature, vol. 2](#). This would essentially be material that's not apocalyptic. Again, these are two good reference works. I don't have them grouped in Reference Works because they're not edited volumes necessarily and they're shorter. They're pretty dense, so you could consider them as things to consult, rather than to just read straight through. But you might want to do that.

Craig Evans has a book called [The World of Jesus and the Early Church: Identity and Interpretation in Early Communities of Faith](#). The title gives you an idea of

what's covered there. That will be more readable. It's shorter, it's more compact, and therefore it doesn't cover as much as the other volumes that I included. But, really, anything Craig Evans does is worth having. He's an excellent scholar and an enjoyable guy, as well, with a broadly evangelical perspective.

Interpretation of Scripture in New Testament Times

10:00

If you would flag one of these in this list as being really the top of the list—top shelf importance—it would be this one. What this category means (interpretation of scripture in New Testament times) is that the New Testament writers had methods of interpreting the Old Testament, and those methods were very much in the mainstream in concert with the way people in the Second Temple era were interpreting the Old Testament, as well. We can't be thinking that just because we have a doctrine we call “inspiration” that the New Testament writers were somehow getting a new method from God for looking at the Old Testament or that they were coming up with something novel. Again, in many ways you could say that there was a novel twist because Jesus was incarnated and they're looking at things through the lens of Jesus, but what they're doing in terms of interpretive method with the Old Testament is completely mainstream for their culture.

I'm going to give you some books here that will help you understand that and frame that and inform your New Testament study. These works also focus on the fact that when the New Testament writers quote the Old Testament, they don't always use the same text. Paul might quote from the Hebrew in one place and the Septuagint in another. On a third occasion, you might not be sure what he's quoting. Maybe he's influenced by an Aramaic translation or a Targum. There are all sorts of issues when it comes to the citation of the Old Testament, and it really matters because one thing you learn pretty quickly is that the New Testament writers do not (and I repeat: *do not*) just strike literal one-to-one equivalences between the Old Testament and what they're saying about Jesus. They will do things with Old Testament passages that you'll look at and you'll wonder how in the world they got that point. It's going to be books like the ones I'll list here in a moment that help you understand what in the world they're doing and how people in that day would have looked at what they were doing and said, "I get it. You're adopting this method. You're using that method." It wasn't foreign to them.

There's one by Watson that is really valuable for historical overview. It's called [A History of Biblical Interpretation, Volume 1: The Ancient Period \(History of Biblical Interpretation Series\)](#). It's a survey of various interpretive methods by different people and groups and how the New Testament writers would be interacting with that or part of that.

Beale has a book called [Handbook on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament: Exegesis and Interpretation](#) (digital version). If you're going to pick a book off this list, I would recommend Beale's book to sit down and just read the

whole thing. It's designed as an introduction to how the New Testament uses the Old and why that matters for biblical interpretation.

Three volumes by Moyise... He is a respected New Testament Second Temple scholar that focuses on the use of the Old Testament in the New. I list his three volumes here. These really are very academic. They're almost bibliographic essays (who says what about what, what are the issues, all that sort of thing). So this is one of those that's almost a reference work, yet isn't. Don't tackle these until you've read through Beale's book and gained some understanding through that book. Moyise has three books: [Jesus and Scripture: Studying the New Testament Use of the Old Testament](#) (digital [version](#)), [Paul and Scripture: Studying the New Testament Use of the Old Testament](#) (digital [version](#)), then thirdly, [Later New Testament Writings and Scripture, The: The Old Testament in Acts, Hebrews, the Catholic Epistles and Revelation](#).

This is a very important category and you want to have good material here and be exposed at least to Beale (and I would say also Watson) thoroughly so you know what the issues are when you go to interpret the New Testament and you're reading commentaries and other material—so you'll be able to understand what the concerns of the commentator are and what he's talking about when it comes to hermeneutics and exegesis.

Greco-Roman / Hellenistic Context

15:00

I have three volumes here, beginning with Ferguson's book, [Backgrounds of Early Christianity](#). This favors Greco-Roman backgrounds, rather than Second Temple Jewish. But the Romans were the overlords here, so they're still in the Second Temple period. Because they controlled so much in the area and their influence was so broad, there is something to be said for Greco-Roman context, as well. Ferguson's book has been a longstanding go-to resource for this kind of material, so I highly recommend that.

Jeffers has a book called [The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era: Exploring the Background of Early Christianity](#). It would be more recent than Ferguson in several respects, but I can't say that it would supersede Ferguson. If you're going to have two books, these would be the two best to have.

Third is David deSilva's [Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture](#). (digital [version](#)) I list it here because it is broadly about New Testament culture (Jewish and Roman), but it's not exclusively Second Temple Jewish. You will get Greco-Roman material in here. The nice thing about this book is it'll also relate it to a Jewish context here and there, as well.

[Transcriber's addition: David deSilva's *Day of Atonement* has been published since the recording of this episode. It's a novel written by a serious scholar with the intention of familiarizing the reader with the tensions between the Greco-

Roman and Jewish worlds during the Second Temple period. The fictional format is a pleasant and effective way to absorb the historical material.]

History of the Second Temple Period

You should also have something about the history of the Second Temple period itself. Lester Grabbe's [An Introduction to Second Temple Judaism: History and Religion of the Jews in the Time of Nehemiah, the Maccabees, Hillel, and Jesus](#), Schiffman's, [From Text to Tradition. A History of Second Temple and Rabbinic Judaism](#), and Sacchi's book, [The History of the Second Temple Period \(Academic Paperback\)](#). Of the three, the third volume is the most lengthy. It would be the most academic, in terms of reader level or reader expectation. But the others are going to be fine. This will give you a good overview of the history of the period—the groups, the sects (Pharisees, Sadducees, and what-not) of this formative period. Rabbinic Judaism (what we think of as rabbinic Judaism, which is actually post-New Testament) has its beginnings in the Second Temple period. This will give you a good overview of all that.

Dead Sea Scrolls & Christianity

Let's talk about Dead Sea Scrolls a little bit. I've listed several books here that specifically relate to the Dead Sea Scrolls and their impact on Christianity (or Christian ideas, or Christian origins). So let's run through them.

Peter Flint and James VanderKam have a book called [The Meaning of the Dead Sea Scrolls: Their Significance For Understanding the Bible, Judaism, Jesus, and Christianity](#) (digital [version](#)). So that's one's broader, but it's a very good intro.

Craig Evans has a book, [Christian Beginnings and the Dead Sea Scrolls \(Acadia Studies in Bible and Theology\)](#) (digital [version](#)). It's all about how the scrolls inform our understanding of the genesis of the Early Church—the make-up of it and the Jewishness of it.

Joseph Fitzmyer, [The Dead Sea Scrolls and Christian Origins \(Studies in the Dead Sea Scrolls & Related Literature\)](#) (digital [version](#)). This works on the same tasks as Evans' book.

A little more specialized here, two volumes by John Collins. [Religion in the Dead Sea Scrolls](#) (digital [version](#)) and then a second volume called [The Scepter and the Star: Messianism in Light of the Dead Sea Scrolls](#). Both of these volumes deal with the theology of the people at Qumran (associated with the Dead Sea Scrolls) and the theology of Second Temple Judaism. Even more particularly, they discuss what their views of messiah were—what their messianic expectation was.

In that regard, the next title (also by Craig Evans) is [Eschatology, Messianism, and the Dead Sea Scrolls \(Studies in the Dead Sea Scrolls and Related](#)

[Literature, V. 1\) \(Studies in the Dead Sea Scrolls & Related Literature\)](#)

(digital [version](#)). Eschatology is the study of last things. This focuses on their messianic expectations and also their expectations about the time of the end. The Qumran community (or at least certain portions of them) thought themselves to be living in the last days. That's something you read in the New Testament, as well.

These sorts of works inform us about the theology of serious Jews at the time and also very specific doctrinal issues related to New Testament studies, such as Christology or messianic expectations.

20:00

Pseudepigrapha, Apocrypha, and the New Testament

I have two titles in this category. Both are aimed at giving us a good look or broad overview of how the pseudepigraphy and the apocrypha matter for New Testament interpretation.

Charlesworth is the first one here. His book is called [The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha & the New Testament](#). You'll learn all about the conceptual overlaps there and how one informs the other.

Then David deSilva: [The Jewish Teachers of Jesus, James, and Jude: What Earliest Christianity Learned from the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha](#). This is a brand-new title. I'm making this podcast in August of 2012 and this book is not due out until October. For those of you who are listening who go to the Evangelical Theological Society meetings or the Society of Biblical Literature meetings, I'm sure this book will be there in time for the conference.

Contextualized New Testament Theology

Are there books that really sort of do New Testament theology against the backdrop of the Second Temple period to sort of flesh out what that looks like (again, New Testament theology explained in light of a deep understanding of the Old Testament and how there's continuity between the Old and New Testaments and also the Second Temple material)? Well, there's actually a lot of that. I've listed three titles here, and then a fourth that sort of goes with the first three.

These three titles are all by N.T. Wright. Now he has written a lot of books, but I recommend these three because they were designed essentially as a trilogy to cover the main points or aspects of New Testament theology. The three titles are [The New Testament and the People of God Volume 1 \(Christian Origins and the Question of God\)](#), [Jesus and the Victory of God \(Christian Origins and the Question of God, Volume 2\)](#), and then [The Resurrection of the Son of God \(Christian Origins and the Question of God, Vol. 3\)](#). (all three in digital [version](#), along with *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*) The material that Wright covers here is just densely permeated with Second Temple contextual material and appreciation and knowledge for that material, with real sensitivity to continuity

between the Testaments. Both of those things are very important because that is the New Testament context.

Wright is not without controversy, specifically he is understood or viewed as the main popularizer of something called "The New Perspective on Paul." Briefly, that is a subject that has to do with what Paul's view of the law was, and specifically Paul's view of the works of the law—how was what Paul was saying about the gospel consistent with or an alteration of Jewish thinking about salvation? Wright is controversial because he rejects the idea that most Jews thought that they could get to heaven by works. So if you're going to say that, then the question becomes, "Well, what was Paul upset about? How was he defining the gospel as something new?" Again, that's what the New Perspective is about.

Toward explaining all that and having a good introduction to it that's even-handed, I recommend Yinger's book. It's a very small book designed for laypeople. I've read it and I think it's excellent. It's called [The New Perspective on Paul](#). You could probably knock that out in an hour or two and it will give you a very good overview of what the issues are related to that specific topic.

So that's what I wanted to cover in this episode. The next time on the Naked Bible, we'll get into some things that might feel more traditionally like recommendations for Bible study. So we're leaving the contextualization issue. I'm hoping, again, that you'll get some of these books so that you know what there is to think about some of the questions that need to be asked—some of the land mines in interpretation. I want you to really feel driven to keep your study of the Bible in the context of the world in which the biblical writers lived, and no other context. Until next time...