

NT Week 1 Vessel of the Lord: The Birth of Christ and the Reframing of Sacred Space

Tuesday, March 31, 2026 10:27 AM

Vessel of the Lord: The Birth of Christ and the Reframing of Sacred Space

Summary of the Lesson:

How the Mind Interacts with Revelation

Welcome to the New Testament in this course. As we study we will be engaging in a cognitive process shaped by how the human mind organizes, filters, and interprets information. If you attended the Old Testament course you are already familiar with how understanding and regularly identifying these underlying cognitive principles allows you to see why scripture can be read so differently across time, culture, and individual experience. The processes you use to study, retain, and fill in your truth towers or core belief structure on the gospel, will shape your entire perception of what is true. Because as the scriptures explain, you can only receive revelation according to what you can comprehend and perceive John 16:12-13. So we need to get more context and facts to be able to expand that comprehension. This section introduces a foundational idea: **revelation is received, but interpretation is constructed.**

Reflections:

Is there any part of the New Testament you feel you could use more context and facts about specifically? Do you have a personal favorite passage and if so which one? Why does that passage resonate the most?

Key Terms (include a pronunciation guide):

Accommodating God principle: God reveals truth in a way that is adapted to the people receiving it.

Ecumenical Councils: formal assemblies of Christian church leaders convened to define doctrine and resolve major theological disputes for the broader Christian community.

Diachronic: studying how language, meaning, or texts develop and change over time

Significant words and their meaning:

Logos (λόγος) – Word, divine ordering intelligence (John 1:1, 14)

Skēnoō (σκηνώω) – To dwell, tabernacle (John 1:14)

Naos (ναός) – Inner sanctuary, dwelling place of God (1 Corinthians 3:16)

Hieron (ἱερόν) – Temple complex (Luke 2:46)

Episkiazō (ἐπισκιάζω) – Overshadow, divine covering (Luke 1:35)

Kecharitōmenē (κεχαριτωμένη) – Fully endowed with grace (Luke 1:28)

Diakonos (διάκονος) – Minister, authorized servant (Romans 16:1)

Ekklesia (ἐκκλησία) – Covenant assembly, gathered body (Romans 16:1; 1 Corinthians 12:28)

Zion (צִיּוֹן) – Covenant center, dwelling of God (Isaiah 66:13; Psalm 48:2)

Rechem (רֶחֶם) – Womb, compassion source (Isaiah 49:15)

Hesed (חֶסֶד) – Covenant loyalty, active love (Ruth 1:8; Micah 6:8)

Mashiach (מָשִׁיחַ) – Anointed one (Psalm 2:2)

Shakan (שָׁכַן) – To dwell, divine presence (Exodus 40:35)

New Testament Cognitive Principles Defined:

1. Schema Theory: The pre-existing framework that you approach scripture with, built from culture, upbringing, language, and prior belief.

(i.e. *Messiah* (in the 1st century) would be associated with kingship, liberation, and covenant restoration.)

2. Top-Down Processing: unconsciously imposing meaning onto the text instead of extracting meaning from it.

(For example, when encountering titles like *Kyrios* (Lord), a Roman audience might hear imperial authority, while early Christians reframe it as divine sovereignty.)

3. My-Side Bias: naturally favoring interpretations that confirm one's existing beliefs.

4. Cognitive Fluency: when repetition, simplicity, and familiarity create a sense of correctness, even when the underlying interpretation may be incomplete.

5. Narrative Compression: the process of complex events and teachings becoming condensed into simpler narrative forms over time; preserving the meaning but removing the context.

(For example, differences between the Synoptic Gospels and the Gospel of John are not contradictions but evidence of **different stages of theological development and narrative shaping**.)

Reflection: Are there any cognitive principles you feel you rely on more subconsciously? How have these principles limited what you take away from the text? What is in the text that is now foundational that you wouldn't have thought of had you not let go of an older belief?

Suggested Readings & Resources

These are strong, credible entry points that align well with what you are teaching:

- [Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy – “Cognitive Science”](#)
- [Simply Psychology – Schema Theory Overview](#)
- [Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy – “Belief Bias”](#)
- [Daniel Kahneman, Thinking, Fast and Slow \(summary\)](#)
- [N.T. Wright – How God Became King \(overview\)](#)
- [Bible Project – Literary Styles of the Bible](#)

Doctrinal Foundations for Expanding Truth

Doctrinal Foundati	Defined	Text
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Revelation in Context	Revelation is delivered into a living, thinking people who must interpret at their level of understanding according to what they are capable of receiving. (Accommodating God Principle)	God speaks “after the manner of their language.” (Doctrine and Covenants 1:24)
Revelation Requires Participation	God does not override human cognition. Interpretation and misunderstanding are both part of the revelatory process. Understanding develops as we engage.	“Study it out in your mind...” (Doctrine and Covenants 9:8–9)
Truth is Given Incrementally	Humans cannot bear all truth simultaneously, Understanding requires lived experience and Context must be built before higher meaning can be received. (This is why earlier texts may appear incomplete or even inconsistent when read outside their historical and linguistic setting.)	“Line upon line, precept upon precept...” (2 Nephi 28:30) "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come." (John 16:12–13)
Light Expands Through Reception	This suggests that truth is not static, but expands in proportion to our willingness and ability to receive it.	“That which is of God is light... that light groweth brighter and brighter...” (Doctrine and Covenants 50:24)
	Diachronic linguistics, historical context, and textual layering are the very means by which we fulfill this commandment.	Knowledge is given “according to their heed and diligence.” (Alma 12:9–11) The Mandate to Seek and Expand It is required to venture into multiple interpretive frameworks to seek further understanding. “Seek learning, even by study and also by faith.” (Doctrine and Covenants 88:118)

LDS Talks for Deeper Study

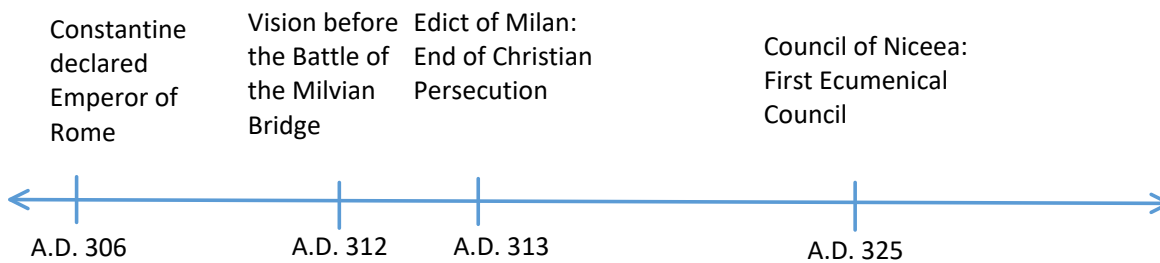
- [Neal A. Maxwell](#) — “A Wonderful Flood of Light”

- [Dallin H. Oaks](#) — “*Truth and the Plan*”
- [Jeffrey R. Holland](#) — “*Cast Not Away Therefore Your Confidence*”
- [Russell M. Nelson](#) — “*Revelation for the Church, Revelation for Our Lives*”

Scholarly Reading

- Matthew Bowen — [Semitic Semiotics: The Symbolic, Prophetic, and Narratological Power of Names in Ancient Scripture | FAIR](#)

The Conversion of Constantine & the Rise of Ecumenical Councils



The Story of Constantine:

Constantine’s Christian take over marks one of a turning point in Christian history. What began as a decentralized, interpretive movement that was rooted in lived experience and local understanding now becomes institutional, formalized, and politically stabilized. To understand this shift, we have to recognize a key principle: Doctrine does not develop in isolation. It develops within power structures. Which ultimately influences the doctrine in critical ways. Tracing that process helps us understand how.

In A.D. 312, before the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, Constantine reportedly saw a vision accompanied by the phrase:

“In hoc signo vinces”

“In this sign, conquer.”

Christianity, once persecuted, now becomes aligned with imperial authority. So by A.D. 313, the Edict of Milan legalizes Christianity. This transition moves Christianity from a Marginal Movement to a worldwide Imperial Religion.

Prior to Constantine	After Constantine
Christianity functioned as a diverse, interpretive tradition	Unity becomes necessary for political stability
Local communities held varying theological views	Disagreement becomes a threat to imperial cohesion
Texts were still being understood and negotiated	Theology begins to require definition, not just exploration

The Council of Nicaea was a theological gathering. It was an attempt to resolve disputes that had **political consequences**. The central issue was the nature of Christ:

- Was He created?
- Was He eternal?
- Was He equal with the Father?

The outcome established a unified position for **imperial consistency**.

This is where theology begins to move from:
Interpretive to -> Defined to -> Enforced

Christianity became tied to empire, which meant Doctrine affects governance, Unity affects stability and Belief affects allegiance. This culture shift affected the fluidity of Christian thought.

Assigned Readings

Primary Historical Sources (Intro Level)

- [Eusebius – Life of Constantine \(Book I & II excerpts\)](#)
- [The Edict of Milan \(A.D. 313\)](#)
- [The Nicene Creed \(A.D. 325\)](#)

Scholarly Overviews

- [Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy – Early Christian Philosophy](#)
- [Britannica – Council of Nicaea Overview](#)
- [Yale Open Course – Early Christianity Lectures](#)



Christ Recognized as the Star God: Biblical, Apocryphal, and Cultural Witness

Christ is repeatedly associated with stellar imagery as a symbol of divine authority, guidance, and covenantal fulfillment. This is part of an ancient worldview in which stars represented divine beings, kingship, and heavenly order.

1. The Biblical Foundation

- *"A star shall come out of Jacob..."* (Numbers 24:17)

This is widely understood as a Messianic prophecy. The "star" functions as a symbol of rulership and divine emergence.

- *"I am... the bright morning star"* (Revelation 22:16)

Here, Christ explicitly identifies Himself using stellar imagery.

- *"asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star in the east and have come to pay him homage'"* (Matthew 2:2)

The Magi recognize Christ through a star.

The star is a sign of divine kingship, a marker of identity and a means of revelation

2. Apocryphal and Expanded Traditions

When we move into apocryphal literature, the pattern becomes more explicit.

The *Infancy Gospel of James* describes the star as:

- Brilliant
- Active
- Guiding

Other texts, such as the *Gospel of Thomas*, shift the language slightly. Instead of emphasizing a literal star, they emphasize **light** as the originating source of Christ.

This is an important transition:

- Star → Light
- Symbol → Essence

The imagery is evolving, but the core idea remains. Christ is associated with heavenly origin and illumination.

3. The Star and the Temple Pattern

The five-pointed star functions as a structured symbol. It encodes progression.

Each point represents movement toward Christ, culminating in the highest covenant.

- Baptism
- Confirmation
- Endowment
- Sealing
- Marriage Covenant (culmination)

At the center is Christ as the **Bright Morning Star**.

This creates a pattern:

- The star guides externally (Magi)
- The temple guides internally (ordinances)

Both are doing the same thing.

They are leading individuals toward divine union.

4. Cultural and Historical Witness

This symbolism was widely understood across the ancient world. Evidence includes:

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- Roman coins depicting divine rulers with stars
 - Synagogue mosaics using star imagery
 - Early Christian art associating Christ with celestial

light

The association between divinity and stars was already embedded in the culture.

When we read the text diachronically, we see:

- A consistent symbolic system
- A shared cultural language
- A developing theological claim

Christ is being identified through a symbol that already carried divine meaning.

The Magi were interpreting a sign within a system they already understood. They knew Christ was restoring the temple. And they identified Him in that singular role within the temple accession.

God reveals truth through the language and symbols people already recognize.

Suggested Readings

Scriptural

- Numbers 24:17
- Matthew 2:1–12
- Revelation 22:16
- Daniel 12:3
- Philippians 2:15

Apocryphal Texts

- [Infancy Gospel of James \(Greek text and translation\)](#)
- [Gospel of Thomas \(Nag Hammadi text\)](#)

Scholarly & Cultural Context

- [Britannica – Star Symbolism in Ancient Cultures](#)
- [Met Museum – Ancient Near Eastern Astronomy and](#)

Religion



Remembered, Edited, and Read Across Time

The New Testament is a record of remembered teachings, inherited traditions, authorial shaping, scribal transmission, and later theological interpretation. Instead of large stitched source blocks, scholars more often identify layers through oral tradition, redaction, textual variants, and theological development across communities. This means that when we study the New Testament diachronically, we are asking how a teaching or tradition moved through time. We ask what may belong to an earlier remembered core, what an author may have emphasized for a particular audience, what later scribes may have expanded or clarified, and how later church structures came to read those texts through more formal doctrinal categories.

Layers of the New Testament Text

Layer	Defined	Analysis	Example
1. Earliest Traditions	New Testament	These passages feel tighter, more rhythmic,	Philippians 2:6-11 as

	preserves material that appears to predate the books in which it is found.	or more formulaic because they were likely remembered and repeated before they were embedded into larger written works.	an early Christ hymn 1 Corinthians 15:3-5 as a very early resurrection
2. Gospel Redaction	an author is arranging, emphasizing, clarifying, and shaping what he has received.	Gospel Redaction often preserves the same events or teachings, but they frame them differently.	Matthew, Mark, and Luke
3. Pauline Letters and Community Development	The development of early Christian communities as reflected in the progression of Pauline writings over time.	The earlier Pauline letters often reflect urgency, missionary movement, and immediate pastoral concerns. Later Pauline tradition tends to show more developed institutional structure, more formal ecclesiastical language, and more concern for order and stability within the church	1 Thessalonians; Galatians; 1 Corinthians (early) → Ephesians; Colossians; 1–2 Timothy; Titus (later tradition)
4. Johannine Expansion	A later theological development that presents a more explicit and reflective portrayal of Jesus' identity.	Compared with the Synoptic Gospels, John presents Jesus with a far more explicit theological self disclosure. In Mark, identity is often revealed gradually. In John, Jesus speaks in direct theological declarations such as the "I am"	The Gospel of John (John 1; John 8; John 10; John 14)

		sayings.	
5. Scribal Additions and Textual Expansion	These are places where later manuscript traditions preserve additions or expansions that are absent from the earliest surviving witnesses.	These examples are especially useful for classroom work because they let students mark the text directly.	Mark 16:9-20 John 7:53-8:11 1 John 5:7
6. Post Constantinian Framing	The ecumenical councils did shape how the text would be read, defended, and standardized within the life of the church.	The councils affected interpretation, doctrinal priority, and theological framing. They did not sit down and insert whole new books into the Gospels. They clarified what readings would become orthodox and how key passages would function in doctrinal debate.	Council of Nicaea (325); Council of Constantinople (381); Nicene Creed

Reflection:

When reading any New Testament passage, students should learn to ask three simple questions:

1. Is this earlier tradition or later framing?
2. What has the author emphasized or reshaped?
3. How has later theology read this passage differently?

These questions train readers to slow down and see the New Testament as a living witness that moved through memory, authorship, copying, and doctrinal reception.

Suggested Readings

Introductory Scholarly Works

- Bart D. Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus*
- Bruce M. Metzger and Bart D. Ehrman, *The Text of the New Testament*
- Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*
- James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*
- Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*

Textual Examples to Study

- Philippians 2:6 through 11
- 1 Corinthians 15:3 through 5
- Mark 16:1 through 20
- John 7:53 through 8:11
- John 1 compared with Mark 1
- Parallel passages in Mark, Matthew, and Luke