



Intro to the New Testament:

Catholic (General) Letters

Session Five

Catholic

- Came to be used by early church to mean general and universal and was applied to James, 1 & 2 Peter, 1–3 John, and Jude
- These letters with the exception of 2 & 3 John lack an address to a single location
- They take their titles from their traditional authors like the Gospels rather than like Paul's letters or Hebrews which take their titles from the location of the addressees



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James

Author & Addresses

Author

- The letter gives the name James as the author (Greek for Hebrew Jacob), who was a leader in the early church
- This second possibility of no blood relation may explain why Jesus's brothers failed to believe in him during his lifetime

Addresses

- James writes to the 12 tribes in the Diaspora, which may be metaphor for the predominantly Gentile church scattered throughout the Roman Empire, but is more likely written to Jewish Christians living outside of Palestine

Purpose & Date

Purpose

- This letter is the most practical and least doctrinal letter of the NT
- It is a manual of Christian conduct that assumes a foundation of faith

Date

- Josephus records that James was martyred in A. D. 62 which means the letter must precede this date
- Some scholars suggest a very early date 45–50, making it the first NT book to be written
 - Note it lacks controversy about Judaizing implying a date before Jerusalem council about A. D. 49
 - As well the Jewish tone suggests before the time it expanded to Gentiles

Jewishness

- The subject matter of James, especially the stress on God's law fit what we know of James from Acts and Galatians and other sources
- Not easily seen in translation there is also verbal parallel between James and the letter from James in Acts 15
- Those who argue that James was a late 1st or early 2nd century pseudonymous work assert that a simple Galilean like James couldn't have written such well styled Greek

Canonicity

- The early church didn't receive James into the canon right away due to the 1) brevity of the letter, 2) its practical rather than doctrinal quality, and 3) its limited address to Jewish Christians
- As well the identity of James (which one when many are mentioned in NT)
- The mistaken impression (like Luther) that James doctrine of works contradicts Paul's doctrine of faith didn't disturb the early church as far as we know
- Once it was recognized that James was almost surely the Lord's brother, it was received into the canon

Topics in James

- James alludes to sayings of Jesus' found in the Gospels, particularly sermon on the mount
- Because James has the style of proverbs or wisdom literature delivered as a passionate sermon it can be difficult to outline; it can be summarized in a list of exhortations for conduct in church meeting and everyday life:
 - Rejoice in trials
 - Ask for wisdom believing it will be given
 - Demonstrate that your faith is genuine through good works so others can see the outward evidence
 - Exhibit characteristics of genuine wisdom required of Christian teachers: control of tongue, meekness, and purity



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1 Peter

Authorship & Addresses

Authorship

- The author identifies as Peter and is supported by two things: 1) a number of phrases match the phrasing in Peter's Acts sermons and 2) the allusions to Jesus' sayings and deeds recorded in the Gospels come from pericopes that Peter featured in

Addresses

- The letter uses phrases: exiles of the Dispersion and among the Gentiles which makes it seem to be addressed to Jewish Christians

Silvanus's Role

- Based on 5:12 some suggest that Silvanus acted as Peter's secretary and polished the Greek of the letter
- This might be so, however the inclusion of a greeting from Mark but not from Silvanus points to the fact that Silvanus carried the letter, needed a commendation to be welcomed, and could greet them in person on arrival
- The name is Latin and likely means in Aramaic Silas who accompanied Paul on his 2nd missionary journey (Paul refers to Silvanus in his letters and Luke narrates Silas for the same journey)
- The similarity of Peter's ethical exhortations to Paul's suggests Peter is influenced by Paul's letters, maybe through Silvanus

Roman Origin & Date

Roman Origin

- Peter writes from Babylon but this is almost certainly a figurative name for Rome like it does in Revelation
- Rome is called Babylon because it is the world capital for idolatry which was once the case for Babylon

Date

- Peter lists Pontus first in the letter's address, so it is significant that Pontus ceased to exist as a client kingdom of Rome after A. D. 63
- In addition, the elements of persecution that pervades the letter suggests he wrote it in 63 or a little earlier; shortly before his martyrdom under Nero in Rome about A. D. 65

Text

- Suffering and Reward (1:1–12)
- Good Conduct (1:13–3:22)
- Descent into Hell (3:18–20)
- Baptism (3:21)
- Exhortations (4:1–5:14)



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2 Peter

Theme

- Heretical teachers teaching false doctrine and practicing immorality were making inroads in the church
- 2 Peter is a polemic against them, especially their denial of Jesus's return and it affirms true knowledge of Christian belief

Authenticity, Canon & Relation to Jude

Authenticity & Canon

- There is doubt among modern scholars that the apostle Peter wrote this letter
- The early church did hesitate to accept it into the canon due to its brevity which may have limited its distribution and therefore people's acquaintance with

Relation to Jude

- Another argument against Peter's authorship is that 2 Peter borrows from Jude especially describing false teachers, since Peter is an apostle he would not borrow from an insignificant person (comparatively) like Jude
- However, in rebuttal, it is pointed out that history has many prominent writers borrowing from obscure ones (like Shakespeare) and it was a common practice in the ancient world

Allusion to Paul's Letters

- Another objection to Peter as author is a reference to Paul's letters; those objecting conclude that the letter is referring to a collection of all Paul's letters that had been published which could only have happened after Paul and Peter's martyrdoms since Paul wrote up to the end of his life
- However, the reference need only be referring to those letters that Paul had written at the time of this letter writing
- Peter's knowledge of the letters would come from his traveling in the areas where Paul's letters were circulating as well as through Silvanus who companioned both apostles

Text

- Reliability of Orthodoxy (1:1–21)
 - Peter glories in the greatness of God’s promises to believers, through which they come to share in the divine nature, and points to the need to nurture Christian virtues—right conduct has to undergird right belief
- Judgment on Heterodoxy (2:1–3:18)
 - Current and future false teachers stand in the tradition of false prophets of the OT and will receive the same judgment from God



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Jude

Theme

- The letter of Jude also is a polemic against false teachers who have penetrated the church, arguably it seems in greater numbers than the time of 2 Peter
- The heresies themselves are not described in detail or rebutted, rather the heretics are attacked

Authorship

- The author identifies as Jude a brother of James, likely not referring to the apostle James of the trio (Peter, James, John)
- Herod Agrippa I martyred that James at an early date
- The writer is referring to James the leader of the Jerusalem church and half brother of Jesus
- That would make Jude a half brother of Jesus too, but he modestly describes himself as a servant of Jesus Christ
- The date of the letter is uncertain, but late enough for heretics to make serious inroads into the church

Outline

- Greeting (1–2)
- Entrance of false teachers into the church (3–4)
- Ungodly character and coming judgment of the false teachers (5–16)
- Resistance against false teachers (17–23)
- Benediction (24–25)

Text

False Teachers

- Jude had intended to write a doctrinal treatise but false teachers entering the church has forced him to change the letter into a call to fight for the truth of the gospel

Pseudepigraphal References

- vv. 14–15 Jude quotes 1 Enoch alluding to Michael's dispute with Satan
- He also seems to refer to the Assumption of Moses although that book has not survived



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1 John

Theme

- 1 John gives several criteria for testing those who professed to be Christian teachers in order to distinguish between heresy from orthodoxy and false teachers from faithful

Criteria for True Christian Profession

- John discusses 3 criteria for determining genuine Christian profession:
 - 1) righteous living
 - 2) love for other believers
 - 3) belief in Jesus as the incarnate Christ

Literary Form, Address, and Purpose

- Likely written toward the end of the first century by the apostle John
- This letter has no introduction, greeting, or concluding salutations
- It may have been a general tract for the whole church, but the affectionate address to my dear children implies a limited circle of Christians that he knows well
- Early church tradition records John living in Ephesus during his old age, so this is likely a general letter written in sermoniac style to Christians he came to know in Asia Minor in the region around Ephesus
- John states his purpose for writing is to strengthen the readers' knowledge, joy and assurance in Christian faith over against false teaching

Anti-gnostic Polemic

- *Cerinthianism*: the heresy of Gnosticism was likely growing in Christendom by the time John wrote
- *Docetism*: other gnostics tried to avoid the incarnation and bodily death of Jesus by saying he only seemed human (dokein = to seem)
- It may seem ironic today that the first christological heresy attacked Jesus's humanity rather than his deity

Outline

- Prologue: Eyewitnesses incarnation of Christ basis for Christian fellowship (1:1–4)
- Criterion of righteous conduct (1:5–2:6)
- Criterion of mutual Christian love (2:7–17)
- Criterion of incarnational christology (2:18–27)
- Criterion of righteous conduct (2:28–3:10a)
- Criterion of mutual Christian love (3:10b–24a)
- Criterion of incarnational christology (3:24b–4:6)
- Criterion of mutual Christians love (4:7–5:3)
- Criterion of righteous conduct (5:4–21)

Text

- After claiming firsthand knowledge of Jesus's life, John insists that true Christians live righteously (not sinless), they love each other, and they believe the truth about Jesus Christ
- Sinlessness? We should note that the language in chapter 3 about not sinning cannot mean flawlessness since chapter 1 has already asserted that if we say we have no sin we are deceiving ourselves
- Sin unto death: mention of a sin leading to death, a sin undeserving of intercessory prayer, likely refers to apostasy warned against in Hebrews which has been exhibited by gnostic heretics and results in irrevocable condemnation



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2 John

Canonicity and Authorship

- There is only weak attestation of these 2 letters in the patristic writings likely because of their brevity
- However, the earliest church had no doubt that the apostle John wrote them
- In both John identifies himself as the elder, not in the sense of an officer of the local church but in the sense of an elder statesman of the church at large, meaning an apostle
- This title contrasts with John's favourite designation of his audience, my dear children

2 John Themes, Purpose, and Address

- Introduction: greeting (1–3)
- Exhortation to Christian love (4–6)
- Warning against false doctrine and entertainment of false teachers (7–11)
- Conclusion: hope for coming visit and second greeting (12–13)

2 John Outline

- Christian love and truth dominate this letter
- Its purpose is to warn against showing hospitality to false teachers
- The recipients are the elect lady and her children
- It seems likely that the elect lady personifies a local church and her children its individual members
- The warning against false teachers and the command to love each other are more appropriate to a church rather than a family



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3 John

Theme, Address, and Purpose

- This letter focuses on a church dispute
- The recipients likely live around Ephesus
- John sends the letter to Gaius:
 - To commend Gaius for hospitality to the brothers
 - To rebuke Diotrephes (a self-assertive leader) for his lack of hospitality to the brothers, for his dictatorial ways, and for his opposition to John's apostolic authority
 - To recommend Demetrius who likely carries the letter
- Demetrius may need the recommendation due to moving from the Ephesian church to the church where Gaius lives or because he is an itinerant teacher like those whom Diotrephes refused hospitality

Outline

- Introduction: greeting (1)
- Commendation of Gaius's hospitality to traveling Christian workers (2–8)
- Condemnation of the rebellion of Diotrephes against apostolic authority and his refusal of hospitality to traveling Christian workers (9–11)
- Commendation of Demetrius (12)
- Conclusion: prospect of coming visit and final greeting (13–14)