Chapter Twelve  

The General Letters

Introduction

The Pauline Letters are known for their writer and named explicitly for their readers. Conversely, the General Letters are known for their readers, a broad audience not connected a particular congregation, and named for their often pseudonymous writers. Because of this general Christian readership these letters are also known as the Catholic Epistles.

Written late in late first century and early second century CE, these letters focus less on the specific relationships between apostolic testimony and early church leadership and more on expansive reassurance to Christians living as a minority group throughout the Roman Empire. While some letters are not, in fact, letters, the books continue to model Hellenistic literary and philosophical styles and reflect the era’s eschatological concerns.

The canonization process for the New Testament was fraught for many of these texts as Christian doctrine developed, likely due to conflicting messages regarding the nature of salvation and the role of Jewish tradition. For some scholars and theologians, there is an intense focus on identifying the “canon within a canon,” a reference to the biblical texts that have been included in the canon from the very beginning (ca. 4th century CE). Scholar Kyle Keefer reminds us readers, though, that, “From a literary standpoint, it makes little sense to speak of canon within a canon. All voices in the text must be allowed to speak; otherwise the reading fails” (Keefer 113).

James

Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures. (James 1:17-18)

Tradition has it was James, the brother of Jesus, who wrote the book of James. Careful analysis of the language of the text suggests a different conclusion, however, according to scholar Howard Kee:
the rather sophisticated Greek literary style, the evidence of impact from Stoic thought, and the learned vocabulary of this writing – as well as substantive differences in content from the Jesus tradition – point to its having been written by someone steeped in Graeco-Roman culture, including exposure to Greek philosophical traditions. (Kee 322)

With no decisive date for the text, in the introduction to the book of James found in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible NRSV*, scholar Timothy B. Cargal suggests that the cumulative effect of literary details such as the symbolic sense of readers, “the twelve tribes in the Dispersion,” point to a Jewish Christian audience living after the time of the apostle Paul’s letters (Cargal 2119).

Cargal also suggests that we readers use the thematic structure in the first chapter of James as a guide for the remaining passages:

- **Testing.** “My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing” (1:2-4).

- **Wisdom.** “If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you” (1:5).

- **Consistency.** “But ask in faith, never doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind; for the doubter, being double-minded and unstable in every way, must not expect to receive anything from the Lord” (1:6-8).

As you read, track your experience using these markers to see the ways in which James joins Paul’s discussion of the relationship between “faith and works,” and addresses ethical guidelines and social justice concerns (see the Questions for Further Exploration and Discussion below).

*The Johannine Letters: 1, 2 and 3 John*
See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. (1 John 3:1)

John the Evangelist is not the writer of what we know to be the Johannine letters, but there is a thematic connection that explains their titular attribution: “We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life” (1 John 1:1). Historical details—both in the texts and known from historical records—clearly suggest that this trio of letters was written later than the Gospel, so we understand this opening as metaphorical rather than the literal.

Further, according to scholar Pheme Perkins in their introduction to 1 John in The New Oxford Annotated Bible NRSV, we know that the initial readers of books of 1, 2 and 3 John were later members of the early Christian church, ones who were living removed in time from the physical life of Jesus and who were experiencing a schism: “A community that had been unified through a period of persecution by Jewish authorities has split over interpretation of Jesus and salvation. Its author seeks to reassure readers that they possess the truth revealed through Jesus” (Perkins 2137). While 1 John speaks to this community more broadly, 2 and 3 John are private letters sent at a later time.

Ultimately, these letters are dated at around 100 CE, and readers can thus use these letters as a lens back toward the Gospel of John, particularly using 1 John and John 13-17.

The key, recurring themes in the Johannine letters include the following:

- **Jesus as the Advocate.** “...But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2: 1b-2).

- **God as Light.** “This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5).

- **On the nature of the Antichrist.** “...and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. And this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you heard that it is coming; and now it is already in the world” (1 John 4:3b).
• **Love is Godly.** “No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us” (1 John 4:12).

• **Abidance in the teachings of Jesus.** “Do not receive into the house or welcome anyone who comes to you and does not bring this teaching” (2 John v. 10).

• **Imitation as an ethical act.** “Beloved, do not imitate what is evil but imitate what is good. Whoever does good is from God; whoever does evil has not seen God” (3 John v. 11).

**The Petrine Letters: 1 and 2 Peter**

Because of its style and narrative detail, the book of 1 Peter it thought to have been written by a disciple of the apostle Simon Peter at the end of the first century CE. A real letter, the book is fashioned in the Pauline tradition and seeks to reassure a general Christian audience suffering under increasing marginalization in Roman society. Scholar M. Eugene Boring describes it this way in his introduction to the text in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible NRSV*, “Christians live their lives in the time between Christ’s resurrection and return. The Christological pattern of suffering and rejection is foundational for the ethic 1 Peter commends…” (Boring 2126-2127).

Thus, the opening chapter serves to remind readers that their new Christian identity – especially their “inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven” – requires a new standard of living: “Therefore prepare your minds for action; discipline yourselves; set all our hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed. Like obedient children, do not be conformed to the desires that you formerly had in ignorance” (1:13-14). When the writer chides readers to not be “surprised” at their circumstances, in chapter 4, he deepens this instruction, “But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ’s sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed” (4: 13).

A Christological focus and instructions for ethical living comprise chapters 2-4, framed by this ontological cue, “For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit…” (3:18).

Patrick A. Tiller explains that the pseudonymous text of 2 Peter comes from Rome sometime during the end of the first century/beginning of the second century CE.
Chronologically, it is perhaps the last authored text in the New Testament and biblical canon. Uncommonly, it is written “as a first-person narrative, [a] written delivery of the final words of Peter to all who share his faith,” Tiller writes in his introduction to the book for *The New Oxford Annotated Bible NRSV* (2132). Thus, despite its title, there is no authorial connection between 1 and 2 Peter, though you will see that they do, indeed, share thematic concerns.

With its noted connection to the book of Jude, 2 Peter participates in its contemporary apocalyptic concerns, evident from the opening chapter: “Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may become participants of the divine nature” (1:4). The book closes with a similarly explicit warning, “But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home” (3:13).

The work in between exhorts its audience to live blamelessly, “according to the wisdom given” by Paul (3:15), and it pulls from Jewish and Greek apocalyptic traditions warning of false prophets (see chapter 7 on Apocalypse).

**Questions for Further Exploration and Discussion**

1. In what ways do you see universal law under Hellenism thematically reflected in the text of James?

2. In what ways does this verse from James reflect the Jewish wisdom tradition: “Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes” (4:14)? How does that connection help us better understand James’ audience?

3. What can we learn about 1 Peter’s audience from this verse: “The end of all things is near; therefore, be serious and discipline yourselves for the sake of your prayers” (4:7)?

4. To what literary genre can we attribute 2 Peter’s claims about “new heavens” and “new earths”? What does this reveal about the writer’s era?

5. Beyond the opening of 1 John, what are other examples from the Johannine letters that help us better understand them as a reflection (or extension) of the Gospel of John?
6. Describe the relationship implied when the General Letters’ writers refer to their readers as “children.” How does that compare to the references of “beloved” and “brothers and sisters”? What are we to understand from such language choices?

**Works Cited and Further Reading**

