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Approaches to the Catholic Epistles as a Canonical Collection

A *Status Quaestionis*

Inspired by the prospect of a canonical reading of Scripture, there is a small group of scholars who have begun to consider the implications of reading the Catholic Epistles as a canonically significant collection. What follows is a brief survey of emerging scholarship revolving around the question of how the Catholic Epistles might be read as a collection in canonical context.[1]

1. SURVEY OF APPROACHES

Peter Davids

Peter Davids has been a major contributor to the study of the Catholic Epistles. He has written major commentaries on James, 1 Peter, and 2 Peter and Jude as well as numerous articles and chapters on these texts.

In an article considering how the Catholic Epistles provide a glimpse into the canonical formation of the Old and New Testaments, Davids reveals how he might read the Catholic Epistles as a collection in context of the developing canon. The first sentence of his article outlines his understanding of canon: "When one uses the term canon . . . one usually means the

1. What follows is an expanded version of Lockett, "Are the Catholic Epistles a Canonically Significant Collection?," 62–80.

collections of books originating among the Israelites . . . commonly referred to as the Old Testament, and the collections of books originating within the Jesus movement in the first century, commonly referred to as the New Testament."[2] Davids thinks of canon as a fixed list of texts or a standardized collection, rather than an authoritative rule or norm.

With this understanding of canon, he first looks back at the formation of the Old Testament books through the lens of the Catholic Epistles and then reflects on the ways the Catholic Epistles shed light on the process of New Testament canonization. In his New Testament section, Davids considers David Nienhuis's book, *Not By Paul*, and Nienhuis's thesis that the Epistle of James was composed in the late second century in the name of the Lord's brother both in order to balance a misreading of Paul, and as a piece of intentional canon to introduce a Catholic Epistles collection. He finds Nienhuis's thesis doubtful and offers a critique of his work. Davids concedes that

> it is possible that Nienhuis is correct in arguing that James and Jude bracket the eventual order of the Catholic Epistles because they were both viewed as brothers of Jesus, which would explain the separation of Jude from 2 Peter. Furthermore, he may be correct that there was an attempt to get a "pillars" collection of James, Peter, and John . . . This, however, could indicate later reading of the letters in canonical context and so point to the *history of hermeneutics* rather than *earlier composition*.[3]

For Davids, the central problem with Nienhuis's observations is that they do not originate from historical exegesis of the text, but rather as hermeneutical observations derived from second-century reception-history. Davids follows the traditional historical-critical approach that relies on a historically reconstructed, first-century context to play the primary role in determining the meaning of the text. He implicitly sets the historical composition of the text over against its later reception in terms of primary hermeneutical importance. As an example of this separation, Davids offers two potential explanations for the Catholic Epistles as a group based on historical probability, "two reasons for a collection of 7 [Catholic Epistles] alongside the Pauline 12 or 13 and the gospels were likely that (1) it made the codices less bulky and (2) it allowed churches and rich individuals to purchase them in groups rather than having to come up with funds to purchase the whole NT (in whatever form it was at the time of purchase)."[4] Though either of

2. Davids, "Catholic Epistles as a Canonical Janus," 403.
3. Ibid., 412n28; emphasis added.
4. Ibid.

these situations may have played a role in the particular development of the Catholic Epistles as a collection, both seem historically reductionistic. Would the final form of Christian Scripture be shaped by such accidental concerns as how bulky a manuscript might become? What might this kind of pragmatism have done to the Old Testament?

The strength of Davids's approach is that he describes the individual stories of how each of the Catholic Epistles came into the canon, yet he does not move beyond this description. He concludes the Catholic Epistles teach us that "the development of the canon was a messy process at best."[5] This messy process essentially refers to the individual journey which each of the seven letters took on their way into the New Testament canon list (which unfortunately overlooks the fact that most New Testament texts entered the canon as *established collections*—see chapter 3). Davids notes that the Catholic Epistles "are windows into the state of the OT 'canon' in the first 50 to 100 years of church history . . . They are also windows into the process of canonization of the NT, both in their references to the traditions and works that would eventually form the NT and in the reception that they themselves received."[6] Clearly the window through which Davids looks is that of the historical development of a list of official books that would eventually be called canon in the early fourth century. Whereas further research into the individual histories of each of the seven letters of the Catholic Epistles is needed, the growth of the New Testament canon in collections of texts (e.g., Gospels, Pauline Corpus) suggests exploring how the Catholic Epistles was included into the canon as a discrete collection well before a final list of canonical New Testament texts fixed in the fourth century—something Davids does not consider.

In summary, Davids works with a narrower view of canon as a fixed list rather than an authoritative rule, he maintains a separation of first-century historical composition from subsequent reception-history, and follows the strategy of tracing the individual histories of each of the Catholic Epistles into the present New Testament canon. These three moves would likely characterize Davids's approach if he were to pursue the question of the canonical significance of the Catholic Epistles collection in fuller detail.

Karl-Wilhelm Niebuhr

Among German scholars, the so-called "canonical approach" has not been widely accepted. Except for a few Roman Catholic scholars, the canonical

5. Ibid., 415.
6. Ibid., 416.

context for interpreting Scripture has been overshadowed by more historical-critical concerns in Germany, a fact that leads Childs to lament in a footnote,

> I find it both surprising and disheartening that a leading German New Testament scholar from Halle (the home of Tholuck, Kähler, and Schniewind!) could confidently assert that the emphasis on the exegetical function of the final form of the canonical New Testament text has been fully overcome by 250 years of historical critical research.[7]

Karl-Wilhelm Niebuhr is an exception to this situation. Niebuhr has written extensively on the Letter of James and, more recently, has focused on the influence of the Christian canon on New Testament interpretation in general and the Catholic Epistles particularly. Whereas, like Davids, Niebuhr operates within the framework of historical-criticism, his openness to the insights of reception-history allows him to find more room to incorporate the insights of canon formation and reception into his findings. In two chapter-length contributions, Niebuhr offers an outline for his reading the Catholic Epistles in canonical context.[8] Several insights surface from these two publications.

First, a controlling concern for Niebuhr is the "reception process" itself. This process includes the reading, collecting, editing, and final canonizing of the texts in the New Testament. He assesses the "reception process" through the lens of the readers. Yet, rather than defining the readers of the text in purely historical-critical terms, Niebuhr argues: "Not only the first readers . . . are to be understood as [the text's] readers, in the sense of an interpretation that is focused on the reception process and its theological value."[9] Thus alongside the first readers, the perspective of later readers sheds light on the reception process and theological significance of these texts. He continues, "The only access we have to those first readers is via the text . . . That they did not remain the only readers is proved by the history of [the text's] transmission and influence."[10] Here the sheer fact of a later canon forces the insight that in addition to the first readers, subsequent readers found Scripture speaking a direct word to them and sheds light on

7. Childs, *Church's Guide*, 253n2 (referring to Udo Schnelle).

8. See Niebuhr, "James in the Minds of the Recipients," in Niebuhr and Wall, eds., *The Catholic Epistles and Apostolic Tradition*, 43–54; and Niebuhr, "Exegese im kanonischen Zusammenhang," in Auwers and De Jonge, eds., *The Biblical Canons,* 557–84.

9. Niebuhr, "James in the Minds of the Recipients," in Niebuhr and Wall, eds., *The Catholic Epistles and Apostolic Tradition*, 51.

10. Ibid.

the reception process itself. In the next chapter we will further consider Neibuhr's "reception process" under the heading of "canonical process."

Focusing on readers from within the "reception process" highlights the function of the New Testament as an authoritative rule, not just a fixed list of books. Niebuhr argues,

> We want to restrict ourselves, in our contribution, to the realization of the shape of the canon as it stood holistically before the readers or copyists of the Bible and as it, in principle, still stands to this day. In this respect our approach differs from that of the description of the history of canon.[11]

While Davids's approach could be characterized as the description of the history of canon—the description of how individual texts came to be part of the New Testament canon—Niebuhr aims to strike a balance between historical description and theological reception. He is interested in the process of canonization, yet without reducing this process to merely giving account of the individual trajectories each text followed into the canon. Rather, he views the text through the eyes of readers within the reception process itself attending to how these texts functioned as norming standard, not just how they became fixed in an authoritative list.

For Niebuhr, there are hermeneutically significant clues derived from this reception process. Traces left by these readers of reception history are discernable as "reading instructions" in the final form of the text, suggested by the prescripts affixed to the New Testament letters themselves.[12] He argues that these

> reading instructions [*Leseanweisungen*] that arise from the letter prescripts of the Pauline and the Catholic Epistles are more clear. The naming of authors allows [the letters'] ordering to be known by the recipients, which, as we have seen, is largely determined by the narrative representations [of the authors] in the Gospels and Acts. Moreover, the accompanying characterizations of the authors and the addressees in the letters, through a number of cross-references, are important for the interconnected [*zusammenhängende*] reading of the New Testament letter collections.[13]

11. Niebuhr, "Exegese im kanonischen Zusammenhang," 561, in Auwers and DeLonge, eds., *The Biblical Canons* (all translations of this work are my own).

12. Trobisch also makes this observation (*First Edition of the New Testament*, 45–54). Chapter 4 in the present work will further engage the presence of "reading instructions" by considering super- and subscripted titles, *nomina sacra*, and chapter divisions.

13. Niebuhr, "Exegese im kanonischen Zusammenhang," in Auwers and DeLonge,

Here we find two more important elements in Niebuhr's approach which are dependent upon each other: 1) reading the Catholic Epistles in light of the narrative framework provided by the Gospels, and especially Acts, which in turn 2) draws together what Niebuhr calls "the continuity of personalities between canonical sections" (*die Personenkontinuität zwischen den Kanonteilen*).

The naming of each of the authors of the Catholic Epistles via each letter's prescript intentionally refers back to the narrative introduction and development of the same characters in the Gospels and Acts. And, through these narratival connections, "all information about the authors from the Gospels and Acts appear as guidelines for reading their letters. One of Acts' decisive guidelines that arises from the readers of the canon is the apostles' community with each other."[14] In this way, the book of Acts serves as "a hinge" for the entire New Testament canon, "It allows the inclusion of all apostolic writings into a single narrative context."[15]

Furthermore, the cohesive narrative context created by reading the epistles through the canonical lens of Acts creates a kind of apostolic harmony. Niebuhr argues that the interactions between the apostles in Acts serve "as model cases to resolve conflicts among themselves and [serve] as models of unity."[16] Even conflict between Paul and James is resolved by the narrative structure of Acts.

> Readers of the canon learn that the conflict in Antioch could not permanently destroy the community of the Apostles from some references to Peter and James in Paul, but especially from the remaining apostolic epistles. There was no hint of a conflict between the apostles in them, not even in the Epistle of James. Instead, the letters of the apostles are now the protagonists themselves, together peacefully joining hands in the canon as in Gal 2:9.[17]

Thus, for Niebuhr, a result of focusing on the readers of the reception process is to follow traces of their "reading instructions" left in the canon. Such

The Biblical Canons, 575.

14. Niebuhr, "James in the Minds of His Recipients," in Niebuhr and Wall, eds., *The Catholic Epistles and Apostolic Tradition*, 51.

15. Niebuhr, "Exegese im kanonischen Zusammenhang," in Auwers and DeLonge, eds., *The Biblical Canons,* 583. Niebuhr makes this same argument in, "Die Gestalt des neutestamentlichen Kanons," in Ballhorn and Steins, eds., *Der Bibelkanon*, 105–7.

16. Niebuhr, "Exegese im kanonischen Zusammenhang," in Auwers and DeLonge, eds., *The Biblical Canons,* 583.

17. Ibid., 574.

guided reading leads to a narrative coherence of the entire New Testament marked especially by Acts. This narrative continuity leads to an "untarnished image of the apostolic community as it is pictured in the book of Acts. Conflicts between apostles, as they are seen in Paul's letters are in this way 'canonically resolved.'"[18]

While concerned for a final canonical form that provides hermeneutical prompts for reading the New Testament, Niebuhr is clearly concerned for how such prompts developed in the canonized text by means of the reception process. For Niebuhr, history is key in building up an image of the ("canonical") reader within reception history. He accepts second-century evidence into the process of interpreting texts composed in the first (unlike Davids), yet his emphasis upon the reception history of the audience of the New Testament remains meaningfully connected to historical sensibilities. Niebuhr finds canonically significant prompts for reading the Catholic Epistles as a canonical collection from the reception process in the history between composition and canonization, unlike, we shall see, Nienhuis and Wall.

David Nienhuis and Robert W. Wall

In their recent book, *Reading the Epistles of James, Peter, John and Jude: The Shaping and Shape of a Canonical Collection*, David Nienhuis and Robert Wall offer the first monograph-length argument for the canonical function of the Catholic Epistles collection. Rather than viewing the Catholic Epistles from a historical-critical point of view which understands the discontinuity and difference between the letters as a symptom of their historical and cultural points of origin, their work "inclines the angle of approach toward the Catholic Epistles differently, admitting into evidence new findings from the canonical period when these seven books were formed into a second collection of letters."[19] They argue

> that the canonical collection of four witnesses, James, Peter, John and Jude ("the Pillars of Jerusalem"), be read together as the interpenetrating parts of a coherent theological whole. The historical process that formed them into a collection can also help guide the church's present use of its sevenfold Epistle as Scripture for spiritual wisdom and moral guidance.[20]

18. Ibid., 584.
19. Nienhuis and Wall, *Reading*, 10.
20. Ibid.

This "historical process" which helps "guide the church's present use" of Scripture is comprised of the following convictions.

First, the point of canonization is hermeneutically more important than the point of composition. In contrast to the majority of modern approaches to the Catholic Epistles that look to the historical circumstances of composition for understanding their meaning, Nienhuis and Wall focus on the texts' "formation and final form as a discrete canonical collection. We contend that this is their *real* point of origin as Scripture."[21] And thus their "project places significant historical interest in the *canonization* of biblical texts (and not their *composition*) as their real 'point of origin' as the church's Scripture."[22] It is at the point of canonization where the text "displays the aesthetic that is maximally effective for understanding the authorized roles of a biblical canon."[23] The reason for such a shift is a deep suspicion of modern notions of authorship. The same passage continues: "The deep logic of this shift of focus, from composition to canonization, with its various additional claims of canonical rather than authorial intent, follows the epistemology of modernity's defense of a text's 'original meaning.'"[24]

Second, in highlighting the moment of canonization over composition, Nienhuis and Wall offer Nicholas Wolterstorff's concept of "aesthetic excellence" as shorthand for understanding this important move. Whereas Wolterstorff argues that people are drawn to art that inspires and is recognizably excellent, Nienhuis and Wall see the same characteristics as true of the canon in three specific ways. 1) The early church "discerned when the

21. Ibid., 9.

22. Ibid., 11.

23. Ibid., 12. This is consistent with Wall's larger project. In the end, the receiving community's reading arbitrates the meaning and canonical significance of the text: "The intended meaning of the biblical text . . . is not the property of its author but of the Church to whom Scripture belongs. The hegemony of modern criticism in the scholarly guilds of biblical interpretation tends to hold Scripture captive to an academic rather than a religious end" (Wall, "Canonical Context and Canonical Conversations," in Green and Turner, eds., *Between Two Horizons,* 165–82). Similarly, elsewhere Wall notes: "The aim of faithful exegesis is not to hunt down 'the' normative meaning of a text based on what the author or first readers intended . . . The goal of critical exegesis is to build a consensus within a community of readers, agreeing on what a text plainly says ideally in anticipation of its various performances as a sacred text" (Wall, *1 and 2 Timothy and Titus*, 2–3). Poirier rightly criticizes Wall here: "To make the Church the arbiter of Scripture's meaning is to invert the New Testament's apostle/church model, turning that which formed the superstructure in the New Testament model (viz., the Church) into the foundation, and turning that which formed the foundation in the New Testament model (viz., the apostles) into the superstructure" ("The Canonical Approach and the Idea of 'Scripture,'" 370).

24. Nienhuis and Wall, *Reading*, 11.

Bible had become shaped into that particular literary form which would more effectively enable the Spirit to use it in performing those religious roles that form a holy people who know and serve God."[25] The usefulness of the text in forming a community of faith is the criterion for "excellence" here. Therefore, they note that the "church's decisions . . . were rational and based upon solid evidence of a text's spiritual utility . . . Scripture is a beautiful thing because it performs its public roles well."[26] 2) The early church was able to recognize and receive texts into the canon because "there are literary properties inherent to the biblical canon that might naturally draw readers to its wisdom or into its narrative world as a story of higher quality."[27] The canon is excellent because it bears superior literary and artistic qualities that commend it to the church. Especially as the diversity of individually composed texts now stand together in a coherent whole, the church receives Scripture as something "aesthetically excellent" and narratively whole. 3) Nienhuis and Wall argue,

> Like the artist who changes the wording of a poem or a line of a painting because it makes the poem better or the painting's image more arresting, the indwelling Spirit forms a community's capacity to recognize which particular bits and what form are necessary in constructing a single biblical canon that is most effective in accomplishing its holy purposes.[28]

This "aesthetic excellence" entails both a shift away from authorial intent, and from Niebuhr's audience of reception-history, to the believing community's use of the text as the moment of authorization. Whereas Niebuhr's readers of the reception process are historically constructed

25. Ibid., 15. See also the almost verbatim passage in Wall, *1 and 2 Timothy and Titus*, 26–27.

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid. Rather than such an "aesthetic excellence," Rowe notes that Childs's canonical approach sought a divine criterion to underwrite Scripture rather than an "aesthetic" one: "For Childs, the entire project of canonical interpretation hinges in its intellectual suppositions not so much on a literary phenomenon, the final form of a text, as it does on the divine referent of scripture. The reason we read all these different and disparate documents together as one book, that is, is not because there is something *ipso facto* literarily pristine or exegetically satisfying about final forms . . . but because together all these various texts constitute Israel's and the church's witness to the one God" ("The Doctrine of God Is a Hermeneutic," 158). Rowe understands that Childs's version of canonical approach relies on the historical witness "to the one God" that is accessed in the final form of the text, rather than what seems for Nienhuis and Wall to be a more literary phenomenon dependent upon the appreciation and recognition of the faithful reading community.

28. Ibid., 16.

and derive from within the space *between* composition and canonization, the readers for Nienhuis and Wall are any believing community that subsequently receives and is shaped by the text. Because it is the moment at which the church recognizes the biblical canon that these texts function as Scripture, it is ultimately *use* that is determinative of the text's "aesthetic excellence" and, therefore, its authority.[29]

Using the idea of "aesthetic excellence" allows Nienhuis and Wall to suggest another important element in their approach. They note "*Scripture's formation into a textual analogue of the apostolic Rule of Faith*."[30] From Tertullian's version of the rule of faith, Nienhuis and Wall isolate five key theological elements: God the creator, Christ Jesus the redeemer, the community of the Spirit, Christian discipleship, and consummation and new creation.[31] Because these loci become key theological convictions of the church, Nienhuis and Wall read them as hermeneutical prompts that guide a canonical reading of the Catholic Epistles. Rather than seeing these later theological developments as disconnected and irrelevant to the Catholic Epistles, they actually shape the theological coherence of the Catholic Epistles. Nienhuis and Wall read each of the Catholic Epistles through the theological prism of these five theological loci. They use the rule of faith as a maximal rather than minimal tool for theological reflection, a point which will be developed below.

Finally, as implied in the quotations above, the *church's* reception and use of the text is key in their canonical approach.

> Our version of the canonical approach is a species of theological interpretation that is vitally interested in a careful reconstruction of the canonical process as a deep reservoir of important interpretive clues for using Scripture to inform the witness and form the faith of today's church. The church's discernment of the Spirit's leading role in the production of the biblical canon is not predicated on the identity of a text's author but on its effect in forming a congregation that is wise for salvation and mature for good works.[32]

29. Note Kruger's discussion of a "community determined canon" based on use by the ecclesiastical community (chapter 2 in *Canon Revisited*). However, Kruger is unable to distinguish between Wall's concerns for the community's reception of the canon with those of Childs (see especially 52–59).

30. Nienhuis and Wall, *Reading*, 13.

31. Ibid., 72–73.

32. Ibid., 12.

Again, it is the process of canonization that provides ecclesial prompts and hermeneutical guidance for the church's use of the text—a process that becomes the focus of exegesis for Nienhuis and Wall.[33]

In summary, like Niebuhr, Nienhuis and Wall refuse to bracket out second-century reception history from reading the Catholic Epistles. They insist, however, that the point of canonization is hermeneutically more important than the moment of historical composition. It is as the believing community recognizes a text's "aesthetic excellence" and in turn uses that text to shape the community's beliefs and morals that the final form of the text finds its authority. Here we see how Nienhuis and Wall move beyond Niebuhr's notion of readers constructed via reception-history. Rather than the process within which readers of the "reception process" read, collect, edit, and finally shape the texts, it is the theological apparatus of the rule of faith that is the definitive hermeneutical guide. To be clear, this is a move to maximize the moment of canonization at the expense of the canonical process itself. Because the church's reception plays such a key role in the canonical approach they are able to use Tertullian's version of the rule of faith as a constructive template for discovering the theological coherence in the Catholic Epistles.

Carey C. Newman

Originally in a paper delivered at the International Society of Biblical Literature meeting in St. Andrews, which has now been published in *Perspectives in Religious Studies*, Carey C. Newman offers his own version of reading the Catholic Epistles as a canonical collection. His contribution focuses on isolating a particular "apostolic theology" shared across the Catholic Epistles, which, in turn, indicates how the collection, read along with Acts, functioned as a second collection of canonical letters alongside of the Pauline collection.[34]

First, Newman argues that there are particular "places where the CE make coded references to an identifiable and accepted summary of apostolic theology," namely to "an already established, known, and accepted apostolic teaching."[35] James refers to the "word of truth" (1:18), 1 Peter speaks of the "living and abiding word of God" (1:23), "the word which was preached to

33. For further analysis of Nienhuis and Wall, see Lockett, "Not Whether But What Kind"; and the response by Wall and Nienhuis, "On Reading Canonical Collections: A Response."

34. Newman, "Jude 22, Apostolic Theology," 367–78.

35. Ibid., 369.

you" (1:24), "the gospel" (4:17), the "true grace" (5:12), and 1 John contains repeated references to "the truth" (1:6, 8; 2:4, 21; 3:18, 19) all of which, for Newman, point to a common apostolic teaching. Second John 4 also refers to "the truth" and warns those who do not abide "in the teaching of Christ" (2 John 9). Newman understands these as references to the "tradition about Christ, handed down by the apostles, that is foundational for constituting the community of the faithful ([2 John] 10). This is the apostolic teaching that has been taught 'from the very beginning' ([2 John] 5) and which must be confessed by the church."[36] Noting as well the shared precious "faith" in 2 Peter 1:1 and Jude's command to "contend for the faith" (3), Newman concludes: "That such apostolic teaching could be invoked without further commentary demonstrates the likelihood that, early on, this teaching had (i) reached some sort of recognizable critical mass and (ii) obtained something of a common acceptance. When Acts is read alongside the CE . . . (iii) appeals to this common apostolic teaching as a primary convictional warrant acquire further apostolic underwriting."[37] Finally, for Newman, "the repeated appeals to the accepted teaching hint at the canonical role of the CE: they collectively work to refute decidedly *un*-apostolic construals."[38]

Newman discovers a second form of evidence in the references to "creedal/hymnic/confessional formulations fossilized in the CE themselves."[39] Here he is careful to head off a number of unhelpful trajectories in analyzing the Catholic Epistles with respect to these underlying elements. "The central issues," Newman argues,

> are not whether this or that text is or is not a creedal fragment; how to determine where the fragment starts or stops; who originally penned the confession; whether the polarity of the original, so far as it can be recovered, is being reversed th[r]ough subsequent incorporation; whether the various stages of a specific confession's development and life setting can be determined; or, even, whether the preformed tradition is best labeled confession, creed or hymn.[40]

Rather, "The primary concern here is how these numerous creeds, hymns and confessions functioned in the CE and, as a theological trope, point to the canonical role of the CE."[41] First John records numerous positive and

36. Ibid., 370.
37. Ibid., 371.
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid.
40. Ibid., 372.
41. Ibid.

negative commands to confess "Jesus as the Christ," that Christ has "come in the flesh," and that "Jesus is the Son of God" (1:22, 23; 4:2, 15; 5:1, 5 and 2 John 7). Whereas this basic confession about Christ may be understood narrowly as referring to the incarnation of Jesus, Newman argues for a more expansive function for these confessions. He notes

> an alternative—and preferable—way to understand these confessions is as short hand for the full story of Jesus (incarnation, life, death, exaltation). It is often assumed that the short confessions "Jesus is the Christ" and "Jesus Christ is Lord" over time grew longer and more elaborate. However, it might well be that just the opposite is the case: "Jesus is the Christ" is an intentional (and later) condensation of a longer narrative. However one decides the issue, these short confessions, when read in light of the sermons in Acts (and other confessions in the CE as well), do invoke the larger narrative of Jesus and, most importantly, the cross and resurrection.[42]

Further, Newman highlights the opening of 1 Peter where blessing is pronounced "through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (1:3), and climatically, in 1 Peter 3:18–22 where believers are called to hope in the victory of Christ over all spiritual power as the new narrative in which they must endure suffering. For Newman, here again is clear evidence of commonly accepted apostolic theology. Drawing from this evidence he argues that these creedal elements in the Catholic Epistles are "distillations of commonly accepted apostolic teaching," which "are the best resource for unpacking the theological, communal, and behavioral implications of the earliest shared set of convictions in the earliest church."[43] And as such, these elements "lay enormous and scandalous stress upon the *cross and resurrection of Jesus* as the topical sequence for a story world" and "are thus the best index for determining the critical mass of a common apostolic theology" especially "for . . . showing how the CE collectively gave literary witness to a fundamental set of claims whose reassertion was central to the flourishing of earliest Christianity."[44]

In a final section Newman argues for the particular ways in which each of the seven letters are joined together in how they begin and end, especially through the repeated terms "truth" and/or "faith." He argues that "each of seven letters rhetorically bind their beginnings and endings together under

42. Ibid., 372–73.
43. Ibid., 374.
44. Ibid.

the catholic faith they reprise."[45] In attempting to demonstrate the overarching literary connection of the seven Catholic Epistles and the hermeneutical function of the Letter of James, Newman attempts to show how the participle διακρινομένους in Jude 22 should be translated "doubt" because of the guiding influence of the use of the same term in James 1:6. In other words, he argues that "the tradition works to clarify the meaning of the διακρινομένους, bringing it in line with James 1:6," and "thereby explicitly linking at the literary level the beginning and ending of the collection of the *epistoloi katholikai*."[46] This move is rather unconvincing.

Newman's contribution, similar to Nienhuis and Wall in allowing for the influence of reception history, offers two specific avenues into discovering the degree of theological coherence and unity in the Catholic Epistles by means of isolating elements of received "apostolic theology" and creedal elements in the texts themselves. These elements which are embedded in the literature itself are stronger resources for discovering the canonical shape and function of the Catholic Epistles than appealing to the text's "aesthetic excellence" or limiting the canonical force of the Catholic Epistles to its "use" by later communities of believers. Newman's approach is agreeable with Niebuhr's move to identify the reception of the text by early readers within this process and perhaps gives further textual tools to discover more about this process. Furthermore, a common element, which is shared by Niebuhr, Nienhuis and Wall, and Newman, is the key role of Acts which functions as a narrative framework within which the Catholic Epistles are understood. As will be apparent, the role of Acts is similarly important even in Childs's distinct approach, to which we now turn.

Brevard Childs

Brevard Childs has been the most prolific and vocal proponent of reading the Old and New Testaments in canonical context. However, Childs never explicitly argued for reading the Catholic Epistles as a canonically significant collection. Even more both Nienhuis and Wall have argued that Childs implicitly *denied* the possibility of such a reading. Considering whether the final form of the Catholic Epistles indicates intentional shaping as a collection, Nienhuis insists that "Childs himself doesn't think so."[47] Furthermore, Nienhuis and Wall together argue that, "Even Brevard Childs, whose work has set the standard for canonical approaches to the NT, saw no compel-

45. Ibid., 377.
46. Ibid.
47. Nienhuis, *Not by Paul*, 8n42.

ling reason to read the [Catholic Epistles] together as a singular canonical witness."[48]

As evidence, they appeal to Childs's brief discussion of the Catholic Epistles in his *New Testament as Canon*. In this two-page précis, Childs notes in "distinction from the collection of the four Gospels and the epistles of Paul . . . there was a third collection of New Testament writings which acquired the collective terminology of the 'catholic epistles'." Specifically discussing the function of the term "catholic epistles," Childs notes that there is "general agreement that the term was initially a formal one designating a letter addressed to a general or wide circle of readers."[49] In a final paragraph Childs concludes:

> In sum, *the term* remains a useful one to designate a collection of New Testament writings which is distinct from the Gospels and the Pauline corpus. *It* is neither a precise canonical nor a modern genre classification. *Its* usage has no great theological significance other than to reflect the church's growing concern that the New Testament letters be understood as universal, even when, in their original form they often carry a specific addressee (cf. II and III John).[50]

Nienhuis and Wall conclude from this final paragraph that Childs did not regard the discrete collection of seven letters as canonically significant. However, this is a misreading of Childs's central point.

When Childs argues that "it is neither a precise canonical nor a modern genre classification," the pronoun "it" refers back to "the term" in the first sentence: "*the term* remains a useful one to designate a collection." Childs's entire discussion focuses on the term "catholic epistles" (καθαλικαὶ ἐπιστολαί). He concludes that the title "catholic epistles" does designate a collection of New Testament writings, yet, because of its range of meaning, the term is not a precise classification of the "catholic" (=canonical) status of these particular letters. Thus, it is the term itself ("catholic epistles") that fails to bear canonical weight. Childs was concerned with the term's later use; namely, that the Catholic Epistles not be considered somehow more canonical than Paul's letters by Western Catholic interpreters.

This is all the more clear when considering the paragraph immediately preceding the one already quoted. This paragraph opens with a few brief comments regarding the internal ordering of the seven letters: though the order varies somewhat, the arrangement of James, Peter, John, Jude appears

48. Ninehuis and Wall, *Reading*, 5.
49. Childs, *New Testament as Cannon*, 494–95.
50. Ibid., 495; emphasis added.

in Eusebius, Cyril, and Athanasius, which is then fixed in the Vulgate by Jerome. He then considers the importance of the placement of this "collection" within the NT canon. Childs notes:

> Of perhaps more significance was the canonical ordering of the catholic epistles. The order which placed them immediately after the book of Acts was very ancient. Tischendorff and also Westcott and Hort attempted to restore this order in their editions of the Greek New Testament. However, the influence of Jerome through the Vulgate has been dominant; there the catholic epistles follow the Pauline.[51]

Why would Childs contend in one paragraph that the collection's placement within the NT canon is of superior significance to the letters' internal ordering only to conclude in the following paragraph that such a collection of letters has no precise canonical significance? His claim is that the term "catholic epistles" is an imprecise label for an otherwise canonically significant group of letters. Because the term "catholic" epistles took on the notion of "canonical" (of which there is an example in the Western tradition), Childs seems most concerned to deny that such a *title* elevated the canonical importance of these letters over those of Paul. Though Childs never fully develops an argument for viewing the Catholic Epistles as a canonically significant collection, this passage certainly does not provide evidence that Childs ever denied such a reading was possible.

Childs' voice, however, is not completely silent on the canonical context of the Catholic Epistles. Throughout his final book, *The Church's Guide For Reading Paul*, he refers to the sub-corpora of the New Testament as the Gospels, Pauline corpus and the Catholic Epistles, and remarks, "With the growing development of a written New Testament, the Pauline letters took their place as a fixed corpus along with the other literary units: Gospels, Acts, General Epistles, and Revelation."[52] Clearly Childs was open to reading the Catholic Epistles as a canonical collection alongside the canonical collections of Paul and the Gospels.

Though a comprehensive description of Childs's canonical approach is beyond the scope of this chapter, there are a few observations suggestive for the present survey. The next chapter will further outline the ways in which Childs's work informs the present argument.

First, Childs's view of canon is more inclusive than David's. Along with Wall and Nienhuis, Childs argues:

51. Ibid.

52. Childs, *Church's Guide*, 7.

> Canon is not just a listing of received books, but involves the process by which the [texts] were received, collected, transmitted, and shaped by the early apostolic church . . . The recognition of this context . . . provides a hermeneutical guide toward an understanding of the whole corpus as Scripture.[53]

But here is where Nienhuis and Wall part ways with Childs. Rather than insisting canonical interpretation is most concerned with the point of canonization at the expense of historical composition, Childs insists that "the modern theological function of canon lies in the literature itself as it has been treasured, transmitted and transformed."[54]

Furthermore, Childs forcefully argues that, "the function of canon is to privilege a particular reading of the biblical text, which the tradents of the evangelical tradition designated as the apostolic witness. This move thereby distinguished the form of the apostolic testimony from all later church tradition."[55] Rather than the church's use of the text at some later moment directed by the Spirit, Childs insists on an authoritative moment within the tradition distinguishing this witness of the text as fixed for later readers. This is in clear contrast to Nienhuis and Wall.

Another area of clear contrast between Childs and Nienhuis and Wall is the function of the rule of faith. As noted above, Nienhuis and Wall argue for the maximal use of the Rule of Faith as a template for the theological coherence in the Catholic Epistles. Though the canonical shaping did function like a rule of faith, Childs registers the problem with using the rule in such an overreaching way. Originally, Childs notes, the rule of faith had a much more discrete function; "[i]t was a negative criterion that set certain parameters within which the material functioned, but largely left to exegesis the positive role of interpretation within the larger construal."[56]

A similarity between Niebuhr, Nienhuis and Wall, and Childs is their view of Acts as a key narrative guide for reading both the Pauline and

53. Ibid., 253–54.

54. Childs, *Biblical Theology: A Proposal*, 39–40. Spina noted this in Childs as well: "Though Childs insists on the primacy of the canonical context for theological purposes, he does not regard the original historical setting as irrelevant. For Childs, however, recovering this context is not the final step in the exegetical task; it is only a prolegomenon. The question, then, is not whether to use critical tools but how, which is why those who have criticized him for returning to a precritical way of doing things have missed the point" (Spina, "Canonical Criticism: Childs Versus Sanders," in Massey et al., eds., *Interpreting God's Word for Today,* 165–90).

55. Childs, *Church's Guide*, 255. Childs continues: "The process of canonization did not remove the need for continuing interpretation, but it established a canonical context within which the ongoing exegetical activity functioned."

56. Childs, *Biblical Theology: A Proposal*, 41.

Catholic Epistle letter collections in canonical context. The canonical function of Acts more than anything else suggests Childs's approval of the canonical function of the Catholic Epistles. Childs notes "at the beginning of the second century . . . the book of Acts served to establish the legitimacy of the Pauline interpretation of the gospel, along with the other apostles, as the truthful apostolic witness to the crucified and resurrected . . . Lord."[57] Acts presented "the apostles as the legitimate guardians of the Jesus traditions, strengthened by the connection with the catholic letters of Peter, James, and John, and the portrait of Paul in Acts as in agreement with that of the letters. This orientation toward legitimating the apostolic proclamation is thus constitutive for an understanding of the New Testament canon."[58] The role of Acts with respect to the Catholic Epistle collection will be considered further in chapter 4. For the context of the present survey, these elements of Childs's canonical-hermeneutical approach will suffice.

2. SUMMARY AND ASSESSMENT

The views above run from roughly more historical (Davids, Niebuhr) to more theological (Nienhuis and Wall) with Childs (and perhaps Newman) attempting a balance. For the purposes of the present investigation, this survey surfaces several central issues inherent in the task of reading the Catholic Epistles as a significant canonical collection. In the following paragraphs we will list each of these issues and offer an initial assessment of how the particular issues have been handled in the literature so far. Using these issues as a starting point, the following chapter will clarify the approach of this study and will outline the canonical approach taken here.

57. Childs, *Church's Guide*, 226. Following Schröter, Childs rejects Harnack's view that Acts is part of the church's political agenda at the end of the second century "to shape its traditions toward the goal of early Catholicism." Rather, appreciating the Wirkungsgeschichte of Acts, "the Gospels and the Pauline letter corpus present two simultaneous stages of the development of the New Testament canon independently of each other, and each acknowledged early as authoritative." And furthermore, "none of the early Church Fathers assigned Acts the role of buttressing the authority of Paul that had long since been accepted. Rather, the expansion of Pauline tradition to all the apostles allows a combination of the Lukan Pauline traditions with the substantive contents of Acts to occur without a sense of undue friction" (Childs, *Church's Guide*, 230–31). Note that, rather than quelling a conflict between apostolic voices regarding the gospel, Childs understands that Acts endorses the equally authoritative witnesses of both canonical epistle collections.

58. Ibid., 231.

Definition of Canon

One's understanding of canon, both its definition and function, is the primary factor that shapes each approach. Childs himself noted in 1979 that "Much of the present confusion over the problem of canon turns on the failure to reach an agreement regarding the terminology."[59] Is canon a final, fixed list of books which first appeared in the fourth century or later? Such a view implies that to speak of canon in the third- or second-centuries is anachronistic and thus is an inappropriate concept with which to approach the interpretation of New Testament texts. Or is canon defined by how texts were used in the community? Thus texts are canonical at the point when they are used as scripture.[60] Of course the problem is clearly defining the boundaries of canon. A key feature distinguishing Davids from the rest is his view of canon as only a fixed list of texts rather than a standard or norm. Davids, furthermore, maintains the traditional distinction between the historical composition of the text over against its later theological reception. Neibuhr, Newman, Nienhuis and Wall, and Childs all argue that canon is more than a fixed list of texts. However, there are various ways in which the interpreter can understand the ongoing canonical significance of the text. Noting the importance of the process of canonization allows Niebuhr to consider how readers within the history of the text's reception would have read and understood the text. Thus, Niebuhr's approach is concerned with reception history. Nienhuis and Wall understand the *church's ongoing* reception and use of the text is key in their canonical approach.[61] In the next chapter we will consider a definition of canon that will guide the rest of the present work.

Composition versus Canonization

Because the text functions as scripture when the community receives it as such, Nienhuis and Wall emphasize the moment of canonization over that of composition. They focus on the texts' "formation and final form as a discrete canonical collection. We contend that this is their *real* point of

59. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, 51.

60. Chapman refers to this view as the "inclusive and functional" notion of canon ("Canon Debate"), Kruger prefers the term "functional" ("Definition of 'Canon,'" 9).

61. Nienhuis and Wall's notion of use as the criterion for canon is very similar to Kelsey (*Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology*, 89–112), who argues that Scripture is authoritative only when used by the believing community, not in and of itself. Claiming a text as "Scripture" is to describe how that text was used rather than making a comment about what the text is.

origin as Scripture."[62] "The deep logic of this shift of focus, from composition to canonization, with its various additional claims of canonical rather than authorial intent," they note, "follows the epistemology of modernity's defense of a text's 'original meaning.'"[63] Such a judgment is one made against modernist appeals to the ability to discover the historical author's meaning. Elsewhere Wall elaborates the concern over modernity's notions of authorship: "the most striking feature of modernity's quest of the real author of biblical texts is the tacit connection made (at least since the Reformation) between the text's author and the letter's apostolicity."[64] Wall's concern is that the apostolicity of the text is founded upon a modern historical reconstruction of the author conducted through the vehicle of historical-critical methodology. Over against such compositional concerns, Wall argues that "apostolicity of a biblical text is recognized by the church, not by modern historical constructions, but from its effects when it is used." Further, he notes that such churchly judgments "about apostolicity are therefore mostly intuitive rather than critical and are based on track records of practical use by Christians as a means of divine grace."[65] Wall continues, "Any reasonable definition of historical-critical orthodoxy can be reappropriated for defining the interpretive contingency of a text's canonization, except now the readers of a *canonical* text (rather than an authored one) are located differently both in relationship to their social worlds and in relationship to the biblical text."[66] Wall's readers are those who received the text after its final canonization. This is quite different from Niebuhr's attempt to isolate readers from within the "reception process" (or "canonical process" as we will discuss in the next chapter) who left "reading instructions" within the textual form of the canon itself.

Here again is where Childs parts ways with Nienhuis and Wall. Rather than insisting canonical interpretation is most concerned with the point

62. Nienhuis and Wall, *Reading*, 9.

63. Ibid., 11.

64. Wall, *1 and 2 Timothy and Titus*, 7.

65. Ibid. Wall (and perhaps Nienhuis) seems to pit history and theology against one another. Wall notes: "In this way the interpreter's move from the particularity of an ancient (or authored) text to the more universal meaning of a canonical (or church's) text may be facilitated." He continues, "the church's reception of the three letters to complete the Pauline canon for the not insignificant reason of providing 'church orders' (according to the Muratorian Canon) suggests an ongoing performance: the instruction of these letters forms and guides local congregations of Paul's tradents in every age and place, who then safeguard the canonical goods of his apostolate to help people reimagine Paul from one generation to the next" (*1 and 2 Timothy and Titus*, 8).

66. Ibid., 15–16.

of canonization at the expense of historical composition, Childs, more in keeping with Niebuhr, insists canon refers to

> the process by which the collection arose which led up to its final stage of literary and textual stabilization, that is, canonization proper. Emphasis was placed on the process to demonstrate that the concept of canon was not a late, ecclesiastical ordering which was basically foreign to the material itself, but that canon-consciousness lay deep within the formation of the literature. The term also serves to focus attention on the theological forces at work in its composition . . . [The] modern theological function of canon lies in the literature itself as it has been treasured, transmitted and transformed.[67]

Elsewhere Childs argues:

> The search for the canonical shape of the text begins with a reading which looks for traces either of how the author intended the material to be understood, or of the effect which a particular reading has on the literature. The point is to take seriously a writer's expressed intentionality, but without pulling text and interpretation apart. At times the canonical text receives a meaning which is derivative of its function within the larger corpus, but which cannot be directly linked to the intention of an original author.[68]

However, this transmission and transformation, for Childs, never obscures what the text was from the start. Keck correctly understands Childs's concerns:

> "Canonization" is not reducible to an event that befell the writings, something that happened to them, an ecclesial act that made them something they had not already become . . . It was instead a formal acknowledgement of the writings' roles in what the church experienced as the truth of the gospel, however variously construed . . . The writings in the New Testament never lacked a "canonical" dimension; none were created to express someone's creativity; all manifest the author's sense of being authorized by the gospel, and were used in the church because it acknowledged the validity of that authorization.[69]

67. Childs, *Biblical Theology: A Proposal*, 39–40.

68. Childs, *New Testament*, 49

69. Keck, "Faith Seeking Canonical Understanding," in Richards and Seitz, eds., *The Bible as Christian Scripture,* 103–18.

Therefore, "the canonical meaning is not an addendum to the 'real' meaning of the text, something of interest to church historians but not to exegetes."[70]

While focusing on the canonical context for theological insight, Childs never regards the historical setting as irrelevant and thus would not emphasize canonization at the expense of composition—the two belong together. It seems, therefore, that Nienhuis and Wall have merely moved the historical-critical moment of interest from the composition of the text to the church's canonization of the same. One wonders whether this actually fixes the problem of the church's canon or just delays it.

Canon as "Use"

Furthermore, closely connected to Nienhuis's and Wall's emphasis on canonization over composition is their view of canon as function or use. Here they contrast "canonization from below" with "canonization from above." "Canonization from below" refers to following the path that individual New Testament texts traveled on their way into the canon "through their earliest history . . . evidenced in the manuscripts, by allusions to and citation of the earliest Christian writings, or in the various canon lists."[71] While helpful, Nienhuis and Wall rather focus on the "phenomenology of the process" of canonization, or "canonization from above." They argue that such a process is one of the church's discernment of the canon via the Spirit's leading. They insist that the "church's discernment of the Spirit's leading role in the production of the biblical canon is not predicated on the identity of a text's author but on its effect in forming a congregation that is wise for salvation and mature for good works."[72]

Yet just here it seems that Nienhuis and Wall invert the direction of the Spirit's work. Rather than only inspiring a community to receive the text, the Spirit also inspires a textual witness to the truth of Jesus' life and death through which that community is grounded in the origins of the Christian movement. It is the one apostolic reception of the Jesus story which is formative for every subsequent reception.

70. Ibid., 107. Of course, the question will be, how do historically conditioned texts speak beyond their original contexts. Keck again summarizes Childs's canonical approach with respect to this key concern: "[T]he particularity of each letter was retained, but relativized when the canonical process created the Pauline arena within all of which the church could hear not simply its favorite (legitimating) letter, but also the apostle's larger witness to the *res*, *die Sache*, the subject matter that evoked it" (115).

71. Nienhuis and Wall, *Reading,* 12.

72. Ibid.

The inversion of Wall and Nienhuis is noticeable in Wall's argument regarding the historical process of canonization: "Gospels and letters, then, were collected first as 'inspired' Scripture, and over an extended period of time were rearranged in ways which fixed and delimited their apostolic (i.e. authoritative) witness to the Christ event."[73] The problem with Wall's assertion is that there is little evidence that the early church was so unconcerned with the text's apostolic origin.[74] Rather, Stephen B. Chapman, following Yeago, makes a very important point about both the process of canonization and the text's ability to stand over against the Church. Yeago argues: "The scriptures are, most basically, a crucial element within the concrete ecclesial witness of the Spirit by which the witness of faith, hope, and love is formed. Scripture is the standing testimony of the Spirit to the church, for the purpose of forming the church itself as the Spirit's testimony to the nations."[75] Chapman goes on to note: "Because Scripture is the testimony of the Spirit to the church, the entire process of biblical canon formation is made meaningful even as a qualitative distinction is drawn between the work of the Spirit leading to the formation of the canon and the interpretive work of the Spirit afterwards."[76]

Wall further specifies his understanding of canon as "use" by stressing the performance of the text by the faithful community:

> Consideration of 2 Tim 3:15–17 . . . suggests that God inspires the *performance* rather than the production of Scripture. That is, Paul does not claim that Scripture's authority derives from those authors who in the past were divinely inspired to produce biblical texts, since nowhere does Paul mention the authors of Scripture and the action of divine inspiration is present and not

73. Wall, "The Problem of the Multiple Letter Canon," 161–83, 163–64.

74. See for example C. Stephen Evans "Canonicity, Apostolicity, and Biblical Authority," in Bartholomew et al., eds., *Canon and Biblical Interpretation,* 146–66.

75. Yeago, "The Spirit, the Church, and the Scriptures," in Buckley and Yeago, eds., *Knowing the Triune God,* 49–94.

76. Chapman, "Reclaiming Inspiration for the Bible," in Bartholomew et al., eds., *Canon and Biblical Interpretation*, 167–206. Similarly, Keck argues, "in our legitimate and relentless quest for historical origins, antecedents, parallels, and influences to explain each writing and its alleged sources, we may have forfeited . . . a fully historical understanding of the New Testament as a whole, namely, as canon . . . the New Testament as canon, like its constituent pieces before they were canonized, not only expressed the faith and those of early Christianity but also addresses them in order to correct them. To overlook this is to fail to understand the New Testament historically" ("Rethinking," 5).

> in the past. Rather Paul's claim is that the sacred *texts* themselves *are* presently inspired by God.[77]

In contrast, according to Neil MacDonald, Childs did not "take refuge in the politics or poetics of 'postmodern' rhetorical (therefore foundationless) performance."[78] Some have taken Childs's notion of "canonical intentionality" to refer to a disembodied and ahistorical notion that robs

> "the text of all determinative force" (BTONT, 723), even under the auspices of a supposed "canonical reading." Or one such canonical reading could be one that takes as its sole datum the givenness of the final form of the text and subsequently constructs meaning at the behest of the creativity of the reader.[79]

Childs's notion of "canonical intentionality" is directly tied to his category of witness, the historical claim to telling the truth about Christ. MacDonald notes, "Of course, there was no such entity as the intention of the canon per se. But there is such a thing as canonical intentionality understood as a historical trajectory of textual redactors in historical time."[80]

It seems that Nienhuis and Wall stress the reader's location (ecclesial) and intended use (discipleship) of the text as determinative of its function as canon. Their focus is on reading the final form of the text with little concern for the historical formation of the biblical tradition. Though Nienhuis and Wall devote an entire chapter to "the shaping of a canonical collection," the focus is on the "uses" of the texts in question through the first few centuries of the Christian era. Even in the next chapter, "the shape of the canonical collection," the focus is on the "final literary form of the CE collection that are laden with hermeneutical promise."[81] Thus, their concerns, even with the final form, are more literary than historical. However, Nienhuis and Wall do not think of their own project as reader focused (or in MacDonald's terms,

77. Wall, "A Response to Thomas/Alexander," 171–83, esp. 176–77. Elsewhere Wall makes the same point strongly: "The theological priority of reading Scripture's Pauline witness at its ecclesial address compels the interpreter to shift an interest in an author's intentions in writing to the church's intentions in canonizing it. In this sense, the canonical approach drills down on a *second* point of origin that follows the postbiblical history of an authored text, written for a particular audience, to the church's recognition and reception of it as canonical for all subsequent Christians" (Wall, *1 and 2 Timothy and Titus*, 15). For a critique of this approach, see Lockett, "Not Whether, But What Kind," 127–36.

78. See MacDonald, "Theological Interpretation," in Seitz and Richards, eds., *The Bible as Christian Scripture,* 85–102.

79. Ibid., 89.

80. Ibid., 91.

81. Nienhuis and Wall, *Reading*, 40.

"performance" oriented). They claim that "we first approach a canonical collection as the literary by-product of a historical process, a final literary redaction that logically reflects the commitments of the process itself." And further clarifying, "That is, the product [final form of the text] should instantiate the core properties of the process that produced it."[82] Whereas this sounds very much like Childs's approach, they continue in a very different direction. Their notion of the canonical process focuses more on readerly practices than textual-historical development. The texts "were arranged according to their perceived usefulness or theological priority when performing a variety of religious tasks . . . The larger point is this: the final shape of collections instantiates value judgments regarding their enduring role as Scripture in forming a community's theological understanding and moral practices."[83] In Nienhuis's and Wall's approach we might just end up learning more about the early church's use of the text than about the formation of the texts themselves.

Rather than canon as "use," Childs, Chapman, and Spellman note that a "canon-consciousness" (*Kanonbewußtsein*, or, in Stone's terms, a "compilational consciousness") is present in the material itself. The key notion of "canon-consciousness" or "compilational consciousness" (what the present study will call collection consciousness) will be outlined in the next chapter.

The Rule of Faith

Another issue that surfaces in reading the Catholic Epistles as a canonical collection is the function of the Rule of Faith. As noted above, Nienhuis and Wall argue for the maximal use of the rule of faith as a template for the theological coherence in the Catholic Epistles. Though the canonical shaping did function like a rule of faith, we noted above that Childs registers a concern with using the rule in such a maximalist way. Perhaps Childs's concern is best articulated by Mark Elliott:

> Those who think that "theological interpretation" is salutary for any profitable reading of the Bible often make reference to Irenaeus and other patristic exegetes as employing a "rule of faith." However, Irenaeus was in fact more concerned that texts did not get distorted by heretical leanings leading to a heavy ideological "spin" than he was suggesting, positively, that scripture needed to be understood in terms of a creedal statement. In other words, any rule was used as a "shield," not a "sword." The term

82. Ibid., 41–42.

83. Ibid., 42–43.

> "regula fidei" as such does not appear in Irenaeus, whose motto might more have been: let the scriptures speak for themselves.[84]

The rule of faith is important for a canonical approach to the New Testament, but the line of differentiation between approaches is whether the rule forms the outer boundaries of canonical interpretation (maximally extending the text's theological meaning), or the nonnegotiable center (focusing on the clear subject matter of the text).

3. CONCLUSION

Each approach surveyed here values reading the Catholic Epistles as a collection with some degree of coherence within the growing canon of Christian Scripture. The views run from roughly more historical (Davids, Niebuhr) to more theological (Nienhuis and Wall) with Childs (and perhaps Newman) attempting a balance. A key feature distinguishing Davids from the rest is his view of canon as only a fixed list of texts rather than a standard or norm. Davids, furthermore, maintains the traditional distinction between the historical composition of the text over against its later theological reception.

By contrast, Niebuhr, Nienhuis, Wall, Newman, and Childs all challenge the assumption that the issue of canon lies in the field of subsequent church history and thus is irrelevant to interpreting the New Testament. Rather, each one argues for the hermeneutical significance of canon. Of these views, Childs's seems most established and potentially most helpful for reading the Catholic Epistles canonically. The notion of "aesthetic excellence" forwarded by Nienhuis and Wall is helpful as it highlights the text's superior literary properties and the Spirit's guidance within the church's process receiving of the text; however, it would be more prudent to limit such authoritative reception to the apostolic period, thereby distinguishing the apostolic witness embedded in the text from later church tradition. Moreover, a caution should be registered over the stress on the texts' "usefulness" as a criterion of its authority as canon. This seems to be too slender (and subjective) a foundation on which to place such great weight.

Whereas the approach of Nienhuis and Wall is similar to that of Childs, especially with respect to the hermeneutical significance of canon, it is Childs and, to a large degree, Niebuhr and Newman who strike a more satisfying balance between history and theology. Nienhuis and Wall note that their version of the "canonical approach presumes that biblical theology is a theological rather than historical enterprise . . . it is . . . religiously

84. Elliott, *Heart of Biblical Theology*, 6–7.

formative more than intellectually formative."[85] By contrast, Childs's focus on the product of canonization and Niebuhr's readers constructed from within the reception process have potential to account for the complexity of the historical *and* theological processes involved in the movement from composition to canonization. Newman's emphasis on a discernable "apostolic theology" and creedal fragments embedded in the text constitute fruitful areas of exploration of the text itself, which may, in turn, indicate the coherence and canonical function of the Catholic Epistles. Furthermore, Childs's understanding of how the rule of faith functions as a negative criterion setting parameters against heretical innovation stands as a needed caution.

Childs's canonical approach provides more solid footing as he works to coordinate historical-critical with reception-historical insights specifically avoiding emphasis of the moment of canonization at the expense of composition. Here both Childs and Niebuhr (perhaps Newman as well) maintain a more stable balance between history and theology. Unfortunately for all of us, Childs will not be able to share how he might have read the Catholic Epistles within his canonical approach.

In light of this survey this study will maintain a balance between history and theology in reading the Catholic Epistles as a collection—a balance which uniquely only the concept of canon can maintain. These seven letters should be read taking both their individual historical situations and their literary and theological placement within the New Testament as crucial for their correct interpretation. Rather than pitting historical description against theological significance, a balanced reading should provide an account of the process of composition to canonization of the Catholic Epistles, which, in reaching its final canonized form, was received as a divinely authorized text by the Christian community. The following investigation will attempt just such a balance while articulating the plausibility of reading the Catholic Epistles as an intentional canonical collection.

85. Nienhuis and Wall, *Reading*, 63n33.