Introduction

Reading the Catholic Epistles as a Collection: A Proposal

The Letters of James, Peter, John, and Jude remain as one of the final frontiers in New Testament studies. Whereas the four Gospels and Paul's letters have received copious attention, these seven letters, in comparison, constitute the distant shores of a seldom traveled land. It is not uncommon to search in vain for substantive treatment of any one of these letters in the standard introductions or theologies of the New Testament. While one can find a handful of introductory texts focusing on "the latter New Testament" or "Hebrews through Revelation," there are precious few devoted specifically to the Letters of James, Peter, John, and Jude, and almost all fail to consider the possibility of interpreting the Catholic Epistles as a discrete collection.[1] Though including entries on the discrete canonical collections of the Gospels and the Pauline Epistles, even the groundbreaking *Dictionary for the Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (2005) fails to supply a separate entry for the Catholic Epistles.

Though not the consensus, these texts are most commonly called "The General Letters" or "Catholic Epistles." The use of these terms in New Testament scholarship wavers between two poles: 1) a genre designation, namely, circular letters addressed to a "general" audience or 2) a title for a discrete

1. For example: *Dictionary of the Later New Testament* (which does not have an entry for "The General Letters" or "Catholic Epistles"); Donelson, *From Hebrews to Revelation*; Wilder, Charles, and Easley, *Faithful to the End*. Jobes comes the closest to introducing these particular seven letters, *Letters to the Church*. None of these texts consider the possibility of interpreting the Catholic Epistles as a discrete collection; rather, they opt to isolate the historical-cultural location of each text as the default context within which to understand their meaning. Of course the great exception to this rule is the recent monograph by Nienhuis and Wall (*Reading*), which constitutes a key dialogue partner with the present work.

canonical collection. When referring to the former, the limits of the collection are rather unclear, either at times including Hebrews and Revelation as other "general letters" or excluding the letters of John because they belong with the other Johannine literature. The latter understanding, though once common before the advent of historical-criticism, is now quite rare.

The issue this present investigation takes up is whether these seven letters should be read in isolation from each other, understanding their individual historical situations as the single determinative context for their interpretation, or whether their collection and placement within the New Testament specifically (and within the Christian canon generally) should constitute a further context within which these letters ought to be interpreted. In much of the current discussion of these texts historical and theological (or canonical) concerns are sealed off from one another.

This surfaces a deeper problem within New Testament scholarship regarding the relationship between historical-critical analysis of New Testament writings and reception-historical theological study of their importance in early Christianity. The key question is whether subsequent judgments regarding canon *clarify* or *obscure* the meaning of these texts. Adolf von Harnack argued negatively that, "Canonization works like whitewash; it hides the original colors and obliterates all the contours," hiding "the true origin and significance of the works."[2] For Harnack, one must keep historical-critical reading distinct and separate from whatever later canonical meaning that believing communities understood from the New Testament texts. Reinforcing this notion, John Barton finds no hermeneutical significance in the ordering of the New Testament canon:

> At least some rabbinic and Christian listings of books seem to be based on nothing more significant than length, which surely implies that the order has no hermeneutical implications. This certainly appears to be the basis for the order of the Pauline epistles in many manuscripts, indeed, in the now current order—though there are a few additional complications such as the insertion of Ephesians after the shorter Galatians, and the separation of Paul's letters to individuals into a section of their own. Thus the fact that Paul's correspondence has been turned into an ordered corpus is important, but the fact that (for example) the Corinthian letters come before those to Thessalonica is not.[3]

2. Harnack, *Origins of the New Testament*, 140–41.
3. Barton, *Holy Writings, Sacred Text*, 147–48.

Furthermore, in a recent assessment of the canonical approach to reading the New Testament, John Poirier accuses Brevard Childs of smuggling into his work the assumption that canonical phenomena are always intentional and hermeneutically significant.[4] Poirier thinks it a more "natural scenario" that the canon was merely a convention for preserving apostolic writings and that viewing texts through the lens of a later canon is distorting.[5] The historical-critical approach to New Testament studies rejects later canonical judgments regarding the collecting and ordering of the texts as anachronistic to their right interpretation. Thus the texts' situation in *history* is set over against their situation in the *canon*. Yet, the opposite is equally distorting. Pitting the *canonical* context over against the historical *context* results in a docetic text cut free from time and place. Historical reconstruction and the theological significance of the text are further isolated from one another as these two means of inquiry are usually assigned completely different disciplines within the academy—namely, Biblical Studies and Patristics—such that practitioners of either discipline are encouraged by their professional context not to account for the results of each other's work.[6]

Asking whether the Catholic Epistles should be read as a canonically significant collection cuts across the line of demarcation between Biblical Studies and Patristics. A basic presupposition undergirding the following study is that the significance of canon *is not* limited to the listing of received books (canon as a fixed collection), *but also* involves the process by which these texts were received, collected, transmitted, and shaped in the early apostolic period (canon as a "ruled" process). Brevard Childs has argued that canon itself "includes philological, historical, literary, *and* theological dimensions." And furthermore, that taking the canon seriously in one's interpretation challenges "the widespread assumption of the New Testament guild that the issue of canon lies in the field of subsequent church history and is irrelevant to the study of [the New Testament itself]."[7]

In his magisterial commentary, Dale Allison notes the emerging trend to interpret James in particular within the context of canon and the difference this would make in the overall perception of the letter. Allison notes that "James exhibits very strong parallels with 1 Peter, and 1 John, and these cry out for explanation. They cannot all be put down either to coincidence

4. Poirier, "The Order and Essence," 503–16.

5. Ibid., 505.

6. For an exception to this general rule, see Schröter, *From Jesus to the New Testament*.

7. Childs, *Church's Guide*, 253; emphasis added.

or to common Christian 'oral tradition.'"[8] Allison goes on to note the work of James Nogalski who argues for a coherent collection in the Book of the Twelve. Allison notes that whereas these prophetic texts "may have had separate origins and tradition histories . . . someone brought them together, put them in a particular order, and redacted them so that they function as a unit." Suggestively he then notes, "Might there be a rough parallel here with the Catholic Epistles? Was the common—although not exclusive—order, James, 1 Peter, 2 Peter, 1 John, 2 John, 3 John, Jude due to design? Was James perhaps placed at the front for theological reasons? Was the collection as a whole intended to balance the Pauline collection and interpret it aright? These questions are worth exploring."[9] Allison's questions reinforce the central concerns of the present study.

In an attempt to address some of Allison's questions generally, while keeping history and theology together, the present study mounts a sustained argument for reading the Catholic Epistles as an intentional, discrete collection set within the New Testament; namely, that the process of editing, collecting, and arranging of these seven texts is neither anachronistic to their meaning nor antagonistic to their very composition. Where there are plenty of studies that consider the meaning and theological significance of these texts individually, very few works consider their significance *as a collection*.[10] This is due, in large part, to the assumptions of discontinuity between composition and subsequent canonization. Rather than emphasizing composition (usually associated with the historical-critical approach) or canonization (associated with subsequent, ecclesial, and theological judgments) at the expense of the other, this project considers both in dialectical relationship.[11] Both the historical context of composition and the circumstances of canonization, with the collecting, arranging and shaping in between, will inform this study. Evidence surfaces in the development from composition, compilation, to final canonical stabilization that indicates the Catholic Epistles were received and functioned as a discrete collection. The very fact of canon, that is the sheer given of a final canonical form of the New Testament, must inform historical inquiry into the development and significance of the New Testament. The concept of canon will play a key role

8. Allison, *James*, 108.

9. Ibid., 108–9.

10. The only modern interpreters who offer various attempts to read the Catholic Epistles as an intentional canonical collection are discussed in chapter 1.

11. Here the term "dialectical" is being used to describe distinction in relationship, namely, resisting either a conflation of both terms into one another or a total separation all the while understanding both in dynamic tension.

in bringing together historical and theological insights into the significance of a sevenfold Catholic Epistles collection.

The argument here is that it is both historically and hermeneutically plausible to receive and read the Catholic Epistles as a canonically significant collection. In arguing for the plausibility of this thesis the work will progress through the following chapters.

Chapter 1 will offer a survey of other attempts to read and receive the Catholic Epistles as a collection. The state of the question will be outlined while raising specific issues that are necessary for arguing for the Catholic Epistles as a coherent collection. Chapter 2 will take up these hermeneutical and methodological issues and will clarify them from the perspective of this study. Specifically chapter 2 will take up: the question of the relationship between Scripture and canon; whether one should argue for a wide or narrow view of the canonical process; specific perspectives on the process of composition, collection, and compilation of the New Testament canon; the connection between composition and canonization within the canonical process; and the degree to which one might detect a "canonical consciousness" (*Kanonbewußtsein* or "compilation consciousness")—something we will eventually call "collection consciousness"—either in the canonical process or even at the moment of composition.

After addressing these preliminary issues, chapter 3 offers a historical description of the development of a Catholic Epistles collection paying special attention to the witness of early church fathers, early canon lists, and hints from the manuscript tradition. Following on from here are three chapters offering textual evidence of the compilation of these texts into an intentional collection. First, in chapter 4, evidence derived from paratextual material is presented and assessed. By paratextual material we mean characteristics such as collection and arrangement of texts, super- and subscripted titles assigned to discrete texts of the Catholic Epistles, *nomina sacra* and chapter divisions. Though such textual features are not formally included in the original moment of composition (that is, the original author did not produce such textual features), they are nonetheless hermeneutically significant regarding the text's composition and compilation into a final form collection.

Chapters 5 and 6 offer further textual evidence of intentional compilation. Chapter 5 will assess shared tradition (Old Testament) between two or more of the Catholic Epistles. In addition, this chapter will also include an examination of the use of catchwords or catchphrases for the purpose of linking material within the Catholic Epistles. Here we will explore the degree to which such catchwords or phrases might indicate the connection of adjacent texts within the collection. Chapter 6 will consider the presence

of framing devices within the Catholic Epistle collection. Specifically, the fact that the Catholic Epistles is bracketed by two brothers of Jesus—James and Jude—is viewed as an indication of intentional framing of a collection. Chapter 6 will also consider the presence and development of specific themes running through the entire collection. By way of conclusion, chapter 7 offers a brief reflection upon the evidence presented which demonstrates that it is both historically and hermeneutically plausible to receive and read the Catholic Epistles together as a canonically significant sub-collection.