

New Testament Survey:
Catholic Epistles

The Catholic Epistles are the letters in the New Testament addressed to the Church at large. The Catholic Epistles are:

- James
- 1 Peter
- 2 Peter
- 1 John
- 2 John
- 3 John
- Jude

James

The inclusion of James in the canon sparked vigorous debate over the centuries. Martin Luther was not fond of the book, to say the least, and argued it had no business in the New Testament because of its emphasis on works. Luther's hesitation notwithstanding, the book was accepted by the early Church and listed in the acceptable canon of books in the Council of Carthage in A.D. 397.

The book's author describes himself as "James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ." There are 4 persons named James mentioned in the New Testament:

1. James, the father of Judas (Luke 6:16, Acts 1:13)
2. James, the son of Alphaeus (Matthew 10:3, Acts 1:13)
3. James the Apostle, the son of Zebedee and brother of John.
4. James, the brother of Jesus (John 7:2-5, 1 Corinthians 15:7, Acts 1:14). James was an unbeliever until Jesus appeared to him after His crucifixion and resurrection.

Of these possibilities, the early Church held that James, Jesus' brother composed this book.

Date: Sometime before the fall of Jerusalem. After the fall, there were too few rich people in Judea to qualify for James' descriptions.

The book is addressed to the "twelve tribes in the Dispersion" (1:1). These were the Jewish Christians scattered throughout the Roman Empire.

James' message is clear: behavior matters in matters of faith. Anyone claiming to be a Christian must live as a Christian.

The Letters of Peter

Peter, the author of the two letters ascribed to him, needs no explanation. Peter is one of the foremost Apostles, ranking with Jesus and Paul as a major figure in the New Testament.

The first letter of Peter is addressed to “elect exiles” in “Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia” (1:1). These Roman provinces were located in Asia Minor (modern Turkey). These areas were predominately Gentile. Peter’s reference in 2:10 would have referred solely to Gentiles.

Peter’s readers were apparently experiencing persecution for their faith. Peter’s letter brought great encouragement by reminding them of the “imperishable, undefiled, and unfading” inheritance awaiting them in heaven (1:4). Peter encouraged his readers to live “holy” lives in spite of their persecution. Peter referred to his readers as a “chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation” (2:9). No one hearing this description would forget his commitment to the Church in trials.

The second letter of Peter claims to have witnessed Jesus’ transfiguration (1:16-18), confirming that Peter the Apostle wrote this letter as well. Peter knows his death is near (1:14-15), dating this letter in the mid-60’s.

Since Peter calls this his “second letter” (3:1), we can assume the same audience as the first letter.

This letter deals with false teaching (chapter 2) and the Day of the Lord (chapter 3). False teachers were sowing trouble in the congregations. To combat their teachings, Peter first emphasized the authority of Scripture (1:20). Peter then attacks the false teachers and warns against their influence (chapter 2).

Some in the church were beginning to doubt the return of Jesus to earth since it hadn’t happened when they expected it. Peter explained that God’s time differs markedly from our own (3:8). Furthermore, Peter gave the real reason for Jesus’ delay: The opportunity for others to believe in the Gospel and escape the judgment to come (3:9).

The Letters of John

St. John the Apostle wrote 3 letters included in the New Testament canon. The Church accepted the canonicity of 3 John later than that of the other 2 letters, but 3 John was eventually added to the New Testament. John wrote his letters and the Revelation later than the rest of the New Testament. These writings are usually dated in the 90’s A.D.

Some scholars believe that another John — not the Apostle — wrote the letters and The Revelation. This John is known as John the Elder (the title, not a reference to his age). Nonetheless, tradition states these letters were written by St. John the Apostle, the same author as the Gospel of John.

The first letter begins with an attack on the heresy of Docetism. Named after the Greek word “to seem,” Docetists claimed that Jesus was not really a human but merely a spirit “appearing” to be human. St. John opened his letter by stating he had seen, heard, and touched Jesus, so he knew Jesus was not a spirit. John also warned against false teachers he calls “antichrists” (2:18-27). Combat against false teachers requires Christians to “test the spirits” (4:1-6). According to John, the true teaching is that which confesses that “Jesus Christ has come in the flesh” (4:2).

First John also speaks of the Christian lifestyle. This lifestyle is characterized by love: Godly love. “God is love” (4:8); this love drove God to offer the perfect sacrifice for our sins. This love for us should define our relationships with one another.

John concluded his letter by giving his readers the comfort of security in their salvation (5:13-15) and by warning them against idolatry.

Second John continues the warning against Docetism and false teaching. John warned his readers not even to greet these false teachers (vv. 10-11).

Third John was written to Gaius, a Christian teacher in a local congregation (v. 1). This congregation faced internal dissension caused by a man named Diotrephes. Diotrephes refused to recognize John's apostolic authority, but John himself would deal with Diotrephes in his next visit. This letter emphasizes the necessity of proper authority in the church.

Jude

Jude was written by the "brother of James" (v. 1). Church tradition states this James is the half-brother of Jesus and the author of the epistle of James. This letter is usually dated anywhere from A.D. 65 to 80.

Jude had originally meant to write to the "called" and "beloved" about the "common salvation" (vv. 2-3). Unfortunately, Jude found himself writing instead about false teachers. These teachers willfully incited their followers to sin (v. 4) and ignorantly railed against spiritual beings far stronger than themselves (vv. 8-10). Jude strongly condemned these teachers.

Jude quoted from 2 apocryphal sources in this letter: The Assumption of Moses (v. 9) and 1 Enoch (vv. 14-15). These books have no canonical authority, and Jude's use of them does not confer this authority. Jude's usage of these examples equates with Paul's quoting of pagan poets in Acts 17:28 (possibly Epimenides of Crete and Aratus). Jude's readers would have known these apocryphal works rather well and would have understood their meaning.

Jude closed with one of the most frequently used doxologies in Scripture (vv. 24-25).

Outline of James

Source: *Holman Bible Handbook* (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 1992).

- I. Greeting (1:1)
- II. Facing trials (1:2-18)
- III. A correct response to God's word (1:19-27)
- IV. The avoidance of partiality (2:1-13)
- V. The production of works of mercy (2:14-26)
- VI. The practice of personal discipline (3:1-18)
- VII. The avoidance of worldliness (4:1-17)
- VIII. The demonstration of justice (5:1-6)
- IX. The practice of endurance (5:7-12)
- X. The proper use of prayer (5:13-18)
- XI. The reclamation of straying Christians (5:19-20)

Outline of 1 Peter

Source: *Holman Bible Handbook* (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 1992).

- I. Greetings (1:1-2)
- II. Method and nature of salvation (1:3-12)
- III. Demand for holiness (1:12-2:3)
- IV. Description of the people of God (2:4-10)
- V. The Christian witness in the world (2:11-3:12)
 - A. Submission to authority (2:13-25)
 - B. Family relations (3:1-7)
- VI. Appeals and promises to the persecuted (3:13-4:19)
 - A. Suffering for righteousness' sake (3:8-17)
 - B. The suffering of Christ for us (3:18-22)
 - C. Proper living (4:1-11)
 - D. Suffering as a Christian 4:12-19)
- VII. Assurances for faithful servants (5:1-9)
- VIII. Praises to God and greetings to the Church (5:10-14)

Outline of 2 Peter

Source: *Holman Bible Handbook* (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 1992).

- I. Greetings (1:1-2)
- II. Provisions for spiritual growth (1:3-21)
- III. The dangers of false teaching (2:1-22)
- IV. A reminder of God's hope (3:1-13)
- V. Closing commands (3:14-18)

Outline of 1 John

Source: *Holman Bible Handbook* (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 1992).

- I. Basis of fellowship with God (1:1-2:6)
- II. The new commandment of love (2:7-17)
- III. The Christian and false teaching (2:18-28)
- IV. The need to practice righteousness (2:29-3:10)
- V. The priority of love for one another (3:11-24)
- VI. Exposure of false teaching (4:1-6)
- VII. The importance of God's love (4:7-21)
- VIII. The victory of faith (5:1-12)
- IX. Assurance of eternal life (5:13-21)

Outline of 2 John

Source: *Holman Bible Handbook* (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 1992).

- I. Greetings (v. 1)
- II. Encouragement to Christian love (vv. 4-6)
- III. Warning against false teaching (vv. 7-11)
- IV. Conclusion (vv. 12-13)

Outline of 3 John

Source: *Holman Bible Handbook* (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 1992).

- I. Greetings (v. 1)
- II. Commendation of Gaius' hospitality (vv. 2-8)
- III. Condemnation of the rebellion of Diotrephes (vv. 9-11)
- IV. Prospects of a future visit (vv. 12-14)

Outline of Jude

Source: *Holman Bible Handbook* (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 1992).

- I. Greetings (v. 1)
- II. Occasion for writing (vv. 3-4)
- III. Description of false teachers (vv. 5-16)
- IV. Resisting the false teachers (vv. 17-23)
- V. Doxology (vv. 24-25)