PARALLEL GUIDE 32
The Letters of James, Jude, and 1 and 2 Peter

Summary

These four epistles comprise a portion of the New Testament sometimes called the "Catholic Epistles." The other three are discussed in Chapter Thirty-three. The word "catholic" means universal. These letters are intended for the entire Christian church. While these works are relatively short, they contain important advice for the church, and they help us to understand better the development of the New Testament Scriptures.

Learning Objectives

• Read the Letters of James, Jude, and 1 and 2 Peter

• Explore the questions of authorship and audience

• Learn how the various epistles connect with other New Testament documents, especially with the work of Paul

Assignment to Deepen Your Understanding

1. The Catholic Epistles show ties to Jewish literature that is not part of the Old or the New Testament. What does this say to you about the authority of the Bible and its relationship to the culture in which it was written?

2. The epistles of James and perhaps of Jude may refer to biological brothers of Jesus. What do you think of this possibility? Why is this issue important to us today?

Preparing for Your Seminar

These epistles begin to provide links to the continuing history of Christianity. The author of Chapter Thirty-two names references to early Christian authors who interpreted these letters as well as to the first complete list of the New Testament books which Athanasius provided in his Easter sermon of 367 CE. What does such a late date for the first list of New Testament books say about the development of Christianity, particularly since there were other writings which did not become part of the biblical canon?

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Chapter 32
THE LETTERS OF JAMES, JUDE, AND 1 AND 2 PETER

The General Letters The term "Catholic Epistles" or "letters" refers to seven New Testament writings: James, 1 and 2 Peter, 1, 2, and 3 John, and Jude. The phrase "catholic" means universal and shows that these are writings intended for the Christian church as a whole. In contrast, Paul's letters were generally destined for a specific Christian community. Today these writings are more commonly referred to as "general letters," a reference which captures their general or universal readership as well as the more general nature of their advice.

This chapter devotes attention to four of these general letters, namely, those of James, Jude, and 1 and 2 Peter. The order in which we examine them differs slightly from the way they appear in the New Testament. We begin with the earliest of these writings, the Letter of James. Then we examine the Letter of Jude, since this letter makes a connection to the Letter of James. Finally, we read the two letters of Peter. The structure of our examination follows the same procedure. We discuss the issue of authorship and other aspects that are necessary to understand each writing and then we comment on the text and the main ideas that emerge from each.

The Letter of James

Author and Readers

The writer refers to himself as "James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ" (1:1). James (or Iakobos in Greek) was a very common name at that time, as can be seen from the number of Jameses appearing throughout the New Testament. In the list of apostles, two bear the name of James: James the son of Zebedee and James the son of Alphaeus (Mark 3:16-19). Another important James was "the brother of the Lord" (Gal. 1:19).

A number of pointers help to identify which James is in this letter. The author is someone who knows the world of Judaism very well. Concepts such as the Law, wisdom, and perfection stem from a Jewish environment. The letter contains practical wisdom advice that brings it into harmony with the Wisdom Tradition of the Old Testament. James' interest in the relationship of faith and works, and the importance and role that the Torah plays in directing one's life, are themes characteristic of a Jewish environment. Because of the strong Jewish tone and flavor of this writing, some scholars in the past have questioned whether James was really a Christian document. Only two direct references are made to Jesus in the entire letter (Jas. 1:1 and 2:1). On the other hand, the letter is clearly at home in the world of early Christianity, where the writing shows connections with the thought of the sayings of Jesus, particularly the Sermon on the Mount. The author writes with great authority: "Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness" (3:1).

James, "the brother of the Lord," fits these characteristics well. He exercised a very important role in the context of the Jerusalem church. Paul refers to him as one of

"the pillars" of the church (Gal. 2:9). He was the leader of the church in Jerusalem until the time of his death in 62 CE under the high priest Ananus. Even the great Jewish historian Josephus mentions him. The author

does not feel it necessary to further specify who he is, despite the fact that James was a common name in the early Christian world. This indicates that his readers might easily identify who James was and leads to the conclusion that the most influential James in the early Christian movement was intended. Whether James, "the brother of the Lord," was the physical writer, or whether he was the inspiration behind the letter, it is still the voice of James, the brother of the Lord, that is heard in this document.

What does "brother of the Lord" mean? This is one of the perennial questions in New Testament scholarship. Some biblical scholars understand it in the way it is used in English, referring to a physical brother of Jesus. Other scholars, relying on tradition that says Mary had no other children but Jesus, argue that the phrase should be understood in the widest sense and that it connotes someone who belongs to an extended family. It is difficult to reach a decision because theological positions tend to cloud the historical investigation. One should not forget that the extended family played a significant role in the ancient world. The concern was less about physical descent than about belonging to a family network. For this reason the term probably refers to someone who belongs to Jesus' family, understood in the wider sense of a social network.

James writes "to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion" (1:1). "The Dispersion" (or Diaspora) is a technical term referring to those Jews who live outside their homeland, Palestine. In the tradition of the Gospel According to Matthew, the mission of Jesus was directed toward gathering in the people of Israel, particularly those who were scattered throughout the world. "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt. 15:24). James sees his task as similar to that of Jesus. His readers form part of the gathering of the people of Israel into God's new kingdom. James later identifies them as the "first fruits of his creatures" (1:18). They are the first to take part in the restoration of God's people.

The first readers of this letter may have come from Judaism and were at home within its traditions. Possibly their community was Antioch in Syria, where around 46 CE many Jews had embraced the Christian message. Antioch was the most influential Christian-Jewish center outside Palestine and the Letter of James is an early writing, appearing some time in the early sixties.

Examining the Text

This document is a letter, although it differs from the structure that Paul typically used. It begins with the usual features, naming the author and those to whom it is written and expressing concise greetings (1:1). In place of the traditional thanksgiving section used by Paul, the Letter of James introduces two sections that express joy (1:2-11) and blessing (1:12-27). These contain the five major themes that become the main topics throughout the letter:

- steadfastness in trials (1:2-4, 12-18; 5:7-11)

- asking for wisdom (1:5-8; 3:13-18; 4:1-10)
- contrast between rich and poor (1:9-11; 2:1-13; 5:1-6)
- being doers of the Word (1:22-25; 2:14-26; 4:13-17)
- control of the tongue (1:26-27; 3:1-12; 4:11-12)

James develops these themes and illustrates them with graphic examples in a very clear and captivating style. Many of the features are reminiscent of the Greek diatribe, a popular form of moral address. The characteristic features of a diatribe include a dialogue with an imaginary partner in which brief questions and answers occur (e.g., Jas. 2:18-26 and 4:13-17).

James concludes the letter in a way that differs from Paul's usual practice by taking up the theme of eschatology (a concern for the end-times and the end of the world, 5:7-20). In many other New Testament

letters (such as 1 Cor. 16:22; 2 Pet. 3:12-14; Jude 18-21) Paul refers to the "coming of the Lord" (5:8), and he expects the return of Jesus at the end of time. This characteristic feature of early Christian thought, the imminent expectation of the end, supports an early dating for this letter. James encourages his readers to see themselves as part of that long line of prophets who remained true to their acceptance of the Lord. They truly are a prophetic community. They have their own values that are different from the world around them.

James does not develop his thought systematically throughout the epistle. In a way similar to the pattern in the Book of Proverbs or the Book of Sirach, James presents short notes on diverse topics that are ultimately interconnected. He wishes to provide wisdom advice for his readers on how to lead their lives in friendship with God (4:4). A number of key themes emerge from James' wisdom advice and reflection that hold special importance for Christians today. The James letter is one of the few writings of the New Testament that addresses the theme of discrimination directly. He presents a beautiful parable (2:1-7) that illustrates the different ways in which the Christian community responds to people on the basis of their wealth: basically the rich and the poor are treated differently within the community. This serves as a challenge to all readers to question whether they discriminate against others in any way. Fundamental to James' teaching is his understanding that the believer is called to make a choice between friendship with the world and friendship with God (4:4). The source for one's values and way of life is one's faith. That is why James stresses that actions must bear witness to faith: "Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers" (1:22). The double-minded person who is unable to commit to anything and who is "like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind" (1:6) is in contrast to the person who puts faith into action.

An important characteristic of James' style is his strong communitarian focus. He frequently addresses his readers in the plural form of "my brothers and sisters" (see 1:2; 2:1,14; 3:1). Literally the Greek text reads "brothers." James is clearly addressing

a community of men and women—hence the translation "brothers and sisters" better captures the reality and intention of the author. The advice that James gives his readers is not an individualistic ethic, but one that the community as a whole can embrace. They are members of the twelve-tribe kingdom, and this is the way in which members of that community are to lead their lives. Another communitarian feature of the letter emerges from his description of how believers are called to pray for one another, especially when one member is ill (5:14-15). They are to confess their sins to one another and to pray for one another to be healed (5:15). The letter ends with an exhortation to accept responsibility to bring back a brother or sister who has wandered from the correct path.

James also shows a connection with the prophetic tradition of the Old Testament. He addresses his readers in the form of a prophetic oracle on two occasions: "Come now, you rich people . . . " (5:1; cf. 4:13). Just as the prophets of Israel championed the poor and the marginalized, so does James. On three separate occasions James deals with the obligation of others to support the poor (1:9-11; 2:1-7; 5:1-6). James promises the poor that while they might be defenseless and powerless in their society, they do have a real champion, God. The Old Testament demonstrated very clearly that God is the defender of the poor. God is on the side of the poor. James embraces this same message. He argues that true religion by its very nature is socially involved and radical. That is why he defines religion as "caring for orphans and widows in their distress" (1:27).

When James considers the relationship between faith and works (2:14-26), he argues that faith, to be true faith, must bear fruit in good works. In other words, actions illustrate the vitality of one's faith. This is not a challenge to Paul's teaching, as some scholars try to argue. James and Paul are concerned with two very different issues. Paul is concerned with the issue of how one arrives at faith and God's justification: they are gifts from God, and we as human beings do not work our faith and justification through our own actions. "For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law" (Rom. 3:28). James devotes attention not to the process by which a person comes to faith and justification, but rather to the

situation of a believer who already has faith and gives attention to the dynamic nature of faith. Faith must influence actions. Good deeds illustrate the nature of faith. This is not a teaching unique to James, but one that is found at the heart of the New Testament (see Matt. 25:31-46; Gal. 5:6; Eph. 4:1; 1 John 3:18).

James shows a close connection with the traditions that make up the Gospels and one hears echoes of Jesus' teaching found in the sayings and traditions of the gospel. The Sermon on the Mount can be heard behind much of the teaching of James.

Compare the following passages:

- James 2:5 and Matthew 5:3 (par. Luke 6:20)
- James 2:13 and Matthew 5:7 (par. Luke 6:36)
- James 4:11 and Matthew 7:1

- James 5:1-2 and Luke 6:24
- James 5:12 and Matthew 5:34-37

Although James refers to Jesus Christ only on two occasions, there are other indications that he has Jesus in mind. For example, his assertion that "the coming of the Lord is near" (5:8) implies a belief in the second coming of Jesus.

As a New Testament writing, the Letter of James holds a special importance within the Christian canon. It challenges readers to seek a friendship with God that will illustrate itself in a life radically committed to the poor and defenseless in society. It reminds every generation that faith is not simply a confession of many beautiful truths. It also requires a particular way of life that seeks to put that faith into action.

The Letter of Jude

Author and Readers

The Letter of Jude is one of the shortest writings in the New Testament (only 25 verses). The author refers to himself as "Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and brother of James" (v. 1). In New Testament times the name Jude (or more accurately Ioudas in Greek) was very common. We know of a number of Judes within the New Testament itself: for example, Judas of Damascus with whom Paul stayed after his conversion (Acts 9:11); Judas Barsabbas who, together with Silas, was the one who brought the decision of the Council of Jerusalem to Antioch. Two people called Judas appear among the lists of the Twelve Apostles: Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Jesus, and Judas, the son of James (Luke 6:16; he is also called Thaddeus in Matthew 10:3).

The author identifies himself as "the brother of James" (v. 1). From Matthew 13:55 we learn that James "the brother of the Lord" also had a brother by the name of Judas: "Are not his (Jesus') brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas?" The writer identifies himself with the brother of James, the leader of the Jerusalem church. At the same time the author shows that he belongs to a period later than that of the apostles: "But you, beloved, must remember the predictions of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ; for they said to you, 'In the last time . . . '" (vv. 17-18). Here the author does not include himself among the group of apostles. Instead he appears to be a second-generation Christian. It appears that the writer is using the authority of Jude in resolving issues that have arisen in certain predominantly Christian-Jewish areas of the Christian world. The family of Jesus was especially influential in Jewish-Christian centers (as can be seen from the Letter of James).

The letter does not identify its first readers with precision. It is simply addressed: “To those who are called, who are beloved in God the Father and kept safe for Jesus Christ” (v. 1). The context, however, that prompted the writing of the letter is clear. The community of the readers is threatened with imminent danger through the appearance of teachers within the community who are undermining the traditional faith. A close reading of the letter reveals some interesting facts. The references to apocryphal writings such as the Assumption of Moses and 1 Enoch (vv. 9 and 14-15) indicate a community that has firm roots in Jewish culture and religion. At the same time the letter shows a very good mastery of the Greek language. Because of these elements

it would be logical to conclude that this letter is addressed to a Jewish-Christian community, possibly in the region of Syria or Northern Palestine. The mixture of Jewish and Greek culture was more evident there than anywhere else in the Roman Empire. In these regions the names of James and Jude were well known.

Examining the Text

The author opens the body of the letter by informing his readers that his original intention in writing them was to reflect upon “the salvation we share” (v. 3). However, a new situation developed that made it necessary for him to defend their faith. Apparently some false teachers have entered the community and are distorting the original message the readers had received from the apostles (vv. 4 and 17). Jude does not give any real clarity about the content of this false teaching, except to show that it was a very real threat to the essence of the Christian teaching handed on from the apostles.

Jude reminds his readers of how God dealt with the wicked in the past (vv. 5-7). These examples are informative for they refer in an analogous way to the intruding teachers. Like Sodom and Gomorrah (v. 7), these teachers also “defile the flesh” (v. 8); like the Israelites wandering through the wilderness (v. 5), they “reject authority” (v. 8); and like humanity at the beginning, they “slander the glorious ones” (namely, the angels; see Gen. 6:1-8).

The reference to angels in verse 8 refers to an apocryphal writing, the *Assumption of Moses*. According to this writing, when Moses died, the archangel Michael struggled with the devil over Moses’ body. In this context Michael left all judgment and condemnation to the Lord: “The Lord rebuke you!” (v. 9) In an analogous way Jude says to his readers that it is not his task to judge or condemn—he will leave all condemnation to the Lord. We do not possess this writing (the Assumption of Moses) to which Jude refers; it has been lost, but in the second century Clement of Alexandria (among others) draws attention to Jude’s use of this writing. We do possess, however, another very badly preserved Latin writing from the sixth century called “The Testament of Moses.” It seems that the account of Moses’ assumption concluded this writing.

Jude continues his tirade against the false teachers in verses 11-13 by drawing a comparison from further examples taken from Jewish tradition: Cain (Gen. 4), Balaam (Num. 31:8; Deut. 23:5; Josh. 24:9-10), and Korah (Num. 16). All these examples feature prominently in Jewish tradition. They symbolize those who lead the community into error and undermine the authority and teaching of the community’s leaders.

These false teachers also disrupt those Christian meals (“love feasts,” v. 12) that celebrate the Lord’s Supper. Paul in 1 Corinthians 11 also contended with such disruptions in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper.

Reminding his readers of the tradition, Jude shows that these intruders were foretold in the prophets, and more recently by the apostles. He quotes from 1 Enoch (vv. 14-15), a very influential apocryphal writing in the period of the first century CE: “The

Lord is coming with ten thousands of his holy ones, to execute judgment on all . . . .” To this Jude also adds a further quotation from the wider Christian tradition: “In the last time there will be scoffers, indulging their own ungodly lusts” (v. 18). While the origin of this quotation has not been identified, it must belong to traditions circulating within early Christianity. Jude has a clear purpose in using these quotations. God had foretold the coming of these false teachers who had invaded the community, but more especially God had shown that judgment lay in store for them.

Through his use of and reference to the extracanonical writings of *1 Enoch* and the *Assumption of Moses*, Jude shows us that the world of early Christianity (particularly one that still retained its roots in Judaism) used many other writings besides those accepted as canonical today. It is testimony to the richness of the traditions that molded early Christianity.

To conclude, the letter Jude indicates why he wrote to this community. He wants to strengthen its faith (v. 20). He ends with an encouragement to his readers to accept responsibility for the life and faith of other members of the community who have become weak. They are to save them “by snatching them out of the fire” (v. 23). This is reminiscent of the conclusion to the Letter of James: “Whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner’s soul from death” (Jas. 5:20).

The Letter of Jude offers a unique insight into the world of early Christianity where a community is struggling to define itself by remaining true to its origins and traditions. At the same time it shows the diversity that characterized the early Christian movement. While some centers claimed the authority of Paul and Peter as a foundation for their traditions, the letters of James and Jude tell of other Christian communities that relied upon other important Christian leaders for the authority of their traditions.

The First Letter of Peter

Author and Readers

The text provides some information about the author. It says that it is from “Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ” (1:1). The writer also claims that he was a witness to “the sufferings of Christ” (5:1) and that he “shares in the glory to be revealed” (5:1). He identifies himself as an elder who holds an authoritative position within the early Christian movement (5:1). This authority is not challenged, as happened with many of Paul’s communities. Instead, the author presumes that his role as teacher is respected and upheld.

The author demonstrates that he is at home in two worlds: the world of Judaism and the wider Greco-Roman world. His knowledge of the world of Judaism emerges from his frequent use of the Old Testament. His method of moral instruction, through lists of virtues and vices, is reminiscent of the Greco-Roman world.

An interesting feature of this letter is that the author shows a knowledge of the sayings of Jesus. This is similar to the Letter of James. Some of the close echoes of Jesus’ words can be seen by examining the Scriptures (e.g., 1 Pet. 1:4 and Matt. 6:20; 1 Pet. 3:9 and Matt. 5:39; 1 Pet. 3:14 and Matt. 5:10-12; 1 Pet. 4:14 and Matt. 5:11).

What does all this say about the actual author of this letter? It certainly appears to make a strong case for an identification between the person of Peter, the leader of the Twelve, and this letter; however, there are some problems in making such an identification.

First, this letter's use of Greek is of an outstanding quality. It is hard to imagine that Peter, a Galilean fisherman, could have produced the quality of language and style that this letter has achieved. Second, many theological concepts in this writing bear similarities to Paul's thought, such as the expressions "in Christ" (3:16; 5:10, 14) and "to serve" (1:12 and 4:10). Both 1 Peter and Paul's letters give centrality to the saving nature of Jesus' death and Resurrection: faith in his death and Resurrection communicates new life to the believer. These similarities are surprising because Paul's letters (especially Gal. 2:11-14) betray a hostility between Paul and Peter. These difficulties can be explained in a couple of ways. Both Paul and Peter are associated at the end of their lives with the city of Rome. This common center could account for their similar theological vision. At the same time, Peter acknowledges that Silvanus has helped him in writing this letter (5:12). Silvanus should probably be identified with that Silvanus, or Silas, who was a faithful companion of Paul during his second and third missionary journeys (see 1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:1; Acts 15:40). In addition, another associate of Paul, Mark, is also referred to by Peter as "my son" (5:13).

Bringing all this information together, we suggest the following solution: The quality of the Greek in this letter tells us that Peter, the apostle, could not have written this letter himself. Peter's authority within the letter and the strong connection that is made with his voice throughout the letter argues that a disciple of Peter is responsible. The reference to the city of Rome as "Babylon" (5:13) is also instructive. This symbolic identification could only have occurred after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE. Rome's devastation of the holy city was a graphic reminder to Jews and Christians alike of the previous destruction by Babylon six centuries earlier. Despite this horrific action, the attitude toward the state is not that of fierce hostility as is found in the Book of Revelation. Peter strongly endorses an approach that upholds the state's authority ("For the Lord's sake accept the authority of every human institution, whether of the emperor as supreme . . . " [2:13]). This means that the date of this letter would be somewhat closer to 70 CE than to the time of the persecutions that the Book of Revelation refers to around 95 CE. This indicates that the letter emanates from the world of Peter's disciples in Rome, among whom Silvanus and Mark are the most influential, writing in Peter's name to Christian communities with whom Peter had been associated during his ministry. The writer reminds them of the teaching that Peter had handed on to them. For the sake of convenience we continue to refer to the author as Peter.

Who are the readers to whom this letter is sent? They are identified as "the exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia" (1:1). These five geographical references are the names of five Roman provinces in Asia Minor, just north of the Taurus mountains. The letter was probably meant to be circulated

throughout these provinces and indicates the route the person who carried the letter would take. Peter identifies his readers as "exiles of the Dispersion" (1:1). We encountered a similar reference to the Dispersion in the Letter of James (1:1). "The Dispersion" (or more correctly the Diaspora) is the technical term for Jews living outside their homeland, Palestine. James had used it in this way to refer to Jewish Christians outside Palestine as the new twelve-tribe kingdom. However, 1 Peter could not use it in the same way as James because the implied readers of this letter are certainly not Jews, or more correctly Jewish Christians. His readers are clearly Christians coming from the pagan world. This reference to the Diaspora, then, should be understood in a metaphorical sense. The true homeland for Christians now is heaven. Christians are seen to live on earth as though they are in the Diaspora, outside their true home. This should give them a specific attitude to the world in which they live. This is not their permanent abode—they are like aliens living in a foreign world.

Examining the Text

This writing has all the features of a letter. It opens with the traditional Greco-Roman formula which the writer identifies. The readers are mentioned, and a brief greeting is given (1:1). The letter also concludes in

the usual way by providing an identification and greetings from those who were associated with the letter and its writer. In place of a customary thanksgiving section (so prevalent in most of Paul's letters) that provided a transition from the opening greetings to the body of the letter, the letter of 1 Peter passes immediately into the body. The author begins by reflecting on the identity and dignity of Christians (1:3-2:10). He provides a transition by calling on his readers to praise God for what God has done for them: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!" (1:3) This is reminiscent of the opening of the Letter to the Ephesians: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places" (1:3). Peter praises God for the greatest gift that God has bestowed on believers, namely the gift of new life that comes through the Resurrection of Jesus: "By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (1:3). This reference to the life that comes from baptism sets the tone for the whole letter and has led many scholars to propose that this letter was originally a baptismal homily. While baptismal themes do surface throughout this writing, that should not distract us from the fact that in its present form, this is a true letter that wishes to remind people of their baptismal inheritance and its implications.

Believers have received new life and they are called to lives of holiness (1:13-25). In the Sinai covenant, God was identified as the All-Holy One: "For I am the LORD your God; sanctify yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy" (Lev. 11:44). To be holy means essentially to be different. God is other than the world; God is different from the world. The people of Israel were set apart. They were called to be different from the nations around them. God is the source for the way they are to lead their lives. In a similar way, Christians are called upon to take God as the source for all their values. They can put this call to holiness into practice because of the work of Christ. He is the lamb without blemish (1:19) who was slaughtered on

their behalf. This is a clear reminder of the Paschal lamb in Israel. Through Jesus' death Christians are now able to place their faith and hope in God (1:21). In 1 Peter 2:9 the writer expresses in a beautiful way the identity of Christians: "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people." This surely must be one of the central verses of the entire letter. When the people of Israel became God's people at Mount Sinai during the Exodus wanderings (Exod. 19:5-6), they were identified by these same characteristics: they were a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people. Now, through the death and Resurrection of Jesus, Christians become God's people.

In a second major section of the letter the writer examines the situation of Christians living in a Gentile world (2:11-4:11). Since their true homeland is in heaven, they are to live as though they were aliens in this present world (2:11). This approach does not mean that Christians are subversive elements within society. Peter goes out of his way to show that the Christian life is meant to uphold the established structures of his society. He expresses his instruction through the literary form known as "household codes." These were lists that outlined the ethical obligations that members of a society or a family had one toward another. It was a popular mode of expression in the ancient world and one that occurs elsewhere in the New Testament (e.g, Eph. 5:21-6:9; 1 Tim. 2:1-2; 2:8-15; 5:1-2; 6:1-2; 1 Pet. 2:13-3:12). By means of such lists the New Testament writers wanted to show how Christians could bear witness to their faith so that the wider society would not see their way of life as a threat, but rather would view them as productive citizens within society. In these household codes Peter draws the attention of his readers to the following relationships: believers and the civil authorities (2:13-17); slaves toward their masters (2:18-25); wives and husbands (3:1-7); and finally relationships within the Christian community itself (3:8-12). These instructions provide the reader with a wonderful illustration of how a text must be read against the background of its own context and historical culture. They are not meant to canonize a particular social structure as normative for all time. Christians are to work within the given structures of their society, whatever they might be. Peter upholds the virtues of honor, concern for others, and service as the important elements in every relationship.

Another important teaching of the 1 Peter letter emerges from its attitude toward suffering (3:13-22). The

sufferings to which this letter draws attention are not to be seen as some type of official state persecution. They are sufferings that Christians experience from their pagan neighbors who cannot understand their faith and way of life. As a consequence, they react by ostracizing and ridiculing them. Christians respond to such opposition by defending themselves "with gentleness and reverence" (3:16), while at the same time willingly accepting suffering as part of God's will (3:17). Peter offers the example of Jesus as someone who, though innocent, accepted suffering and ultimately death on behalf of others "in order to bring you to God" (3:18).

As the author reflects on the suffering of Jesus (3:18-22), some interesting religious ideas emerge. On two occasions Peter presents Jesus as preaching to the dead (3:19

and 4:6). In verse 3:19 the writer graphically portrays Jesus after his death as preaching to "the spirits in prison" (3:18). This imagery can be understood only against the background of the Jewish explanation of Genesis 6:1-4. According to an interpretation of these difficult verses, evil angels were held accountable for leading humanity into sin. As punishment, God banished them to a pit. (See 1 Enoch 22:10-11). This imagery of Jesus going down to the place of the dead and preaching to them after his death is a symbolic way of showing the theological significance of Jesus' death. First Peter views Jesus' death as a triumph over the forces of sin and evil. Jesus' preaching proclaims this victory over evil and sin.

The writer continues with a reference to another episode from the Old Testament, that of Noah (3:20-22). In the past God saved Noah from the evils of his world—the waters of the Flood. In a similar way God now saves those Christians who are faithful by means of the waters of baptism.

By expressing his thoughts on the saving significance of Jesus' death and Resurrection, the author of 1 Peter shows that these thoughts are shaped by a credal formula that was in use in the church's liturgy:

> Put to death in the flesh,
> made alive in the Spirit,
> he preached to the spirits in prison,
> and having gone to heaven,
> he is at the right hand of God,
> making subject to him
> angels, authorities and powers.
> (based on 3:18-22)

Looking to the future, the author of 1 Peter is convinced that "the end of all things is near" (4:7). This belief in the nearness of the parousia has serious implications for the readers: they must lead their lives by demonstrating attitudes of prayer (4:7), love (4:8), hospitality (4:9), and service to others (4:10).

The body of the letter concludes with a series of exhortations (4:12-5:11). The writer now gives the themes mentioned before a future orientation. Present sufferings are viewed as part of God's judgment of the world. The readers already share in that judgment. After calling on his readers to resist every form of evil (5:9), Peter offers them the assurance that through their sufferings, they will ultimately share in the glory of the Resurrection. The path of Jesus from death through resurrection is the traditional path that the faith of Christianity envisages for every follower of Jesus. "And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you" (5:10). This gives expression to what is surely one of the foundational beliefs of Christianity. All is a divine gift. All grace comes from God through the death and Resurrection of Jesus. Like the communities to whom the 1 Peter letter was written, Christian communities today are called upon to open themselves up and trust totally in this saving grace through God in Christ Jesus.

The Second Letter of Peter

Author and Readers

The letter states that it is from "Simeon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ" (1:1). The writer also supplies information about himself: he was a witness to the Transfiguration (1:17-18), and he has written a previous letter to them (3:1). Despite these identifications with the apostle Peter, it seems very unlikely that the historical apostle was the actual author for a number of reasons. One of the main objections to Peter's authorship comes from the probable date of this writing. As indicated below, 2 Peter makes use of the Letter of Jude almost in its entirety. Nineteen of the twenty-five verses of the Letter of Jude are incorporated into this second letter of Peter. Since Jude's letter is a writing from a second-generation Christian, the date of 2 Peter would be even later. In addition, 2 Peter presumes that, at the time of writing, the first generation of Christians had already passed away: "For ever since our ancestors died . . . " (3:4). The writings of the apostle Paul were also being collected into a group and considered to have an authority equal to the writings of the Old Testament (3:15-16). For this to have occurred, a long period of time needs to have passed between Paul's writings and their actual acknowledgement as part of the Scriptures.

It appears very unlikely that the actual writer of this letter was the apostle Peter. It comes from a time at the beginning of the second century, making it probably the last writing of the New Testament. Why then does it bear the name of Peter? Probably because the author of 2 Peter was a disciple of Peter who appealed to his authority to uphold the traditional faith of the community to whom he writes. False teachers, who have recently entered the community, were undermining the traditional faith, so the writer uses Peter's authority to remind the readers of what Peter taught and how Peter would have spoken to the issues had he still been alive.

The readers are identified in this way: "To those who have received a faith as precious as ours" (1:1). This is a very general statement. However, we can be more precise. Since the writer refers to 1 Peter, one would presume that the readers make up the same communities to whom 1 Peter was written. Reference is made to the letters of Paul as a collection. The communities who received this letter must look upon Paul and Peter as holding importance and authority. Since the letter shows more of a connection to Greek thought and expression, it is logical to identifyguess the readers withmight have been those Gentile Christians living in areas of Asia Minor where Paul and Peter exercised their ministry.

Examining the Text

The writing opens in the form of a letter (1:1-2). Instead of final greetings, the writing ends with a doxology (3:18). There are very few personal allusions to the readers and no one is named. This indicates that this letter has a more general character. In fact the best way to designate the literary genre of this writing is to call it a testament. This type of writing was very common among Christians and Jews in the first centuries of the Common Era. The context for a testament is that of an important figure who bids farewell to his or her closest associates. At the point of death this person tries to hand on to those who remain behind the essence of his or her teaching and gives them encouragement. The message is expressed by means of a farewell speech. A testament challenges the readers to uphold the teachings of a specific person by

reminding them of the importance he or she held within their tradition. Among the best known of the testament speeches in the Scriptures are those of Jacob in Genesis 47:29-49:28; Moses in Deuteronomy 29-31; Joshua in Joshua 23-24; Paul in Acts 20:18-38; and Jesus in John 13-17. As a testament, 2 Peter

intends to challenge the readers to remain true to the teachings of the apostle Peter (and Paul) as well as to warn them against the new teachings that false teachers are introducing into the midst of the community.

This letter provides many insights into some truly enduring teachings. The writer reminds his readers that God's power has given them everything necessary to lead their lives in conformity to their call as Christians. They are "participants of the divine nature" (1:4). This is one of the deepest insights in the New Testament describing the identity of Christians and their relationship to God. First Peter hints at a similar understanding when it speaks about "one who shares in the glory to be revealed" (1 Pet. 5:1).

Because of their identity the readers are urged to remain true to the call they have received (2 Pet. 1:5-11). Their way of life is illustrated through the practice of many virtues that the author enumerates: faith, goodness, knowledge, self-control, endurance, godliness, mutual affection, love. This method of presenting moral teaching by means of lists of virtues and vices was very common in the world of Greece and Rome.

The character of a testament appears very clearly in verses 1:14-15, when the writer has Peter speak about his impending death and says that he wishes to leave behind a document of his teaching to which they can later refer. The writing shows that the traditional faith of the readers has been assailed. The attack centers on the second coming of Jesus (the parousia). This letter aims at defending and explaining the Christian understanding of the end of the world. Peter's message does not rest on "cleverly devised myths," but on the tradition that goes back to the revelation of God who bore witness to Jesus as God's Son at the Transfiguration (1:18).

A further significant insight provided by this letter is that of the inspiration of scripture: "First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God" (1:20-21). For the writer, the interpretation of prophecy and scripture remains a communal experience: it is not a matter of a private interpretation and feeling.

In defending his teaching against the false teachers, the author of 2 Peter uses the Letter of Jude—in fact, almost all of it! This author uses the material from Jude to criticize his opponents and to illustrate how their teaching is false. Referring to examples taken from the Old Testament, the author demonstrates how God punishes the wicked and blesses the faithful (2:1-10). The intention is to show that the future coming of Christ (the parousia) will bring with it judgment and blessing.

Chapter 3 challenges the false teachers who speak about the end of the world. The heart of their objection concerns belief in the return of Christ (3:4). Their arguments rest on the observed permanency of the world: "For ever since our ancestors died, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation!" (3:5) Their cynicism shines through this statement. In effect they are saying: God has not been intervening in the world; why should he suddenly start now? The author answers the objection by referring to examples drawn from salvation history. God's rule over the world can be seen through the simple act of speaking: by God's word, the creation took place, and by the same word of God, the world was destroyed by water at the time of Noah (3:5-6). The author argues that the end of the world has not yet occurred because God has caused a delay to give more people time to repent and consequently attain salvation (3:9). In any case the concept of a delay only occurs from a human perspective, because "with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day" (3:8). As in the Synoptic Gospels, 1 Peter presents the final coming of Jesus as totally unexpected, like a thief in the night (Mark 13:32-37). This central focus on the end of the world and the return of Christ provides a challenge to the readers to lead lives "of holiness and godliness" (3:11). This is a reminder again of the identity of Christians as indicated in the beginning by describing them as "participants of the divine nature" (1:4).

At the conclusion the author refers to Paul's writings and offers some significant insights. He shows that the letters of Paul are being collected as a group at this stage in the history of the early church ("in all his letters" [3:16]). But more important, the letters of Paul are considered to have the same authority as the writings of the Old Testament. He refers to "the other scriptures" (3:16), namely the Old Testament. Paul's letters are judged to have the same status as scripture or sacred writings. This marks the start of a process that would take an additional three hundred years or more before Christians would come to final agreement on what books comprise the New Testament. The search for a canon of scripture was in effect a search that the author of 2 Peter initiated when he spoke about "the other scriptures." The desire grew within the Christian community to define the extent of their sacred writings. Only with the Easter letter of Athanasius (367 CE) was a sort of agreement reached among Christians as to the composition of the Holy Scriptures.

Second Peter illustrates an insight that is valid for every generation of Christians: the importance of remaining connected to the tradition that has been handed on and in which one stands. However, one does not remain static or fossilized in this adherence, as Peter himself shows. He has adapted terms familiar within Greek philosophy to express his Christian ideas, such as the phrase "participants of the divine nature" (1:4). The challenge remains the same for every Christian generation: to steer a path that remains true to its traditions, while at the same time attempting to express these beliefs within the language and context of its own world.

End of chapter

Relationship to the culture back

It actually says more about the culture at the time the material was codified.

Iakobos back

Jacob

The extended family back

This looks like special pleading to me. Take the word in its first and most natural meaning, unless you have some good reason to do otherwise.

“Brothers and Sisters” back

Why not “Comrades?”

Faith and Works back

How about the validity of works without faith? Pope Francis seems interested in the concept.

The family of Jesus back

Not to be bitchy— OK, to be bitchy—a cynic like me thinks of the not-always-estimable behavior of MLK's family.

Disrupt the Lord's Supper back

It would be interesting to know how. Probably they just partied a bit too hearty. But note that Christians were frequently accused of cannibalism and incest – a charge that Tertullian (Mr. T to his friends) has great fun repudiating. As we'll see in Year 3.

Peter couldn't have written Greek like this back

But his secretary could have

Peter's Greek back

Let's not be snobbish. Perhaps he took night classes.

s And the EFM writers set it down as though it doesn't much matter!

Diaspora back

This is stretching the sense a bit. They could have been exiled non-Jewish Christians.

Not meant to canonize back

How do we know this? It's a matter of faith.

Pagan neighbors back

Let's pause for a moment and think of all our normal-looking neighbors, and the crazy things they probably get up to behind closed doors.

Jesus preaching to the dead back

I'm sorry, but I'm not willing to give up the idea of Jesus preaching to the souls in Purgatory.

Peter's testament back

Sorry but, literary conventions notwithstanding, if Peter didn't write this it's close to forgery.

One day like a thousand years back

Nice try!