**NT General Letters and Revelation**

**Hebrews**

Hebrews is not a real letter but a sermon (see introduction, NT, 1700– 1702). The best way to experience Hebrews is by reading it out loud from beginning to end. Subtle points of Greek rhetoric— such as the alliteration in the opening verses— will still escape the contemporary reader. But oral recitation helps to catch the sermonic rhythms of Hebrews, its use of “we” and “you” (so natural to the sermon), and its alternating pattern of exposition and exhortation.

Hebrews has significantly shaped the liturgy, doctrine, and spirituality of the church. Although other New Testament writings speak of Jesus’s death as a sacrifice, Hebrews’ unique reflection on Melchizedek (chap. 7) and on Jesus as the Great High Priest influenced the development of Catholic liturgy. Hebrews’ insistence on Jesus’s full divinity and equally full participation in human nature contributed to the understanding of Jesus’s identity as God’s Son (1– 2). And Hebrews’ vision of faith as a pilgrimage toward God (11– 12) created a symbolic framework for the Christian understanding of discipleship as a “journey.” For all its riches, Hebrews resists easy assimilation for two reasons: the first is that it presents a sustained argument from beginning to end; the second is that its symbols are hard to understand. Dealing with these difficulties clears the way to more intelligent and satisfactory reading.

Each part of Hebrews plays a role in a complicated interplay of argument and explanation concerning Jesus and Christian life. Hebrews resists being excerpted. It uses a form of argument, found both in Greek philosophy and rabbinic Judaism, called “from the lesser to the greater.” The argument goes, “If something is true in a smaller matter, it is even more true in an analogous greater matter.” In Hebrews, the contrast is between the partial revelation of God in the past through angels, law, and priesthood, and the perfect revelation “in the last of these days” through God’s Son, Jesus, between that former “lesser” salvation and the present “greater” salvation. The argument in Hebrews has a practical aim. The real point is the contrast between the response to God’s word by God’s people of the past, and the response demanded of believers today.

*Donald Senior; John Collins; Mary Ann Getty. The Catholic Study Bible (pp. 1364-1365). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.*

**James**

In the case of James (as noted in the NABRE introduction, pp. 1721– 1722), the letter format is the frame for a moral exhortation intended for a general readership. James is not terribly difficult to understand; its style is lucid, its message is straightforward. The reader’s task is putting into practice what James teaches. Our task here is simply the deeper appreciation of a clear witness.

The form of Greco-Roman moral exhortation called parenesis was concerned with reminding readers of traditional values rather than with constructing theory. Such reminders often took the form of short maxims. James’s first chapter in particular has such maxims, which are less connected to each other than to other sections of the composition. Chapters 2 through 5 take the form of short essays. The maxims in chapter 1 set themes that are developed in the essays of chapters 2 through 5. Note how the control of the tongue in 1: 26 is elaborated by 3: 1– 12. Moral exhortation also presented models of virtue for readers to imitate. In James, the figures of Abraham, Rahab, Job, and Elijah provide examples from Scripture of the practical virtue James encourages. James, however, is more than a moral treatise. It is a religious writing that uses the symbols of Scripture. James resembles the Wisdom tradition in its use of maxims, and in advocating a “wisdom from above” as the measure of life (3: 13– 18). James uses the language and perspective of the Prophets in its attack on rich oppressors (5: 1– 6). James also uses the Law. For James, both the Decalogue and the Law of Love are binding for Christians.

*Donald Senior; John Collins; Mary Ann Getty. The Catholic Study Bible (p. 1379). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.*

**1 Peter**

First Peter bears all the marks of a real letter. It was written to Christians scattered throughout the provinces of Asia Minor. Although written in clear and even elegant Greek, and although containing an exhortation and witness (5: 12) at once simple and profound, 1 Peter is given far less attention than it deserves. Partly this is because many contemporary scholars think that the letter is pseudonymous and a product of second generation rather than primitive Christianity (see, for example, NABRE introduction, pp. 1728– 1729). This letter speaks powerfully to a situation of early believers and retains enduring value for readers in every age. Since the letter is addressed to Christians spread over a large geographical area (1: 1), we do not expect the detailed treatment of local problems. By reading between the lines, however, we are able to learn something about the shared characteristics of First Peter’s readers. They seem to have been recently converted. Peter reminds them repeatedly of their former life of vice (1: 18– 20; 4: 3– 4), as well as their initiation into the messianic community through baptism (1: 3; 1: 22– 2: 3). They seem, furthermore, to be direct converts from paganism rather than from Judaism. They were themselves Gentiles and continued to live among the symbols and social structures of the Roman Empire. They inevitably felt pulled between an allegiance to their new calling and an attraction to the values of the world they had left. They were, finally, converts who were experiencing suffering.

*Donald Senior; John Collins; Mary Ann Getty. The Catholic Study Bible (pp. 1390-1391). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.*

**2 Peter**

An appreciative understanding of 2 Peter demands more than ordinary effort. Hard work is necessary to uncover the situation addressed by the letter. Perhaps even more difficult is the hurdle presented by the letter’s sustained argumentative tone. Such effort finds its rewards, however, in the surprising discovery that a writing which at first appears as the New Testament’s most irrelevant can emerge as having perennial pertinence.

The same author did not write both 1 and 2 Peter. The style, outlook, and concerns of the two letters are too disparate for a common authorship. The main thing they have in common is the mention of Noah and the flood. Second Peter has far more in common with Jude (with which it shares the polemical material of chap. 2) than with 1 Peter. In all likelihood, 2 Peter is a pseudonymous composition. Despite the self-presentation of chapter 1, it is not “Symeon Peter” who writes, but someone who invokes his authority as a support for shared traditions being threatened by deviance. This sermon in the form of a letter may have been addressed to a single church, but it may also have been intended for a larger audience, namely all “those who have received a faith of equal value to ours” (1: 1). It is thus considered a “general” epistle. The title “Catholic Epistles” was applied to 1 and 2 Peter, James, 1, 2, 3 John, and Jude because they were written for a broader audience than a local church (in Greek, “catholic” = “pertaining to the whole”). Some readers also consider 2 Peter “catholic” in another sense: they see its concern for tradition as anticipating the emergence of the Catholic Church in the second century.

*Donald Senior; John Collins; Mary Ann Getty. The Catholic Study Bible (pp. 1401-1402). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition*.

**Letters attributed to John**

The New Testament contains three letters attributed to John. How these letters connect to the Gospel according to John and the book of Revelation is not easy to determine. Scholars agree that all came from a community of “Johannine Christianity” in the late first century, but neither their precise authorship nor sequence has been established. We are not even sure of the location of this “Johannine Christianity,” although Asia Minor seems most likely.

First, the figure of Jesus played a central role in the identity of the community. Second, these churches had experienced tragic division. In the Gospel and Revelation, there is conflict between these messianists and the Jews. In the letters and Revelation, there is also evidence of divisions within the churches. Third, this experience of division sharpened the community’s symbols into a stark dualism: light and darkness, life and death, truth and falsehood, flesh and spirit.

In the three letters, we see conflict happening within the churches. Disputes involve the proper understanding of Jesus. The letters provide a window on this early Christian conflict, revealing at once its multiple dimensions and its seriousness.

*Donald Senior; John Collins; Mary Ann Getty. The Catholic Study Bible (p. 1409). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.*

**1 John**

Early Christian tradition identified this work as a letter of John the apostle. Because of its resemblance to the fourth gospel in style, vocabulary, and ideas, it is generally agreed that both works are the product of the same school of Johannine Christianity.

The purpose of the letter is to combat certain false ideas, especially about Jesus, and to deepen the spiritual and social awareness of the Christian community (1 Jn 3: 17). Some former members (1 Jn 2: 19) of the community refused to acknowledge Jesus as the Christ (1 Jn 2: 22) and denied that he was a true man (1 Jn 4: 2). The specific heresy described in this letter cannot be identified exactly, but it is a form of docetism or gnosticism; the former doctrine denied the humanity of Christ to insure that his divinity was untainted, and the latter viewed the appearance of Christ as a mere stepping-stone to higher knowledge of God. These theological errors are rejected by an appeal to the reality and continuity of the apostolic witness to Jesus.

*Donald Senior; John Collins; Mary Ann Getty. The Catholic Study Bible (pp. 6242-6243). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.*

**2 John**

Written in response to similar problems, the Second and Third Letters of John are of the same length, perhaps determined by the practical consideration of the writing space on one piece of papyrus. In each letter the writer calls himself “the Presbyter,” and their common authorship is further evidenced by internal similarities in style and wording, especially in the introductions and conclusions. The literary considerations that link 2 John and 3 John also link them with the First Letter and the Gospel of John. The concern with “truth,” christology, mutual love, the new commandment, antichrist, and the integrity of witness to the earthly Jesus mark these works as products of the Johannine school. The identity of the Presbyter is problematic. The use of the title implies more than age, and refers to his position of leadership in the early church. The absence of a proper name indicates that he was well known and acknowledged in authority by the communities to which he writes.

The Second Letter is addressed to “the chosen Lady” and “to her children.” This literary image of a particular Christian community reflects the specific destination and purpose of the letter. Unlike 1 John, this brief letter is not a theological treatise but a reply to problems within the church. The Johannine themes of love and truth are used to support practical advice on Christian living.

*Donald Senior; John Collins; Mary Ann Getty. The Catholic Study Bible (pp. 6259-6260). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.*

**3 John**

The Third Letter of John preserves a brief glimpse into the problems of missionary activity and local autonomy in the early church. In contrast to the other two letters of John, this work was addressed to a specific individual, Gaius. This letter is less theological in content and purpose. The problems of the Presbyter in this short letter provide us with valuable evidence of the flexible and personal nature of authority in the early church. The Presbyter writes to Gaius, whom perhaps he had converted or instructed, on the basis of their personal links. The brothers have also confirmed him as a loyal Christian in action and belief. Gaius accepted the missionaries from the Presbyter and presumably will accept Demetrius on the Presbyter’s recommendation. In contrast, Diotrephes refuses to receive either letters or friends of the Presbyter. Although he is portrayed as ambitious and hostile, he perhaps exemplifies the cautious and sectarian nature of early Christianity; for its own protection the local community mistrusted missionaries as false teachers.

*Donald Senior; John Collins; Mary Ann Getty. The Catholic Study Bible (p. 6263). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.*

**Jude**

This letter is by its address attributed to “Jude, a slave of Jesus Christ and brother of James” (Jude 1). Since he is not identified as an apostle, this designation can hardly be meant to refer to the Jude or Judas who is listed as one of the Twelve (Lk 6: 16; Acts 1: 13; cf. Jn 14: 22). The person intended is almost certainly the other Jude, named in the gospels among the relatives of Jesus (Mt 13: 55; Mk 6: 3), and the James who is listed there as his brother is the one to whom the Letter of James is attributed.

The letter is addressed in the most general terms to “those who are called, beloved in God the Father and kept safe for Jesus Christ” 1), hence apparently to all Christians. But since its purpose is to warn the addressees against false teachers, the author must have had in mind one or more specific Christian communities located in the unidentified region where the errors in question constituted a danger. While the letter contains some Semitic features, there is nothing to identify the addressees specifically as Jewish Christians; indeed, the errors envisaged seem to reflect an early form of gnosticism, opposed to law, that points rather to the cultural context of the Gentile world.

*Donald Senior; John Collins; Mary Ann Getty. The Catholic Study Bible (p. 6267). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.*

**Revelations**

The Apocalypse, or Revelation to John, the last book of the Bible, is one of the most difficult to understand because it abounds in unfamiliar and extravagant symbolism, which at best appears unusual to the modern reader. Symbolic language, however, is one of the chief characteristics of apocalyptic literature, of which this book is an outstanding example. Such literature enjoyed wide popularity in both Jewish and Christian circles from ca. 200 b.c. to a.d. 200. This book contains an account of visions in symbolic and allegorical language borrowed extensively from the Old Testament, especially Ezekiel, Zechariah, and Daniel. Whether or not these visions were real experiences of the author or simply literary conventions employed by him is an open question.

This much, however, is certain: symbolic descriptions are not to be taken as literal descriptions, nor is the symbolism meant to be pictured realistically. One would find it difficult and repulsive to visualize a lamb with seven horns and seven eyes; yet Jesus Christ is described in precisely such words (Rev 5: 6). The author used these images to suggest Christ’s universal (seven) power (horns) and knowledge (eyes). A significant feature of apocalyptic writing is the use of symbolic colors, metals, garments (Rev 1: 13– 16; 3: 18; 4: 4; 6: 1– 8; 17: 4; 19: 8), and numbers (four signifies the world, six imperfection, seven totality or perfection, twelve Israel’s tribes or the apostles, one thousand immensity). Finally the vindictive language in the book (Rev 6: 9– 10; 18: 1– 19: 4) is also to be understood symbolically and not literally.

The Book of Revelation cannot be adequately understood except against the historical background that occasioned its writing. Like Daniel and other apocalypses, it was composed as resistance literature to meet a crisis. The book itself suggests that the crisis was ruthless persecution of the early church by the Roman authorities; the harlot Babylon symbolizes pagan Rome, the city on seven hills (Rev 17: 9).

*Donald Senior; John Collins; Mary Ann Getty. The Catholic Study Bible (pp. 6274-6275). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.*