The Catholic Epistles as a Canonical Janus: A New Testament Glimpse into Old and New Testament Canon Formation

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The Catholic Epistles look back at the forming “Old Testament” canon, showing not only the use of all segments of the Tanakh but also a preference for the Septuagint, the reading of all Tanakh passages through Second Temple literature, and a wider body of authoritative literature than the Tanakh. They look forward as part of the process of New Testament canon formation in their own use of the Jesus tradition and references to Paul (although references to Pauline literature outside 2 Peter are disputed) and in their own history of canonization in that only one had a smooth acceptance while the others were all ignored or disputed. They were finally accepted as part of a group of seven books, which is the basis of David Nienhuis’s novel theory about the creation of James, which may have been viewed as a collection of the three “pillars.”

Key Words: canon, canonization, Catholic Epistles, James, 1 Peter, 2 Peter, Jude

When one uses the term *canon*, especially in the context of the Institute for Biblical Research one usually means the collections of books originating among the Israelites, especially in the First and Second Temple periods, 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, collections that in one form or another have been used by the Christian church for the past 1900 years, more or less. In trying from an NT perspective to gain a handle on the formation of this list or canon, it is clear to this writer at least that the Catholic Epistles are uniquely situated. That is, they give interesting perspectives on the state of the “Old Testament” “canon” in the first century of this era, and they also contribute significantly to our knowledge of the formation of the

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1. With some exceptions, all of the works of the NT are commonly dated within the first century, and certainly the various citations in the Fathers show a belief that all originated in the first century.
NT canon both through their own reflection on and through their getting caught up in the process. Thus, they look both forward and backward and in this sense are like the two-faced Roman god Janus. It is this double aspect that this article seeks to start to unpack.

1. **LOOKING BACK**

It is clear that the Catholic Epistles look back in that they use those writings commonly used by the various Jewish groups, that is, Scriptures, that they consider authoritative.² Whereas only 1 Peter makes extensive use of quotations from the Jewish Scriptures, each of these four books alludes to their content. It is this usage that raises some issues.

1.1. **What Language Is Canonical?**

The first issue that is raised is that of version. When it comes to James, it has long been known that the author cites the Septuagint wherever that claim can be tested.³ Now this may just be the special case of “Jerusalem” writing a Diaspora letter (which this writer, following Karl-Wilhelm Niebuhr, takes to be the genre of James)⁴ and thus using a Greek text, yet the fact remains that this letter shows no consciousness of there being any authoritative text other than the Septuagint. The same can be argued for other Catholic Epistles with the possible exception of Jude. Richard Bauckham argues that Jude 12 is dependent on the Hebrew of Ezek 34:2 and Prov 25:14.⁵ The latter of these could be (pun not intended) proverbial and not an allusion to the Scriptures at all, but the former has some possibility of being an allusion to the Hebrew text, although Bauckham has not convinced the majority of other commentators that we are not in both cases dealing with an expression that has become, at least in the Jesus movement, an idiom of general speech. The greater problem, of course, is that

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2. It is clear that various Jewish groups considered a variety of works authoritative, but it seems also clear that most agreed that the Torah was authoritative, and so to a large extent were the Prophets. There appears to have been more variety of opinion on the Writings.

3. This article will use *LXX* or *Septuagint* as shorthand for the Greek version of the Jewish Scriptures, although strictly speaking one is talking about proto-Septuagint versions. It is true that in my *Epistle of James* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 10 n. 33, I try to minimize this fact. But Kennedy’s data, which are cited there, remain true, and there are no contradictory data. And even if some expressions are possibly part of the tradition of the Jesus movement and thus not direct citations, they show that the whole group has mined the Septuagint. Thus, to the extent that James does cite the Scriptures, his Bible is the LXX.

4. The letter presents itself as written from Jerusalem authorities to Jewish followers of Jesus in the Diaspora. I have argued that it fits the period between the death of James and the start of the war of A.D. 66–70 and thus preserves the teaching of James. Whether the author was actually in Jerusalem or not and what his position in the community was is not discernible, nor is it significant for this article. Karl-Wilhelm Niebuhr, “Der jakobusbrief im Licht frühjüdischer Diasporabriefe,” *NTS* 44 (1998): 420–43.

5. Richard Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter* (WBC 50; Dallas: Word, 1983), 87. He also believes that Jude 13 alludes to the Hebrew of Isa 57:20, but this is far less likely because the wording is not as close as in the other two cases.
Jude does not cite the traditional books of the Hebrew canon at all, so we lack good test cases for demonstrating the text that he is using. Be that as it may, the point of this argument is that, while there may have been some use of the Hebrew Scriptures in the early Jesus movement, there is no evidence in the Catholic Epistles that it was preferred as more authoritative than the Septuagint. In fact, this literature points to the Septuagint as having been the form in which most of the movement read the Scriptures.6

1.2. What Is the Extent of the Canon?

The Catholic Epistles can give us a false comfort when considering the extent of the “canon” in the first century Jesus movement. On the one hand, they do cite familiar material from the now-traditional OT canon. James 2:8, 11 cites the Decalogue and the familiar summary of the Law. James 2:21 refers to Gen 22, and Jas 2:25 refers to Josh 2. James 4:6 cites Prov 3:34. There are also numerous allusions to various scriptural passages. 1 Peter also cites Prov 3:34 (in 1 Pet 5:5) as well as Prov 11:31 (in 1 Pet 4:18). The work has two Psalm citations (Ps 118:22 in 1 Pet 2:7 and Ps 34:12–16 in 1 Pet 3:10–12) and at least four Isaiah citations (Isa 40:6–8 in 1 Pet 1:24–25, Isa 28:16 in 1 Pet 2:6, Isa 8:14 in 1 Pet 2:8, and Isa 43:20–21 in 1 Pet 2:9). There are two citations of the Pentateuch, both composite citations (Lev 19:2; 11:44; and 20:7, 26 in 1 Pet 1:16; Exod 19:6 in 1 Pet 2:9). Again, there are numerous allusions (my commentary lists 20 verses in 1 Peter as alluding to the now-canonical OT).7 One does not have the same phenomenon of citations in 2 Peter and Jude, but these books certainly include numerous references to narratives contemporary readers know from the Torah. In other words, it looks like the authors of this literature are reading the same OT portion of the same Bible that many of the readers of this article read in their youth. Or, to put it another way, these authors appear well versed in the Septuagint, which is even more evident when one realizes, for instance, that most of the Semitic constructions and unusual vocabulary in James (e.g., “doer of the word,” Jas 1:22) is septuagintal and so likely indicates an even greater familiarity with the Septuagint than his references suggest. Thus, these references suggest that James and 1 Peter were familiar with the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings, although the narrative citations in 2 Peter and Jude are exclusively of narratives found in the Torah.

However, before one gets too comfortable with these authors’ use of Hebrew Scripture, one should note that, while the actual citations are indeed citations of the Septuagint, at least in James every citation except

6. It is also the explanation for the occasional Semitisms, such as those in Jas 1:20–25. The Semitisms of the Septuagint influenced the language of the community much as contemporary communities that read the King James Version often display that language creeping into their religious speech (e.g., prayers, sermons, and religious writing) and sometimes into their other speech (as this author can testify to having happened in some of his essays in high school).

Prov 3:34 is also a citation of a passage found in the teaching of Jesus, and Prov 3:34 seems to have circulated within the Jesus movement as witnessed to by its use in common with 1 Peter. In other words, while one should not doubt that James did know the Septuagint, his scriptural usage could have been mediated to him by the teaching of Jesus and common tradition. It is, of course, clearer that 1 Peter is saturated with direct knowledge of the Septuagint, or at least did not get all his citations through the medium of the Jesus tradition as modern scholars know it. Yet when it comes to 2 Peter and Jude, one does not see much evidence at all of direct contact with Hebrew Scriptures or the Septuagint, unless one accepts Richard Bauckham’s argument cited previously, and that would give only minimal contact.

“Wait,” one may say, “you have forgotten the narratives that are cited.” No, not forgotten, just put off discussing them. The problem with the narratives is that one needs to ask in what form these authors knew them. For instance, in previous work I have argued that Jas 5:11 is referring not to canonical Job but rather to the Testament of Job, since he attributes to Job a virtue never mentioned in the canonical book but around which the Testament revolves. Likewise, it is only in Second Temple literature that one reads about the prayer life of Elijah to which James refers (Jas 5:17–18). While it is not as clear in the case of the Abraham and Rahab references, there is reason to believe that James also knows these stories in their Second Temple form. Even if he does not, it is clear that “non-canonical” versions of at least two narratives, whether in oral or written form, are the definitive versions of the narratives for him.

One might feel that in 1 Peter one has escaped that ambiguity, but when one reads about Sarah in 1 Pet 3:6 one again sees a reference to a noncanonical form of the Hebrew narrative. It has long been recognized that it is difficult if not impossible to view this verse as referring to Gen 18:12, the only place in the Septuagint in which Sarah refers to Abraham as “lord.” It is now clear that, during the Second Temple period, Sarah, who was something of an embarrassment to Philo and Josephus, had been remade into a good Hellenistic wife, and so in the Testament of Abraham she repeatedly addresses Abraham as “my lord.” The dating of the version of this work that we have is too uncertain to confidently assert that 1 Peter knew it, but it is clear that his reference to Sarah is far closer to the Sarah of this work than to the Sarah of Genesis. In other words, 1 Peter as well


9. The reader is referred to the relevant parts of my Epistle of James and to my “Pseudepigrapha in the Catholic Epistles.” In the case of Abraham, one should also read Jas 1:13, which appears to contradict Gen 22:1 but does not if James knew the form of the narrative found in Jubilees.

10. For further discussion of this issue, see my “Silent Witness in Marriage,” in Discovering Biblical Equality (ed. Ronald W. Pierce and Rebecca Merrill Groothius; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 224–38, especially pp. 231–34 and the literature cited there.
is at least “hearing” the Genesis narratives through first century rewritings that are culturally congruent for him. That means that in functional terms the “canonical” version of the narrative is for him the first-century version, not the septuagintal version (which in the case of Genesis is a relatively faithful translation of the earlier Hebrew narratives).

When one turns to 2 Peter and Jude, a similar situation prevails. Jude, of course, is well known for his citing 1 En. 1:9 in Jude 14–15 as well as his probable reference in Jude 9 to the death of Moses in the Testament of Moses. It is also clear that 1 En. 1:9 is the only ancient text that Jude cites. But what is less obvious is that every reference to narrative material in 2 Peter and Jude that can be checked reveals that the narrative is being read through the lens of what is known to modern readers as Second Temple literature. The Gen 6:1 narrative is clearly being read in the version found in a work such as 1 Enoch, for only in this literature does one have references to the angels or watchers or sons of God being kept in some type of prison, as is the case in both 2 Peter and Jude. Noah’s preaching and Lot’s righteousness and distress are both subjects of Second Temple literature, not the respective narratives in Genesis, as is also true of the nature of the sins of Sodom. Balaam’s love of money and the donkey’s speech are both subjects of Second Temple writings rather than topics of Genesis. All of this can be easily documented.

One may argue that these authors never say that the various works that have influenced them are “Scripture.” While that is quite true, it is also true that (1) γραφή has a wider meaning than “Scripture” in the religious sense, picking up that meaning in the NT from context; (2) the term appears only six times in the Catholic Epistles; (3) two uses are general references to scriptures (2 Pet 1:20; 3:16); (4) three are references to specific passages (Jas 2:8, 2:23; 1 Pet 2:6); (5) one use is probably a reference to an unknown “Scripture” (Jas 4:5); and (6) most references to septuagintal passages in the Catholic Epistles do not use the term. Thus, the term can apparently include literature not in the modern canon (i.e., a now-unknown document that is thus by definition not canonical) but is also not a necessary term when referring to literature that is now known as canonical. It would probably be true to say that the use of this term indicates

11. Some references in 2 Peter and Jude to the older narratives are, of course, too brief to indicate what version of the narrative is in the mind of the author.
12. It may be suggested that the donkey does speak in Genesis, which is true, but the speech is short, and it is really the angel who rebukes Balaam, unlike in Second Temple accounts. Likewise, in Genesis Balaam refuses money and does not seem tempted by it, but in Second Temple stories it is clear that that was his motivation.
14. BAG 166 lists “1. of a little book . . . 2. in the NT exclusively w. a sacred mgng. of Holy Scripture—a. ἡ γ. the individual Scripture passage . . . b. Scripture as a whole—a. the plural οἱ γραφοί designates collectively all the parts of Scripture: the scriptures . . . οἱ γρ. τοῦ προφητῶν the writings of the prophets . . . b. the sg. as designation of Scripture as a whole.”
literature that the author considers authoritative, although to term this “canonical” would be anachronistic. But it is clear that this term is not the only way of citing or alluding to this literature. For example, the reference to 1 En. 1:9 is clearly a reference to a prophecy that Jude views as authoritative, but he refers to it as a “prophecy” (using the verb “prophesied”) and thus to 1 Enoch as a prophetic book. There is no reason to believe that the other Second Temple versions of the narratives that these authors refer to are not likewise viewed by them as authoritative. Given that formal discussions of canon postdate this literature, the viewing and using of literature as authoritative is as close as this period comes to canon consciousness. In other words, in the view of this writer these authors reveal the use of a “canon” that is wider than that of the later Septuagint. And it is precisely this phenomenon that causes these authors problems when one look at the NT canonization process.

2. LOOKING FORWARD

Having seen how the Catholic Epistles look backward toward the developing canon of the Septuagint, it is now time to look at what they have to contribute to the development of the NT canon.

2.1. The Process of Canonization

There are at least two ways that these works have been seen as contributing to the process of canonization. The first are the possible references in the Catholic Epistles to the Jesus tradition and the developing Pauline corpus. It is clear to many scholars that James and 1 Peter in particular are dependent upon the Jesus tradition and are in fact closest to its Matthhean form. This has been shown not only in this present writer’s own work but also in the dissertations of Rainer Metzner and Dean Deppe. While the evidence does not support the conclusion that either James or 1 Peter knew Matthew in its finished form, there are plenty of data to suggest that both these works show the Jesus tradition on its way to being fixed in Matthew. It was this fixing that would eventuate in Matthew’s becoming a “ca-


16. For instance, in his woes concerning the rich, James is closer to Luke than to Matthew, but in many other respects he is closer to Matthew, suggesting that he probably was not dealing with a manuscript of Matthew when he alludes to the Beatitudes. Also, there is no clause in either James or 1 Peter that is identical to a Matthean counterpart. Thus, it looks more like these authors are dependent upon an oral rather than a written text. Finally, in both works it is sayings rather than narratives that appear to provide the influence—in the case of James, it is first and foremost the Sermon on the Mount that concentrates the type of sayings that James alludes to—which is further evidence that the full text of the Matthew was not before him.
nonical” gospel, although only after there were competitors that would need to be ruled out as appropriate for reading in the communities.17

When it comes to the Pauline corpus, one has three pieces of evidence. The least controversial is the linguistic similarities between 1 Peter and the Pauline corpus. Whereas in the past this led to considering 1 Peter to be secondary to Paul, usually an inferior secondary relationship, it is presently recognized that 1 Peter is indeed dependent upon Pauline language and ideas, but that it is not entirely clear whether he actually knew any Pauline letters, although if he knew a Pauline letter it was Romans.18 Thus, 1 Peter is a witness to the circulation of at least Pauline ideas and possibly to the circulation of Romans having influenced him enough that he has picked up some language and ideas from it.

James is also said to have a relationship to the Pauline corpus and to Romans and Galatians in particular. Here, the evidence is more difficult to assess. It is true that Jas 2:14–26 and in particular 2:20–24 seems to have contact with Pauline ideas: there are the common use of the terms faith, works, and justified, the common use of the Abraham example, and the common issue of the relationship of faith to works. However, closer examination reveals that the meanings that James assigns to the various terms differ from Paul’s meanings,19 that James cites the Akedah but Paul cites Isaac only in terms of his being chosen over Ishmael, and that James’ core issue of charity is one on which Paul and James agree. Klaus Haaker is surely right when he argues that, though James may have come into contact with Pauline language, he has never seen either Romans or Galatians.20 Thus, James is probably a witness to Pauline language being in circulation rather than to contact with one or more Pauline letters.21

2 Peter is quite another matter. The author clearly indicates that he believes that Paul had written a letter to the same community or communities he is addressing and that this letter contains the theme of the final judgment and/or that of Parousia delay, “speaking of this as he does in all his letters” (2 Pet 3:16). Thus, he is aware (1) that Paul wrote a letter to his addressees, (2) that Paul wrote other letters, and (3) that the theme of the final judgment is a common theme in Paul’s letters. This reference could reveal a knowledge of the completed Pauline corpus but only necessarily

17. That is, there is no need to compile a list of works that are to be read in church (to the exclusion of others) unless there are alternative possibilities for what one or more of the churches in an area might read. Canon assumes there are alternatives.
21. The other alternative is to argue that James is an incompetent reader of Paul, not realizing that Paul’s “works of the law” are not deeds of charity and not understanding the arguments of Galatians and/or Romans. As Haaker (“Justification, Salut et Foi,” 88) puts it, ”Frère Jacques, Dormez vous?”
indicates an awareness of the addressees of one specific letter and that this theme was present in at least some of Paul's other letters, that is, those about which our author knew. So without having necessarily to claim that our author knew the entire Pauline corpus (although that is possible), it is clear that he was aware that Paul had written several letters that reportedly discussed Parousia delay and/or final judgment (as would, for example, be the case if he knew of 1 and 2 Thessalonians and 1 Corinthians). Unfortunately, our author does not elaborate, nor does he show any dependence upon Pauline writings.

2 Peter does know that “the ignorant and unstable” twist Paul’s writings “as they do the other Scriptures.” Now 2 Pet 1:20 has referred to “prophecy of Scripture” or, perhaps better translated, “prophetic writing,” and one wonders what he means by this. Normally, the Scriptures are referred to using the plural of γραφή, but this phrase seems to indicate only one type of writing, namely, prophetic. Does he mean to include 1 Enoch, the content of which he refers to without using Jude’s direct quotation and which Jude designates as prophetic? 2 Peter is not clear. Nor is it clear whether he is grouping Paul’s letters with “the Scriptures” or is simply saying that Paul’s letters are distorted just as other writings/Scriptures are. However, given the usual use of λοιπός, especially the plural form, as indicating others of the same group or class, and given that the preceding discussion could be read as accusing the teachers he opposes of having distorted or ignored the meaning of some of the works in the Septuagint (the “canonical” Scriptures that 2 Peter knows), it is probable that he is in some sense including Paul’s letters with “the Scriptures,” consciously or unconsciously. They are among the works that he believes agree with his point of view, although only in relation to the Pauline letters does he add the caveat that there are some statements that are difficult to understand.

Thus, one sees in 2 Peter some works that will come to be known as part of the NT, being known and valued in 2 Peter’s time alongside more traditional writings from the past. One can hardly call this a canon or even an incipient canon in that the reference is not being used to exclude other works that are not “Scripture,” but it does reveal a stage in the canon-forming process.

22. As noted above, 2 Peter does read his scriptural narratives through the eyes of Second Temple versions, which he expects his readers to know (otherwise, his brief references would lose their relevance). Then there is the reference in 2 Pet 1:22 that could include 1 Enoch, because he at least knows about the imprisonment of the “watchers.” Is he referring to all these as “Scriptures,” not just the Septuagint as it would eventually be known? Against this, one places the fact that he drops the reference in Jude to the narrative in the Testament of Moses (although he does not drop the charge against the false teachers) and does not include the quotation of 1 En 1:9. Does this mean that he is rejecting that literature as “Scripture,” or does it mean that he is trying to condense Jude’s material (he also does not maintain the triadic pattern that is found in Jude) and did not think that that material was necessary to the argument? Either of these is reasonable, so one cannot be dogmatic either way and thus one cannot know for sure the content of 2 Peter’s “Scriptures.”
2.2. The Canonization of These Works

The process of developing a body of authoritative works from the early Jesus movement and excluding from that body other works that claimed a similar origin continued, and the Catholic Epistles were one of the more interesting and conflictual chapters in that process. Though 1 Peter was never (to the knowledge of this writer) disputed, was probably known by 1 Clement, and was cited by name as early as Irenaeus (Haer. 4.9.2; 5.7.2; 16.5),23 James is not cited by name until Origen, and 2 Peter is disputed right up until the late fourth-century canon lists and beyond. Thus, whether or not 1 Peter was written during the lifetime of Simon Barjona from the modern point of view, it was early enough, useful enough (in that it addressed persecution, even though it does not appear that the persecution 1 Peter refers to was already official persecution), and uncontroversial enough that it was quickly accepted, perhaps right from the start, and shows up on canon lists almost as soon as those lists start to appear.24

James has quite a different history. While most scholars agree that James has a relationship to the Shepherd of Hermas due to its shared use of the term διψύχος, which it is often assumed that James coined, and it may be reflected in 1 Clement, it then disappears from the radar screen until Origen (Comm. Jo. 19:6; Comm. Rom. 4:1, 8; 9:24; Hom. Gen. 26:18; Hom. Exod. 3:3, 8:4, Hom. Lev. 2:4; Hom. Job 7:1; Sel. Ps. 31:5).25 In the first of these passages Origen indicates that he knows that the letter is disputed, a fact that one also finds attested to by Eusebius (Hist. eccl. 2.23),26 although Eusebius himself uses it as Scripture. Thus, one recognizes that it was known by 253, the death of Origen, and was still being disputed in 314. It was well accepted in the eastern Mediterranean (Catechism of Cyril of Jerusalem, Gregory of Nanzianzus, Athanasius’s 39th Festal Letter), but it was the end of the fourth century before it was clearly endorsed in the West (Council of


24. Jude is mentioned in the Muratorian Fragment (line 68), and the Apocalypse of Peter is mentioned with reservations (lines 71–72), but no reference is made to either of the Petrine letters. However, in that respect the Muratorian Fragment is an oddity, and the significance of this is more to relativize the lack of mention of James and Hebrews than to witness to a lack of knowledge of 1 Peter. (The fragment is very clear in rejecting works that it knows but does not accept for reading in the church.) In general, 1 Peter was clearly accepted. See Lee M. McDonald, The Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 217, 226.


26. Eusebius, Hist. eccl. 2.23.25. “These things are recorded in regard to James, who is said to be the author of the first of the so-called catholic epistles. But it is to be observed that it is disputed; at least, not many of the ancients have mentioned it, as is the case likewise with the epistle that bears the name of Jude, which is also one of the seven so-called catholic epistles. Nevertheless we know that these also, with the rest, have been read publicly in very many churches.”
Carthage, 397). (Of course, that is not the end of the story, because its canonical status was later devalued by Luther.) These data can be read in more than one way. Many scholars, perhaps the majority, have read them as indicating that, while the work appears to have reached Rome by the late first century, it fell out of use in the west due to its subject matter, although it appears to have been valued and preserved in the eastern Mediterranean, perhaps because of its connection with Jerusalem (at least in terms of its attribution).

More recently, David R. Nienhuis has argued that James was composed in the late second century in the eastern Mediterranean in order to balance Paul, counteract Marcion, and introduce the collected Catholic Epistles. Thus, it parallels the development of 2 Peter in the west and completed the collection of the seven-letter Catholic Epistles (at least in the east), whose collection of the three “pillars” was designed canonically to counterbalance Paul, or, better, to facilitate readings of Paul that fit the developing orthodox tradition. As the introduction to that collection, James picks up and transforms themes from the rest, as he also does themes from Paul. In order to argue this, he must claim that James is dependent upon Hermas rather than vice versa and that Origen is the first to cite James because James did not exist until around 180.27 Though he includes a detailed discussion of the manuscript and patristic evidence for the developing Catholic Epistle collection and a fascinating thesis that is thoroughly argued, I have not found the overall thesis convincing. The greatest problem with this thesis is that it requires the author of James not just to be self-consciously canonical (i.e., introducing a balancing collection over against Paul, deliberately picking up themes not only from Paul but also from 1 Peter and 1 John)28 but also to be scholarly enough that he does not let on that he is writing in the late second century. He accomplishes this by deliber-

27. David R. Nienhuis, Not by Paul Alone: The Formation of the Catholic Epistle Collection and the Christian Canon (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007). The book never answers the question of why one would date James in 180 if the most significant datum is that Origen cites it roughly 70 years later. True, Origen does not claim to have discovered the work and knows that some dispute it, which implies some circulation before Origen, but would not 20 or 30 years do for that? Or was it just that dating James after 200 would be too strange a thesis?

28. On the other hand, 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, although the inclusion of Jude does make that pattern a bit more problematic (Nienhuis argues that Jude is deliberately identified as “the brother of James” to bring him under the “shadow” of that “pillar”). This, however, could indicate later reading of the letters in canonical context and so point to the history of hermeneutics rather than earlier composition. Furthermore, two reasons for a collection of 7 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 the funds to purchase the whole NT (in whatever form it was at the time of purchase). Furthermore, liturgical use of the gospels in church meant that they would tend to be separate anyway.
ately using a genre and historical stance that will look more like the first century and by avoiding the burning issues of his own period, such as the Christological controversies and the ongoing debate with Marcion.29

The manuscript evidence is consistent with these data cited above, however it is interpreted. The earliest papyrus evidence for James is \( \Psi^{23} \), from the beginning of the third century, with \( \Psi^{20} \) coming shortly later, both of Alexandrian text type. Neither of these fragments has any other NT book, so it is not clear whether James was circulating alone or whether the codex contained other works as well. If we knew that either or both of the codices contained other “recognized” works, then we would have some evidence that James was being read as some form of Scripture by that time.30 What is clear is that the letter does appear in the fourth century uncial, which shows that by then it was grouped with other works that were being used in church, such as the gospels and Paul’s letters, not to mention the Septuagint, Epistle of Barnabas, and Shepherd of Hermas.

Thus, James reveals a canon in flux. One has books circulating independently and, perhaps in the case of James, having only a limited circulation. It appears on the radar screen of history, but there is some debate about it when it is mentioned by name. Some churches use it, while others do not. However, certain significant leaders champion it, and that may be what gives it the boost that it needs to find acceptance. A century later, it is clearly included with other books that are viewed as Scripture, which is also perhaps why it appears in the lists of the period (although it is clear that those very codices include works that will not ultimately be viewed as Scripture by the wider body of the church). It will gain wide acceptance until it again falls out of favor in the Reformation, although it is ironically the dogmatic statements of that time (both the Council of Trent and the various Protestant formulations) that finally give James a solid place in a fixed canon.31

When it comes to Jude and 2 Peter, there is yet another level of controversy. With Jude, one has very early attestation in that it was valued
enough by 2 Peter to be incorporated into that work. Of course, because the date of 2 Peter is debated, this does not establish the date of Jude, but it does show early usage (much as the use of Mark in Matthew and Luke does for Mark) with a degree of certainty that is greater than finding possible allusions or isolated quotations in other texts, such as in the Apostolic Fathers. That usage appears to have continued, for Clement of Alexandria cites it, it was used by Origen and Tertullian, and the Muratorian Fragment includes it. But what does this mean? Eusebius lists it, along with James and 2 Peter, among the disputed works (Hist. eccl. 3.25.3; cf. 2.23.25).

Whereas most of the church seems to have gotten over these doubts, in Syria it was the sixth century before it was accepted. Its general acceptance by the fourth century is seen in the fact that it appears in codex form in both a Catholic Epistles collection (𝔓72) and alone (𝔓78) around the end of the third or beginning of the fourth century and also appears in the great fourth-century codices. (Luther, of course, had his questions about Jude just as he did about James.) What caused the period of uncertainty about this work to which Eusebius witnesses? It has frequently been suggested that the doubts were occasioned by Jude’s citation of 1 Enoch, which, if true, means that by the time of Eusebius the church was getting uneasy about endorsing certain “Old Testament” works, while at the same time it was not ready to speak with a unified voice about the boundaries of the OT canon, as one sees in the various works found bound in the fourth-century codices.

2 Peter could be called the book that has never been fully accepted. It was in use early enough to appear in 𝔓72, be translated into Coptic, and be cited (although not by name) by Clement of Alexandria and Cyprian. Thus, it was being used in the early third century in the eastern part of the Mediterranean. But in the western part of the Mediterranean, we do not find it being used much at all. Irenaeus may have used it, and the churches

32. There are scholars who have argued either that both Jude and 2 Peter depend upon a third work or that Jude is abstracted from 2 Peter. However, the vast majority of scholars argue for the dependence of 2 Peter on Jude because (1) introducing a third work that has disappeared without a trace is a council of despair, (2) Jude shows no traces of 2 Pet 1 or of the last half of 2 Pet 3, which is unlikely if it was abstracted from that work, and (3) Jude and 2 Pet 2–3 take up the same topics in the same order (with only one reversal of order), often using some of the same language, which rules out total independence.

33. McDonald, Formation, 199. Of course, Clement also cites Barnabas, 1 Clement, the Shepherd of Hermas, the Preaching of Peter, and the Didache. Citation shows that he valued the work but not that he thought in terms of what would become the NT canon.

34. Before one concludes from this that the Catholic Epistles were circulating separately, one should remember that these manuscripts are papyri, often found in fragmentary form. The best one can say is that it was in the same area of the codex as the other Catholic Epistles. 𝔓74 is later (7th century) but shows Jude coming after the Johannine Epistles and separated from James and 1 and 2 Peter, although all seven Catholic Epistles follow Acts, which is another interesting datum. In other words, Jude is not necessarily closely linked to James and the Petrine literature in the papyri.

35. To be more exact, Firmilian, Bishop of Caesarea in Cappadocia, refers to it in his Epistle to Cyprian para. 6, which is Ep. 74 in Cyprian’s collection of epistles (ANF 5.391).
in Lyons and Vienne knew at least some phrases from it (or from the *Apocalypse of Peter* that was dependent upon it and was clearly used in Vienne), but that is rather spotty attestation.

It is also the one work that was questioned on stylistic grounds. In *Lives of Illustrious Men* 1, Jerome comments that there are two letters of Peter, “the second of which, on account of its difference from the first in style, is considered by many not to be by him.” This questioning of the work was noted by both Origen (who quotes from it) and Eusebius.36

Nevertheless, 2 Peter is accepted by the significant canon lists of the fourth century (Athanasius’s 39th *Festal Letter* and then the Synod of Carthage), although in its case as well it was the sixth century before the Syrian tradition accepted it. Thus, acceptance started in Alexandria and spread west and north into the Latin world but bypassed Antioch, so to speak. Doubts continue to be raised by people such as Jerome, but whether it was because of its usefulness in attacking heretics or the fact that it did not teach anything objectionable and did refer to a known incident in the life of Peter, it was eventually accepted.

But the acceptance was not without some later grumbling. Erasmus, Luther, and Calvin all questioned it, although none of them dropped it from their canon, Erasmus and Luther including it in their editions and versions and Calvin writing a commentary about it. In the modern period, of course, it has continued to be critiqued, thought by some to be sub-Christian, and ignored by others, as Elliott and other scholars have pointed out.37 Yet this has not meant either its rejection by any ecclesiastical body (thus its inclusion in lectionaries) or the failure of any commentary series to include a commentary on it.

**Summary**

So what do the Catholic Epistles teach us about the topic of canon? They teach that the development of the canon was a messy process at best. There is one work that was cited right from the start and is never questioned, although many modern scholars doubt that its putative author could have written it. The other three were all questioned, but only in one case are readers informed about what the questions were and that only at the turn of the fifth century. With James, it was apparently the fact that it had not been used that weighed against it, while Jude was clearly used, but by the wrong work, 2 Peter, so early usage did not help. Jude also cited the wrong works and was not apostolic, which is intimated by the way Origen and Eusebius refer to it, but was otherwise unobjectionable. With 2 Peter, there were objections that never seem to be resolved. The questioning of 2 Peter and Jude was going on in the fourth century, but the letters still appear in

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36. Origen, *Com. Jo.* 5.3. Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.3.1–4; 3.25.3, “But we have learned that his [Peter’s] extant second Epistle does not belong to the canon; yet, as it has appeared profitable to many, it has been used with the other Scriptures.”

papyri collections and in the major codices. Was it perhaps Alexandrian acceptance that eventually led to wider acceptance? Could it be that Athanasius was influential in more than just *homoousios*? Or did the very fact of binding these works with other accepted works lead to their wider circulation and eventual acceptance? Or could it be that they were clearly not heretical (with respect to the teachings deemed heresies that were circulating during the third and fourth centuries) they were not worth arguing over? What they do show is that the rationalizations given by the church fathers (and often repeated by later authorities) for the inclusion of works in the canon are just that. At least two of them do not claim to be apostolic, and, though they are orthodox, so are works that were rejected. With the exception of 1 Peter, they were not widely used, even though their antiquity was not doubted (although had 2 Peter been viewed as not by Simon Peter, its antiquity probably would have been doubted). They were eventually viewed as inspired, although it is clear that, again with the exception of 1 Peter, few leaders in the first four centuries had been inspired by them. In the end, they seem to be accepted because they were associated with other accepted works and because influential people accepted them. This was a messy process, but then much of what goes on in the church or in human organizations is like this.

The Catholic Epistles are indeed a canonical Janus. They are windows into the state of the OT “canon” in the first 50 to 100 years of church history (thought some might stretch that to 150 years). 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. As such, they are a useful place to test any theories that one might have about the canon and canon formation, although they tend to leave one with more questions than answers.

38. Of course this did not mean eventual acceptance for either *Shepherd of Hermas* or the *Didache*, so inclusion with other works was not in itself enough to guarantee later acceptance.

39. The list of reasons is taken from McDonald, *Formation*, ix, and then pp. 228–49.

40. Here, Nienhuis has a point that the collection of these works into a group of seven by the inclusion of the Johannine epistles with them may well have been a significant step in their final acceptance, just as the acceptance of Hebrews was facilitated by its inclusion with the Pauline Epistles. There are, of course, a number of references to the seven in canonical discussions. However, it is far from clear that they were seen as the three “pillars” over against Paul. It is not at all clear that the late second-century church or its successors would have seen any such conflict. More likely, they were seen as a supplement, a completion of the gospel and Pauline collections.