

The Letters to all Christians

This is a group of seven letters which make no claim to Pauline authorship. Most of them are addressed to Christians in general rather than to any particular community, whence the name “Catholic”, that is, “Universal” Epistles. All except the first, attributed to James the “brother of the Lord” and therefore not the Apostle, are attributed to one of the Twelve Apostles, but in every case, this attribution has been questioned.

In the Jewish sphere of the time, works of religious literature were often attributed to a well-known and authoritative figure of the past, thus suggesting that this is what such an author would have said in the circumstances, the guidance he would have given to followers.

The following seven letters belong to this category:

- *the Letter of James*, which offers practical advice about how to live wisely in the world
- *two Letters of Peter*, the first of which talks about how our lifestyle is a vital part of Christian existence; the second is about claims of superiority that appear to be causing problems in the community
- *three Letters of John*. 1 John is a testimony about who Jesus was and is and what that means for those who seek to follow him. 2 John tells us what John says he thinks love is and how this should affect how we live. 3 John talks about hospitality
- *the Letter of Jude*, which tells us about Jude’s clear vision of “good” leaders and “good” followers of the way.

James

The Letter of James offers practical advice about how to live wisely in the world.

A favourite quote

"Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom" (James 3.13).

The Letter of James

This letter is the clearest example in the New Testament of the type of Wisdom writing known from the Old Testament books Proverbs, *Ecclesiasticus* and Wisdom, a series of succinct, well-formed aphorisms on a sensible way for believers to conduct themselves.

The letter of James appears to have very few personal details in it, and it reads much more like a sermon than a letter. It contains down-to-earth pragmatic advice about how to live as a Christian. This, coupled with its emphasis on God's wisdom, suggests that it draws a little on the Old Testament wisdom tradition. It is the closest that any New Testament book comes to being a part of the wisdom tradition since time and time again it urges its recipients to live their lives according to the wisdom that comes from God rather than earthly wisdom. At the heart of the letter lies the invitation not just to listen to good advice but to put this advice into action.

Suggested Reading

James 1:19-27: about listening and doing and how everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry and James 3:1-12: about taming your tongue.

Who wrote this letter?

The author identifies himself as "James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ" who is writing to "the twelve tribes scattered abroad" (James 1:1). James was the leader of the Jerusalem church, who was martyred in 62 CE – so, if he was the author of this letter, it gives it a very early date, possibly the earliest of all Christian writings. There are, of course, other people called James in the New Testament but the weight of tradition suggests that this James was the leader of the Jerusalem church.

James appears a few times in the New Testament. Paul declared that the risen Jesus appeared to him (1 Corinthians 15.7) and in Galatians 2.9 referred to him, alongside Cephas (Peter) and John the Apostle as being a pillar of the church. Acts 12.17 implies that he might have been the leader of the Jerusalem community and in Acts 15.6-19 played an important part in the gathering that took place in Jerusalem, which is often called the Jerusalem council. Again in Acts (in 21.18ff) James insisted that Paul cleansed himself ritually at the temple to counter the claim that he had rebelled against Torah.

Liturgical notes

The Catholic tradition has taken the Letter's instructions on prayer and anointing for the sick (James 5:13-15) as the foundation of the sacrament. Its exhortations to practical love have been used to defend the doctrine that genuine faith must be expressed in action. The Letter of James is read on Sundays 22-26 (Year B) and semi-continuously on the weekdays of Weeks 6 and 7 (Year II), as well as at the anointing of the sick.

How is it structured?

1:1	greeting
1:2-18	opening encouragements, many about joy
1:19-27	don't just listen, do it!
2:1-13	on favouritism (to the rich)
2:14-26	there is no faith without works
3:1-12	on controlling the tongue
3:13-5.6	on living wisely
5:7-20	farewell and final encouragements

God speaks to us through James

James writes, "But someone will say, 'You have faith and I have works'. Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works" (James 2:18).

1-2 Peter

Two Letters of Peter, the first of which talks about how our lifestyle is a vital part of Christian existence; the second one is about claims of superiority that appear to be causing problems in the community.

Favourite quotes

"You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy" (1 Peter 2.9-10).

"For this very reason, you must make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love" (2 Peter 1.5-7).

The Letters of Peter

The purpose of the First Letter of Peter is not so much doctrinal or moral instruction as encouragement to stand firm in hardship and difficulties. Thanking God for living hope, founded on the resurrection of Jesus, surpassing the expectation of prophets, the letter commends holiness of life, grounded on God's word. The duties of free citizens, slaves, wives and husbands are outlined (with Christ the example for all). The innocence of the crucified Jesus demands that his followers be innocent before the law and yet steadfast when persecuted.

In the Second Letter of Peter, we read that those who await the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ must conduct themselves accordingly, living lives of faith and love. The prophets pointed to the second coming and, properly interpreted, refute the predictions of immoral false teachers, a breed whose imminent destruction was foreshadowed by the fate of fallen angels and the like. The faithful are exhorted to remain firm in the hope of the imminent return of Jesus, remembering that, with the Lord, one day is as a thousand years.

Suggested Reading

- 1 Peter 1:3-9: praising God for, in his mercy, he has caused us to be born again.
- 2 Peter 1:3-15: of how God has given us everything we need for living a godly life.

Who wrote these letters?

1 Peter 1:1 states that the author of the epistle was Peter an apostle of Jesus Christ, which has been taken to mean "the" Peter of the Gospels. There are many scholars, however, who do not believe that the author was, in fact, Peter. Some make the argument on the grounds that the author was well versed in Greek philosophy and rhetoric (and Peter couldn't have been); others argue that the persecution referred to in the epistle was probably from a later date (maybe as late as AD 80s-90s);

others again that 1 Peter shares many themes with Ephesians and so may have been written after that epistle (and therefore after Peter had been martyred in Rome). Other scholars find themselves unconvinced by these arguments and continue to attribute it to Peter.

Authorship of the Second Letter of Peter is ascribed to “Simon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 1:1). It may or may not be significant that this is different from the opening of 1 Peter “Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 1:1).

Most scholars do not think that the same person wrote both 1 and 2 Peter. The style, focus and contents are very different in the two epistles.

Liturgical notes

First Peter is read on the Sundays of Paschal-tide (Year A). At the time of the arrangement of the lectionary, scholars thought it was a homily or even connected to baptismal catechesis. Today, there are serious doubts about this but the hypothesis remains. It is also read on weekdays of Week 8 (Year II) and for the Vigil of St. John the Baptist and for the Dedication of the Lateran Basilica.

Second Peter is read at the Eucharist in preparation for the coming of the Lord on the second Sunday of Advent (Year B), and on Monday and Tuesday of Week 9 (Year II).

How are they structured?

First Letter of Peter

Second Letter of Peter

1:1-2	greeting	1-2	opening and greeting
1:3-12	praise for what God has done in Jesus	1:3-11	recap on what we believe
1:13-2:3	being God’s holy people	1:12-15	why the author is writing
2:4-10	Jesus the cornerstone	1:16-3:13	the main argument of the letter – the importance of Christ’s return; the importance of the Scriptures; the problem of false teachers, the importance of the last judgement.
2:11-4:11	how to live faithfully in a hostile environment	3:14-18	final encouragements
4:12-5:11	words of exhortation and hope		
5:12-14	closing words		

God speaks to us through Peter

Peter speaks to our own pilgrimage when he tells of suffering now and glory to come. Stormy seasons of persecution were beginning for the church in Asia Minor. These storms rage on in the modern world. Peter shows us what the story of Jesus' life means for us as we take up our cross and follow him.

1, 2 & 3 John

Three Letters of John. 1 John is a testimony about who Jesus was and is and what that means for those who seek to follow him. 2 John tells us what John says he thinks love is and how this should affect how we live. 3 John talks about hospitality.

Favourite quotes

"Let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love" (1 John 4.7-8).

"I ask you, not as though I were writing you a new commandment, but one we have had from the beginning, let us love one another" (2 John 1.5).

"Beloved, do not imitate what is evil but imitate what is good. Whoever does good is from God; whoever does evil has not seen God" (3 John 1.11).

The Letters of John

The Letters of John are interconnected and are named after St. John the Apostle. If the letters were issued later than the Gospel of John, a date after 100 CE is likely. They may have been written in Ephesus in response to bitter divisions within the intense but fragile communities the apostle left behind.

Suggested reading

1 John 2:7-17: about how Jesus did not give us a new commandment – but an old one that we have had from the beginning. Also read the whole of the 2nd and 3rd letters of John

Who wrote these letters?

The author is not identified in 1 John. If the author of 1 John is John the apostle, then, he was the brother of James, called by Jesus to follow him early in his ministry. He is often thought to be the beloved disciple of John's Gospel (see introduction to John's Gospel for more on this); if he was, then when he was on the cross, Jesus handed over care for his mother to him. Christian tradition states that he took her to live in Ephesus, where he lived to a ripe old age (around 100). If the author is a different John, then we know much less about him.

The First Letter of John: In the face of dissidents who have left the community because they deny that Jesus is the Messiah (Christ) and who claim to be without sin, the writer teaches that sin is ever present and ever forgiven, that Jesus died to overcome *the sins of the whole world*. To know this Jesus is to know the Father and the Spirit and to live according to the commandment of love. The false prophets who teach otherwise are antichrists and belong to the world of sin. True believers recognise that *Jesus is the Son of God*.

The Second Letter of John: From an anonymous elder to a Christian household, the letter repeats the essential commandment: *love one another*. Anyone who does not acknowledge that Jesus is truly the Messiah and truly a human being is to be rejected.

The Third Letter of John: Directed to a certain Gaius, this letter praises his adherence to the truth and begs assistance for fellow workers in the service of God's truth. Diotrophes is condemned. Demetrius is commended. All are enjoined to imitate what is good.

Liturgical notes

First John is read on Sundays 3-7 of Paschal-tide (Year B), emphasizing the love and unity which should prevail especially in the new born community of the Church. For the same reasons, it is read on All Saints, All Souls and the Feast of the Sacred Heart. Second and Third John are allotted one reading at Mass in the 32nd Week (Year II).

How are they structured?

First Letter of John

Second letter of John

Third Letter of John

1:1-4 witness to the nature and life of Jesus	1-3 greeting and blessing 4-11 instruction to remain strong in the truth and to resist false teaching	1 opening 2-8 reflections on walking in the truth and on hospitality
1:5-3:10 walking in the light		9-12 the problem posed by Diotrophes
3:11-5:12 living in love	12-13 closing	13-15 John's travel plans
5:13-21 do not sin		

Pope Francis on the Three Letters of John

"In his three letters, the 'disciple whom Jesus loved' says that he proclaims the Good News 'so that our joy may be complete' ([John 19:26](#); [1 John 1:4](#)). We too are disciples whom Jesus loves, and so if our joy is to be complete, we too must share the saving love of Christ with others" (published 15 April, 2015 on the Seek First the Kingdom website).

Jude

Jude shares a clear vision of “good” leaders and “good” followers of the way.

A favourite quote

“Keep yourselves in God's love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life” (Jude verse 21).

The Letter of Jude

This book is named after Jude (also called Judas, but not Iscariot), the brother of Jesus and James (Mark 6:3). Warning against itinerant charismatics who pervert God's grace into moral license, Jude teaches that such people have been condemned in Scripture and will meet the same fate as unbelievers, fallen angels, Sodom and Gomorrah, Cain and other biblical villains. The apostles condemned such scoffers who follow their own passions. He advises righteous living, preparing for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Despite its brevity, Jude's letter is filled with a rich awareness of the history of salvation that God has been working out through the ages. It was written to an early Christian community about the dangers that selfish, immoral, false leaders posed to them as a community. Using examples from Israel's history, Jude urges the community to beware of these kinds of leaders and to rest in confidence in the faithfulness and love of God.

Suggested reading

Jude 17-25: this provides a series of exhortations designed to make sure that we stand strong in the faith.

Who wrote this letter?

Very little is known about Jude and this letter tells us very little about him other than that he oversaw the well-being of a Christian community and was worried that they were being led astray by unreliable leaders. It is not even clear where Jude wrote from, nor from where the community was, that he was writing to in this letter. As with all letters, the epistle of Jude is writing about a situation that they all knew about and we don't. There is not much evidence in the letter to help us piece together exactly what was going on.

Liturgical notes

Jude wins a reading in the Eucharistic liturgy on Saturday of Week 8 (Year II).

How is it structured?

1-2	introduction
3-4	a plea to contend for the faith
5-16	arguments against false teachers
17-23	how to stand firm against false teachers
24-25	look to Jesus who is the source of our strength

God speaks to us

The global message of Jude is that the Church must work, locally all the way up to internationally, to defend the faith. For false teaching leads to immorality, but true believers will persevere, by God's grace, to the end.