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Review of *Reading the Epistles of James, Peter, John & Jude as Scripture – The Shaping & Shape of a Canonical Collection*

Submitted to Dr. Craig Price for the course BISR9302 NT Genre

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Nienhuis, David R., and Robert W. Wall. *Reading the Epistles of James, Peter, John, and Jude as Scripture: The Shaping and Shape of a Canonical Collection*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2013.

Author Information¹

David R. Nienhuis has been connected with Seattle Pacific University in a variety of ways throughout the years. He received his undergraduate degree in 1990, after which he worked as an SPU staff member until 1993. Following the completion of his master of divinity studies at Duke University Divinity School, he returned to SPU as an adjunct faculty member (1998–2001). After earning his doctorate at the University of Aberdeen, he assumed a full-time teaching post in 2004.

Dr. Nienhuis' research interests lie at the intersection of several theological sub-disciplines – biblical studies, church history, doctrine, and Christian formation – that meet in a set of questions under the broad rubric of “canon” studies: What is the purpose of the Christian biblical canon? What factors occasioned its ancient emergence and construction? Does its final literary shape bear any hermeneutical significance?

Dr. Nienhuis teaches University Foundations courses, upper-division undergraduate New Testament courses, and the Introduction to New Testament course for the SOT graduate studies program. He is the author of *Not by Paul Alone: The Formation of the Catholic Epistle Collection and the Christian Canon* (Baylor University Press, 2007). He is married to a 1993 SPU alumna, and they have two children.

Robert W. Wall received a BA from Valparaiso University in 1969, a ThM from Dallas Theological Seminary in 1973, a ThD from Dallas Theological Seminary in 1979, and completed additional graduate study at Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University. He has been teaching at Seattle Pacific University since 1978.

Robert Wall's books and articles — whether aimed at other scholars or clergy — originate in the ferment of the university classroom and in conversation with his students and colleagues. In both his published research and classroom teaching, Dr. Wall approaches the Bible as a sacred text — a “production of the Holy Spirit” — and in a manner that forms a clearer understanding of God for the people of God.

¹ Information adapted from “David Nienhuis - Seattle Pacific University,” February 18, 2015, n.p. Online: <http://spu.edu/academics/school-of-theology/undergraduate-programs/undergraduate-faculty-staff/nienhuis-david>; “Robert Wall - Seattle Pacific University,” February 18, 2015, n.p. Online: <http://spu.edu/Lists/faculty-staff/SOT/wall-robert>.

The Reverend Dr. Wall is a Seattle native, an avid sportsman, and a dedicated Seattle Mariner's fan. He is an elder of the Free Methodist Church who enjoys an active ecumenical ministry of preaching and teaching adult Bible studies in congregations of various faith traditions.

Purpose

The book is divided up into three parts. Part one, entitled "Introduction to a Canonical Collection," consists of three chapters that address fundamental aspects of the process of canonization and the nature of canonical interpretation. The authors state, "*this* part of the book will relate how the historical shaping and the final shape of the collection envisage a particular reading strategy for the whole" (xvi). Part two, entitled "Introduction to the Catholic Epistles," consists of five chapters with one providing an introduction to the collection as a whole and the other four outlining with the content in the reception of the epistles of James, Peter, John, and Jude. Again the authors note, "These *chapters* are rather entry-level commentaries designed with the student in mind to introduce and illustrate our particular approach" (xvi). Part three, entitled "Conclusion," contains the final chapter of the unifying theology of the collection and closes with an epilogue. The authors describe part three as "the climax" of the book where "a theological reading of the collection as a whole" is provided (xvi).

According to page xvi, "The central core of this study is the insistence that the Catholic Epistles collection is in fact a *canonical collection* and not a random grouping of 'other' or 'general' letters that emerge from communities not founded by the apostle Paul." On page 10, the authors state the thesis of their work. It is as follows

We contend that the canonical collection of four witnesses, James, Peter, John, and Jude, be read together as the inter-penetrating parts of a coherent theological whole. The historical process that formed them into a collection can also help guide the church's present use of its seven epistles of Scripture for spiritual wisdom and more guidance. In fact, our thesis is that when this epistolary collection is embraced in the church according to the hermeneutics of the canonical process, both its theological coherence and its crucial role within the biblical canon will become more clearly understood.

In summary, then, this book sets out to understand the Catholic Epistles in light of the reception by and the subsequent canonical shaping of the ancient church.

Summary

The first chapter of the book, entitled "Introduction: Chaos or Coherence?," The authors set out to argue for an intentionally shaped collection of works that bring the New Testament canon to completion. On page 9 the authors state, "a close examination of the ancient canonical process that brought this collection into being offers real promise for the Bible reader committed to hearing the apostolic message as it's communicated through the integrity of the final, fixed form of the text." On page 11, the authors admit, "The final shape of each collection and the finality of the single biblical canon create an aesthetic that is substantively and functionally different than those alternate "shapes" of biblical writings created according to the interest of modern scholarship in individual text's authorship, date, and social location." Obviously, the present

work represents quite a departure from the majority of scholars who attempt to study the Catholic Epistles in their historical and grammatical context.

In chapters two and three, entitled respectively “The Shaping of a Canonical Collection” and “The Shape of the Canonical Collection,” the authors begin by asserting that the Bible “is reflective of community’s redactional act.” The authors continue, stating, “The early church did not simply receive and transmit its diverse Scriptures in ad hoc fashion, but carefully and prayerfully arranged them to forge evocative inner textual relations which, under the aegis of God’s Spirit, would produce an inexhaustible fountain of interpretive insight useful for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness.” At this point is interesting to note that is not the Scriptures themselves that produce “insight useful for teaching, reprove, correction, and training in righteousness,” but the early church’s forging of those Scriptures that produce such helpful things. Throughout the remainder of chapter 2, the authors survey the works of the apostolic in early church fathers up until the fourth century. Essentially, key figures are considered with due attention given to how they not only quoted from but understood the “pillars of Jerusalem” and their respective works. On page 38 the authors conclude stating

By the time the CE collection arrived in the late third century, it is highly unlikely that a seven-letter collection titled “catholic” which simply connoted a ‘general address.’ The ancients would have likely received these letters is a kind of whole and complete apostolic witness from the early church: as the last piece of the New Testament canon to be formed, it would’ve been received as a legitimate completion of the canon, both aesthetically and doctrinally; and given the pervasive concern about protecting a right, “catholic” of Paul against his many heretical champions, they would have received this collection is a kind of unifying safeguard against the many aspects of Paul’s letters that are “hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures” (2 Peter 3:16).

The authors conclude this chapter admitting that this collection cannot explain how it balances out the New Testament canon, thus the need to consider the “final literary shape” of the text (39), which is taken up at length in chapter three.

Part two, which begins on page 71 and concludes on page 243, generally serves as a canonical reading of the epistles of James, Peter, John, and Jude. This portion begins with a brief introduction that includes a key synthesis of Tertullian’s rule of faith (considered in previous chapters). As a guiding principle, the authors reiterate that “As a whole, the CE collection functions strategically to curb the church’s tendency to read and use Paul’s witness as its canon within the canon. It is our confidence that this collected witness to God’s word will establish a more fully formed biblical theology informed by the full breadth and depth of the ancient apostolic witness” (73). Each chapter includes a basic introduction to the canonical book, a brief commentary of the respective sections, in a concluding portion on the theology found in the work. Part two is the most substantial portion of the book.

Part three brings the book to a close with the chapter entitled, “The Unifying Theology of Catholic Epistle Collection.” The brief epilogue that follows functions simply to rehash the argument made throughout the book in summary form and encourage future work in this area.

Critique

For this reviewer has several problems with the book, is worth noting that of vast majority of the book, particularly that which is found in part two, is helpful and worthy of a broad readership. The problem this reviewer finds with the work is more related to method than content produced by the employment of the method.

The canonical approach proposed in this book raises many questions that are left unanswered. While the authors make a compelling case from history that the early church did in fact collect and shape the writings of the New Testament, the authors failed on some fundamental levels that seem to undermine the entirety of the approach or at least significantly alter its course. Of the questions left unanswered, the following represent only a few:

1. If one embraces the hermeneutical approaches revealed in the canonical process of the early church, what else should modern Christians be expected to accept from the ancient church?
2. If a text is intended to be understood in its canonical context, did these texts, which were certainly written outside of such a context, have any meaning at all prior to the canonical process? If so, was that meaning authoritative? Furthermore, could that meaning be arrived at now and if so would it be authoritative for the modern church?
3. Are the readers to assume that the ancient church was theologically and hermeneutically monolithic in confession and practice? If so, where is the evidence? If not, with this not undermine how modern scholars value their methodology?
4. Is not the author's insistence upon community-constructed meaning based upon an evaluation of early church authors in their own "original historical setting?" Are not canonical critics guilty of the same charge that they race against historical critical scholar?
5. If the intention of the author cannot be determined, how is it that the community's intention can be determined based upon the final redacted form of their work?
6. At what point does the spirit-filled community stop redacting the documents of the New Testament? Is not the modern church filled with the same Holy Spirit who led the early church to redact the documents? Where is the line to be drawn?

These questions represent only a small portion of the ones raised in the mind of this reviewer as he read this book. On page 4, the authors state

"While we have no interest in denying the value of historical investigation into a text's point of composition, we reject the notion that an understanding of the biblical text is entirely predicated on the scholar's ability to reconstruct its "original historical setting." Put sharply, these texts were preserved not because of what their first readers thought of them but because, over time, the church

discerned that they were vehicles of the Spirit's communication to faithful readers regardless of their socio-historical locale.

While this statement seems particularly spiritual, it seems to suggest an ongoing, ever-changing context for Scripture. Obviously, the interpreter's context changes, but the historical context of the document does not and must not.

Lastly, among other issues, the authors raise the matter of community redaction (partial addressed above in questions). This reviewer understands this to be another example of a move away from the author in his intention. As mentioned above, what happens when the community does not have theological or interpretive consensus on the matter? Obviously, this is where the magisterium of the Roman Catholic Church factors heavily into interpretive and theological matters. In fact, this is exactly their argument for the need of a central institution of authoritative interpretation. Throughout the book, the authors fail to make a compelling case regarding the nature of the ancient church whose practices the reader is encouraged to emulate. It is hard to imagine how anyone of a Protestant tradition with the battle cry of *Sola Scriptura* on their lips could ever accept the *Sola Ecclesia* implications of this particular canonical approach.

Was this book profitable? This reviewer was answer, "Yes." However, there are better books on the CE that deal with the works in their historical-grammatical context and present a compelling case for their contribution to a canonical understanding and approach to scripture without attempting to establish a particular approach to reading scripture that is rooted in the extra-biblical practices of the early church.

Synopsis of Reviews

In *Themelios*, Ched Spellman of Cedarville University provides a helpful and favorable review of the Nienhuis and Wall's work, stating, "This volume represents a substantial treatment that will need to be taken into account in further studies of the New Testament canon." Spellman thoughtfully summarizes the work and concludes with a few comments on potential weakness.