

The Pillars and the Cornerstone

Jesus Tradition Parallels in the Catholic Epistles

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ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviations of ancient sources are given according to the list provided in *The SBL Handbook of Style for Ancient Near Eastern, Biblical and Early Christian Studies* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1999).

AB	Anchor Bible
AJT	<i>Asia Journal of Theology</i>
ASNU	Acta Seminarii Neotestamentici Upsaliensis
BBR	<i>Bulletin for Biblical Research</i>
BDAG	Bauer, W., F.W. Danker, W.F. Arndt and F.W. Gingrich, <i>Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> , Chicago, 3d edn, 1999
BECNT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
BETL	Bibliotheca ephemeridum theologicarum lovaniensium
<i>Bib</i>	<i>Biblica</i>
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
CBR	<i>Currents in Biblical Research</i>
CNT	Commentaar op het Nieuwe Testament, derde serie Joel B. Green, Jeannine K. Brown, Nicholas Perrin,
DJG	<i>Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels</i> , Downer's Grove, 2 nd edn, 2013
DPL	Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, Daniel G. Reid, <i>Dictionary of Paul and his Letters</i> , Downer's Grove, 1993
EJT	<i>European Journal of Theology</i>
ETR	<i>Etudes Theologiques et Religieuses</i>
EvQ	<i>Evangelical Quarterly</i>
ExpT	<i>The Expository Times</i>
FN	<i>Filologia Neotestamentaria</i>
FR	<i>Fides Reformata</i>
HBT	<i>Horizons in Biblical Theology</i>
HTKNT	Herders theologischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament
ICC	International Critical Commentary
IdS	<i>In die Skriflig</i>

IVPNTC	The IVP New Testament Commentary Series
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JETS</i>	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
<i>JSHJ</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus</i>
<i>JSNT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
JSNTSup	Journal for the Study of the New Testament, Supplement Series
<i>JTI</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Interpretation</i>
<i>JTS</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
<i>L&S</i>	<i>Letter & Spirit</i>
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
LSJ	Liddell, H.G., R. Scott, and H.S. Jones, <i>A Greek-English Lexicon</i> . 9 th edn., with revised supplement, Oxford, 1996
MNTC	Moffat New Testament Commentary
NIBCNT	New International Biblical Commentary on the New Testament
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NIDNTTE	<i>New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis</i> , 2 nd edn, revised by Moisés Silva, 2014
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
<i>NovTest</i>	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
NTC	The New Testament in Context
<i>NTS</i>	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
<i>RHR</i>	<i>Revue de l'histoire des religions</i>
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SBLMS	Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series
SBT	Studies in Biblical Theology
<i>SF</i>	<i>Sárospataki Füzetek</i>
SNTSMS	Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series
<i>ST</i>	<i>Studia Theologica</i>
TAnZ	Texte und Arbeit zum neutestamentlichen Zeitalter
<i>TB</i>	<i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>
<i>TR</i>	<i>Theologia Reformata</i>
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament

ZNW

Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft

Introduction – the Pillars and the Cornerstone

The Pillars

A casual survey of New Testament scholarship throughout the last one hundred years or so, would suggest that the seven epistles following (in most Bible editions) Paul and Hebrews, and preceding Revelation, do not really matter all that much. In comparison to the endless shelves of books that have been devoted to the study of the Pauline letters, scholarly attention for the Catholic Epistles is negligible. Similarly, the average church-goer might raise his or her eyebrows in alarm when asked to look up 2 Peter or Jude. Luckily, they are indeed placed somewhere near the very end, which is probably the location he or she will intuitively start to scan.

However, these seven epistles are part of the New Testament canon and have been weighed and handed down by Church Fathers and generations of Christians who have cherished and valued them as Scripture. The question is whether church and academy are willing to embrace this canonical reality and interact as intently with the Catholic Epistles as they have done with the Pauline letters throughout history.

A tentative optimism is in place. The last ten to fifteen years may have marked a turning point in the relative negligence of the Catholic Epistles. In the wake of Brevard Childs' ongoing call for canonical sensitivity, it seems that the canonical unity of these seven letters is gaining increasing scholarly attention.¹ Two large essay-volumes,² several articles³ and monographs⁴ have enriched New Testament scholarship in this respect.

¹ Eusebius already acknowledges the seven epistles as a canonical unit (*HE* 2.23-25).

² Schlosser, J. (ed.), *The Catholic Epistles and Tradition*, BETL 176, Leuven: Peeters, 2004 ; K.-W. Niebuhr & R.W. Wall (eds.), *The Catholic Epistles and Apostolic Tradition*, Waco: Baylor University Press, 2009.

³ P.H. Davids, 'The Catholic Epistles as a Canonical Janus: A New Testament Glimpse into Old and New Testament Canon Formation', *BBR* 19 (2009), 403-16; Carey C. Newman, 'Jude 22, Apostolic Theology and the Canonical Role of the Catholic Epistles', *PRSt* 41 (2014), 367-78; Darian R. Lockett, 'Are the Catholic Epistles a Canonically Significant Collection? A *Status Quaestionis*', *CBR* 14 (1), 2015, 62-80.

⁴ Nienhaus, David R., 2007, *Not by Paul Alone: The Formation of the Catholic Epistles Collection and the Christian Canon*, Waco: Baylor University Press; Darian Lockett, *An Introduction to the Catholic Epistles*, London: T & T Clark, 2012; Darian Lockett, *Letters from the Pillar Apostles, The Formation of the Catholic Epistles as a Canonical Collection*, Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2017.

The relevance of acknowledging the canonical role of the Catholic Epistles lies, among other things, in the balance it brings to the message of the New Testament.⁵ The counterbalance these seven letters present vis á vis the Pauline letters is in fact mirrored by the book of Acts. As Childs puts it:

In terms of a canonical reading of Acts, Harnack correctly described the *three determinative corpora of the New Testament canon consisting of the Gospels, Pauline Letters and the Catholic Letters*. From this perspective the canonical function of Acts emerges with clarity. It consists primarily of *presenting the apostles as the legitimate guardians of the Jesus traditions*, strengthened by the connection with the catholic letters of Peter, James, and John, and the portrait of Paul in Acts as in agreement with that of the letters.⁶

The history of the church has proven that the witness of Scripture is needed to provide balance where there is tension. Such tension already existed in the days of the apostles, as can be seen, for instance, in Galatians 2. There Paul seems to write about a conflict between the Jewish mission of the Pillar apostles (James, Peter and John) and his own Gentile-oriented mission. The tension is resolved, when the Pillar Apostles and Paul can shake hands, and acknowledge both their contributions to God's overarching mission (Gal.2:9).

The Apostolic Decree, described in Acts 15:12-29 (cp. 21:17-26) confirms this state of resolved tension. So much so, that the notion of tension was almost forgotten in subsequent readings of Acts. *1 Clement* 5:2 indirectly testifies to this, when it mentions 'the greatest and most upright pillars', referring, not to the 'Jerusalem pillars' from Galatians 2:9, but, rather, to Peter and Paul together.

⁵ Augustine (*De fide et operibus* 21) seems to make this point, when he says that 'somewhat obscure statements of the Apostle Paul were misunderstood ... other apostolic letters of Peter, John, James and Jude are deliberately aimed against the argument I have been refuting...'. Cf. Nienhuis, *Not by Paul*, 1-2.

⁶ Brevard Childs, *The Church's Guide for Reading Paul. The Canonical Shaping of the Pauline Corpus*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008, 131 (emphasis mine).

Pillar Collection

It is, however, not self-evident to accept the Catholic Epistles as a meaningful canonical collection, nor is it common practice to accept the hermeneutical implications of such a move. This is understandable, considering the wide variety of style, origin and (possibly) dating of these epistles. Such a step, however, may be a way towards a better understanding of these letters on all levels: the canon can be taken as a necessary interpretive context where historical and theological questions can be researched alongside each other. In the words of Darian Lockett:

[S]uch collection consciousness, though not necessarily in the preview of the original authors (being perhaps unforeseen, yet not unintended), is neither anachronistic to the meaning of the letters nor antagonistic to their composition.⁷

Following this perspective, the present study embraces the canonical unity of the Catholic Epistles, and the notion of these epistles as a deliberate 'Pillar collection': The handshake that we read about in Galatians 2:9 finds its literate, canonical, counterpart in the Corpus Paulinum and the Catholic Epistles. Of course the Pauline collection speaks with one, clearly recognizable voice, whereas the Catholic Epistles form a chorus of voices (or, more aptly: a barbershop quartet).⁸ Yet there is distinct theological and topical unity throughout the Catholic Epistles that justifies a canonical approach.⁹

⁷ Lockett, *Pillar Apostles*, 231.

⁸ All introductory discussions concerning authorship, authenticity and pseudepigraphy aside: the Pauline letters are presented as a canonically unified voice regardless of whether one thinks of them in terms of 'disputed' and 'undisputed'.

⁹ Cf. Nienhaus, *Not by Paul*; Lockett, *Pillar Apostles*. Cf. also Dale C. Allison, *James* (ICC), London: T & T Clark, 2013, 108-09, who does not present a theory of canonical or theological unity, but rather simply states that 'James exhibits very strong parallels with Paul, 1 Peter and 1 John, and these cry out for explanation.'

The Cornerstone

As Brevard Childs puts it, Acts' canonical function is primarily 'presenting the apostles as the legitimate guardians of the Jesus traditions'.¹⁰

This is a very interesting way of framing the New Testament canon: Acts as a hinge between the life and words of Jesus and the writings of his earliest followers, as his message spread across the First Century-world. This framing fully appreciates the role of Jesus' teaching, Jesus' life story and the *kerygma* that derives from both. In a way, the apostles' role was to vouchsafe the integrity of this message, and to encourage its dissemination throughout the world. To look at the Pauline letters and the Catholic Epistles in this way, allows for a perspective in which Jesus and the traditions that are either ascribed to him or tell his story, are, in fact, the controlling subject matter of all these writings.

Paul shows this to be true, in a way at least, of his theology, when he writes of his gospel: 'what I received I passed on to you' (1 Cor.15:3a). He then goes on to paraphrase the gospel message, making it clear that this is not something he is making up, but something that he has received and is now passing on. Paul's gospel is not so much his own, as it is dependent on Jesus Tradition.¹¹

Similarly, the epistle of James is (as is widely accepted, cf. chapter 2 of the present study) heavily reliant on several strands of Jesus Tradition. For instance, the words of James 1:22-25 are seemingly dependent on Matthew 7:24-28 (cp. Luke 6:47-48), Jesus' parable about the house being built on either sand or rock:¹²

¹⁰ Cf. note 6 above.

¹¹ Cf. esp. David Wenham, *Paul. Follower of Jesus or Founder of Christianity?*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans: 1995; Gerry Schoberg, *Perspectives of Jesus in the Writings of Paul. A Historical Examination of Shared Core Commitments with a View to Determining the Extent of Paul's Dependence on Jesus*, Cambridge: Pickwick Publications, 2013.

¹² For a full discussion of this parallel, cf. 2.2.1 below.

Jas.1:23

Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who ...

Matt. 7:26

But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice ...¹³

Interestingly, in this simile, Jesus does not equate *himself* with a rock, as Augustine assumed,¹⁴ but he equates *his teaching* with a rock. Jesus exhorts his hearers to look upon his teaching as a foundation upon which their lives can be built. However, as Augustine's exegesis indicates, the idea of equating Jesus himself with 'the rock' was never a remote possibility. All the more since some Hebrew Bible passages (some of which are picked up in the New Testament) seem to apply the words 'stone' or 'rock' to God directly, which, of course, lent itself very well for Christological implications.¹⁵ In Matthew 21:42 we can see how Jesus relates the words of Psalm 118:22-23 to himself; both Peter and Paul conversely affirm this reading as part of a 'living stones'-theology:

Matt. 21:42

Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the Scriptures:

"The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes'

1 Pet.2:4-5a

As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him— you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house

Eph.2:19-20

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.

In the book of Acts, the apostles are presented as carrying Jesus' message and the gospel narrative forward into the First Century Mediterranean

¹³ Here, and throughout the present study (unless otherwise indicated), portions of Scripture in English are taken from the NIV (2011). The Greek text is taken from the NA28 edition.

¹⁴ *De Sermone* 87.

¹⁵ Cf. Norman Hillyer, 'Rock-Stone Imagery in 1 Peter', *TB* 22 (1971) 58-81; cf. NIDNTTE, 735-40.

world. The witness of both the Pauline and the Catholic Epistles underscore their roles as tradents and proponents of Jesus Tradition. Jesus is believed to be the cornerstone of a new and living Temple and his message is presented as a firm foundation on which the apostolic gospel message is built.¹⁶

The present study will focus on the question just to what extent the seven letters that are associated with the so-called Pillar Apostles (i.e.: the Catholic Epistles) are dependent on Jesus Tradition. In other words: *how do the Pillars relate to the Cornerstone?*

Research question

The research will deal with two areas of New Testament research, one of which is easily demarcated: the seven letters of the Catholic Epistles. The other, however, is less easily demarcated and in fact needs to be defined from the start: 'Jesus Tradition' is often as broad as its researchers make it out to be.

In trying to mark off the boundaries of Jesus Tradition, the present study will be informed by contemporary ways in which Jesus Tradition and New Testament writings are conceived, mainly with sensitivity towards oral tradition studies and Ancient Greek writing techniques.

Most of this, and the basic question 'what is Jesus Tradition?', will be laid out in the first chapter. The consecutive chapters (2 through 5) will then deal with the actual research: Jesus Tradition parallels within the Catholic Epistles. The final chapter will then draw conclusions from the research and try to weigh its significance.

The actual research question, propelling this study henceforth, is:

What parallels to Jesus Tradition can be found in the Catholic Epistles, and how do these parallels inform us on the relationship of the Catholic Epistles to Jesus Tradition, both on a historical and a theological level?

¹⁶ In this sense, the words λίθος ('stone': Matt.21:42) and πέτρα ('rock': Matt.7:24-28) have related, yet distinguished metaphorical meaning.

Parallels

To enter the arena of *parallels*, is to beg the question of validity and solid methodology. Several decades ago Samuel Sandmel warned against 'parallelomania', which he defined as

[T]he extravagance among scholars which first overdoes the supposed similarity in passages and then proceeds to describe source and derivation as if implying literary connection flowing in an inevitable or predetermined direction'.¹⁷

His plea for caution against overly simple methodology is a welcome one, as is his assurance that the New Testament authors are perfectly capable of being original, rather than being mere copycats, whose every thought must have originated in some underlying tradition.

These cautionary remarks have been taken to heart in the present study. The authors of the Catholic Epistles will indeed be presented as fully original writers, capable of formulating their own words and sentences. This, however, does not mean that they are not greatly influenced by Jesus Tradition. The following chapters will argue that not only the canonical, but also the historical realities behind the New Testament imply a continuing reliance on Jesus Tradition on the part of those who sought to follow Jesus' footsteps.

After defining Jesus Tradition, the following chapter will lay out a careful methodology for establishing parallels.

¹⁷ Samuel Sandmel, 'Parallelomania', *JBL* 81 (1) (march 1962), 1-13. T.L. Donaldson later built upon Sandmel's paper. Donaldson states that a true parallel must be genealogical, i.e.: unless it can be shown that one text has influenced the other somehow, it is useless to discuss the matter. Also, his insistence to make a distinction between stronger and weaker parallels is useful, when trying to establish the significance of a parallel; T.L. Donaldson, 'Parallels: Use, Misuse and Limitations', *EvQ* 55 (1983), 193-210.