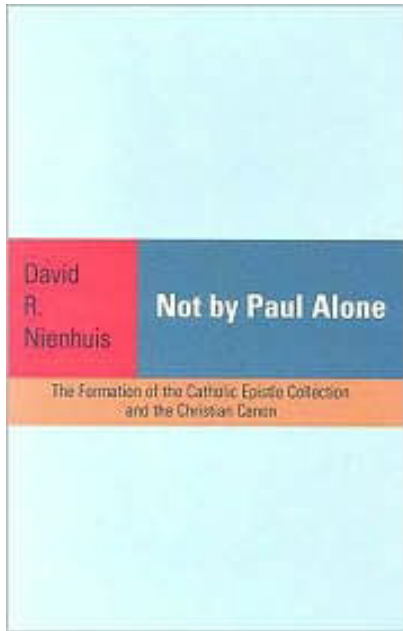


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Nienhuis, David R.

Not by Paul Alone: The Formation of the Catholic Epistle Collection and the Christian Canon

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Not by Paul Alone has a twofold aim: it sets out to examine and explore the reception of the Letter of James within the context of the early Christian church; it also offers a theory to account for the late emergence of this Letter of James. This monograph is a light revision of the doctoral thesis that David R. Nienhuis completed under Professor Francis Watson of the University of Aberdeen.

In a succinct introduction (1–28), Nienhuis sets out clearly what this study will embrace. His focus rests on that collection of seven writings generally referred to as the Catholic Epistles (James; 1 and 2 Peter; Jude; and 1, 2, 3 John). The hypothesis that he sets out to prove is that this Catholic Epistles collection was the result of an intentional design on the part of the canonizing community: “That is to say, this book proposes that the letter of James was written with the nascent apostolic letter collection in view, in order that it might forge together a discrete collection of non-Pauline letters, one shaped according to a particular *logic* or apostolic authority (that is ‘not by Paul alone’) in order to perform a particular *function* in the larger Christian canon (the correction of Paulinist misreadings of the whole apostolic message)” (5).

Chapter 1 (29–97) presents a detailed analysis of the formation of the Catholic Epistles collection. This is a valuable survey of the evidence for the existence of a Catholic Epistles collection within the early Christian communities in the East and in the West. Nienhuis’s careful analysis of the material leads him to conclude that “it was in the East then, sometime in the period between Origen and Eusebius, that the CE collection was shaped into the canonical seven and entitled ‘the Catholic epistles’” (68–69). Nienhuis’s point is that patristic evidence for the individual seven letters as well as for their formation within a sevenfold collection did not exist prior to Origen. It was only with Eusebius’s *Historia ecclesiastica* testimony to the existence of the Catholic Epistles (in 300 C.E.) collection that knowledge and acceptance of a Catholic Epistles collection grew rapidly throughout the Christian world, beginning especially in the East.

Chapter 2 (99–161) focuses specifically on the Letter of James. Nienhuis’s investigation concerns one of the perennial questions relating to the Letter of James: its authenticity or pseudonymity. Nienhuis examines the arguments for the authenticity of the letter of James and concludes against the possibility that James is an authentic letter in any sense. Instead, he maintains that a pseudonymous origin for the letter of James makes more sense. Nienhuis acknowledges honestly that “it is true that neither authenticity nor pseudonymity can be proved beyond the shadow of a doubt” (159).

Chapter 3 (163–231) presents the heart of Nienhuis’s hypothesis, namely, that the Letter of James is a conscious pseudepigraphical writing emanating from the mid to late second century. It was deliberately constructed by an author so that it would act as an introduction to this sevenfold collection of writings from the so called “pillars” of the church (namely, James, Peter, and John). In constructing this text (the Letter of James), the composer deliberately used the letters of 1 Peter and 1 John in order to forge a unity among them. Nienhuis sees the Letter of James as an attempt to promote the Jewish roots of Christianity (against Marcion and his followers) by linking passages deliberately with other writings of this collection, namely, 1 Peter and 1 John. At the same time, Nienhuis sees a further aim in the Letter of James as providing “an orthodox view of an apostolic kerygma fundamentally informed by Pauline thought” (229). In other words, the writer is attempting to provide an orthodox understanding of Paul’s thought.

The true value of Nienhuis’s study is without doubt contained in his first chapter. Nienhuis provides a wonderfully detailed examination of the evidence for a knowledge or use of the Letter of James in the course of the first three centuries of the Christian era. His examination has looked at the various centers of developing Christianity. This is an invaluable study well worth the price of the book, irrespective of what one’s judgment is regarding his further hypothesis on the origin and purpose of the Letter of James.

As one who belongs to that group of scholars who sees the Letter of James as an early writing, I still remain unconvinced by the arguments that Nienhuis has provided for his position. Although I respect the careful way in which he has laid out his position, my deepest concern still lies in the connections and use that Nienhuis tries to draw between James and 1 Peter and 1 John. Nienhuis distances himself very well from that view of an editor of James using scissors and paste to establish a connection with the texts of 1 Peter and 1 John. Nienhuis rightly stresses that “the author of James was simply working from memory intentionally echoing and alluding to the authoritative texts he and his community knew quite well” (167). Undoubtedly this is the way to proceed. But I do not think that Nienhuis was able to carry out clearly enough what he expresses here. One has to take seriously the way in which people of the ancient world worked with existing texts. Instead of imposing twenty-first-century perspectives on the past, it is necessary to refer to the methods that people of the first centuries of the Christian era used in their reproduction of existing texts. Vernon Robbins’s pioneering work in the field of rhetorical criticism has shown that an examination of the rhetorical culture out of which the New Testament writings emerged aimed not at performing their sources in new ways in order to persuade their hearers to act in particular ways (see his, “Writing as a Rhetorical Act in Plutarch and the Gospels,” in *Persuasive Artistry: Studies in New Testament Rhetoric in Honor of George A. Kennedy* [ed. Duane F. Watson; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991], 142–68). Nienhuis, in examining the relationships between James and 1 Peter and 1 John, has still remained too entrenched in the usage of verbal parallels, as he himself notes in his conclusion to his examination of the relationships among the writings: “Throughout this chapter we have noted a series of parallels between James, 1 Peter, 1 John and the letters of Paul. Even apart from my historical reconstruction, a number of these connections are strong enough to warrant an affirmation of literary dependence” (224). To my mind, an examination of the rhetorical composition of the Letter of James reveals far more the attempt to perform once again the sources of those early followers of Jesus, namely, the Greek Scriptures (LXX) as well as the traditions of the sayings of Jesus.

Be that as it may, the most valuable and important contribution of Nienhuis’s study is his detailed evaluation and presentation of the evidence related to the use and knowledge of the Letter of James within those first three centuries of the Christian era. While I still disagree with his conclusion of a mid to late second-century origin for the Letter of James, his work raises some very fascinating and intriguing questions.