

# Texts Less Traveled

Exploring Hebrews, the Catholic  
Epistles, and Revelation

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# Introduction

ONE OF THE MOST FAMOUS—if not *the* most famous—American poems is Robert Frost’s “The Road Not Taken.”<sup>1</sup> The closing lines, in the poem’s fourth and final stanza, are among the best known in American literature:

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.

In fact, the renown of these lines is such that many people mistakenly call Frost’s poem “The Road Less Traveled.” Its appeal is that it seemingly calls for taking the risk to try something that the majority passes by, a risk that later is appreciated as rewarding, as making “all the difference.”

The purpose of this book is to invite and assist readers to embark on a rewarding “journey” through texts in the New Testament that are less trodden. The texts I have in mind are the Letter to the Hebrews; the Catholic Epistles—James; 1 and 2 Peter; 1, 2, and 3 John; and Jude—so named because, in most cases, the indicated audience is much broader than a particular church community (hence, the audience is more “catholic”);<sup>2</sup> and the Book of Revelation. One reason these texts are less traveled is their placement in the New Testament canon.

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A look at the table of contents of the New Testament reveals that it opens with the four Gospels, moves to the story of the early Church as recounted in the Acts of the Apostles, and then transitions to the thirteen writings attributed to St. Paul. The texts less traveled are placed at the *end* of the list, as the final nine (of twenty-seven) writings in the New Testament.

Another reason Hebrews, the Catholic Epistles, and Revelation are less traveled, at least for many Catholics, is that readings from these texts are rarely the subject of preaching in the Church's Sunday eucharistic liturgy. In Ordinary Time, the Gospel reading is coordinated with the first reading, taken from the Old Testament. The second reading—where the texts in question are proclaimed—is on its own cycle and is not coordinated with the Gospel reading. Priests and deacons typically focus their remarks on the Gospel, for understandable reasons. But that means that James (five Sundays in Year B) and Hebrews (seven Sundays in Year B; four more in Year C) are hardly ever commented on. Interestingly, during the Easter Season the Church listens to passages from 1 Peter (Year A), 1 John (Year B), and Revelation (Year C) in the second reading. But truth be told, these texts are seldom the subject of Easter homilies.

A third reason for lighter traffic in Hebrews, the Catholic Epistles, and Revelation is that resources to help guide readers through them are less available, both in terms of quantity and in terms of quality, than those for the Gospels and the Pauline letters. To be sure, the Gospels form the "canon within the canon," the privileged part of the New Testament, for Catholics (evident, for instance, from the proclamation of the word of God at the eucharistic liturgy). One would expect more resources for them. Moreover, the letters attributed to Paul<sup>3</sup> lend themselves to synthetic treatments (e.g., setting forth a Pauline theology), over and beyond the individual letters, which is not the case with the less traveled texts.

## *Introduction*



The three reasons just outlined are not the only explanation for the lighter traffic in Hebrews, the Catholic Epistles, and Revelation. The texts themselves present a number of puzzles, difficulties, and strange features. For instance, take the Letter to the Hebrews, the subject of chapter 1. The issue of who authored the text has been a source of debate from early on. The great third-century CE biblical scholar Origen ultimately concluded that only “God knows” who wrote it. Among the difficulties in understanding this text is that it operates with a different worldview from ours, Platonism, in which earthly entities are understood to be mere “shadows” of the true heavenly reality. Another challenge is that Hebrews draws heavily on Jewish cultic rituals and sacrifices, including those of the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur)—something not familiar to most Christians—to present what God has done through Jesus.

Turning to the Letter of James, the focus of chapter 2, the text begins with the identification of the author as “James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.” Is this James the figure identified as “the Lord’s brother” (Gal 1:19; cf. Mark 6:3), the leader of the early Church in Jerusalem? Or is he some other figure, writing later in the first century CE, as many scholars contend? The text itself appears to be fairly straightforward, offering a series of challenging exhortations on right living. But a peculiar feature of James is that the name “Jesus” is mentioned only twice, including in the opening line quoted above. This fact is one reason why Martin Luther famously described the writing as “an epistle of straw,” lacking substance—a notoriously low assessment.

The Petrine letters and Jude, the topics of chapter 3, likewise have some curious characteristics. The elegant style of Greek of 1 Peter has raised the question about how it could

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have been penned by the apostle, who was an uneducated fisherman from Galilee. While 2 Peter gives the impression of deriving from the same author, evidence internal to the text suggests that it comes from a much later date. For example, the text refers to Paul's letters as a collection and as having the status of Scripture. Second Peter also contains, in its middle section, much of the content of the Letter of Jude, but without some strange references from the latter, such as the archangel Michael contending with the devil over the corpse of Moses. What is the relationship, if any, between 2 Peter and Jude?

Coming to the Johannine letters, the focus of chapter 4, one immediately recognizes a number of motifs and terms from John's Gospel: a prologue in 1 John that highlights the "word of life," God's Son Jesus Christ; God's love revealed in Jesus's humanity; exhortations to walk in the light and truth; and the notions of abiding in God and of God abiding in us. Well and good. But then there is the ominous mention, in 1 and 2 John, of the coming of the "antichrist" and of allusions to schism in the community. The unnamed "elder" who pens 2 John cautions against extending hospitality to false teachers, while he complains in 3 John that he and his emissaries are not being welcomed by someone in an authoritative position in the Johannine community. How to make sense of such division in writings that emphasize the importance of *koinōnia* ("fellowship" or "communion")?

Last, and perhaps most perplexing of all, is the Book of Revelation, the subject of chapter 5. The name of the book derives from the English translation of the first word of the text—*apokalypsis* (from which we get *apocalypse* and *apocalyptic*). Written by a man named John in exile on the island of Patmos, Revelation employs a number of exotic and mystifying figures and features: a slain yet victorious lamb, four horsemen, angels blowing trumpets to unleash plagues, a red dragon, a woman clothed with the sun and crowned with twelve stars, and symbolic numbers (e.g., the infamous 666).

## Introduction

The genre of apocalypse requires much care when offering an interpretation. Indeed, there is a troubling history of interpretation of this text, which includes *misinterpretations* that have led to terrible tragedies. Just think of the massive number of deaths among the Branch Davidians in Waco, Texas, in 1993.



The issue of interpretation brings me back to Frost's poem with which I began this introduction. Notice that I employed the adverb *seemingly* in the last sentence of the opening paragraph. The poem's final lines *seem* to suggest the virtue of setting out on the less traveled road. However, as has recently been argued by literary critics,<sup>4</sup> the poem itself is not so clear-cut. Earlier in the poem, Frost writes that the passing there "had worn them [i.e., the two roads] really about the same." In addition, "both that morning equally lay / In leaves no step had trodden black." So, is one road really less traveled than the other?

It is also crucial to note that the final stanza begins with the poet placing himself in a different point in time, namely, the future—"I shall be telling this with a sigh / Somewhere ages and ages hence." Thus, the determination of taking the road less traveled is an "after the fact" judgment of one looking back in time. Is this the poet's way of saying that people try to make sense of their lives in retrospect, explaining things in order to give their lives coherence and meaning? If this is the case, then is the typical reading that I set forth at the outset wrong? Or does the ambiguity allow for multiple readings?

Now, my purpose here is not to offer an authoritative interpretation of "The Road Not Taken" (which is beyond my competence) but to illustrate the importance of a close, thoughtful reading of texts. If this is true of a poem about a walk in the woods, how much more is it the case when it comes to reading texts that we regard as the word of God, including Hebrews, the Catholic Epistles, and Revelation—with all the challenges

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and difficulties mentioned above? My hope is that the following chapters will encourage and assist readers to engage in a careful, prayerful reading of these less traveled texts. These texts are worth such a reading because they contain a number of inspiring images and teachings that can deeply nourish the life of faith. We ought not to be deterred by the challenges and difficulties.

The format of this book is similar to the one I have used in two previous works: *Opening the Door of Faith*, which is largely about the Gospels and Acts of the Apostles; and *Written for Our Instruction*, which is about St. Paul's teaching, mostly via the Letter to the Romans. Each chapter begins with a brief overview of the writing(s) in question, and then I propose four key themes found in them that I proceed to develop. These themes focus chiefly on the portrayal of Jesus and on Christian living in light of what God has done through his Son and the gift of the Spirit. At the end of each chapter are discussion questions to facilitate further reflection—preferably done with others.

I want to be clear that this book is not intended to substitute for reading the biblical texts themselves, but rather to provide assistance for appreciating the life of faith proposed in them. You may consider reading first the biblical text in question before reading my analysis. Or, if you prefer, you can use my presentation as an entry point for your study. The internal biblical citations are intended as an aid, though some readers might find it easier to pass over them.

In the concluding chapter, I gather and summarize the major points. In particular, I highlight all the things we would miss out on if we did not traverse these less traveled texts. The benefits and gains are considerable. I am confident that, when we arrive at the end of the journey, we will find that it makes, if not *all* the difference, at least a significant difference in our understanding of the life of faith and the way of discipleship.





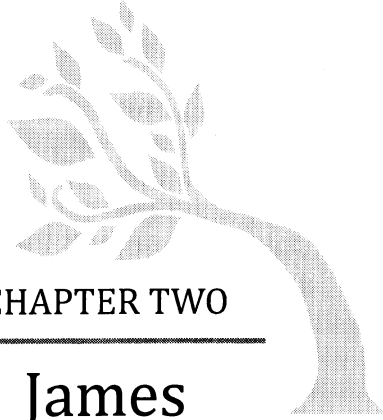
## CHAPTER ONE

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# Hebrews

**B**EFORE THE THREE-YEAR lectionary cycle appeared in 1969 (as mandated by Vatican II), the liturgical proclamation of passages from Hebrews was introduced by the formula “A reading from the Letter of St. Paul to the Hebrews.” This formulation was inaccurate on three counts. First, the writing is not from St. Paul, but from an anonymous figure, one who (like Paul) was well versed in the Old Testament and skilled in rhetorical argument.<sup>1</sup> Second, while the text concludes with epistolary conventions, the author himself more accurately describes his work as a “word of exhortation” (13:22). In other words, the text is a homily that interweaves biblical and theological exposition with pastoral applications. Third, the audience is not “Hebrews” but, rather, a community of Jews who had become Christ-believers.

More specifically, the author writes to a group of Jewish Christians who had previously endured persecution and suffering. Some had been imprisoned; others had property confiscated (10:32–34). Moreover, it appears that such opposition was still a possibility in the present. As a result of suffering for their faith, some members were becoming discouraged. One manifestation of their discouragement was to stop coming to the community’s liturgical gathering (10:25). Whether



## CHAPTER TWO

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# James

THE FIRST OF THE CATHOLIC Epistles in the New Testament canon is the Letter of James. Unlike Hebrews, whose author is anonymous, the writer of this text is named at the outset: “James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ” (1:1). The “James” in question is probably not either of the two apostles of Jesus with that name (James, son of Zebedee; or James, son of Alphaeus). Rather, he is the James to whom Paul refers as “the Lord’s brother” (Gal 1:19).<sup>1</sup> Like Paul, he was the recipient of a revelation of the risen Lord (1 Cor 15:7). This James became the most prominent leader of the early Church in Jerusalem (cf. Acts 15:13–21; Gal 2:9, 12). Does this writing derive from the life and ministry of James, or does it come from someone writing later in his name? The manner in which the author employs Jesus-traditions (see below) and the intense expectation of the return of the Lord (Jas 5:8) indicate, at least to me, that the former is more probable. If so, the text was likely penned in the 50s CE (James was martyred ca. 62 CE).

The author identifies himself as a teacher (3:1). James is a teacher of wisdom who imparts advice on how to live a good life. While the text begins with an epistolary greeting, it is best described as wisdom instruction. The opening chapter

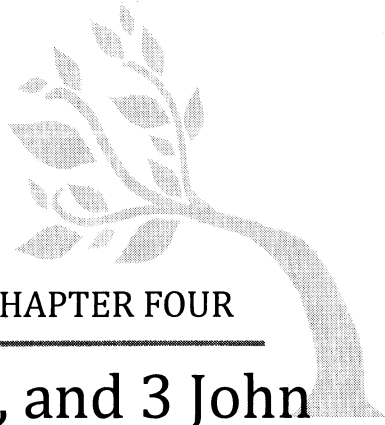


## CHAPTER THREE

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# 1 and 2 Peter (Jude)

**T**HE TWO LETTERS ATTRIBUTED to the apostle Peter offer material for reflection on mysteries that make up, in effect, two sides of a coin. On one side, 1 Peter teaches that Christians are on a pilgrimage to a heavenly homeland, a journey that can involve misunderstandings and hardships. Most scholars argue that the author of this text is not the apostle himself (e.g., the literary style and quality of Greek would seem beyond the ability of what we know about Peter) but instead writes in the name of Peter. I, however, am among those who see no reason why Peter is not the source of this letter, written from Rome (1 Pet 5:13; “Babylon” is code language for Rome), probably in the early 60s CE. The secretary Silvanus (5:12) may have provided the literary polish. First Peter is a circular letter to Gentile converts residing in several Roman provinces in what is present-day Turkey (1:1). These converts were experiencing opposition from their pagan neighbors. The author writes to encourage his readers, reminding them via baptismal imagery what it means to participate in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the suffering servant.



## CHAPTER FOUR

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# 1, 2, and 3 John

**T**HE THREE LETTERS attributed to “John” are descendants of the Fourth Gospel. That is, they are products of the community of faith that found its inspiration in the Beloved Disciple, the key source for that Gospel (John 21:24). These letters employ several symbols and motifs found in John’s Gospel, such as the themes of God’s love and the eternal life bestowed through Christ, the contrast between light and darkness, the emphasis on truth, and the opposition of the “world.”

The author of 2 and 3 John identifies himself as “the Elder” (*presbyteros*, from which we get *presbyter* and *presbyteral*), one of the leaders of a network of communities grounded in the Johannine tradition. There is no identification of the author of 1 John, which is presented as coming from more than one person (the pronoun *we* permeates this writing). Nevertheless, there is a definite kindred spirit among these writings, and most scholars argue that they come from the same source.<sup>1</sup> The date and provenance of these writings are hard to ascertain. In terms of the former, a good estimate is the end of the first century CE.

What precisely are these writings and what is their relationship with one another? Third John is a personal letter written to a man named Gaius, who likely was the host of a house



## CHAPTER FIVE

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# Revelation

**A**S NOTED IN THE INTRODUCTION, the Book of Revelation takes its name from the translation of the very first word of the text, *apokalypsis*. This Greek word means an “unveiling” or “disclosure” of information and truth; hence, “revelation.” In this case, the disclosure is via a vision given to a man named John, who was exiled on the island of Patmos, located in the Aegean Sea.<sup>1</sup> John was in exile because of his witness to the gospel (Rev 1:9). His visionary experience took place “on the Lord’s day” (1:10)—that is, a Sunday.

This is no ordinary revelation or disclosure, to be sure. It is “the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1:1), a phrase that signifies that it both comes *from* Jesus and is *about* Jesus. Ultimately, this revelation is *from God*. The source of the revelatory vision is the risen Lord Jesus, who appeared to John (more below) and instructed him to write down all that he was to see and then to send his text to seven churches located in Asia Minor (present-day western Turkey), including the church in Ephesus. That John was in exile for proclaiming the gospel suggests a context of persecution. That datum is supported by several details in the text, which evoke the threat, even the reality, of persecution of the churches he was instructed to address. Indeed, we will see below that this context is crucially important for

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## Conclusion

HAVING TRAVERSED AND EXPLORED Hebrews, the Catholic Epistles, and Revelation, it will be helpful to take stock of some of the highlights we have encountered. I cannot offer here a thorough review; however, a brief summary of themes, topics, and images we would miss were it not for the content of these less traveled texts can be beneficial.

These writings contain some important theological teachings. That is, they reveal to us significant information about who God is and what God wants for us. James's description of God as "the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change" (Jas 1:17), aptly communicates divine transcendence. His teaching that God "gives to all generously and ungrudgingly" (1:5) speaks to the expansive quality of divine munificence. James also reminds us of God's special love and concern for the poor (2:5). The Johannine epistles teach us just how generous God is: "God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him" (1 John 4:9). And all this because, as the Elder so famously expressed, "God is love" (4:8, 16), a theological statement unsurpassed for its succinctness and profundity.

The less traveled texts have also revealed God's desire to be in relationship with us. Readers will have noticed how frequently I have used the word *covenantal* to describe God. As