



Aim of lesson

To place these books in their historical context and briefly consider their content.

Bible background

The letters of James, Peter, John and Jude, and Revelation.

Preparation required

It would be worth spending a while re-familiarising yourself with these books.

Outline of lesson

Look at the opening of each letter and discuss to whom the letters were written, then have a more detailed look at the contents. It is useful to emphasize that all the authors were eye witnesses to Jesus' ministry, and had had direct contact with him.

We cannot be sure when these letters were written, but there are some approximate dates in the students' books, and they could mark them on the timeline at the foot of the page and/or the class timeline.

The dispersion

This term (James 1:1, 1 Peter 1:1) refers to Jews who were scattered around the middle east (John 7:35). Many Jews had not returned to their land after the exile so there were large Jewish communities in many countries. How would this have affected the message of the letters? Talk about how different communication was then, in comparison to today. How important a letter would be when travel was so slow and restricted it was the only way to communicate.

James

There is a 'Which James?' exercise in the students' books. The letter is generally believed to have been written in around AD 45, in which case it is probably the first New Testament book to be written. The author seems to be James the brother of the Lord Jesus, though if James¹ the brother of John was the author it must have been written even earlier. James, the eldest of the Lord's brothers, had become a 'pillar' of the early church (Galatians 1:19, 2:9), even though he had previously not believed (John 7:1-3).

In a nutshell, James writes that faith is not an academic thing but a practical one: we must be doers of the word, not hearers only (1:22).

1&2 Peter

In Acts 2:9-10 we read of the many countries from which Jews had come to the feast of Pentecost; compare the list with 1 Peter 1:1-2 - maybe a lot of those who read Peter's letter had been converted by him many years earlier. In 2 Peter 3:1 he writes: 'This is now the second letter that I am writing to you ...' so obviously both letters are addressed to the same audience.

Peter seems to write 2 Peter 3:15-16 while Paul is still alive, but after he has written several of his letters; that gives us a hint as to when Peter was writing.

Peter's reference to the transfiguration (2 Peter 1:16-18) gives us confidence that it is indeed Peter who is writing. There are other echoes of his earlier life, for example:

- 1:18 recalls Peter's words when healing the lame man in Jerusalem (Acts 3:6).
- 2:6-8 speaks of believers built into a spiritual house; Jesus had said to Simon 'you are Peter, and on this rock² I will build my church (Matthew 16:18).
- 3:15: Peter had not been able to cope with questions and denied his Lord.

In a nutshell, those to whom Peter was writing were facing persecution, so he encourages them to see beyond their sufferings to the hope that lies ahead (1 Peter 5:10). This point is made even more strongly in the second epistle (2 Peter 3:11-13).

¹ James the brother of John was killed (Acts 12:2) by Herod Agrippa I, who died in AD 44.

² Jesus names Simon 'Petros', which means 'a rock'. When he says 'on this rock' the word is Petra, which means the bedrock on which a house might be built.

1 John

There are so many echoes of the language of John's gospel ('Which John' in the students' books) that even though the author doesn't introduce himself there can be little doubt who he was. **In a nutshell**, he writes that the reality of our faith is tested by our actions. (1 John 2:4-5), and if we truly love, that love will show itself in the way we live (3:16-18).

2 John

Don't get bogged down in who the chosen (or elect) lady is. John was writing to real people, either a family or an ecclesia, and it doesn't really matter which; maybe he wishes to conceal their identity in the face of persecution (v12). **In a nutshell**, we should love one another, and if we love Jesus we will obey him (v5-6) - echoes of John 13:34, 14:15.

3 John

Obviously written to a real brother, who was living in a chaotic situation, with Diotrophes seeking to promote his own interests in the ecclesia. **In a nutshell**, John exhorts Gaius not to be dragged down by this behaviour, but to do what is right (v11).

Jude

This seems to have been written soon after 2 Peter - compare v4, 6, 9-10, 12 with 2 Peter 2:1, 4, 11-12, 17, and v17-18 with 2 Peter 3:3. **In a nutshell**, Jude exhorts his readers to build one another up and to look to the kingdom of God (v20-21).

Revelation

Spend a few minutes looking closely at Revelation 1:1-3. Point out that it is a letter from the Lord Jesus, to show 'his servants' (believers who already understand the 'milk' of the word), things which would happen after this time. Emphasize the blessing that is given on those who read the book and obey - even though it is complex we should keep reading it but maybe getting exhortation from it is more important than sorting out exactly what it means. Notice from 1:9 that the book was recorded by the Apostle John whilst he was on the island of Patmos possibly while he was in prison. You could get the students to draw a route from Patmos to the seven churches to which letters are sent in chapters 2-3.

Talk about the use of symbols in the Bible. Choose something that the students are familiar with, for example, Nebuchadnezzar's Image, to show how symbols are used in the Bible to represent things. Explain that this is the case in the book of Revelation.

Discuss the structure of the book briefly - the letters to the churches, the prophetic visions and the kingdom visions. Look at the things which occur seven times in the book - in particular the seven seals and trumpets, and the final bowls of God's wrath. This is just to give a flavour of some of the things within the book. **In a nutshell**, the Lord Jesus is giving John a series of pictures which describe both the situation at the time, and events to come, leading up to his coming and the revelation of the kingdom (Revelation 1:19).

The book of Revelation is complex because of its use of symbology. Briefly mention some of the approaches that have been used to interpret it, and explain what the terms mean (for example, 'continuous historic' means the prophecies show the path of history in a line from the time of writing to the return of Jesus). Try not to push your own view. End by reading together one of the 'kingdom visions', for example Revelation 22:1-7.

Relevance to our lives

The letters were written to believers struggling to hold on to what they had learned in a challenging world - their message is equally relevant to us today.

We may not fully understand all the prophecies now, but the visions of the kingdom and the lessons from the letters to the churches are for us now as well as all people throughout history. There is a blessing for those who read the book, so we should keep doing it.

Extension activities

- Look for cross references between James and the sermon on the mount to emphasize the influence of Jesus' ministry on the letter.
- Look at the letters to the churches, and how they link to the locations and cultures surrounding each ecclesia.
- You could look at the use of symbols in Revelation as used elsewhere in scripture, making the point that the secret to understanding Revelation is to look at the rest of the Bible. Get the students to compare
 - Revelation 1:5 with Ezekiel 1:24 (rushing water)
 - 13:6-7 with Daniel 7:25 (the beast)
 - 6:2-5;8 with Zechariah 6:1-4 (colours of horses)
 - 7:1 with Jeremiah 49:36 (four winds and four quarters)