

Introduction To 1 Peter

I. **Purpose**

- A. Evidently Peter's object is to cheer and strengthen the Christians in these five provinces who are undergoing fiery trials. The fiery trials referred to are those which often come to Christians as they live faithfully in a pagan and hostile society.
- B. Persecution took the forms of slander, riots, local police action, and social ostracism. The readers are encouraged to rejoice and live above such reproach.

II. **Authorship**

- A. This letter, considered pseudonymous by many and genuine by others, is believed to come either from late in Peter's life or late in the first century, written by someone else in his name. There are several issues to be considered in making a decision between the alternative suggestions.
 - 1. Reference to Jesus.
 - a) Peter does refer to the fact that he is a "witness of the sufferings of Christ" (5:1). Critics often want it both ways; 2 Peter is full of these kinds of references, including a reference to the Transfiguration, and many say the pseudonymist is overdoing it there, i.e., that he has too many references to his experience with the historical Jesus. How many is too many? How few is too few? One suspects that this argument is brought in to bolster a conception already held.
 - b) Remember that 1 Peter is an epistle, not a gospel. In Mark's gospel we probably have Peter's reminiscences of his experience with Jesus. The argument for pseudonymity based on what an author "should" or "would have said" is tenuous at best.
 - 2. Similarity with Paul's teaching.
 - a) Because 1 Peter shows similarity of thought with Paul, critics have speculated that either Paul wrote the epistle or a follower of Paul wrote the epistle and attributed it to Peter.
 - b) If one examines Acts, they will see Peter agreeing with Paul in principle on the Gentile question. Peter takes the gospel first to the Gentiles (Cornelius, Acts 10-11). In fact, Peter says later that God chose him for that purpose (Acts 15:7).
 - c) When Peter later refuses fellowship with the Gentiles (Galatians 2:11-14), he has already been eating with them. He only draws back when some believers of a stricter view come down from Jerusalem. This means that Peter was in agreement with Paul in

essence, but through a failure of nerve he did not put into practice what he believed.

- d) The purpose of all this is to show that Peter and Paul did not hold to significantly different teachings. To look at 1 Peter and say that it is "like Paul" is assuming too much difference between them. It would be fairer to say that what Peter and Paul write is of the common faith.

3. Language.

- a) Could Peter, the Galilean fisherman, have written the impeccable Greek of this epistle, including its various rhetorical devices? This is a real difficulty to the idea that Peter himself sat down and wrote the epistle with his own hand, or that he dictated it verbatim to a scribe. The church father Papias made the statement that Peter needed an interpreter when he preached in Rome. Did he speak Aramaic and have it interpreted into Latin or Greek? Did he speak Greek and have it interpreted into Latin? We do not know, but this may be a hint that his Greek was not very good.
 - (1) Many scholars believe that Silas/Silvanus was more than a courier (1 Peter 5:12); they believe that he was in fact a co-author or a scribe give considerable freedom. Paul made use of an amanuensis in his writings (Romans 16:22; cf. 1 Corinthians 16:21; Colossians 4:18; 2 Thessalonians 3:17).
 - (2) The phrase, "By Silvanus" could mean no more than his being a courier, but we see Silas named as joint author (in some sense) in 1 and 2 Thessalonians. "Wrote letters by them" (referring to Paul, Barnabas, Judas Barsabbas, and Silas) in Acts 15:22-23 may refer to a simple courier job, but writing "By Silvanus" might mean more. Paul never says he writes "by" anyone; he typically mentions the courier by name and says "he will tell you more" or "receive him well."
 - (3) If Silas is the joint author or a scribe with a free hand, this could account for the good Greek, and also for the similar elements of Paul in 1 Peter. The Today's English Version accepts this idea and makes it explicit: "I write you this brief letter with the help of Silas ..."
- b) On the other hand, Greek, along with Aramaic and Hebrew, was commonly spoken throughout Palestine. That was especially true in Galilee, where Hellenistic influence was strong. As a businessman in Galilee, Peter would almost certainly have been fluent in Greek. Peter even had a Greek name (Acts 15:14). Matthew and James, also Galileans, wrote New Testament books in excellent Greek. In addition, Peter wrote this epistle after

three decades of traveling and working among largely Greek-speaking people, which would have given him even greater proficiency in Greek.

- c) There are also several striking parallels to Peter's sermons recorded in Acts (cf. 1:10-12 with Acts 3:18; 1:17 with Acts 10:34; 1:20 with Acts 2:23; 1:21 with Acts 2:32; 2:4, 7 with Acts 4:11; 3:22 with Acts 2:33; 4:5 with Acts 10:42; the use of *xulon* ["tree"] in 2:24 and Acts 5:30 and 10:39).
4. Church situation.
- a) When was there a persecution that could be called a "fiery trial" (4:12)? Some say Domitian's persecution in the nineties, or Trajan's in the early second century, are the only ones that fit the qualification of a persecution that reached to Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia. Nero's persecution of A.D. 64-65 was localized in Rome.
 - b) But notice that the persecution is not necessarily legal. There is nothing in the letter that demands such an understanding. Insults are in view (2:12, 23; 4:14), but not necessarily legal persecution. Furthermore, the letter assures the readers that normally good conduct will bring them praise and not blame from political leaders (2:13-14; 3:13-14).
 - c) This evidence shows that a date within Peter's lifetime is not ruled out, because the persecution in view does not have to be any official persecution that we know about from history. In fact, several statements indicate that there was not a unified, governmental persecution, but a persecution by a decadent society.
- B. External evidence for Peter's authorship is strong all the way back, with the exception of the Muratorian Canon, whose text is corrupt at that point and may originally have included 1 Peter. Despite the circulation of forgeries purporting to be written by Peter (e.g., the Gospel of Peter, the Acts of Peter, and the Apocalypse of Peter), the early church never doubted that the apostle wrote 1 Peter. The earliest affirmation of that comes in 2 Peter, which Peter himself described as the second letter he had addressed to his readers (3:1).
1. There are similarities of 1 Peter's words and phrases in such late first- and early second-century writings as the Epistle of Barnabas, the First Epistle of Clement, the Shepherd of Hermas, and the Letters of Ignatius.
 2. The earliest extant work that actually quotes from 1 Peter is Polycarp's Epistle of the Philipppians, likely written in the second decade of the second century.

3. In the late second and early third centuries, Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Clement of Alexandria definitely attributed 1 Peter to the apostle Peter.
- C. Peter states that he is in Babylon (5:13), perhaps with his wife (1 Corinthians 9:5). There have been several theories concerning the identity of "Babylon."
1. Some argue for the ancient city of Babylon in Mesopotamia, but that region was sparsely populated in Peter's day. It is unlikely that he, Mark, and Silvanus would all have been there at the same time.
 2. Others point to a Babylon on the Nile River in Egypt. It, however, was little more than a Roman military outpost, and again it is highly improbable that Peter (along with Mark and Silvanus) would have taken up residence there.
 3. "Babylon" is most likely a cryptic name for Rome, chosen because of the Imperial capital's debauchery and idolatry (cf. Revelation 18-19).
 - a) With persecution looming on the horizon, Peter took care not to endanger the Christians in Rome, who might have forced further difficulties if his letter had been discovered by the Roman authorities.
 - b) It also fits in with the traditional view that Peter ended his life and ministry in Rome (accompanied by Mark, which is another point of contact with later tradition).

III. ***Date And Addressees***

- A. Assuming the genuineness of the epistle and the death of Peter about A.D. 67 or 68, the date can be assumed to be just before Nero's persecution, which followed the great fire that ravaged Rome in the summer of A.D. 64.
- B. The absence of any reference to martyrdom makes it less likely that the epistle was written after the persecution began, since numerous Christians would by then have been put to death.
 1. Peter was evidently not in Rome when Paul wrote Romans (A.D. 57 or 58).
 2. It is also unlikely that Peter was in Rome during Paul's first imprisonment, since he is not mentioned in any of the prison epistles.
- C. Peter was addressing the Jewish Christians in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia. It has been shown that the order of the provinces goes roughly in a circle. The courier might have traveled the route and circulated the letter. Even though the letter seems aimed at Jewish Christians, it must not be thought that the Gentiles were

excluded. Peter clearly expresses the familiar idea that the gospel is the true Judaism of God's promise (1 Peter 2:4-10).