



OPENING THE SCRIPTURES

1 Peter: Traditional Authorship Challenged

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“Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ: To those chosen, living as exiles dispersed abroad in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia,…” (1 Pet 1.1).

Since the church’s earliest history, 1 Peter has been “recognized as one of the high points of NT literature and theology” (Köstenberger 2009, 729); Luther designated 1 Peter, John’s gospel, and Paul’s letter to the Romans as “‘the true kernel and marrow’ of all the NT books” (Elliott 1992, 270; citing Luther’s *Prefaces to the New Testament*, 1522).

Part of the early church’s esteem for the document is owed to its association with the fisherman apostle known for his bold affirmations and public failures of Jesus, as well as for his leadership in the early church’s preaching and defense. His contributions were acknowledged in the period immediately following the NT era, as demonstrated by allusions to his life and faithfulness in *I Clement* and *The Letter of Polycarp to the Philippians*. Irenaeus (130–200), Clement of Alexandria (150–215), and Tertullian (160–225) cited 1 Peter and attributed it to the apostle, and “Eusebius listed it as the only ‘undisputed’ book of all the General Epistles” (Köstenberger 2009, 730; cf. *Eccl. Hist.* 3.3.25). The patristic evidence led Charles Bigg to write, “There is no book in the New Testament which has earlier, better, or stronger attestation, though Irenaeus is the first to quote it by name” (Bigg 1902, 7).

Beginning in 1784, however, critical scholars began to challenge Peter’s authorship (Köstenberger 2009, 730). As Blaiklock summarizes,

In common with that of every other document in the New Testament, the traditional authorship has, of course, been challenged, sometimes with subtlety, often perversely, seldom objectively, and nearly always on grounds which would not be regarded as valid in any other sphere of historical and literary criticism (Blaiklock 1977, 14).

At a time when questions about the authenticity of Christian traditions are widespread—including among many believers who, because they also are active internet and social media users, need to have their faith confirmed—we need to be aware of and prepare to answer these challenges. To better understand the critics’ rationale, we’ll first undertake a brief summary of Peter’s life.

Historical Framework

Peter was one of the first apprentices of Jesus, who gave him the nickname, “Rock” (*Petros* in Greek and *Kēpaʿ* in Aramaic, transliterated into Greek as *Kēphas*). As one of the especially called disciples (Mark 3.13), he “was appointed by Jesus as one of the twelve official delegates who appear to be so designated as the core of the renewed Israel” (Davids 2014, 101).

After Jesus’ resurrection, Peter continued as one of the movement’s leaders, as indicated by Paul who referred to “James, Cephas, and John [as] those recognized as pillars” (Gal 2.9). Luke describes his itinerant ministry in Judea and bordering provinces in Acts 8–11, and in Acts 12 reports that sometime between 41 and 44 AD, Peter was arrested by Herod Agrippa I. Following his release, he is mentioned as being in Jerusalem only one other time, in Acts 15.7.

Paul says that before Galatians was written, Peter had left the Judean area and traveled as far north as Syrian Antioch (Gal 2.11), where he temporarily came under the influence of “those from the circumcision party” (v. 12). But after that point, we have no definite NT information about Peter’s whereabouts. As Davids writes,

After Gal 2:11–14 or Acts 15 [Davids notes that the chronological order of these texts is debated, but doesn’t matter for this discussion] we lose track of Peter. There is a possible hint that he had been in Corinth in the presence of the “Cephas party” there (1 Cor 1:12) and in the Corinthians’ apparent knowledge that Peter traveled with his wife (9:5—neither she nor the wife of any other of the twelve is ever named), although there are plenty of explanations of the existence of such knowledge without necessitating Peter’s personal presence (Davids 2014, 101).

Information about the latter part of Peter’s life is gleaned from references in the Church Fathers. In what is certainly a reference to his death and conceivably his martyrdom, Clement says that he “endured not one or two but many trials, and thus having given his testimony went to his appointed place of glory” (*1 Clem* 5.4). Third century traditions report that he was martyred in Rome by Nero, likely sometime between the great fire in Rome and Nero’s suicide (64–68 AD). But nothing definite is recorded about his activities during the last fifteen to twenty years prior to his execution, that is, between the events of Galatians 2 and Acts 15 and his death.

Despite the lack of specific information, “scholars seem inclined to accept the traditions as reasonably accurate, for they fit the period and fit well with what we know about Nero and Roman execution” (Davids 2014, 101). Furthermore, there are no opposing traditions to counter them. But, even when we grant their accuracy, we have no information about why Peter was in Rome, nor about where his activities had taken him prior to going there. It is evident that “Nero’s arrests

were within the vicinity of Rome, so Peter would have had to have already been there” to have been caught up in them (Davids 2014, 101 n. 48).

Objections to Petrine Authorship

The view that Peter did not write 1 Peter “has become the majority position today,” although “vigorous protests” have been lodged against it (Köstenberger 2009, 730). Our purpose here is to survey the major arguments offered in that view’s defense.

First, critical scholars claim that the geographical destination of the letter to remote regions of Asia Minor does not fit the location and audience that were part of Peter’s apostolic jurisdiction (Köstenberger 2009, 730). Paul says Peter was sent to the “circumcised,” that is, the Jews (Gal 2.7), a commitment which his refusal to eat with Gentiles suggests he, at one point at least, took too seriously (Gal 2.11–14). But the regions addressed, and references to the readers in the letter, point to a largely Gentile church in a region that fell within Paul’s sphere of influence (Davids 2014, 102).

Second, critics see similarities to Paul’s letters in the teaching of 1 Peter and conclude that it must have been written by a member of a Pauline school after the deaths of both apostles. This accords with the critical view of many regarding the Pastoral Epistles. For example, in the second of what he says are “decisive arguments ... against the Petrine authorship of 1 Pet [sic],” Werner Kümmel argues that “1 Pet presupposes Pauline theology. This is true not only in the general sense that the Jewish-Christian readers ... are no longer concerned about the fulfillment of the Law, but also in the special sense that, as in Paul, the death of Jesus has atoned for the sins of Christians and has accomplished justification (1:18 f.; 2:24).” Kümmel notes other points of emphasis, including the letter’s exhortation to suffer with Christ, its command to obey civil authorities, and its use of the Pauline formula, “in Christ,” to argue that “1 Pet stands in the line of succession of Pauline theology, and that it is scarcely conceivable for Peter” to have written it (Kümmel 1973, 423).

Third, skeptics of Petrine authorship argue that the setting of 1 Peter fits with a time after Peter’s death, no later than 68 AD. Some contend, first, that the region of Asia Minor where Peter’s readers lived could not have been evangelized in Peter’s lifetime (Köstenberger 2009, 732). They also cite the absence of evidence of State directed persecution in Asia Minor, or even Greece, until the latter years of Domitian’s reign (81–96 AD) and early second century (Davids 2014, 102). (Cf. the letter from Pliny the Younger, governor of Bithynia, to Trajan, ca. 111 AD; Bruce 1974, 23–29.) In addition, some contend the ecclesiology depicted in 1 Peter is more developed than it was in Peter’s lifetime (Köstenberger 2009, 731).

Fourth, critics claim that the letter’s Greek is too polished to have been written by a Galilean fisherman, a member of a class of people not known for their education (Davids 2014, 102). Factored into this argument is Luke’s statement in Acts 4.13 that Peter and John were “uneducated and untrained men.”

Conclusion

Peter himself provides the rationale for responding to these challenges: “In your hearts regard Christ the Lord as holy, ready at any time to give a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you” (1 Pet 3.15). Accordingly, we’ll look more closely at these arguments in future installments.

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An Additional Thought

“There are two outstanding emphases in Peter as to the Christian life ... The first is steadfastness in suffering. Suffering is the normal experience of Christians because the world is to them an alien land. It must be borne patiently and steadfastly, even with rejoicing, for it occurs under the providential hand of God, brings added blessings with it, and gives assurance of sharing Christ’s future glory (4:13).”

~ George Eldon Ladd. 1974. *A Theology of the New Testament*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 601

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