



OPENING THE SCRIPTURES

Authorship Challenge: Is 1 Peter a “Pauline” Letter?

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Regarding 1 Peter, E. M. Blaiklock observed that “any challenge to Petrine authorship came only with the appearance of nineteenth-century skepticism, when anything once believed was suspect and open for attack on no other grounds than that another age has held it” (Blaiklock 1977, 18).

Blaiklock’s point is well taken, and in fact many of the skeptical assertions once widely accepted are no longer affirmed in scholarly discourse (cf. the comment about the abandoned conclusions of the Tübingen School in Köstenberger 2009, 733 n. 38). But even as we acknowledge that shift, we also observe that the questions raised by the critics serve a useful purpose, one that goes beyond the fact that they require us to do the thinking necessary to competently “make a defense” against their arguments (1 Pet 3.15). The work of analysis and response to the critical arguments yields insight that helps us better understand the complexity that always exists when flesh-and-blood people decide to freely honor God and fulfill his will in a fallen world.

The Argument Stated

As seen [previously](#), one of the critical arguments against the traditional view that the apostle Peter wrote 1 Peter contends that it reflects a Pauline theology that Peter, the apostle to the Jews, would not have expressed. Proponents of this thesis base their contention on observations about the letter, the relationship between Peter and Paul, and the respective ministries of the two men.

By way of background, notice that several statements in 1 Peter indicate it was written to an audience of formerly pagan Gentiles whom the writer now considers to have become part of “the exiles of the Diaspora” (διασπορά, 1.1). These statements include the following:

- 1.14 — “the desires of your former ignorance.”
- 1.18 — “you were redeemed from your empty way of life inherited from your ancestors.”
- 2.9–10 — “you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his possession ... of the one who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people.”
- 2.25 — “you were like sheep going astray, but you have now returned.”
- 3.6 — “You have become [Sarah’s] children.”
- 4.3–4 — “There has already been enough time spent in doing what the Gentiles choose to do: carrying on in unrestrained behavior, evil desires, drunkenness, orgies, carousing, and lawless idolatry. They are surprised that you don’t join them in the same flood of wild living.”

In light of Galatians 2.8–9, many critics affirm an ongoing polarized relationship between Paul and Peter and argue that 1 Peter’s author cannot have been the apostle charged to go to “the circumcised.” That man would not have had a relationship with believers who had been so obviously pagan. Nor would he have had an audience of believing readers in an area known to have been evangelized by Paul, the apostle “to the Gentiles” (v. 9). But they don’t argue that Paul wrote the letter. Instead, they contend that it must have been a student or loyalist of Paul’s who pseudonymously wrote in Peter’s name.

A related argument contends that 1 Peter reflects a Pauline theology, and especially resembles Romans and Ephesians. Werner Kümmel, for example, notes the letter’s emphasis on the atoning death of Jesus who was “foreknown before the foundation of the world” (1.18–20; 2.24), its exhortation to suffer with Christ, its command to obey civil authorities, and the author’s use of the Pauline formula “in Christ” as among the “decisive arguments” which show that “1 Pet[er] stands in the line of succession of Pauline theology” (Kümmel 1973, 423). He concludes from this that the author was someone dependent on Paul, not an independent apostle who is presenting his own understanding (cf. Köstenberger 2009, 733).

Responding to the Argument

In response to the first argument, that Peter’s polarized relationship with Paul rules him out as the author of this Gentile-oriented letter, notice, first, that an assumption used to justify this conclusion overstates Paul’s response to other teachers who taught in places he evangelized. It is true that 2 Corinthians and Galatians show that Paul reacted strongly to those who tried to transform his churches by attacking his apostolic credentials and leadership, or by bringing in “another gospel.” But “he shows no concern about leaders whom he perceives as more or less in agreement with him who enter the sphere of his churches, even if others promote them as rivals” (Davids 2014, 104).

Apollos is a case in point. Acts 18.27–28 reports that, after Paul planted the church in Corinth, and Apollos was taught more accurately in Ephesus, Apollos traveled to Achaia (Corinth), carrying an endorsement letter from the Ephesians. In 1 Corinthians 3.6, Paul commends his work of “watering” what he, Paul, had “planted.” Later, he says that he had “strongly urged [Apollos] to

come to you with the brothers, but he was not at all willing to come now. However, he will come when he has an opportunity” (1 Cor 16.12).

But in 1 Corinthians 1.12, he names Apollos as the nominal leader of one of the factions in the Corinthian schism. In view of his endorsements of the man elsewhere, it is evident that, even though Apollos had gained some prominence in one of “his” churches, Paul’s problem in 1 Corinthians 1 was not with Apollos himself, but with the Corinthians’ sectarianism. Significantly, aside from “Paul” and “Christ,” the other named faction leader in Corinth was “Cephas,” i.e., Peter. In view of his response to Apollos’s work, it stands to reason that Paul would not per se have had a problem with Peter writing a letter to encourage churches in his Asia Minor “territory” (cf. 1 Pet 1.1).

Furthermore, consider what Paul says about his plans for future ministry. Part of his purpose in writing to the Romans was to solicit their support (likely a financial appeal, Rom 15.24; cf. Dunn 1988, 872–873) for his plan to evangelize west of Rome, eventually all the way to Spain (Rom 15.22–29). Aside from some sort of doctrinal threat, there is no reason for him to have been concerned about Peter, or any other author, sending a letter to churches Paul might (or might not) have taught in which that writer encouraged them to remain faithful to their commitment.

In response to the second argument, which affirms that since 1 Peter reflects Paul’s theology, it must have been written pseudonymously by a disciple of Paul, we ask, first, why a writer wanting to compose a “Pauline” letter would attribute it to *Peter*. This problem has led several recent scholars to abandon the argument. But their shift led them to conclude the letter was written by a member of a “Petrine school” in Rome, not Peter (Köstenberger 2009, 733).

In fact, the parallels between Paul’s writings and 1 Peter are not as obvious as the critics have claimed. This was demonstrated more than a century ago by Charles Bigg, who compared the respective writings and concluded that “that the parallels to Ephesians are not very strong, that the resemblances to Romans are superficial, and that the same is true regarding the rest of Paul’s letters” (Köstenberger 2009, 733; cf. Bigg 1902, 15–23). In fact, the letter that most closely parallels 1 Peter is James (cf. esp. Jas 5.20 and 1 Pet 4.8, both of which are citations of Prov 10.20 from a translation or paraphrase other than the LXX). “Thus, one finds that the nature of the so-called parallels is not the sort that demands a literary dependence on Paul” (Köstenberger 2009, 733).

Summation

Evidence for the claims that 1 Peter was written by a member of a Pauline school does not support the thesis. But the work of responding to the argument does lead us to more closely examine the relationship of Peter and Paul, their respective ministries, and how various servants in the earliest churches complemented each other. We are better for having made the effort.

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An Additional Thought

“There are two outstanding emphases in Peter as to the Christian life ... The second is that of good behavior (the verb *agathopoieō*, ‘to do good,’ appears four times in 1 Peter—2:15, 20; 3:6, 17—but nowhere in Paul). This doing good is not the good work of Jewish legalism, but involves righteous conduct in contrast to pagan sinfulness (4:2). This good behavior is itself a witness to unbelievers and will frustrate their hostility (2:15), and possibly win them to Christ (3:1). It includes a right relationship to other men, and submissiveness to the established institutions of the state (2:13, 15), family (3:1, 6), and even of slaves to their masters (2:18). The Christian life is to express itself in true love toward the brethren (1:22) and in tenderness and humble-mindedness (3:8; 5:6).”

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

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