Opening the Scriptures

1 Peter: Author, Date, and Point of Origin

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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, chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to be obedient and to be sprinkled with the blood of Jesus Christ.
> May grace and peace be multiplied to you (1 Peter 1.1–2).

The opening verses of 1 Peter present us with several things to consider concerning the letter's author, point of origin, reader circumstances, primary themes, and relevance for modern disciples. With this article, we begin a big picture introduction to these matters, noting in particular the internal evidence in 1 Peter that comports with the traditional view that it was written by Simon Peter to churches in northern Asia Minor in the mid-first century AD.

"Peter, an Apostle of Jesus Christ"

As we think about Peter as the author of the letter, we'll notice two features in particular. First, the writer claims to be a "witness [μάρτυς, *martys*] to the sufferings of Christ" (1 Pet 5.1). In 2.21–24, he emphasizes the exemplary nature of Christ's sufferings with the vividness we would expect from someone with firsthand experiences that were seared into his memory. Throughout the passage, he utilizes words and allusions from Isaiah 53, a passage often featured in the teaching of the first century church (cf. Matt 8.17; Luke 22.37; John 12.38; Acts 8.32–33; Rom 10.16; Rev 14.5). He notes that Jesus' sufferings were unfair (no sin or deceit), his response to them was ex-

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ceptional (no return insults or threats), and his trust in "the one who judges justly" was consistent with his teaching and character (1 Pet 2.22–23). Additionally, Peter's theological articulation of Jesus' exemplary actions are what we would expect from a close associate who had been commissioned to tell the good news. He bore our sins, died so we might live to righteousness, gives healing by his wounds, and provides the way for us as straying sheep to return to the Shepherd and Overseer of our souls (vv. 24–25).

Second, we hear in the letter echoes of Peter's speeches in Acts. Chapter 2.24's reference to bearing our sins "in his body on the tree" repeats the language of Acts 5.30 ("whom you murdered by hanging him on a tree") and 10.39 ("yet they killed him by hanging him on a tree"). Acts 2.23's declaration that Jesus was "delivered up according to God's determined plan and foreknowledge" finds an echo in 1 Peter 1.20's confidence that "he was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was revealed in these last times for you."

Timing of the Letter

More than any other NT writing, Peter refers to the *suffering* of Christians. Together, the verb πάσχω (*paschō*, twelve times) and noun πάθημα (*pathēma*, four times) appear sixteen times in 1 Peter, in just 1,679 Greek words (closest in number is Hebrews, with seven appearances of the words).[1] The letter's references to the exilic nature of the Christian community (e.g., 1 Pet 2.11–12) reinforce the notion that their suffering was due to persecution (cf. 3.13–17; 4.12–19).

Keener notes that "three basic periods of persecution have been suggested as the background" for 1 Peter: the reigns of Nero (54–68 AD), Domitian (81–96 AD), and Trajan (98–117 AD) (Keener 2014, 684). We know Christians were experiencing Roman persecution during Trajan's reign from the letter he received ca. 111 AD from Pliny, Bithynia's governor (cf. 1 Pet 1.1) (Metzger 2003, 93). Earlier, Domitian had widely persecuted Christians as the consequence of their refusal to acquiesce to his "demand that his subjects address him as 'Lord and God' and to worship his image" (Metzger 2003, 304).

Of course, both the Domitian and Trajan periods are too late for Simon Peter to have written 1 Peter before his death, which church tradition says occurred at the hand of Nero. That Nero was responsible for a severe persecution of Christians in Rome is documented by the Roman historian Tacitus (ca. 55–ca. 117 AD) who, in his *Annals* (ca. 115 AD), "relates that Nero, disturbed by a rumor accusing him of having deliberately started the great fire that destroyed half the city of Rome in A. D. 64, tried to throw the blame for the catastrophe on the Christians." He subjected them to appalling tortures, including dipping them in tar, and setting them on fire and turning ferocious animals on them in the amphitheater (*Annals* xv. 44) (Metzger 2003, 93–94).

While the Neronian persecution occurred before Peter's death, the evidence indicates that it was limited to Rome and did not extend to the provinces. What, then, is the basis of Peter's encouragement to endure suffering that is addressed to Christians in the provinces mentioned in 1 Peter 1.1? Two possible answers to this question, both of which are plausible, have been given.

[1] In total, the verb and noun appear 58 times in the NT; the seven uses in Hebrews occur in 4,953 words. Both the verb and the noun appear more often in 1 Peter than in any other writing.

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First, as happened elsewhere (e.g., Acts 14.1–7, 19–20; 17.5–15; 19.21–41; etc.), the persecutions in the background in 1 Peter were localized pogroms instigated by pagans who were suspicious of and hostile to the new faith (Metzger 2003, 291–292).

Second, Peter, writing with the perspective of spiritual wisdom accumulated over a lifetime, anticipated that hostility similar to that experienced under Nero could, and likely would, occur elsewhere. As Keener writes, "The situation of persecution described here fits Rome, and it would be appropriate for Peter to send advance warning of that situation to believers in Asia Minor, the stronghold of emperor worship" (Keener 2014, 685).

"She Who Is in Babylon ... Sends Greetings

First Peter 5.13 indicates that the letter was written from "Babylon." Three possibilities for understanding this reference have been suggested. First, the location could be Mesopotamian Babylon, the center of the empire that had overthrown Judah and destroyed the temple in 586 BC. But by the mid-first century, that city was all but deserted; the geographer Strabo (ca. 64 BC–ca. 24 AD) had reported that the "'Great City is a great desert'" (*Geog* 16.1.5; in Köstenberger 2009, 736).

A second possibility is the Babylon located in Egypt. But "it was an insignificant military outpost, and there is no evidence of any Christian mission there until much later" (Köstenberger 2009, 736).

The third and best option is that "Babylon" is a cryptic and metaphorical reference to Rome. It is widely accepted that "Babylon" became a cipher for a world-power that was hostile to God. Keener notes support for such use in Jewish works and in Revelation (Keener 2014, 684–685). Green comments that, in the case of the Christians, "'Babylon' is not so much identified with Rome as [it is] used as a brand to describe what Rome has become" (Green 2007, 183).

The mention of "Mark" in 1 Peter 5.13 adds additional support for the Babylon-as-Rome option. From Paul's writings, we know that Mark was with Paul later in the apostle's life, at times he was almost surely in Rome (cf. Col 4.10; Phlm 24; and esp. 2 Tim 4.11). First Peter 5.13 places him with Peter when that letter was written. According to Eusebius (*H. E.* 3.39.15), in statements that may trace back to the first century, Papias, bishop of Hierapolis until ca. 130 AD, affirmed that Mark became "Peter's interpreter" near the end of the apostle's life and that the second gospel in the canon resulted from that relationship (Carson and Moo 2005, 172–173).

Summation

Based on internal evidence from 1 Peter and what we can learn about the cultural circumstances in the mid-first century Roman empire, we have good reasons to affirm that Simon Peter wrote 1 Peter from Rome during the final years of Nero's reign in the mid-60s AD.

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An Additional Thought

"The essential message of Peter can be categorized into three separate features: (1) salvation, (2) church, and (3) the Christian life. Peter's letter is an exhortation (5:12) to socially disenfranchised Christians to live steadfastly before God with faithfulness, holiness, and love. This steadfastness may lead to suffering, but a genuine understanding of persecution permits them to face it head-on and go forward faithfully. But the foundation of their faithfulness is an understanding of their salvation that Peter paints graphically at the beginning of his letter."

~ Scot McKnight. 1996. *1 Peter*. The NIV Application Commentary. ed. Terry Muck. Zondervan, 29

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