

1 PETER: BACKGROUND

Recipients: The author uses a large number of OT allusions. However, several references point to a Gentile audience, such as “the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors” (1:8), “Once you were not a people” (2:10) and “For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do—living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry” (4:3). So in all likelihood the audience is mixed, but mostly Gentile.

Themes: 1 Peter provides advice to Gentile Christians, God’s elect, who are under persecution.

Date: If written by Peter, then 62-63—not later, since Peter was probably martyred, along with Paul, in the persecution by Nero in 64-65. Otherwise 70-100 is a typical range.

Provenance: The author says he is writing from “she who is in Babylon,” probably a reference to Rome.

Authorship: The letter itself claims to be written by “Peter the apostle,” and the church has historically taken this to be the case. For instance, 1 Peter is the only of the general epistles Eusebius classifies as “undisputed.” However, “despite [the] strongly attested claim of authorship, a significant number—perhaps even a majority—of contemporary scholars deny that Peter was the author of the letter”(Raymond Brown, 1997). Questions like why Paul doesn’t mention Peter in his letters from Rome, Peter and Paul’s early agreement to evangelize different groups (Peter: Jews, Paul: Gentiles), the mention of a church hierarchy (1 Pet 5:1-5)—these are relatively easily addressed. The good Greek and use of the LXX for OT references were deemed a problem (for Peter, an “unschooled” fisherman; cf. Acts 4:13), though this can be explained if Silvanus, mentioned as the letter’s carrier, was also Peter’s amanuensis.

Judging by Mark Allen Powell’s introductory text on the NT (2009), Petrine authorship is not as out of favor as it was. Some of the key argument against are no longer considered convincing. Scholars have also pointed out that (a) the author believes the second coming is near (4:7; 1:5; 4:17); (b) the encouragement to follow the emperor as the promoter of justice (2:13-14) would make more sense from an author prior to Nero’s persecution. Both of these suggest a work written during Peter’s lifetime, at least.

The authorship question often hangs on two litmus-test questions: (1) how much faith can you place in early-church tradition; and (2) whether you believe there’s sufficient evidence that pseudepigraphy was an accepted practice in the early church.

Fortunately, interpretation of 1 Peter is largely independent of the authorship question—though verses like 5:1, where the author refers to himself as “a witness of the sufferings of Christ”, and 1:8, where the author writes, “although you have not seen (Jesus), you love him,” are read in a different light if written by Peter.

Style: “Unlike Paul who often develops a theological point before applying it, Peter mixes imperative and indicative almost from the beginning of the letter” (Carson & Moo, 636). This letter also makes greater use of OT allusions than any other, save Revelation and Hebrews, especially Pss, Prov and Isa. It is also believed the letter is a unity, and not composed from pieces by an editor.

Peter’s post-resurrection career:

Many of us are familiar with the impulsive and headstrong Peter from the Gospels. What do we know of his career after the resurrection? From 1 Cor and Gal we can glean that he initially was the leader of the Jerusalem church (Gal 1:18; Acts 1-5, 8-11; Acts 12:17). With the establishment of deacons, Peter led the Hebrew believers and Stephen the Greek believers. Though Saul’s persecution scattered believers from Jerusalem, Peter, with the other apostles, remained behind. Not long thereafter Acts tells of Peter and John following in Philip’s footsteps and journeying to Samaria for pastoral and investigative reasons, and continuing from there throughout Judea.

Acts records Peter’s flight from Jerusalem (12:17) during the reign of Herod Agrippa (perhaps in 43?). When he returned in ~45, James was the senior leader of the Jerusalem church. With John, the three of them serve as leaders, with James foremost.

Powell summarizes, “...[Peter] was a missionary who traveled with his wife (1 Cor 9:5), ...he was highly respected as a leader in the church (Gal 1:18, 29), ...and many people traced their identity in Christ to his ministry or influence (1 Cor 1:13; cf. Acts 2:41-44; 4:4; 8:25). He does not seem to have been regarded as an innovative theologian or as one who was clearly identified with distinctive doctrine or practices. Even Paul seems to regard him as a key player in the church who is just one among many who are all basically doing the same thing: proclaiming the true gospel of Christ (1 Cor 1:12; 3:22; 15:11).”

Peter’s death is described in 1 Clement 5:2-4, “Because of jealousy and envy the greatest and most upright pillars were persecuted, and they struggled in the contest even to death... Peter bore up under hardships not just once or twice, but many times; and having thus borne witness he went to the place of glory he deserved.” In the second century, Tertullian indicts Nero for their deaths, referring to Rome as, “a fortunate church... where Peter had a passion like that of the Lord, where Paul was crowned with the death of John” (i.e., beheaded; *Praescrptione* 35).

How did the churches Peter was writing to fare? Four decades later (~112), Pliny, governor of one of the areas to which Peter writes, notes that “many persons of every age, every rank, and also of both sexes” were associated with the church. He further complains that “the contagion of this superstition has spread not only to the cities but also to the villages and farms.”

Bibliography

- Mark Allan Powell, *Introducing the New Testament* (Baker Academic, 2009).
- D. A. Carson and D. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Zondervan, 2005).
- Raymond Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Yale, 1997).