

2 PETER: BACKGROUND

Themes: This letter is a polemic against false teachers, refuting in particular disbelief in Jesus' return and grounding ethical behavior in eschatological belief

Reputation, Ancient and Modern: [BW3 260]

- *Origen* (AD 185-254) provides our first clear evidence that the church fathers knew and used 2 Peter. Along with Jude, 2 Peter was regarded as of doubtful value if not spurious altogether
- *Eusebius* (260-340) lists 2 Peter as a "disputed" book: "But the so-called second epistle we have not received as canonical, but nevertheless it has appeared useful to many, and has been studied with the other writings." (*Hist. Eccl.*, 3.3.1)
- *Jerome* (347-420) believed Peter just used a different amanuensis, as the style and vocab of 2 Peter betray "another hand," "and perhaps his authority led to its eventual acceptance" [BW3 261]. Yet elsewhere Jerome seems to reject Petrine authorship
- "*Didymus the Blind* (d. 398) urged people not to 'overlook that the epistle is forged,' insisting that 'though it is read publicly, it is nevertheless not in the canon.'"¹
- *Athanasius* in 367 accepted 2 Peter as canonical, later ratified in the 3rd Synod of Carthage in 393
- *Erasmus* (1466-1536) saw it as spurious or by Silvanus
- *Luther* (1483-1546) thought it only *might* be written by Peter
- *Calvin* (1509-1564) believed it was written by a disciple at Peter's direction
- *Fred Craddock* (famous American preacher): "This epistle is seldom read and studied even less."
- *James Dunn* (liberal NT scholar): "I would want to insist that not a few compositions of Martin Luther and John Wesley, for example, were as, if not more, inspired than the author of 2 Peter."
- *Ben Witherington III* (evangelical NT scholar): "Yes, it is true: 2 Peter has been something of the stepchild or even the whipping boy of NT studies, especially in Germany."

How the canon was formed:²

- Three criteria: (1) Apostolic authorship, including e.g. Mark writing for Peter or Luke by association with Paul; (2) Harmony with the rest of the NT; (3) Continuous acceptance in the churches.
- There wasn't a particular time when the canon was decided upon; it happened gradually. By the 2nd cent the Gospels, Acts, 13 letters of Paul, 1 Peter and 1 Jn were accepted. On the other hand, 1 Clement, Barnabas, the Shepherd of Hermas and the Didache were accepted by a minority of the church as scriptural. By the 4th century the canon was closed with the books we now have.

On Pseudepigraphy (writing in someone else's name): 2 Peter claims to be written by the apostle. Does that mean it has to be either a forgery or authentic?

- It is popular in liberal academic circles to see p. as an accepted fictional literary device which intended to and succeeded in deceiving no one. E.g., "in his *Life of Pythagoras*, Iamblichus, a neo-Platonist writer of the third century AD, congratulates the school of Pythagoras because they prefix his name to their writings in a desire to honor him as the source of all that is true and

¹ Mark Allan Powell, *Introducing the New Testament*, 26.2.

² Bruce Metzger, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, pp. 274-6.

original in their thought.”³ Jewish p. most often took the name of a famous person from antiquity, as in the intertestamental books named for Enoch.

- While there are many examples from the 2nd cent. of p., we have none from the 1st cent.⁴ Paul condemned the practice of writing in his name in 2 Thess 2:2; 3:17. In fact, we have two examples where the practice was explicitly condemned:

...in the second century, the author of the Acts of Paul and Thecla was unfrocked for this very practice. He protested that he attributed his work to Paul only in order to increase the latter’s honor; but to no avail... Precisely the same conclusion emerges from the story of Serapion and the Gospel of Peter. Serapion, bishop of Antioch about AD 180, heard of the partiality of a small town in his diocese for the Gospel of Peter. When he had investigated the matter he forbade its use. He says, ‘For our part, brethren, we both receive Peter and the other apostles as Christ, but the writings which falsely bear their names we reject, as men of experience, knowing that such were not handed down to us.’ [MG33-34]

- There are actually several cases of pseudepigrapha in Peter’s name from the second cent.:
 - “The *Apocalypse of Peter* professes to add to our knowledge about the future life.
 - “The *Gospel of Peter* is written in the interest of docetic Christology [i.e., Jesus was not fully human].
 - “The *Letter of Peter* is Ebionite [i.e., Judaized], the *Travels of Peter* sheer romance.
 - “The *Kerygmata Petrou* was a writing designed to claim apostolic precedent for heretical tendencies, and
 - “The *Acts of Peter* is a sort of novel for the entertainment of the faithful who were not supposed to go to theaters and other pagan entertainments.
- “2 Peter has little in common with any of these undoubted forgeries. It has no heretical axe to grind.” [MG]
- Given the number of false attributions to Peter, and the overlap with Jude, it’s not surprising that the Fathers were leery of accepting 2 Peter into the canon.

Curious Relation to Jude:

- There are many parallels in language between 2 Peter and Jude: “None of these parallels is especially long, but taken together they are nevertheless striking: many involve words and expressions not found elsewhere in the Bible, and... they occur in the same order in both letters.” [C&M656]

³ MG: Michael Green, *2nd Peter and Jude*, p. 33.

⁴ Richard Bauckham, in his lauded 2 Peter commentary, argues that our sole example is actually 2 Peter itself, as a fictional testament written in the apostle’s name.

- Historically it was thought Jude borrowed from 2 Peter, given Peter's greater stature. But given that Jude contains a reference to Enoch which is absent in 2 Peter and which would have bothered or seemed irrelevant to some readers, it is generally assumed that 2 Peter borrow from Jude.⁵

Style and Audience: These can shed light on 2 Peter's authorship

- The style is strikingly different from that of 1 Peter being written in the florid, baroque "Asiatic" style of Greek. This has implications about the audience:

2 Peter is a document that can truly be said to be one of the first Christian attempts at 'mass communication.' It is written to all Christians in the Empire, unlike 1 Peter, for example. And Asiatic Greek was, especially in the middle of the empire where Christianity was beginning to flourish, the *vox populi*. This is persuasion for the masses, and only more traditionalist patricians, upper-crust Romans and other well-educated members of society were likely to turn up their noses at it. Like modern musical snobs who love classical music but look down their noses at pop or country or rap music, style in the empire was often a reflector of class, education and ambitions. But in our case, it tells us the most about the audience 2 Peter addresses. And this audience is Christians, both Jews and Gentiles, throughout the empire, who need to be galvanized to continue to embrace the apostolic values and virtues, beliefs and behaviors of the previous generation of believers.⁶

- This letter is written in the form of a "testament." In a testament, a heroic person summarizes his teaching, announces his death is near, urged readers to remember his message and predicts what will happen after his death. Examples include Moses and the end of Deuteronomy, Jacob's advice to his sons in Gen 49, and even to some degree Paul in 2 Timothy. There are also examples of *fictional* testaments written in the name of a famous person, as in *The Testaments of the Twelve Apostles*, always in the name of someone long dead.

Authorship:

- *Not Peter:* The style differs from 1 Peter; it refers to Paul's writings as "Scripture", it teaches a delayed *parousia*; and it looks like a testament, which can be fictional.
- *Yes, Peter:* Scribes were given much leeway in antiquity, so style isn't a clear indication of authorship; possibly, Peter deliberately adopted the Asiatic style to reach a wider audience; the apostles considered their own words to carry an authority tantamount to Scripture (e.g., 1 Cor 5:3; 2 Cor 10:11; 2 Thess 2:15; 3:14)⁷; even Jesus teaches a delayed *parousia*(!)⁸; and some

⁵ Since Jude doesn't appear to be a composite document, it's unlikely they both borrowed from a third source (C&M *contra* Green).

⁶ BW3: Ben Witherington III, *Letters and Homilies for Hellenized Christians*, Vol 2, p. 266.

⁷ C&M: Carson & Moo, NT intro text, p. 661.

testaments were authentic and not fictional. In fact, if it was obviously a fictional testament, why did authorship questions keep it out of the canon?⁹

- In summary: Most believe 2 Peter was not written by the apostle, but some (Bauckham, Carson & Moo, Witherington, Green) find the arguments inconclusive, especially where they rely upon prevailing academic belief in benign pseudepigraphy.

Date:

- It draws upon Jude, so it must have been written after 50-60
- It must be before works such as the *Acts of Peter* (180) and *Apocalypse of Peter* (ca. 110-140) and possibly the *Letter to Theodorus* which seem to draw upon it
- It bears “obvious affinities” to other Roman documents written in ~80-100 such as 1 and 2 Clement and Hermas [BW3 based on Bauckham]
- If it’s by Peter, then it had to have been written in 64-65, squeezed in between 1 Peter and Peter’s martyrdom under Nero
- If it’s not by Peter then it was certainly written before 140 and possibly before 100

Resources:

- Michael Green, *2 Peter and Jude* (small, characteristically insightful)
- Richard J. Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter* (smaller version of his magisterial work; very good)
- Douglas J. Moo, *The NIV Application Commentary: 2 Peter and Jude* (breaks out application nicely)
- Ben C. Witherington III, *Letters and Homilies for Hellenized Christians*, Vol II (great background and critique of other commentaries)
- Jerome H. Neyrey, *2 Peter, Jude*, Anchor Bible series (I haven’t read it, but it appears to have good socio-rhetorical background)

⁸ Some source critics will no doubt assert that any words asserting a delayed return *must* have been put on Jesus’ lips by a redactor. I believe the presence of this message in the parables, likely our oldest and best record of Jesus’ teaching, refutes that assertion.

⁹ Witherington offers an interesting theory for Petrine authorship: 2 Peter 1:12-2:3 has both style and a number of unusual words in common with 1 Peter, suggesting they were composed by the same author. Given that letters were attributed to their most famous contributor, it is quite possible that if 1 Peter was by Peter, then the author of 2 Peter combined the authentic Petrine passage 2 Peter 1:12-2:3 with material from Jude to form this general epistle.