

Introduction to 1 Peter

NIV Study Bible

Author and Date

The author identifies himself as the apostle Peter (1:1), and the contents and character of the letter support his authorship (see notes on 1:12; 4:13; 5:1–2,5,13). Moreover, the letter reflects the history and terminology of the Gospels and Acts (notably Peter's speeches). Its themes and concepts reflect Peter's experiences and his associations in the period of our Lord's earthly ministry and in the apostolic age. That he was acquainted, e.g., with Paul and his letters is made clear in 2Pe 3:15–16 (see notes there); Gal 1:18; 2:1–21 and elsewhere. Coincidences in thought and expression with Paul's writings are therefore not surprising.

From the beginning, 1 Peter was recognized as authoritative and as the work of the apostle Peter. The earliest reference to it may be 2Pe 3:1 (see note there), where Peter himself refers to a former letter he had written. 1 Clement (a.d. 95) seems to indicate acquaintance with 1 Peter. Polycarp, a disciple of the apostle John, makes use of 1 Peter in his letter to the Philippians. The author of the Gospel of Truth (140–150) was acquainted with 1 Peter. Eusebius (fourth century) indicated that it was universally received.

The letter was explicitly ascribed to Peter by that group of church fathers whose testimonies appear in the attestation of so many of the genuine NT writings, namely, Irenaeus (a.d. 140–203), Tertullian (150–222), Clement of Alexandria (155–215) and Origen (185–253). It is thus clear that Peter's authorship of the book has early and strong support.

Nevertheless some claim that the idiomatic Greek of this letter is beyond Peter's competence. But in his time Aramaic, Hebrew and Greek were used in the Holy Land, and he may well have been acquainted with more than one language. That he was not a professionally trained scribe (Ac 4:13) does not mean that he was unacquainted with Greek; in fact, as a Galilean fisherman he in all likelihood did use it. Even if he had not known it in the earliest days of the church, he may have acquired it as an important aid to his apostolic ministry in the decades that intervened between then and the writing of 1 Peter.

It is true, however, that the Greek of 1 Peter is good literary Greek, and even though Peter could no doubt speak Greek, as so many in the Mediterranean world could, it is unlikely that he would write such polished Greek. But it is at this point that Peter's remark in 5:12 (see note there) concerning Silas may be significant. Here the apostle claims that he wrote "with the help of" (more lit. "through" or "by means of") Silas. This phrase cannot refer merely to Silas as a letter carrier. Thus Silas was the intermediate agent in writing. Some have claimed that Silas's qualifications for recording Peter's letter in literary Greek are found in Ac 15:22–29. It is known that a secretary in those days often composed documents in good Greek for those who did not have the language facility to do so. Thus in 1 Peter Silas's Greek may be seen, while in 2 Peter it may be Peter's rough Greek that appears.

Some also maintain that the book reflects a situation that did not exist until after Peter's death, suggesting that the persecution referred to in 4:14–16; 5:8–9 is descriptive of Domitian's reign

(a.d. 81–96). However, the situation that was developing in Nero’s time (54–68) is just as adequately described by those verses.

The book can be satisfactorily dated in the early 60s. It cannot be placed earlier than 60 since it shows familiarity with Paul’s Prison Letters (e.g., Colossians and Ephesians, which are to be dated no earlier than 60): Compare 1:1–3 with Eph 1:1–3; 2:18 with Col 3:22; 3:1–6 with Eph 5:22–24. Furthermore, it cannot be dated later than 67/68, since Peter was martyred during Nero’s reign.

Place of Writing

In 5:13 Peter indicates that he was “in Babylon” when he wrote 1 Peter. Among the interpretations that have been suggested are that he was writing from (1) Egyptian Babylon, which was a military post, (2) Mesopotamian Babylon, (3) Jerusalem and (4) Rome. Peter may well be using the name Babylon symbolically, as it seems to be used in the book of Revelation (see Rev 14:8; 17:9–10 and notes). Tradition connects him in the latter part of his life with Rome, and certain early writers held that 1 Peter was written there. On the other hand, it is pointed out by some that (1) Babylon is known to have existed in the first century as a small town on the Euphrates; (2) there is no evidence that the term Babylon was used figuratively to refer to Rome until Revelation was written (c. a.d. 95); (3) the context of 5:13 does not appear to be figurative or cryptic.

Themes

Although 1 Peter is a short letter, it touches on various doctrines and has much to say about Christian life and duties. It is not surprising that different readers have found it to have different principal themes. For example, it has been characterized as a letter of separation, of suffering and persecution, of suffering and glory, of hope, of pilgrimage, of courage, and as a letter dealing with the true grace of God. Peter says that he has written “encouraging you and testifying that this is the true grace of God” (5:12). This is a definitive general description of the letter, but it does not exclude the recognition of numerous subordinate and contributory themes. The letter includes a series of exhortations (imperatives) that run from 1:13 to 5:11.

Outline

- Greetings (1:1–2)
- Praise to God for His Grace and Salvation (1:3–12)
- Exhortations to Holiness of Life (1:13—5:11)
 - The Requirement of Holiness (1:13—2:3)
 - The Position of Believers (2:4–12)
 - 1. A spiritual house (2:4–8)
 - 2. A chosen people (2:9–10)
 - 3. Aliens and strangers (2:11–12)
 - Submission to Authority (2:13—3:7)
 - 1. Submission to rulers (2:13–17)
 - 2. Submission to masters (2:18–20)
 - 3. Christ’s example of submission (2:21–25)

- 4. Submission of wives to husbands (3:1–6)
 - 5. The corresponding duty of husbands (3:7)
- Duties of All (3:8–17)
- Christ's Example (3:18—4:6)
- Conduct in View of the End of All Things (4:7–11)
- Conduct of Those Who Suffer for Christ (4:12–19)
- Conduct of Elders (5:1–4)
- Conduct of the Young (5:5–11)
- The Purpose of the Letter (5:12)
- Final Greetings and Benediction (5:13–14)