

Special Studies in 2 Peter

The Authorship of 2 Peter

Intro: In the past few months we have studied together the text from both 1 Peter and 2 Peter. Our focus was on the message that Peter wanted to communicate to the believers who lived in the Roman provinces that were in what is now northern Turkey.

However, it is important that we also be somewhat familiar with some of the critical issues that surround these books. In your study you may come across a commentary that expresses the view that the apostle Peter is not the author of the 2nd letter that bears his name. Or, you may see on the History Channel a show featuring a Christian "scholar" like Bart Ehrman who considers 2 Peter unauthentic. In fact, most modern liberal scholars would be in that camp.

Many Christians will be quite surprised at such a claim and wonder how any reasonable person might offer such an idea in the face of the obvious indications in our edited bible that Peter is the author of this work and was accepted as canonical based on that belief.

So tonight we will look at the evidence and see what conclusions we might reach.

The evidence for Peter's authorship of 2 Peter

A person reading second Peter for the first time in English, without any information from other sources, would likely find it quite acceptable to consider Peter the author for several reasons:

The epistle claims to come from the apostle Peter.

"SIMON PETER, a bond-servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who have received a faith of the same kind as ours, by the righteousness of our God and Savior, Jesus Christ:" (2 Peter 1:1)

Some commentators point out that the Greek spelling here at 1:1 is unique and reflects a spelling used by transliterating from Hebrew into Greek, something that a Palestinian Jew might do in spelling his Hebrew name in another language.

The writer claims that this epistle is the "second time" he is writing to his readers.

"THIS is now, beloved, the second letter I am writing to you in which I am stirring up your sincere mind by way of reminder, that you should remember the words spoken beforehand by the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Savior spoken by your apostles." (2 Peter 3:1–2)

The most natural understanding would suggest that Peter is referring to an earlier epistle that bears his name--1 Peter.

The writer claims to have received revelations from Jesus. He indicates that the Lord has made known to him that his death is imminent.

“And I consider it right, as long as I am in this earthly dwelling, to stir you up by way of reminder, knowing that the laying aside of my earthly dwelling is imminent, as also our Lord Jesus Christ has made clear to me. And I will also be diligent that at any time after my departure you may be able to call these things to mind.” (2 Peter 1:13–15)

Peter could be thinking of the prophecy of Jn. 21 where Jesus predicted that Peter would experience a violent death and that he now infers from that in view of his age it will come soon. However, we might most naturally think that Peter is affirming that the Lord has more recently revealed to him that his death is coming soon.

The writer claims to be an eye-witness of Jesus' life.

“For we did not follow cleverly devised tales when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty. For when He received honor and glory from God the Father, such an utterance as this was made to Him by the Majestic Glory, “This is My beloved Son with whom I am well-pleased”—” (2 Peter 1:16–17)

The writer claims that he was present when Jesus was transfigured on the mountain and heard the voice of God.

“and we ourselves heard this utterance made from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain.” (2 Peter 1:18)

The writer refers to the apostle Paul as a "beloved brother," an expression that would ordinarily indicate a close contemporary relationship.

“and regard the patience of our Lord to be salvation; just as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given him, wrote to you,” (2 Peter 3:15)

All of these claims taken a face value would easily lead one to conclude that Peter was indeed the writer of this letter. However there are some things that have caused some modern scholars to question Peter's authorship, issues that were also recognized by some ancient writers as well. Let's consider these for a few moments as well.

The evidence that Peter did not write 2 Peter

For the sake of both time and clarity, I'll try to state the reasons why some modern scholars say Peter didn't write the book and also give what I believe is a reasonable response that defends the traditional view.

2 Peter is not referenced in the literature and correspondence of the post-apostolic church.

The argument is that if 2 Peter were written by the apostle in the first century, it would have been quoted by numerous writers in the second century and onward.

Moreover it is said that 2 Peter was first mentioned by name only by Origen in the early third century indicating that it was a work composed much later than the first century.

Response:

Origen appears to have accepted the book as apostolic and quotes from it in other writings.

Even if 2 Peter were not quoted by the early church fathers, this would only be an argument from silence. 2 Peter may not have been quoted for various reasons (the book not widely distributed, the subject matter not relevant to issues the apostolic fathers were writing about). However this does not conclusively disprove authorship by Peter.

Daniel Wallace cites a recent study by a man named Picirilli that affirms that there are indeed allusions to 2 Peter in the writings of the early church fathers. Wallace considers at least 22 of them possible or even probably allusions. He did not in his article cite specific examples; and I have not been able to acquire and read the Picirilli article yet.

So at least we can say that the claim that 2 Peter was not quoted might have to some degree been disproved.

Some early church writers indicated that Peter's authorship of 2 Peter was disputed by some people.

Origen in the early third century mentions that some questioned the origin of the book.

Fourth century historian Eusebius does not consider it spurious, but classifies it as "antilegomena," books spoken against.

Jerome includes it in his Latin Vulgate; but notes that the style of 2 Peter is different from 1 Peter. He explains that on the basis that Peter may have used an amanuensis for 1 Peter.

Response:

When Origen says that some questioned the book, it does not itself mean that he did not consider it authentic nor does it mean that it was not written by Peter.

There arose a number of spurious works in Peter's name (we'll say more in a minute). It could be that there was additional caution toward 2 Peter because of these other spurious works.

It may also be important to know that Eusebius'

"antilegomena" also included several other books received into the canon such as James, Jude, 2 & 3rd John, the Revelation, and Hebrews. So if we eliminate books that are spoken against by someone, we would in fact be eliminating nearly a fourth of the NT.

In the second century there appeared a number of works attributed to Peter that do not appear to be authentic.

They are referred to by the label pseudonymous (falsely named) or pseudepigraphal, i.e. written under a false name.

The apocalypse of Peter

The gospel of Peter

The Acts of Peter

Since such works were clearly non-Petrine, it suggested the possibility that 2 Peter likewise might be of the same nature.

Response:

These spurious works were rejected as canonical; but 2 Peter was not treated in the same way and eventually was considered apostolic. The early church could see clear differences in the content and background of 2 Peter.

As we said before the appearance of spurious works under Peter's name might have made some people overly cautious with 2 Peter as well.

Some suggest that the subject matter and message reflect a second century milieu, i.e. the religious environment seems to reflect features that are not commonly associated with the first century.

Modern scholars sometimes contend that the reference to "all of Paul's epistles" implies an extant collection of Paul's letters already in existence by the time Peter wrote. Since such did not presumably come into existence until much later, the writer of 2 Peter must have lived in the second century.

Response:

Peter in 2 Peter 3 does not indicate that all of the epistles of Paul were available in some collected form, though that was entirely possible.

He simply alludes to "all of Paul's writings," indicating that Paul had spoken on the same issues that Peter addresses.

In addition, the modern critical scholars affirm that the book seems to respond to the Gnostic heresy of the second century. The argument here is that the book reflects spiritual heresy of Gnosticism that existed in the second century. Therefore the book must have a second century date and an author familiar with these things. The apostle Peter would have been dead for several decades.

Response:

Peter's description of the false teachers is presented as "predictive." He anticipates the false teachers and describes them in terms of their attitude toward authority and morality. Already one can see evidence of incipient Gnosticism in the first century in some NT books like Colossians for example.

Some find the style and vocabulary of 2 Peter to be incompatible with the writing of 1 Peter.

Many modern scholars will point to many "hapax legomena" (words only found one time in Scripture) that are in 2 Peter. This in their view would indicate another writer with a different vocabulary.

Furthermore they argue that the Greek of 2 Peter is not as polished as the Greek of 1 Peter.

Response:

Clearly, native Greek speakers and those very comfortable in the language even from ancient times recognized a difference in the Greek of 2 Peter. Though a subjective conclusion, I think that it is possible for a very capable Greek scholar to perceive these differences.

As for these differences of style and grammar, one explanation can be that 1 Peter shows signs of having been written by the hand of an amanuensis, Silvanus. In that case he may have written in more polished style than Peter would have, since Greek would have been a second language for Peter as a Palestinian Jew.

D. Wallace thinks that 1 Peter was written by an amanuensis and that 2 Peter was actually written by Peter in what was clearly less polished Greek.

Arguments on unique vocabulary are often the result of subject matter. When one compares the subject matter of 2 Peter we can see how it might have introduced terms not found in other NT books. So the argument on unique words is not conclusive and also somewhat subjective.

Thus modern scholars would attribute second Peter to another unnamed person who adopts the name of Peter as either a disciple or someone who is a part of a Petrine circle who thinks he can faithfully represent the teaching that Peter would have given to deal with the matters at hand.

They point to a body of pseudepigraphal literature that arose in which the writer presumes to be someone now deceased; and writes in his name. Modern scholars insist that people were comfortable with the idea. They did not consider this to be a deception, since the writer would give off clues that he was not really the person who he purports to write in the name of.

Response:

It is true that there were pseudepigraphal works written as if they came from a well-known person in the ancient world. However there are also clear signals from the apostles that they would not have allowed something written in their name to be accepted as Scripture. Paul for example explicitly “warns of this in his letter to the Thessalonians.

NOW we request you, brethren, with regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and our gathering together to Him, that you may not be quickly shaken from your composure or be disturbed either by a spirit or a message or a letter as if from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. Let no one in any way deceive you, for it will not come unless the apostasy comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction,” (2 Thessalonians 2:1–3)

In addition, those who lived closest to the time and with the shortest historical link to the first century concluded that this

work came from Peter's hand and thus ought to be regarded as Scripture.

Lessons for us

Though not as well attested as other NT books, there is no reason to reject the message of 2 Peter. In fact, the more one delves into the issue the more one can see the subtle indications that the author is the apostle Peter and not a very clever fabricator writing in his name.

More and more we will hear modern critical scholars assert these kind of things about the various books of the Bible and they get a lot of air-time to propose them to those not well informed. We must not lose faith in the authenticity of the NT documents nor in the integrity of the process by which the early church identified and preserved the writings of the apostles. We must be willing to dig a little deeper and examine the evidence carefully for ourselves.

We need to be aware that sometimes "scholarship" becomes the justification for rejecting traditional points of view that do indeed rest upon solid evidence. The claim to "scholarship" does not always mean that the "scholar" really knows more than others. People may sometimes allow their pride of intellect and education to go to their head and cause them to reject the truth. They may hold liberal points of view that they seek to justify. Rejecting the authenticity of the Scriptures can be a convenient way of setting aside the truth found in many NT books.

Conclusion: Believe it when Peter says that a great Day of Judgment and destruction is coming when Jesus returns. Take it to heart and act upon it.